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Kane's Odyssey by Jeff Clinton

CHAPTER ONE

Rufus, wearing skins, stood at the edge of the woods with his friend John. It was cooler in the shade after the heavy work. Rufus took a drink of the cold water from the rusty can and wiped his forearm across his mouth. He squinted out at the field, harsh and rocky under the pea-green sky. A dozen of his kinsmen remained at work in the field, struggling under the murky sun, shoving their wood plows through the parched brown dirt. This time, the elders said, the plowing would be good because it would rain in time. Rufus doubted it.

"We'd better get back to work," John said beside him. John was twenty, five years younger than Rufus, and not so tall, but with a thick, powerful body. He usually managed to look cheerful, even at times like this, late in the working day. "Come on, Rufus," he smiled.

"One more sip," Rufus stalled.

"We have to hurry, before the rain comes."

"Who said it's going to rain?"

"The elders. You heard them."

"All their arguments were non-sequiturs," Rufus said.

"What?" John said, startled.

"Non-sequiturs," Rufus repeated.

"What's a non-sequitur?"

"It's a logical argument that doesn't follow."

John's forehead wrinkled. "Where did you get that? From *The Learner*?"

"No. From a book."

John sighed. "Nobody reads books."

"I do."

"You're crazy."

"Why?"

"Because reading those books is *dangerous*."

Rufus got interested in the logic. "Why?"

"Because people will think you're crazy."

"Why?"

"Because nobody reads books any more."

"Non-sequitur," Rufus said.

"I'm getting back to work," John said, "and if you're smart, you will too."

Rufus hung back a moment, watching his friend trudge out into the furrowed field and lift the heavy handles of the push-plow. The murky sun glistened on John's sweaty shoulders as he began wrestling the awkward wood machine through the earth. John's deerskins, like Rufus's, were soaked through with perspiration, and hung clammy and dark, tied around the neck and the waist, leaving arms and legs bare.

It was a brutal, senseless way to live, Rufus thought suddenly. There was no future, no thought, nothing. A man could work his life away, dripping his sweat and blood into this dead soil, and it would never matter at all. It was insane and there had to be a better way of life

somewhere.

Which immediately made his skull throb with savage pain—a shot of bone-vibrating pain and then the dizziness which almost dropped him to his knees.

Rufus quickly changed his line of thought. The pain went away.

Why was the pain? What made it come when you thought certain things?

But even the wonderment made the pain begin again, gnawing like an uncertain little animal inside his skull.

He sighed and stopped thinking about that, too. He immediately felt better. Physically.

He went out to his own plow and shouldered it. The wood blade chunked through the dirt, which crumbled to a fine brown powder as he slogged along. The dust became the only reality of your existence during the worst days out here: it rose, choking, making fine grit between the teeth, clogging the nostrils, making a dull ache in the lungs; it rimmed the eyes and made them sticky and hurtful, coated the sweat-slippery skin and itched, tugged at bare feet, ankles and legs slipping and sliding through the powdery stuff.

The plow hit a large rock. Rufus stopped and lifted the rock and staggered across the field with it to the edge of the hillside and tossed it down. The drop-off was steep, and he watched the rock tumble and bounce down and down, hopping, then flying, then skidding to far below where it looked like thousands of *other* rocks had been thrown. Was there no end to rocks?

His head warned him that this bordered on being a dangerous thought.

Rufus sighed and stole a moment for the view. Slowly but surely he was learning to cheat his head—think thoughts quietly and not be pained for them—or steal moments like this without punishment.

The field and the woods were on a highland plain of some kind, and the hill down which he had thrown the rock was a precipice falling toward a lower level of valley hundreds of feet down. The valley looked as parched

and lifeless as the highland, but it stretched far. And off to the northwest a near-infinite distance were the bluish ghosts of the mountains, craggy, mysterious, unknown.

There were other people out there somewhere. There was even a city.

Rufus knew this. He had only the vaguest idea of what a city was like—except that it was very bad, of course—and he had not even been as far from home as the valley floor. But at times like this he felt a supreme yearning. He wanted to go, to discover, to *find out for himself*. There were times—such as now—when he knew he would never respect himself or have anything like happiness unless he could accomplish this.

His head stabbed pain.

He had made the mistake of thinking too directly about what was on his mind.

He went back to his work, joining the other men of varying ages, tearing up the dead earth.

* * *

THE TRUE CITIZENS numbered about three hundred. Rufus, at 25, was about the average age for the commune. Fewer than twenty of the citizens were over 50, and there were, of course, no children at all. They lived in the woods on the highland plain near what had been a small town, but only a few of the strongest old buildings had withstood the ages and it was forbidden to go there any more. The True Citizens lived in earthen or stone huts, usually fifteen or twenty to a "family," and the customs decreed that everyone gather in the evenings in the big clearing near the cliff for food and comradeship.

It usually got very cold after dark, and there were people who said the darkness away from the campfire was magic, and to be feared. But Rufus found his best friend Joseph hunkered against a tree on the very fringe of the light from the great bonfire, as he expected. A few other hardy souls, and some lovers, had also chosen places well away from the center of things, where women served food from steaming pots and some of the men so assigned were busy sewing skins and stripping the carcasses of animals slain for future food. It was not really considered antisocial to linger this far from the fire as long as one didn't make it a regular habit.

Rufus squatted beside Joseph, who was not more than 18 and very thin and silver-haired. Being one of the student hunters, Joseph had a dish of meat, while Rufus had his usual heavy cup of soup and several slices of thick bread.

"Hello," Rufus grinned. "How was the hunt?"

"One deer," Joseph smiled back. "I helped drive him."

"Did you make the kill?"

Joseph chuckled bitterly. "Patrick made the kill. You know that. Patrick always makes the kill."

"You'll get to make a kill."

"Not as long as Patrick is around. Patrick enjoys killing. Patrick would kill anything or anyone. I suppose that's why all the women love him. He's a pig."

Rufus drew in his breath sharply and watched to see his friend's face contort with pain. But there was no sign of pain; Joseph's expression remained one of mere frustration and anger.

"What's the matter?" Joseph asked, seeing the way Rufus was eyeing him.

"Did that hurt?" Rufus asked.

"Of course not. Are you back on pain again, Rufus? —When are you going to explain to me what it is you *mean* when you ask if words hurt me?"

"It's nothing," Rufus said quickly.

"Here," Joseph grunted, and handed him a piece of meat.

"No, that's yours. You earned it."

"Take it," Joseph growled in mock anger, "or I'll practice my killing on you."

It was good meat, seared in the fire, still bloody in-side near the bone,

and very strong and powerful. Rufus tore at it eagerly.

Joseph leaned closer to him. "Did you know there's a place where there are books?"

"Of course," Rufus said, surprised. "The cave near the Oracle."

"No, no," Joseph said impatiently. "In town."

"*In town?* How would you know about—" Rufus stopped, seeing Joseph's little grin of reckless pride. "Joseph, did you go into town?"

"Today," Joseph replied. "The hunt was near the town. They told me to scout around the far side, and they went through the ravines. I was alone. There was the town. I went into it. I looked around."

Rufus was stunned. "It's dangerous in the town. You could have been killed. What would the elders do if they found out?"

Joseph's lips curled in a sneer. "There's no danger in that town. I've been there four times before. This was my fifth visit. No one goes there. But I go there. I'll take you with me the next time."

"No," Rufus said quickly.

"Afraid?" Joseph taunted.

"We're not supposed to go there."

"Well, I've been there and I'm all right. And I'll go again. It's not dangerous. It's just old wrecked buildings and rubble and a few places standing, and today in one of them I found the books."

"In the town?" The question was dragged out of Rufus despite the twinge of pain it cost.

"Part of the roof is down," Joseph told him eagerly. "There must have been thousands and thousands of books once. Most of them are ruined, buried under trash or wrecked by the rain and snow. But there's a basement. I found it and went down there. The books are still all right in the basement."

"What kind of books?" The pain was worse, but Rufus had to know.

"I didn't have time to look. But I'm going back. Maybe tomorrow."

Nearby, a couple making love had reached the stage where the girl's gasps of pleasure caused heads to turn idly. Rufus turned too, and watched for a moment. The girl's name was Sandra and he had made love to her a few times also. She was very good and very passionate.

Rufus turned back to Joseph. "Tell me where the books—"

Joseph hissed and silenced him with a look. Someone was coming. Turning, Rufus saw three people, two men and a woman, approaching with their plates.

"We've been looking for you," the girl said. She was slender and dark-haired, and the distant firelight gleamed seductively on her strong legs. She bent and kissed Rufus half-playfully on the lips, then sat close beside him on the ground.

"Hello, Mari," Joseph said to her easily. "Hello, John. Hello, Fred. Join us."

The two men sat facing Rufus and Mari so that the group formed a rough circle on the ground. John, Rufus' friend from the field crew, started eating without a word of greeting. Fred, a somewhat older man whose hair hung down his back although he was bald on top, smiled and winked at Rufus.

"The two of you look like conspirators," he said.

"Mari and me?" Rufus said innocently.

"I *know* about Mari and you," Fred chuckled in a way that wasn't quite decent. "I meant you and the mighty hunter, here."

Joseph gave Fred a cool smile. "We were plotting your overthrow, Fred."

"Really? Would you like to tell me about it?"

"Certainly not."

"I thought so. Well, we'll catch you one day, my young friend."

Joseph smiled blandly. "Catch me doing what?"

Fred winked. "Something."

It was all a joke, of course, but Rufus felt a twinge of discomfort. He did not trust Fred. Fred was an adviser to the elders. He did not work in the usual sense. He was a planner. He was always friendly. But Rufus didn't like some of the jokes, he didn't like the streak of potential cruelty that seemed to lie behind the veneer of joking, and he didn't like the way the older man had stayed near Mari lately.

Mari... He turned to her and watched her as she ate. Her head was down, her face partly averted, her dark hair hiding her expression. The firelight made her lithe legs and the deep valley of her fine breasts the color of newly burnished copper, and he felt the softly choking rise of need for her.

She caught him watching her, and made a little face at him. "Eat your food!" she murmured in a mock-scolding tone.

"Can we walk later?" Rufus asked. His throat was constricted.

She smiled at him. "Yes. I'd like that."

He felt better, as if a band had been released from his chest. They were all a family, of course. No woman belonged to any man, no man to any woman. All shared and loved alike because it was the only logical way to have harmony. But there were times when Rufus hated the rule. He wanted Mari for himself, and no one else, wished she could handle situations so she could save herself for him, as a few women secretly saved themselves for their favored man.

Dull shaft of pain. Stop thinking.

Fred was talking to Joseph again. "You enjoy the hunting?"

"Most days," Joseph said, finishing his food.

"What do you like about it most?" Fred asked.

Joseph shrugged.

"The chase?" Fred persisted.

Joseph met his eyes. "I suppose I like getting out of the commune best of all."

Rufus bit his tongue at the danger of the statement.

Fred, however, held the same casual smile. "You like to range the countryside, then."

"Yes," Joseph said, seemingly intent on angering the older man. "I like to get away from people who watch and ask questions."

Rufus felt near panic. He tried to help Joseph. "He was saying, Fred, just as you walked up, that it's good to provide for the family."

"I see," Fred said, glancing sharply at him.

"I like the moving around," Joseph insisted, angry with Rufus now.

John looked up from his food. "Why would you want to move around?"

"To see new things," Joseph told him. "To learn. To feel more free. To move into new territory."

The dangerous words lay there a moment, making their group seem very silent amid the tinkle of voices around the big clearing and the fire, now smoking up against a cloudy sky highlighted by a brown, crusty old moon.

"Why would anyone want to go anywhere else?" John asked blankly.

"Have you ever been anywhere else?" Joseph retorted.

"Of course not."

"Then how can you say no one should want to see new things?"

John chewed his food and blinked a while. Finally he said, "Everywhere else is bad, Joseph. You know that."

"Have you ever *been* anywhere else to know that?" Joseph repeated.

"Of course not. It's bad."

"How do you *know* it's bad?" Joseph insisted.

"Because if it was good it wouldn't be so different."

"How do you know other places are so different?"

John looked frightened. "I don't know. My mother told me."

"I wonder why she told you that."

"Because it's true, I suppose."

"I don't believe she even told you that," Joseph said.

John looked startled. "Who?"

"Your mother."

"Well, maybe she didn't."

Joseph looked at Rufus and spread his hands in resignation.

"Easy," Rufus pleaded.

Fred leaned forward toward Joseph. "You seem very troubled."

Joseph grinned. "No. I'm kidding. I'm fine."

"Are you?"

"Yes. I was only kidding."

"I hope so," Fred said with a gentle smile. "You know that people who become maladjusted can only cause trouble for themselves."

"It's a safety outlet," Joseph said, smiling wider and looking truly boyish and innocent now. "I tease a lot." He was a good actor.

Fred mopped up his plate with his last crumb of bread. "Well," he sighed, "I'll have to attend another meeting shortly. I'd better move along." He got to his feet and looked down at Rufus and Mari. "Take good care of them, Mari."

Again there was that sickly sexual connotation somewhere behind the words. But Mari chuckled easily and shook her head as if to say Fred was a hopeless case, and not to be considered seriously. Fred grinned at her for another moment, let his hand rest on Rufus's bare shoulder for an instant, then walked away toward the campfire.

Joseph watched his figure walk away. "Pig," he said softly.

"Shut up!" Rufus hissed. "He might hear you!"

"I'm sick of being afraid!" Joseph flared.

Rufus saw the placid surprise in John's dull eyes. "Be quiet, Joseph," he pleaded.

"I'll be quiet now," Joseph snapped. "But—"

"Joseph—"

"All right," Joseph sighed. "All right."

Mari touched Rufus's hand. "Shall we walk now?"

Rufus hesitated. He wanted to, but he was very worried about Joseph in this mood.

"Go ahead," Joseph smiled. "I'll be a good little boy."

Rufus got to his feet and took Mari's hand. It was soft and warm. He felt excitement again.

"You're sure you're okay?" he asked Joseph.

"Sure," Joseph said. John and I will sit here and talk about the successful winter enjoyed by our commune."

"Rufus," Mari murmured crossly, "come on."

Reluctantly Rufus went with her, first going nearer the fire and then away from it on the far side. Most of the commune family was here, young men tearing at their food while the women sewed skins or did the cleanup work. Many of the young women, Rufus noted idly, were as thin from the long winter as most of the men. Mari was one of the few who had

somehow come through rounded and in glowing good health. He felt proud of her as they walked, and it crossed his mind that he was a fool to be curious about things he didn't understand, or impatient with a future that seemed as faceless as the river under ice.

They walked through the woods and up the slant of the hill toward the area where the Cave of the Oracle was, but were careful to stay the required distance from it. Throughout the walk they were silent, and it was not until they paused that Mari broke the silence.

"You're upset," she said, reclining on the grass in a little grotto formed by huge boulders. "Why?"

"I'm just tired," Rufus said, sitting beside her.

"It's more than that," she said.

"Yes," he admitted.

"What, then?"

"I feel... uneasy. I'm worried about Joseph."

"Is that all?" Her hand stroked his thigh.

"Joseph is a good friend."

"I know. But you take care of yourself first. We all know that."

"I wonder what else there is," Rufus burst out.

"There's nothing else," she said calmly. "Just the Wildies—the people who exist in the old cities, far away. And you know what they're like."

"I've never seen them."

"Why would you want to see them? You know they're beasts!"

"I remember something," Rufus suddenly realized. "I don't know where the memory comes from. I was on a hill and I looked up and there in the sky—very high and far away—there was *a thing*."

Mari's pretty face clouded. "A thing?"

"It was far away. It had wings, but they didn't move. But the thing was—flying along. It had a long stream of smoke coming from it. And it made no sound, or else it was too far away and too high for me to hear it, and then it went out of sight."

Mari shivered and looked afraid. "An omen."

"I think it was from the cities," Rufus said.

"A creature?"

"I don't know. But it was from somewhere—*somewhere else*. I wanted to know about it, Mari. I wanted to go and find out what it was, what the cities are like— everything."

"You mustn't," Mari whispered, worry in her dark eyes.

The words had caused Rufus' brain to crash with pain, and he nodded quickly. "I know," he said, making the top level of his thinking lie about what was underneath in his secret thoughts, as he had learned to do to make the pain stop swiftly. "I know it's crazy."

"It's beautiful tonight," Mari said, stroking him again. "And I've missed you. Lie down with me now."

Rufus stretched out beside her, and she was all softness and warmth. He trembled, needing her. "I wish—" he began passionately, and broke off.

"What?" she whispered, nestling closer.

"I wish I could have you all to myself forever. I wish it could be just the two of us, alone—no one else."

Mari chuckled softly. "Darling, where do you get all these atavistic impulses?"

"I don't know," he groaned, as she arranged her clothing to admit him.

"You should stop worrying so much, you know."

"Yes. I know that."

"You know there's no one else. Why worry about possibilities? Love me."

Now. Here. Do this. Yes. Just keep doing that and don't think, my sweet Rufus."

Yes, he thought distantly, and of course she was right. But it was all right to lie; the rules said so. And loyalty came first to the family; the rules said that, too. So there was no way he could ever know, ever be *sure* ... of her, of himself, of anything.

CHAPTER TWO

It was known that there had been another family in the same general area years earlier. Because there was no written history, the details were known only vaguely, by oral tradition. It was said that three battles had been fought with the other family, and that the True Believers, or True Citizens, of whom Rufus was a member, had lost the first two encounters. The third battle had lasted for three days and three nights, and at its conclusion, the True Citizens had not only killed the last man of the other family, but had torn the bowels out of their women, leaving no person alive to plot further violence. There had been, after that historic war, a later and smaller one. A band of men and women following a strange, nomadic path had happened through the valley which the stronghold mountain overlooked. The True Citizens had mounted a war party, gone into the valley, and slain the interlopers in their sleep.

None of this was recorded in the Learner, the device which young persons visited regularly for their education. The Learner taught the language as spoken to all, provided elementary methods of counting and calculation, and taught a select few how to put these calculations into numbers and the ideas into words. But the knowledge within the Learner contained no history, and except for rules and procedures to be followed by the family for its survival, included nothing else at all.

A few members of the family continued to visit the Learner after their youthful education was concluded. Rufus was one of these.

He did not know why, but it was decreed that each full moon he was to report to Fred, who took him to the cave where the Learner was kept. Fred activated the Learner, and Rufus submitted to it for a few minutes. Submission involved grasping two cold tubes, attached to cords like slippery ropes, which extended from the sheer face of the Learner, which itself looked like nothing so much as a very fine door fitted into a wall of

rock. Rufus was to grasp the tubes and wait. Customarily he would experience a slight tingling which was not unpleasant; when the tingling subsided, he was finished.

He had no idea what it was all about, but he had always submitted without really thinking about it.

It was a few days after Joseph first admitted going into the town that the matter of the Learner came up.

Joseph had been back to the town repeatedly. He had told Rufus this, but had refused to provide any details, angrily insisting that Rufus should come along himself if he was that curious. But Rufus had declined, frightened.

"We could go in there tonight," Joseph said on this occasion, as they both carried firewood through the clearing.

"No," Rufus muttered. "I don't want to. Besides. Tonight I visit the Learner."

"You still visit that thing?" Joseph asked sharply.

"Yes. You know that. Once each moon."

"Rufus," Joseph said even more sharply, "don't do it any more."

"Don't visit the Learner?" Rufus asked, astonished. "Why?"

"Don't do it, that's all!"

"But I report to Fred, and he goes there with me. He'd know if I failed to follow instructions."

"Oh, God," Joseph groaned. "Rufus, *listen* to me. Have you ever failed to go to the Learner—for even a single month?"

"Once I was sick..."

"And did failing to go to the Learner cause any problem for you? Did you fall ill? Did you start forgetting things?"

"No," Rufus said, bewildered. "As a matter of fact, I felt very well all

that month. It was the next month that the headaches came back."

"*After* you visited the Learner again?"

"Yes, but—" Rufus tumbled. "Are you saying *the Learner* causes my headaches?"

"I don't know," Joseph snapped, as someone was approaching. "I don't know enough yet. But *stay away from it*. Fool Fred somehow."

"How?"

"I don't know.—Don't grasp both handles at once. Pretend, but *don't*."

They had no opportunity for more talk. The few words baffled Rufus and unsettled him. They built the evening fire, and the grayish sun went down and the disc of a brownish moon peered over distant craggy peaks. The family gathered, and voices filled the darkening meadow. Rufus tried to think about what Joseph had said—tried to penetrate the puzzle with some kind of logic. But every time he thought he saw a glimmering—whenever the pieces began to fit—one of those shafts of pain threatened to drop him to his knees.

He saw Mari at the meal. She already knew it was his night with the Learner. He wanted badly to tell her what Joseph had said, but something warned him against this. Joseph, he thought, was in grave danger. It was too risky to tell anyone. Even Mari.

It was later in the evening that he reported to Fred. The leader was seated in a group of a half-dozen men and women, and they were telling stories of the olden days and the battles. Fred looked up with something like irritation in his eyes.

"Yes, Rufus," he said, getting to his feet. "We have that work."

They left the group and started up the hill under the trees.

"Tell me how you've been feeling," Fred suggested as they walked.

"Very well," Rufus lied.

"Any more of those headaches?"

"No," Rufus lied.

"Good," Fred smiled in the dimness. "And you like your work?"

"Oh, yes."

It had been this way, Rufus realized, for a long time. He had lied for many months. Why had he lied? He didn't know. He thought it had begun from fear. But of what? Did he have anything to fear from Fred—or the Learner?

"We have every prospect of good rain soon," Fred was telling him. "The crops will be good. Animals will abound. Our stores will be filled and we will have days of playing and games, with no work at all. We have no enemies and surely our place is the most beautiful and serene in the universe."

"What is the universe?" Rufus asked carelessly.

Fred glanced sharply at him. "What?"

Fear. "I only asked, what is the universe?"

"You read, but you don't know the term?"

"I'm sorry. No."

"The universe," Fred said, "is this land we live in. It is all there is. You understand that."

"Yes," Rufus smiled.

"And of course you believe it, as we all do."

"Yes. Oh, yes."

Fred seemed to relax. They were well up the hill now, where the trees were fewer. The night air bit coldly into Rufus's skin. The moon sailed. It was not far now, and Rufus's skull was dazzled with pain as he wondered if he would dare do as Joseph had said.

"Tell me," Fred suggested, "about our friend Joseph."

Rufus almost gasped, thinking Fred had seen his thoughts. "What is there to tell?"

"Is he happy, do you think?"

"Of course. Isn't everyone happy here?"

"Of course that's so. And yet I worry about Joseph."

Rufus said nothing. His teeth chattered with fear, and he hoped the cold would be blamed.

"A man must be protected from wrong thoughts," Fred persisted as they clambered up through the rocks. "If Joseph—or anyone else—had wrong thoughts, it would be the duty of the family member who knew about it to tell us so we could help the ailing one."

"Yes," Rufus said. "I understand that."

"Tell me. Has Joseph ever mentioned the town to you?"

"The t-town? No! No one goes to the town!" Dazzling pain.

"Yes," Fred said, watching him closely. "Well. Here we are."

They had reached the cave. The family member standing guard recognized Fred and raised his arm in a smart greeting. Fred returned the signal. He let Rufus walk ahead of him into the cave.

It was low and long. Light seemed to glow from behind the rock walls in a way that could only be magical. It was always the same temperature in the cave, so that in the summer it felt chill, but on a night like this, with the wind cool outside, it felt warm and cozy. The floor of the cave was perfectly smooth, the way no rock Rufus had ever seen could possibly be.

Along one wall of the cave were several of the things that Rufus thought of as cold doors. From them extended sets of slippery ropes with handles, as Joseph had called them.

"All right, Rufus," Fred said amiably. "You know what to do." He leaned against the wall.

Rufus shuffled forward to the door that was his. He picked up one of

the handles, with its attached cord. He reached for the other, held in a shiny metal clasp. As he grasped it, he heard a distant humming, as of wind in a cavern, and the tingling began.

Perhaps it was fear, but this time the tingling seemed to hurt.

He glanced back at Fred, who was leaning back with his eyes closed.

On impulse, Rufus slid the handle through his hand so that he grasped instead the slippery covering of the attached cord. The tingling stopped.

A thunderbolt of pain shot through him.

He clung, gasping for breath, his back to Fred.

The moaning behind the door continued. But there was no tingling, and Rufus managed by supreme effort to make himself think of Mari—of the fields, of anything but what he was doing. He was terrified, but he intended for reasons he did not fully comprehend to hang on, to fool the Learner.

A long time passed. The pain dazzled him, but he had learned well to deal with it, and somehow he managed. He waited long past the time he felt the lesson was ordinarily completed. Usually he quickly fell to daydreaming with the Learner, and this time there was none of the soothing sensation, so he gave himself much more time.

Finally he detected a change in the humming behind the door.

With a little gasp of relief, he placed the handles back in their sockets.

He turned to Fred.

Fred smiled. "Finished?"

"Yes," Rufus managed.

"How do you feel?"

"Good." It was what he always said. Always before it had been true. The pain was a torrent through his mind.

"Come, then," Fred said.

They walked outside together, into the cold. They started down the hill.

"Will you join us in our talk?" Fred asked him politely, seemingly with new warmth in his tone.

"I—I need to meet someone," Rufus said. "A girl."

Fred chuckled. "Of course. All right, Rufus." He clapped Rufus on the shoulder and turned away, heading on down the hillside alone.

Rufus watched him for a long moment, then turned and staggered off the trail. He was alone and it was black. The pain engulfed him and he fell to hands and knees, retching.

The paroxysm slowly passed. Gasping for air, he got back to his feet. The wind was icy on the sweat coating his body. But he felt a surge of triumph, too.

He had fooled Fred and he had fooled the Learner. And he was still alive. He would never, he promised himself, submit to the Learner again. He did not need it. He was Rufus.

CHAPTER THREE

The elders clearly considered it odd for anyone to study the allowed books. Only a handful of those in the family considered the books worth any consideration whatsoever, and the majority had never seen them. But Rufus had seen them many times, and in the weeks following his first fooling of the Learner, he found himself going to the square rock building which housed them more and more often.

There were nineteen books in the building. Six told of how to count with numbers and do other practical things which the Learner had already taught everyone. Four were in a language Rufus could not understand. Of the remaining nine, Rufus had read four by the end of the next moon cycle. One was a story about a man who lived in a faraway place of great buildings, and his father had died and came back to haunt him about the marriage of his mother and his uncle. Rufus wasn't able to make much of it. Another book was useful, and told how to catch fish, but suggested using implements Rufus couldn't fully imagine. Yet another book was a listing of laws, and was so complex that Rufus could only

conclude that somewhere, once, there had been a society incredibly more complex than his own. The fourth book was about nature, and was the most puzzling of all.

This last book unsettled Rufus more than any of the others. It included pictures. It showed many wild beasts he had never seen nor heard about. It showed all manner of plants totally unfamiliar to him, and growing in a profusion that was hard to believe. It told about the weather, and none of it made sense because the pictures showed a blue sky, rather than a green one, and clear water in streams rather than brown-black, and white clouds instead of orange-dusty or black ones. It even talked of the seasons as if they were different, as if different times of the year were radically different rather than virtually the same under the canopy of the green sky.

It occurred to Rufus, reading these books, that he was reading things written in some earlier time before the dawn of history—before, even, the beginning of the family. He wondered. He tried to imagine theories, and although stretching his imagination in this way caused pain in his head as always, it seemed to him that the pain was less than normal.

In this same time, the predicted rains did not come. The prepared fields were scoured by the wind, and the elders decreed that the men would prepare the fields a second time, using the last of their seeds. This was done, but another full moon came and the rain did not come.

For a second time, Rufus fooled Fred and he fooled the Learner.

Joseph was becoming more reckless. Rufus knew, without asking, that he was continuing to visit the town. He wondered how Fred and the elders could miss the multiple signs. One night at campfire, Joseph practically branded himself.

David, one of the elders, was talking with Rufus and Mari when Joseph strode up and joined them. David, his skinny shoulders muscular, clapped Joseph on the back. "Joseph! The hunting goes well?"

It had been a bad hunt that day, and Joseph looked completely exhausted, still coated with dirt and showing bloodstains from a dozen bramble slashes. His eyes blazed back at the skinny older man.

"It would go better," he snapped, "if I weren't used like a dog, chasing the buck for the others."

David's long face held the mild smile. "Every hunter must begin."

"I could hunt," Joseph shot back. "I could kill. I get no chances."

"Patrick is the leader. If you have a suggestion, you should speak to him about this."

"The only suggestion I have," Joseph said, "is to lead Patrick into a lion's cave. If he were out of the way, perhaps the rest of us would be given a chance."

"We can never condone violence to gain our ends, Joseph," David said, shocked.

"Why not?" Joseph demanded, getting angrier and ignoring Rufus's warning looks.

"Nothing was ever achieved through violence."

"Wasn't this family started with violence?"

"That was different."

"Wasn't this family expanded through violence?"

"That was different."

"Isn't the family maintained through violence?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean lashing a man who disobeys an order?"

"That's different, too, Joseph," David said sternly, "and you know it. You're trying to confuse the issue with revolutionary rhetoric, and it won't work."

"All I know," Joseph said, "is that I never get a chance."

"You get every chance."

"I get no chances, and I have no freedom. I'm treated like a hunting dog to glorify Patrick; not like a man."

"Joseph," David sighed, "you're tired and confused. Rest, before you say things you might regret."

"I'm free to rest and keep my mouth shut, is that it?"

"Joseph, you know you have *perfect* freedom!"

"Why don't I *feel* it, then?" Joseph demanded.

"You're tired. You give up too easily."

"Why can't I hunt alone? Why are we restricted to certain areas? Why don't we hunt on the other side of the mountain? Why can't Rufus, here, hunt with me if he wishes it?"

"Because those things have been decreed," David answered patiently.

"What kind of freedom is that?"

"It's the best kind, Joseph. You are free to do anything we say is allowable. That frees you from uncertainty and error. The system gives you this as a gift, in exchange for your faith.—You know that faith is the greatest attribute of all."

"What," Joseph cried out, "about things I can't believe in?"

"Accept!"

"Without thought?"

"That is the greatest kind of human endeavor, as you well know!"

Joseph shot Rufus a despairing glance, then turned back to face the elder again. "You talk in circles."

"Truth is cyclic. You know that. In the beginning is the end."

"If I want to hunt alone," Joseph persisted, "what must I do?"

"You won't accomplish anything through revolutionary rhetoric. I can tell you that much."

"All right, then, what if I shut my mouth? How can I make changes?"

"First you must show faith in the system. You must work through the system."

"All right, what do I do first?"

David looked numb. "For what?"

"To get into the system."

"You can't be allowed in the system! You talk like a revolutionary."

"How can I change *that*?"

"You wait," David smiled.

"I wait?"

"One day, Joseph, you too will be a lead huntsman. Like Patrick. You will have your own hut and your status as leader, and perhaps even your own fine bow. Then you will appreciate the system, and see how fine it is, and then you will become a part of it."

"Just as soon," Joseph said incredulously, "as I have enough from it so I have a vested interest in maintaining it as it then stands?"

"Precisely."

"Then there will *never* be change!"

"Perhaps not," David agreed amiably. "There never has been."

Joseph looked so stunned that he said nothing, and Rufus finally had his chance to interrupt, to try to save him.

"Joseph," he said huskily, "you're tired. Let's walk—"

Joseph muttered a harsh expletive, pulled away from his grasp, and turned to run off into the woods.

David sighed and stared after him. "I worry, Rufus."

"He's fine," Rufus said quickly. "He's tired, that's all, and—"

David silenced him with a slight gesture. "Whatever course Joseph may be on, he is following it. Fate will determine his future. I trust it will work out favorably." Then he turned to Rufus with a look so keen and penetrating that Rufus thought for a ghastly instant that he knew about tricking the Learner. "I worry about you."

"Why me?" Rufus gasped.

"You associate with Joseph. It is possible you'll allow his kind of thinking to spoil your mind?"

"No. Certainly not. I—"

"All right," David said quickly, reacting to Rufus's genuine fear. "Be of good heart, Rufus. Do your work as assigned to you. Work for the good of the family. Be a True Citizen and obey in all things. Follow your natural and good impulses. Distrust aberrations such as so-called logic; it only poisons the mind and destroys our most precious gift: faith. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Rufus murmured, bowing his head.

David said nothing, and when Rufus finally looked up, the elder had gone.

* * *

STILL THE RAIN did not come, and another cycle passed. The hunters roved farther from the mountain, and for a long time Rufus did not see Joseph at all. Once more Rufus fooled the Learner. His head seldom hurt any more.

It was toward the end of this period that those events took place which changed Rufus's life.

One of the females, a girl named Sarah, was discovered to be with child. It was forbidden, of course, and the herbs had been taken properly. But she was pregnant nevertheless, and by the time she was finally discovered, as they said, she was well developed, the child evident in her swollen belly.

Sarah was taken by three of the women and two of the elders to the area near the Oracle, which was forbidden to all others. She was gone a

day and a night, and returned pale and shaken, not speaking of what had happened, but slender again, the child gone.

The Oracle was so powerful, and so many inexplicable things had happened around it in the past, Rufus might have thought little about it if Joseph and John had not sought him out later in the night.

"We saw what happened," Joseph whispered bitterly.

"You saw—?" Rufus repeated, stunned.

"Both of us," Joseph hissed.

John's face was a pale, glistening oval in the darkness. "Yes," he muttered, and then shuddered from head to foot.

"You've taken John with you into wrongdoing?" Rufus demanded.

"For a long time I confided in you," Joseph said bitterly. "But you never move. John is young. He's growing. He's beginning to question, like me. I didn't force him to go."

Rufus glanced at John for corroboration.

"I wanted to go," John muttered huskily. Then a sob choked him. "I wish I *hadn't*—!"

"What did you see?" Rufus asked, afraid to know.

"They took Sarah to the Oracle," Joseph said. "They took the child."

"The Oracle," Rufus said. "Of course. I understand that. The powers—"

"There were no powers," Joseph grated. "There were only the elders and the women. They took her near the Oracle and there was a building and they took her inside. They put her on a table. They had lights of a kind I've never seen, lights that *glowed*. They gave her something to taste, and she slept. Then they spread her legs and put instruments inside her and pulled and tugged and cut, and they took the baby out of her."

"There was no baby," Rufus argued. "It was still inside her, so it was just a growth—"

"They took it out," Joseph snarled with savage anger. "They pulled it out, *twisting* it, and it started to cry."

"Don't talk about that part," John sobbed.

"They pulled it out and it started to cry," Joseph said.

"So they took some instruments and they broke its head. We heard its head break, and it crying, and then it stopped, and they threw it into a pail and carried it away."

"No," Rufus said. "I don't believe that."

"They took a baby and they killed it."

"No. It wasn't born yet. It had no rights."

"They killed it."

"They had to do it because the girl's rights are more important, and the family has the rule—"

"They murdered the baby," Joseph hissed. "They broke its skull and killed it and threw it in the pail like garbage and carried it away."

John sobbed and moaned, rocking on his haunches.

"It's the kind of thing they do," Joseph whispered, his eyes no longer angry but suddenly haunted. "They break babies' heads and say it's all right, because someone else has more rights than the baby."

"You don't understand what you saw," Rufus argued, pleading for himself. "It was something different."

"No," Joseph said. "*Now* will you believe what I've been telling you about this place?—Will you go away from here with John and me?"

"Go—away?"

"To a better place."

"There is no better place."

"Then we'll make one," Joseph said.

Rufus looked at them with horror.

"Will you go with us?" Joseph said. "Rufus! Every man has to face a choice eventually. He comes to the day when there can't be any more delay, any more self-delusion, any more wishing things were different. The day comes and he may never know it until he's old, and it's so much too late. Will you go with us? You may never have another chance!"

"I *can't*," Rufus groaned.

Joseph turned to John. "We can make it without him. We'll leave on the night before the day of rest. Everyone is busiest then, and we have no duties in the morning. We'll be a day away before anyone notices."

"The Oracle will tell the elders your plan!" Rufus protested.

"The Oracle isn't what they say," Joseph retorted. "Nothing is as they say it is. Don't you even understand that much yet?"

"The Oracle—"

"Have you ever *seen* the Oracle, Rufus?"

"No! It's forbidden—"

"Go see it!" Joseph sneered. "I've seen it. John saw it the other night. There's no magic in that cavern. We can't understand it all, but it's not magic."

"I couldn't go near the Oracle," Rufus trembled.

"Then be damned," Joseph said disgustedly.

But it wasn't that easy. Joseph and John pointedly stayed away from Rufus during the next day, and it hurt him. They had been his best friends. He missed them. He didn't like the way they were treating him now. He tried to understand, but even now, if he thought directly about the problem, the old head pains returned, not as severe as for lesser transgressions in the past, but definite and agonizing.

He did not consider telling anyone what he knew about them. A day

passed, then another, and he knew they were stealing food and hiding it for their journey, which was a serious offense. But he told no one. If they treated him badly and were no longer his friends from their viewpoint, he still loved them. There would be no betrayal.

He yearned for someone, and approached Mari.

"Oh, Rufus," she sighed, "I'm very tired, and I have so much work to do. Why don't you see someone else?"

"You know how I feel about that," Rufus said thickly.

She sighed again. "I know. But I can't see you just now, darling. I know you understand."

He sat with others of the family around the big fire and talked with them, but felt utterly alone.

Was there a chance Joseph and John were right in what they were doing? Rufus rejected the idea as it came to him. They were breaking too many laws, and laws were just. And yet... *and yet*. It occurred to him that he had doubted Joseph about the Learner, and Joseph had been right. He had doubted Joseph when Joseph said there would be no rain, and again Joseph had been right.

Could Joseph be right about this, too?

Rufus tried to puzzle out the moral questions involved in the killing of the baby, for he now believed this was a true report. It was complex. It was said the family was humane and highly civilized: no member ever killed but in just combat, or to protect a higher principle. It was said that an unborn child was not a child but a parasitical growth in the host female. So the family had removed a troublesome parasite, and if the thing had had life, it was only a little life, and not worth much bother.

But it had cried. Oh, God, it had *cried*.

Could the family, he wondered, really claim to love life and justice if it allowed this thing to happen, and even blessed its legality? What did it imply for the family's respect for others' lives—for *his* life—if it could justify killing with some fine-sounding abstraction about higher goods and relative rights?

Was the family—and here he came to the unthinkable idea—really a just and moral organization?

The blast of pain that this thought brought him dropped him to his knees. Because he was working in the field when it came, to him, he pretended to have tripped, and as he forced his brain into another cycle of thought to relieve the agony, he saw something else as well.

The family allowed its True Citizens freedom of thought. But it was freedom only to think *what the family considered conceivable*.

The thought he had just had was too basic to be allowed. For, he saw, if one really began to question the basic honesty of a concept, there was no end to the lengths that doubt might extend. The family might lie. The family might kill. The family might exist for evil purposes. The family might be the worst, not the best, place in the universe.

And perhaps it was precisely this line of thought that had led Joseph and John to their plan.

The line of thinking excited Rufus enormously. He intuited that he was on the very shallow edge of something that might quickly engulf him. He knew he did not have a subtle or clever mind. And yet he was tremendously excited by intuition more than by thorough understanding.

He would find Joseph this evening at campfire, he decided, and question him. What did this line of thought imply? Where did it lead? Was it the way Joseph and John had come? Let them explain their findings!

But that night, as the fire licked smokily at an encircling cool fog shrouding the mountainside, he went to the accustomed places and could not locate Joseph anywhere.

At first he assumed he was early, or late, and it meant nothing. He went to the hunters' tent and found several of the hunters, but didn't see Joseph. As he started to leave, Patrick called after him. "Rufus! A word."

Rufus turned as the barrel-chested man strode after him. Patrick was a head taller than he, and carried twice his weight in sheer sinew, and smelled strongly of blood and sweat.

"When you locate Joseph," Patrick boomed down at him, "send the scamp running to me."

"Yes sir," Rufus said meekly.

"He left the hunt early today," Patrick snapped. "I have a punishment awaiting him."

Muttering a promise, Rufus hurried away, more worried than ever. He tried to keep the fear beaten back. It was all right, he told himself repeatedly.

But he tried the equipment building without result, went back to the fire without result, and finally looked for the woman Joseph had been seeing, a girl named Ruth. She was sitting with another man, and said coolly that she hadn't seen Joseph since morning, although he had promised to see her at suppertime.

By now it was clear that John, too, was missing. Rufus accepted food at the fire and stood alone, chewing the tasteless bread and old meat that had been doled out to him.

Something had happened. Something very bad.

Rufus walked around the fire again, looking now for Mari. He had to talk to someone. He was very near panic, and was controlling it only by more will than he had known he possessed. The smoke of the great fire mixed with the cold fog, making shadowy figures of the family members eating their night meal. Through the misty smoke and fog above, the crust of a brown moon occasionally peered through. Rufus was chilled, and the taste of his fear was rancid in his mouth.

He found Mari with Fred and three others on the upwind side of the fire where the smoke was less bothersome.

"Rufus!" Fred smiled. "Join us a while!"

"I was on my way somewhere," Rufus lied.

"Did you see Joseph today?" Fred asked easily.

"No."

"He asked me to give you a message," Fred smiled. "He has his chance at last, it seems."

"His—chance?" Rufus's pulse crashed in his temples.

"Patrick has sent him on a hunt," Fred said. "Joseph took your other friend, John, with him. As a trainee. Joseph was very pleased. He said to tell you he would return soon."

Were they watching him very keenly? Rufus had an instant of feeling nearly insane. *It's a lie!* his mind screamed. *It's all a lie, you're lying to me, Patrick doesn't know where Joseph is either!*

But somehow he managed to keep his face placid, and even force a frozen smile. "I see," he murmured.

"You should be pleased for him," Fred said, slipping his arm around Mari.

"I am," Rufus said. "Very much. He needed a chance—"

"And now he has it," Fred grinned.

Rufus looked at Mari. "Will you walk with me?"

She smiled. "I'm very tired, Rufus. Another time?"

"Of course," Rufus said, and turned away.

He nearly stumbled as he left them, aware of the terrible need to appear calm and unsuspecting.

It was a lie. All lies. They thought he was a fool. The truth was obvious. Joseph and John had been caught. His only friends had been trapped, somehow, and taken somewhere. Where? How? What could he do?

The idea of doing *anything* was alien, another new concept under these circumstances. But he knew immediately that he had to *try*.

* * *

He would try.

The moment Rufus decided this, the worst dread and turmoil passed out of him. It was immediately replaced by something he had never felt before, a curious, icy calm.—All right, he told himself, the worst has happened. Now it has to be dealt with.

He would deal with it in some way. He would not await orders, sit under a tree and worry, listen to his fears, curse his fate, or ponder imponderables. And having made this resolution, he felt strong. It was a fine feeling. He liked it.

But what could he do?

There were two or three things that might be tried. If something very bad had happened, it probably could be traced in some way to the old town below. The forbidden place. It was there, he suspected, that Joseph and John had been hiding their foodstuffs. So if there was a clue to be had, the place to start was in the town.

A day earlier, the idea of going to the town would have petrified him. But he had been lied to often enough that fear was secondary. He felt almost reckless. He would go to the town.

It was dark, chill and foggy away from the campfire place. Once in the woods, Rufus knew he was relatively safe from being followed. Still, driven along by his newfound recklessness, he moved slowly, alone, pausing now and then to listen for possible footfalls behind him. He had no good idea what he would do if he heard a pursuer, any more than he knew what to expect or what to do in the town. Since no one was following, as far as he could tell, the question was moot.

He crossed through the wood, worked his way down the hillside, slipped through the field of old fallen boulders, and came to the ancient road that led to the town. He had a touch of fear at this point, but swallowed it. Keeping to the brush along the side of the road, he headed into the forbidden place.

It did not take long, although he had never been this far from the family site prior to this night. He walked for perhaps an hour, and then realized that he had come to the town itself. The fog was less dense here, and his first signal was the look of blocky buildings standing ahead against the moonlight. The buildings looked incredibly old, staggered, close together in hideous closeness, silent.

Rufus stopped in the brush alongside the road after he had drawn near the first of the buildings. The fog seemed closer and more dank near the old town, and the moonlight was opaque and shifting, making shadows seem to move. There was a faint odor of rot in the air; somewhere a creature of some kind was rustling in a wall of a structure, and distantly a wild dog barked. Rufus shivered.

He decided to turn back.

But then, as he actually turned back, he felt a pulse of anger. If he had any chance of learning the fate of Joseph and John, it had to be here. Joseph had dropped enough hints that the old library was the place they were hiding their supplies. He had described to Rufus where this building was in relationship to several others, including some that had burned and tumbled rubble into the streets. Rufus could find the library. He could seek a clue—if he was man enough.

It was a startling thought, and the first time Rufus had ever considered the possibility that courage might be related directly to his manhood. He did not know whether the idea was appealing, but it was startling enough to decide him.

Taking a deep breath, he turned and faced the town again. Boldly he stepped out of the brush and walked down the main street, passing between huge old buildings.

It was silent in the town, and very dark. Once a creature scuttled swiftly across his path, frightening him badly. But he kept going, his breath short and his heartbeat a pain in his throat.

The buildings had been unoccupied for a very long time. Most roofs were gone, windows broken out, doors gone, walls fallen in. A few strange metal buildings, with wheels on them, stood wrecked in the street. Rufus did not understand why it had ever been necessary to have such small buildings, and to have them portable.

He came to a cross-street, looked up and down, and spotted the vague outlines of an enormous pile of wreckage a half-block away. That was his signal. He turned and made his way toward it, moving with total silence in his bare feet.

Reaching the piled rubble, he turned round and spotted another

landmark, the very building he wanted. His heart hammered louder as he picked his way through chunks of granite and old beams of wood, climbing to the stairs of the building. He had to wend his way through more obstacles to get to the inside.

The first floor was open to the sky, wrecked walls standing like monuments in the shifting mist. There was just enough light to see the stairway leading down. Rufus moved cautiously toward the stairs. He had never been in a real building before and it made him more uneasy than ever. Would the lower level be completely black? He should have brought a torch—

At that moment he spied a crumpled form on the floor almost at his feet. He stopped abruptly, gasping. Then, assuring himself that it was the body of a person and not a trick of his eyes, he dropped to his knees to examine the situation.

"No!" he groaned.

The man was dead, sprawled on his back, his mouth agape with terror and pain, eyes staring at a sky he would never see again. The man was cold and stiff, his chest was covered with blood that had also pooled beside him, the shaft of a hunting arrow stuck horribly from his chest, and his dead hands had clawed the flooring and dirt where he had fallen.

He had died violently and hard.

The dead man was John.

* * *

FOR AN INDETERMINATE TIME Rufus knelt, rocking on his shins, and the sobbing that echoed softly through the silence was his own. Only slowly was he able to begin to find some semblance of control. When he did, the first question that came to his mind sent him quickly to his feet, and hurrying almost hysterically around the rest of the ruined building floor.

He did not find Joseph.

Was Joseph in the level below?

Rufus wrung his hands. He had no torch. Making one would take more time than he could spare. He would be missed soon by the family. He had to get back.

Tomorrow, he thought. Tomorrow he would come back in daylight, and with a torch. He would search for Joseph's body, too.

With that thought, he started to turn away.

A creature—a large rat—scattered across the floor.

Chills shuddered over Rufus in waves. If he left John's body, the rats would have a feast.

Deciding instantly from the revulsion making him quake, Rufus grasped the dead youth's arms and dragged him laboriously outside and down the steps. An area of brush and weeds bounded the steps and the street. Finding a broken board, Rufus hacked at the earth to scoop out a shallow grave.

He had never dug a grave before, and although he was strong, he quickly got tired and badly out of breath. It was made more difficult because he was crying. He didn't know why he was crying, or for whom, because it was all mixed up. He was crying for John and probably for Joseph, and for the people who had done this, and the human condition, and for himself. For the first time, distantly, he saw why people dug graves for the fallen. The work of clawing this soft dark hole in the earth with one's own hands was a good work; it somehow partook of the sorrow that made the work necessary. *I'll dig this hole for you, John, Rufus thought. I'll take care of you and lovingly place you in the ground, because it's all I can do for you, all anyone can ever do for anyone. It doesn't help at all, but it is done, and I'll cover you, but I won't forget.*

He rolled John's stiff corpse into the hole and covered it up, wincing as he tossed in the first harsh earth, then scrubbing the dirt over the body swiftly, out of a hellish need to have it done so he could stop the rolling chills. Then he turned away quickly and hurried out of the town.

* * *

ON THE WAY HOME AGAIN, Rufus wondered where he could find Mari. He knew he didn't dare to tell her. But he feared being alone yet

tonight. He told himself he could simply seek her out, and she would understand that there was no desire in his need this time, and she would respond.

Tomorrow, he thought, would have to wait. There was too much of tonight yet to deal with. Tomorrow he would return to the town and seek Joseph. He might yet unravel precisely what had happened, and how, and why so many had already lied about what had taken place. He had no idea how he would respond or what it all might mean.

As he neared the hill where the family resided, he chose a shortcut through a small wood floored with lush grass, where lovers often went. He moved cautiously and silently, knowing that no one would give him a second glance, out of politeness, if they did hear him pass. It was very cold and deep into the night now, and he did not really expect to find anyone in the place for lovers.

When he heard the soft sounds of love-making directly in his path, he was both surprised and irritated. He started to skirt the little glade, going to hands and knees for greater stealth.

"That's it," the girl's voice moaned in delight. "Yes, darling—!"

The voice was one he knew.

Shrinking, without truly willing it, Rufus turned toward the hidden shelter where he knew the lovers were. He crawled forward, nearing the sounds of passionate love. The fog was slight here, and the moon spilled silver through higher clouds.

Rufus peered through the brush.

On the floor of the tiny grotto were two persons, a girl and a man. The man was Fred, naked, between the the girl's long and beautiful legs, lurching rhythmically against her, and her arms and legs entwined his body, and her head was back in transport so Rufus saw her face, and it was Mari.

Words she had said lanced into his memory: "*Darling, where do you get these atavistic ideas and impulses?*"

So all the time she had been too tired, or too busy, it had really been

Fred—Fred or any number of others.

And of course this was perfectly acceptable under the rules of the family.

In a flash, as he turned and stumbled quietly away, Rufus saw the truth: he was no longer of this family.—They lied and killed and took others' women or men, and pretended, and it was madness. They were mad or *he* was mad, but whatever the truth, he could not live with it another minute.

Was it a conscious, rational decision? He would always know that it was not. Was it even fully realized? He would never know the answer to this question.

All he knew was that he crawled away from the trysting place a little way, and then fell on his face and threw up. Then, shaking, he got back to his feet and began to run.

He ran across the side of the hill and through the highland pastures and down the far side under the brooding brown old moon, and clambered down the face of the cliff to the valley he had never before visited, and then, after a little rest, he set out across the valley toward the distant mountains. In the morning, he knew, they would miss him, and they would pursue him. So he ran again, sobbing.

When he came to an old highway, he followed it. It seemed to extend in the right direction.

CHAPTER FOUR

The city was alive.

Crouching in the rain-beaten forest a mile or two from the city's walls, the realization of *life* there was almost more than Rufus could bear. He had seen the tall buildings from a hilltop many miles away, and after the month of pursuit by the family, he had imagined he would at last find refuge, real shelter and a solitary place to regain his strength. He felt sure he had eluded his pursuers now—hadn't seen them for well over a week—and had looked forward to having a meal in this abandoned city, too, since he had learned how to trap rats.

But now his hope was blasted, turned to gnawing terror.

Night was slipping over the hills, and here and there in a window of the tall buildings Rufus clearly saw faint lights. He spotted wisps of smoke coming out of the stone canyon streets, and while he crouched here in hiding he had seen no less than six horse-drawn wagons rumble down the old highway and go into the gates of the great wall. Now, watching with the keen eyesight of the hunted, he could make out little movements atop the wall—sentries.

The city was not only alive; it was a fortress.

Shaking from the cold and his sickness, Rufus tried to figure out a course of action. Behind him were the mountains and the terrible cold that had first filled his lungs with sputum and then made him burn as he froze, and shake horribly. He hadn't eaten in five days.

The thorns in the wood had torn his animal skin to shreds and he huddled nearly naked now, rivulets of half-frozen rain glistening on his bare arms and legs.

The last place he wanted to go was into this hostile city. He didn't know the people or what might befall him. But he also knew, feverishly, that if he didn't find a warm place to rest, and food, he was going to die.

It began to rain harder, and lightning veined the sky. The icy raindrops pelted Rufus's body with the force of painful hammers. He decided: he had to risk it.

Almost in the moment he made his decision, he also knew how he would enter. The road a few paces away, over which he had been spying, was evidently a supply line of some kind; all the wagons that had entered the city had rumbled along the road, quite close to him. A faded old metal sign along the road had an ancient heraldic symbol painted upon it, 35. Whatever old curse had been on the road, the wagons that came along periodically were no longer affected by it.

Rufus decided to wait. When another wagon came along, he would try to hide in it.

He crouched, shuddering with cold and sickness.

A little while passed and the rain intensified.

The two big wagons were almost opposite his position before he saw them in the maelstrom, and he couldn't hear them at all. The first, drawn by two horses, was long, with an open flat bed piled high with some sort of materials covered by a huge yellowish skin of a kind he had never seen. The second, a few paces behind, was even larger, and had a kind of giant oval tent built over its bed. A rear flap swept out and billowed in the wind, glistening.

Clutching his weapon, a rock with a sharp edge and a handle of animal-skin tied around it, Rufus allowed the first wagon to go by. He waited until the second was abreast of him and he could see the lone driver up on the front seat, wrapped tightly in skins against the lashing rain.

As this second wagon moved ponderously by, Rufus sprang to his feet and ran onto the slippery, jagged pavement of the roadway.

The rain masked his movement, and perhaps the miserable driver wouldn't have noticed at any rate. No one challenged as Rufus darted in behind the wagon, grabbed the wet boards of the rear platform, and heaved himself up and inside, head-first.

Gasping, he rolled over in the relative warmth and musky closeness of the wagon's interior. Rain pounded in the sleek skin roof over his head, and whistled in around the lightly fastened sides. The wagon jounced and rumbled, creaking slowly along. It was dark in the interior, but Rufus smelled animal skins and alien odors he could not identify.

Looking around, he saw that the interior was piled high with big sacks. No one was there to challenge him. Scrambling around, he felt of the material of the nearest sack, and found it heavy and rough and dry. Using his weapon, he slashed the sack and seeds spilled whitely out.

Making his decision in a moment, Rufus quickly split the sack up one seam, dumping the seeds out over the others. Then he hacked out a head-hole with his weapon, and slipped the makeshift cloak over his shoulders. It billowed and he was still cold. He tore an edge off the sacking and tied it around his waist after slashing another seam to free his arms on the sides.

The material was rough and scratchy, but it immediately made him *think* he was warmer, even if he was not.

With one more wary glance around, Rufus cuddled down between the heavy sacks of seeds, closed his eyes, and was instantly asleep.

It was the stopping of the wagon that shocked him awake.

Tingling, he sat up, clutching his weapon. He remembered where he was and how he had gotten there, but everything else was confused. Rain hammered on the roof and sides of the wagon, but it was no longer moving.

He scrambled to the back flap and raised it cautiously. The wagon was parked beside a great building and he could hear voices out to the front. Beside the blank face of the building he saw smaller pavement fronting the road, glistening with pelting raindrops. There was no one in sight.

But ah, God, all around were the tall buildings, many with faint lights in their windows.

The voices suddenly sounded like they were getting closer. Rufus cowered, trying to choose between the evil of running into this city and perhaps the greater evil of remaining here to be discovered.

The wagon rocked as someone climbed up on its side near the front, and voices sounded louder.

"Unpack this one next, boys," a male voice yelled in a barbaric accent.

Rufus decided. He hopped over the back gate, hit barefooted on the wet pavement, and began to run.

* * *

SELDA FOUR WEARILY walked up the rain-spattered street toward her apartment building, her legs aching from the twelve-hour shift on the machine. She was soaked to the skin and thought she might be coming down with a cold. She would take a tablet the moment she was safely inside her own apartment, she reminded herself. It would be a shame to spoil the weekend.

The term "spoil the weekend" echoed through her mind, and she felt a pang of ironic self-hatred. For the women with families or men, a cold could truly spoil the weekend; it might mean cancellation of parties, postponement of games, calling off trips, spoiling of laughter or subduing the urge to make love. But what, she wondered, was there to spoil in her weekend?

For the truth was that her weekends meant nothing. She rested. She did her laundry and cleaned the apartment—making it gleam for the guests who never came. She read a bit, perhaps wrote a letter to her mother, took another bath, dreamed another idle dream, stared at her bowl of tropical fish, listened to the news. She had never thought much about her weekends; it wasn't good to think too deeply about one's own life. But now, soaked and miserable and cold, she momentarily faced the fact: her life was empty.

Walking nearer her apartment, Selda angrily kicked the thought back into the back of her mind. She was, she told herself, only thirty-eight. She was not too old and she was not that unattractive. One day she would find... someone.

Of course she was a bit eccentric. She would admit that. She had never been good at party conversation. She was not quite clever enough to hide her intellect, and some men were afraid of her. She had not been, and never would be, promiscuous. Each of the four men in her life had truly meant something, had been her lovers in more than name.

Selda reached her apartment and went through the empty lobby, her mind momentarily warmed—and pained—by random memories of her loves. She had been *good*, she thought with fierce pride, remembering. And one day, perhaps...

As she climbed the stairs, a pang of longing went through her. It was hard to push back the longing that there could be someone *now*, this weekend, so there could be wine and excitement and the redolent aroma of love in the bedroom, rather than faint, slightly musty sachet, the distant bubble of the aerator in the fish globe, and drone of the news.

Well, Selda put it out of her mind with briskness. She would simply not think about it. She could do that. She was efficient enough. She *was*, she told herself.

Reaching the third floor, she walked down the barren corridor of doors to the one that was hers. She unlocked the apartment and went in. Simple, utilitarian furniture, arranged perfectly, greeted her eye as she turned on the dim lights.

Hanging her wet coat in the closet, Selda began stripping off the wet pants, blouse and underthings as she padded barefoot to the bathroom. She turned the hot water full on and bent over the sink to brush at her wet, tangled hair as the tub began to fill. Heat was off in the building because of the latest rationing, but steam would make the little cubicle warm soon. Shivering, she bent over the tub to assure herself that the water was steamy hot.

Her fingers recoiled from water as chill as ice.

Giving a little grunt of displeasure, she knew at once what was wrong. The tank in the basement. It was the third time within a month. A broken window down there allowed wind to gust in from the north. Despite her complaints, it hadn't been repaired. If more of the tenants' apartments had water heaters in the north wing, she thought angrily, the complaints might get more action.

Leaving the bathroom, she went to her bedroom and slipped into sloppy brown slacks and a bulky sweater. The coarse material of the sweater rubbed on her breasts irritatingly. It was only for a moment.

Carrying her key in her hand, Selda left the apartment, went down the back stairs, and then to the basement.

It was dark and dank in the huge old basement.

Generators hummed and apartment water heaters bubbled. Cobwebs hanging here and there from the ceiling touched Selda's face, making her shudder involuntarily. She hurried through the darkness to the area where the broken window hung open, allowing cold wind and rain to sweep in onto the floor.

Holding her back to the wind to provide shelter for her lighter, Selda got the heater started again, then pulled a trash can around in front of the little unit to prevent its going out again immediately.

She turned to start for the stairs.

A slight movement behind the furnace startled her nearly out of her wits.

It was furtive—near the floor—a gray movement. A person, jerking back out of sight.

"Who's there?" Selda choked.

Silence.

"Who's *there*?" Her voice rose with beginning fear.

Still nothing.

Selda hesitated. There *was* someone there. She couldn't run because the furnace area was between her and the steps.

Taking a gulp of air, she tried to make her voice lofty. "I see you there. Come out this instant!"

For another moment there was no response. Then, slowly, the figure moved out into view, cowering against the granite wall behind the furnace.

Selda's first spurt of fear gave way to wonderment. The intruder was a man. He was not tall. Shorter than she, actually, and so thin that she almost hurt to look at him. He wore a kind of sacking material draped around his bony frame, he was soaked and shaking from head to toe, and his eyes burned with a fear and curiosity that was like nothing she had ever seen.

"Who are you?" Selda asked. "What do you want?"

The man—he was not more than a boy, really—licked split lips. His great eyes never left Selda's. "To hide," he said thickly, in a strange, guttural accent. "Hide... get warm... find food... rest."

"How did you get here?" Selda asked in amazement.

"The—window. In a wagon—I ran."

Quickly, seeing how frightened and weak he was; Selda was losing all sense of deep fear. She even felt herself take a step toward him, driven by

her curiosity. "Are you from another city?"

"From—my family is from far," the youth managed.

Then he staggered and almost fell.

Selda moved to his side and impulsively put her hand to his forehead. His flesh was afire.

"You're *sick!*" she cried. "You need a doctor!"

He pulled away, frightened. "No! They would send me back!"

"All right, all right," she said quickly, afraid he would bolt.

"Please," he whispered. "I just need—rest. A little while—"

"You can't stay here. The custodian will find you. Or the police look in—"

The youth staggered again, and this time really would have fallen if she hadn't caught his arm.

"But you can't go back out there," she murmured. "You'd die."

"Just rest," he muttered, as if in a daze.

Selda tried to think. She knew her impulse was insane and wildly dangerous. But he was very small and very sick, and the impulse took her.

"Come with me," she said, pulling his arm.

"Where?" He hung back, fear in his eyes again.

"I'll hide you. I know a place. Come."

It occurred to her, as she led the tattered youth up the back stairs, that anyone who saw them would know certainly that she was insane. Her heart beat wildly with fear and excitement. But no one saw them, and she got him into her little apartment safely.

He stood in the living room, swaying with fatigue and illness.

"This way," Selda ordered him crisply, and he followed her dazedly. She put down the sheets of her bed and shoved him into it, covering him firmly.

"Get out of that wet thing you're wearing," she told him. "I'll bring you something hot to drink."

He stared up at her with largely unseeing eyes.

Now shaky herself, Selda hurried to the kitchen. What was she doing? What had she let herself in for? She could be arrested. He might be a maniac, ready to strangle her!

He was only sick, she told herself. He was helpless. He had no one—as she had no one—and she had to help.

In a moment or two the cup of broth was heated. Cupping it in her hands, she hurried with it back into the bedroom.

"Here we are," she said briskly, going to the bed.

But then she looked down and saw that the youth was already deep asleep.

She resisted the impulse to awaken him. Putting the broth on the side table, she paused an instant and looked down at the sleeping face on the pillow. He slept deeply, not a line on his face. He had removed his wet garment and dropped it on the floor beside the bed. Selda picked it up and was amazed to see that it was precisely what it had appeared—a sack of some sort, slit to accommodate head and arms.

She looked back at the stranger sleeping. His forehead was high, his rain-matted hair curly, his mouth wide. It was, she thought, a good face.

Tiptoeing into the kitchen, she sat at the table and drank the broth herself. It was very quiet in the apartment, but she was softly excited and, in a way, pleased with herself. He did need help, she reminded herself, and if she was mad, at least she was no longer completely alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

When Rufus awoke, he knew some time had passed. He remembered

frightening dreams and knew he had been very sick. But he awoke very slowly, his first impressions being of half-sitting in bed while a calm-faced, dark-haired woman in bizarre dress spooned some kind of soup into him, and so he was not as afraid as he might have been.

It was almost a week after his entry into the city when he was fully awake one evening when the woman came in. He was sitting up in bed, trying to puzzle out the printing on a sheet of paper he had found by the bed; when the woman came in with a plate of broth, she recoiled in surprise at his quick glance and almost spilled the food. She stayed by the door, tense in every line of her thin body. She reminded Rufus of nothing so much as a little rabbit or bird frightened in its lair. He felt pity for her.

"Hello," he said, smiling.

She was not really pretty, and was older than most women in the family, but she had a certain frail intensity that made her seem very vulnerable and nice. Her large eyes looked like she was standing very far behind them, afraid to approach nearer.

"You're—better," she murmured. She had a nice voice, soft.

"You helped me," Rufus said. "Is this, a hospital?"

"You know what a hospital is?" she asked, surprised.

"I know the word. I think they must have them in the cities. Is this a hospital?"

"No," she said, and then color crept along her throat. "This is my home."

"I ran away," Rufus marveled. "I hid. You found me and took me in.—Why?"

"You were sick."

They looked at one another, and Rufus realized that she was as frightened as he was. It bonded them together, somehow.

"I am Rufus," he said.

"My name is Selda."

"Thank you for helping me," Rufus said formally.

She flushed again, then seemed to remember the bowl of food in her hands. "You should eat," she said.

"Yes."

She came hesitantly toward the bed, extending the bowl at arms' length and stepping back quickly as he took it. She stood watching him. The soup was good and Rufus ate it rather quickly even though it was hot.

"You look much better today," she said, smiling a **little**.

"I'll get strong again now," Rufus said.

"You're not from the city."

"No. And I wonder if you are in danger."

"In danger?"

"For hiding me."

"No," she said too quickly.

"In the family I come from," Rufus explained, "they say all towns and cities are evil. We live in the hills. Do your people in this city say *we* are bad, too?"

"I didn't know if you really existed," Selda admitted. "We hear you're very dangerous."

Rufus had to chuckle, thinking of his pursuers. "Some of us are."

Selda hesitated, still standing, then seemed to make some decision. She pulled the bedside chair up and sat down, leaning forward intensely.

"You've come far?"

"Yes."

"Are you a criminal?"

"They might say so."

"What did you do?"

"I refused to accept the Learner. I asked questions."

"The Learner? I don't understand.

Rufus tried to explain.

Selda was indignant, real fire showing in her eyes. "How barbaric! It must be a form of brain wave induction. How could the people *allow* such things?"

"The people?" Rufus echoed.

"The people who vote!"

"Vote?"

"The citizens!—Don't you elect your leaders?"

"We have elders," Rufus explained, bewildered.

"How are they named?"

"I don't know."

"How barbaric!"

"Is it different in this city?" Rufus asked.

"Of course! Each city has its executive. He leads. But our system is a democracy—free."

"Free?"

"We're free people, to do as we see fit!"

"No one makes rules?"

"Of course," Selda smiled. "But they're for the common good."

"And no one is in charge?"

"The executive, of course. But we have checks and balances."

"How does this executive get named?" Rufus asked.

"The people pick him. They vote."

"How?"

"Two candidates come forward. The people pick."

"How," Rufus puzzled, "do the candidates come forward?"

"Through the system, of course."

"But how does the system *work*?"

"It's a democracy."

"I think," Rufus admitted, "I'm confused."

"I'll get you a book," Selda smiled. "You can read?"

"Yes. Oh, yes," Rufus said proudly.

"Good," she said. "I'll get you a book, then."

"But I have to get well and leave right away," Rufus argued.

A cloud swept over her face for an instant. "Yes. I forgot that. You must have somewhere to go. You must have something important to do."

Rufus looked at her.

"Don't you?" she asked.

"I ran away. I have—nowhere."

"Then you can stay here a little while," she said. "Until you get all better."

"You're good," Rufus said simply.

"Nonsense," she said, brittle. "It's just common sense. You can't walk

out into an alien culture. They'd probably arrest you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. But they would."

"I just want a place to stay and figure out things," Rufus told her.

"I'll help you a little while," she told him.

"Will your man be angry?"

Her face stiffened. "No. I have no man."

"No?"

"No." She got to her feet, brisk. "I have work to do. You rest now. Sleep. You're still weak and sick. We'll talk tomorrow."

"I won't be trouble for you," Rufus said. "I like you. You're very nice. I'll try to be quiet. I needed a friend and you came. I want to be your friend. I'll help you, too. I don't know how yet, but I will. You won't regret helping me. I promise."

She smiled faintly, relaxing. "Just hush and rest."

"Yes," Rufus said. "But more people should be like you.—You know my thought on this? I think of all the people in this city, not many would have helped. You are one of the best. I owe you my life."

She blushed again. "Nonsense, I say!" She turned and walked crisply from the room, her broad pant legs swishing.

Rufus lay quiet in the bed for a long time, hearing her rattle dishes and then operate some machine in the other part of the place. He was more befuddled about the world than ever, and saw that he now had everything to learn about everything, and it wouldn't be easy.

But one thing made sense, and made him feel good. He could tell that his words had pleased her. He wanted to please her. He guessed that not enough people had ever tried to please this woman, and he vowed to himself that he would do something nice for her before leaving. She deserved it because she was good and gentle and kind, and he liked her,

and it was nice to have said something that made her face warm.

Later, in the night, he pretended to be asleep when she glided into the room and stood over the bed, looking down at his face in silence, for a long, long time.

* * *

IT WAS THE NEXT DAY that Selda brought Rufus the book.

They talked for a while after she brought the slender volume, but they were shy with each other, and frightened. Selda went to another part of the apartment, and later to her bed in the far room, closing the door with the soft sound of a turning lock. Rufus wished she would come out so they could try to talk again, but she didn't. He began reading the book, which was titled "The Origins of Modern Civilization."

The world, he learned to his surprise, was much older than he had suspected. And once it had been much more complicated.

The collapse of the Earlier Ages, the book said, began in the year 1987—centuries ago—when what was then called the United States witnessed the Great Food Strikes and City Riots of that summer. With nearly 100 million persons out of work, the torment was bitter and prolonged, leading finally to the shelling in nine large cities and the use of napalm in New York and Detroit, or "Thrust for Peace," as the president called the maneuver.

Perhaps to take attention away from this turmoil, but perhaps with some intelligence justification, the U.S. and U.S.S.R. (which was having troubles of its own) issued their famed "Joint Warning" to China concerning possible spread of the Asian Conflict beyond its limited scope of Vietnam, Laos, Pakistan, Cambodia, Taiwan, Japan and their island allies. China responded by launching 19 nuclear warheads on the U.S. and 22 on Russia. The U.S. responded with 714 and Russia with 404. China vanished.

The U.S. and U.S.S.R., however, had lost cities and population. Resulting fallout killed an estimated billion persons, and the following "greenhouse effect" made portions of the American Southwest and all of Central America unfit for human habitation. In the resulting realignment of powers and priorities, the world entered the Age of Retrenchment, or

Modern Era.

Among other things, the Age of Retrenchment meant no less than the end of the old American Dream. It was a concept which Rufus found impossible to grasp, but in that earlier age it had been assumed, by many in the so-called "civilized" countries at least, and in the United States in particular, that there was enough of everything for everybody... enough land, air, food, water, power, *everything*. It had been, the book said, an epoch of colossal luxury and extravagance: whole buildings were heated automatically, and even *cooled*, somehow; people were whisked from place to place at high speed in wheeled machines on the ground and under it. Machines flew through the air and into the space beyond the planet's gravitational attraction; food and drink and clothing of incredible variety was available everywhere in the wealthy countries.

It was only after the Four Hour War, Rufus read, that it really began to dawn on the survivors that there was not enough air and water and power for everyone, and that problems created by technology could not always be overwhelmed by more technology, and that, in fact, men could continue to believe the technocratic ideal only at the expense of their race. The decision to dismantle the great power companies, destroy all machines that could be spared for minimum survival, junk nationalism and territorial expeditions and decentralize all civilized life had, even when undertaken, been greeted by the Turbine Riots and West German Insurrection, including the Ruhr Valley Massacre of 1990.

It was not at all clear, the book told Rufus, whether the collapse of the Earlier Ages had been truly suspected in the years preceding it. There had, to be sure, been unrest among racial minorities and young people, climaxing in 1970 and resulting in the New Sedition Act of that year, which saw 472 militants hanged and 31,364 sent to federal prisons for life. These harsh penalties, in conjunction with an earlier "No-Knock Law" and the growing power of the Nixon Court with its landmark "Right to Apathy" ruling of 1974, seemed to crush rebellion against the status quo.

Still, historians could see signs of trouble in the years that followed, preceding the War. There had been the collapse of the Western Economy in 1980, when the American stock market fell to 119 and the dollar—a kind of barter symbol in use at that time—became worthless. But there had been no widespread violence, as the government of the U.S. attributed these minor problems to the necessarily high costs involved in expeditions

to fight Communism (FITECOM) in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama, Peru, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, New Zealand, Australia, Italy and several nations in Africa, along with the continuing disturbance in Asia and the cost of tooling up for the Mars Expedition as well as establishing the new Deep International Space Missile Arsenal Line (DISMAL) designed to counterbalance Russia's orbiting space stations with their thousand megaton guns. It was possible, the book told Rufus, that some few people had been distressed by some of these events, although contemporary records did not reflect it.

Possibly also, the book said, atmospheric pollution had already begun to be watched with some concern prior to the War. It was clear that the earth's rivers, lakes and oceans had been dying earlier, and rising coastlines due to warming of the atmosphere had already led to incursions of subsoil salt water in coastal water supplies. Israel's open-air nuclear tests, conducted over Cairo in 1977, had resulted in more than the unfortunate decimation of Arab peoples, which the United Nations—another antiquarian curiosity—had ruled accidental; it had raised the levels of radioactivity around the globe, and some historians suspected there had been widespread radiation sickness in that year although the contemporary records did not mention it, being, of course, government controlled in the national interest.

Whatever the causes, however, it was indeed clear, the book told Rufus, that the War had ended an epoch. With the disbanding of earlier methods of rule and the collapse of most communications, citizens the world over had returned to (or continued) a simpler and more civilized way of life: some became nomadic hunters; others remained in their cities to work at machinery and skills remaining; some simply vanished, perhaps unable to cope with simplicity. A great toy unwound, springs "spronged," and the earth groaned.

In those early decades, Rufus learned, the retrenchment had not been an unalloyed success. Strife continued, with threats and accusations being hurled by various groups still trying to figure out what happened to their world. There were small wars, such as the Hudson Valley Expedition of 1989 and the Sweep Through California in 1994. Vandalism and guerrilla warfare reigned in most areas.

It was generally agreed, the book said, that the former state of Oklahoma had been the first to counter the wave of bloodshed, which

most often centered around conflicts between "Simplicists," i.e., young people determined to continue the Age of Retrenchment, and "Modernists," who wished to re-establish the old order. What Oklahoma did was pass a "Safe Streets Law," specifying death for persons convicted of consistently "agitating," and ordering the interning of "those whose conduct, appearance or stated beliefs offend the morality of the majority, and, in so doing, violate the rights to privacy of that majority."

Five of Oklahoma's 77 counties were set aside, and undesirable persons moved there by force. Much bloodshed marked the transition phase, but those who tried to fight the troops carrying out lawful orders were killed, which was another solution to the problem. The people of Oklahoma generally applauded the system, and other states quickly wrote similar laws; the pattern was set for all Southern states, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Kansas, and the state of Hawaii.

In New York, New England, Pennsylvania, California and Oregon, a solution called "coexistence" was tried for a time, but it evidently did not work. In these areas, as in the states that did nothing, dissident elements finally were "motivated" through continual arrest and harrassment to move voluntarily into isolated rural areas. This set the pattern for the "Dual Existence Program" still in effect throughout much of the contemporary world.

There was considerably more in the book Selda had brought Rufus, but he did not understand much of it. The portions which he studied the hardest did not in themselves make perfect sense, by any means. When he finished reading in the dawn hours of the morning, it was with a pulsing headache. The world, he concluded after considerable deep philosophical meditation, was complicated.

CHAPTER SIX

"Is there ever any trouble in your cities today?" Rufus asked Selda the next night.

"Not very often," Selda told him. She was more relaxed tonight, and even smiled at him as she sat curled in her chair by the bed, eating a peach.

"If there is trouble, how is it handled?" Rufus asked.

"By law," Selda said.

"What is law? Is it like rules?"

"Yes."

"Who makes your laws?"

"People do, of course."

Rufus was intrigued. "Do *you* make laws?"

"Of course not! I'm just a cloth-maker, Rufus."

"So some people get to make laws and some don't."

"I suppose you could put it that way."

"Is that fair?"

"It's simply the old case of the have's and the have-not's."

"But what happens if a have-not complains?"

"The court explains to him his rights and advantages."

"What if they argue?"

"They're put in jail for a little while."

"And if they try to fight?"

"Then society has to kill them, Rufus."

"You kill people in this society?" Rufus asked.

"Well," Selda said, coloring slightly, "*we* don't. The State Militia does."

"I think it's bad to kill," Rufus said, angry with her.

"Well, more often there are other ways. I forgot you didn't know that, either."

"Other ways?"

"A person who causes trouble can always be wiped out."

"What is wipe out?"

"It's a process, Rufus dear, where the troublemaker is placed in a hospital. By electronic means, his memory is destroyed and certain minimal new and different ideas are implanted through re-education. The troublemaker awakes, remembers nothing, and can be re-trained to be a useful member of civilization."

"You make them different," Rufus said, shocked. "That's worse than killing!"

"Not at all. There's no pain, and since there's no memory, the person simply—starts over."

"But sometimes you don't do that. You kill. Why?"

"There are people who resist the treatment," Selda said, frowning. "I'm just an ordinary citizen. I don't understand it too well. Heavens knows there are a lot of things an ordinary citizen is better off if he *doesn't* know, as the executive himself recently pointed out. But sometimes a person doesn't stay under the treatment; he remembers, or he reverts, or he goes mad. That kind, of course, has to be eliminated."

"I think I was one of those," Rufus said suddenly, with an inspiration. "I think my Learner was part of this kind of a thing."

"There's no reason to believe that," Selda replied, startled by the suggestion. "Rufus, don't say you might have been one of those!"

"Why not? It might explain why I was one of those on the Learner. It could—"

"No!" With an impulsive gesture she put her small hand over his mouth, then recoiled as if shocked by what she had done.

"Why are you afraid?" Rufus asked.

"If you were one of those people, and anyone learned you were here, they'd come for you. Then you would be arrested."

"And try to do it to me again?"

"Yes."

Rufus stared at her, seeing her fear, and chills of horror went through his nervous system. He said slowly, "I'd make sure I died."

"It might not be possible. They might keep you under guard. I don't know what they might do.—Rufus, you have to be careful and *never* say what you just said to me to anyone!"

"I'll go somewhere else," Rufus suggested. "Some other city or family."

"It would be the same. You musn't move around like that. Your only chance is to find a place and stay there and get a job of some kind and then just become part of the society, so no one ever notices you at all."

"How can I do that? What could I do?"

Selda rubbed her temples. "Did you have some kind of work in the place you come from?"

"I helped grow the seed."

"You farmed?"

"Yes."

"It's all right, then," she said quickly, relieved. "We have crews who work the fields all around this area. You can report there. I'll tell you everything you have to say. Let me see... I can get a work permit at the company where I work, and we can fill it in. We'll say you're from somewhere far away, like Amarillo. We'll say you came here to visit me. We're cousins, we'll say. What's your number?"

"Number?" Rufus repeated, not understanding.

"Your identity number."

"I don't know. I don't think I have one."

"I suppose maybe you don't," Selda groaned. Then, seeing his confusion, she explained, "Everyone has an identity number. I told you I was Selda Four. The name we go by is just the six-place digit of our identity number. My real name is Selda four-five-nine-two-two-five."

"But I have no such number," Rufus said. "What can I do?"

Selda frowned as she thought about it. "We'll have to make up a number for you," she decided finally. "They never check the numbers unless there's a court case or something like that. The computer here will pay you from whatever number we make up as long as no one already has the number locally—and I can find out if the number we make up is locally held just by contacting placement services."

"Will it be dangerous?"

"No, not really. I know how to do it. I can put the data into the question unit myself, and if by chance the computer says the number is local, I'll just keep making up different ones until the computer tells me otherwise."

"You can do this?" Rufus whispered.

"Yes," she said, shaking her head with a firmness he liked.

"Why," Rufus asked after a moment, "will you do this for me?"

"It's your only chance," she said simply.

"But you've done so much already. You took me in, sheltered me.—Why?"

"You need help."

He looked at her, meeting her eyes, and he saw that she didn't want him to question her about it, because her reasons were complex and close to her so that she did not fully understand them herself, and so she was embarrassed about them.

"If you can help me," he said, "I'll repay, you."

"Don't talk nonsense," she said almost crossly.

"You like to order me," Rufus smiled.

She laughed. "It's for your own good." It was the first time she had laughed.

"Do I live on the farm?" Rufus asked.

"No."

"Then I find a place like this?"

"Soon you can," she replied. "For a little while you have to stay here. You'll be my cousin. If you filed for your own place, they'd have to know where you lived last, and it could get very complicated."

"So I stay here and you help me and I work," Rufus said.

"Yes." She looked stubborn, as if defying him to argue.

Rufus thought about it. He didn't know if he wanted to stay in the city very long, but he had to hide for a while, and he obviously had much to learn. Someday, he thought, he would also learn what had happened to Joseph and John, and whether he had ever been wiped out, and how he had gone to the family, and what the world was like. But right now he had to survive.

"I'll do as you say," he decided.

"Will you?" Selda asked sternly.

"Yes. I will."

"Good," she said, and smiled. "Now. I'm going to start telling you what the city is like, and what you have to be sure to remember. I'll probably have to drill you on a lot of it every day for a week or more before you go to work. In the meantime you'll be able to walk along with me when I shop; you can learn that way. It's going to be difficult for you, so you have to try hard. All right?"

"Yes," Rufus said, grinning at her seriousness.

"Stop grinning and be serious! Now. Pay attention. I'm going to tell you what it's like on the farms, and what you'll have to remember."

Dutifully Rufus forced his face straight. It wasn't easy because he was amused with her, and liked her so much. But he would try, he promised himself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The hot summer wind whipping his cloak against his body, Rufus trudged back toward the collecting shed with the younger members of his work crew behind him. He allowed himself a glance upward at the gritty sky, and saw there would be no rain. The gauge on the side of the building, as he entered it, said 116, but he thought it was hotter; in his decade on the job he had never known a worse day, and once during his third year the temperature had been over 120.

Other crews had already reported into the giant, open wood building. Rufus had a reputation as a hard-driving foreman, and his crew was always one of the last to report from its day in the fields. This did not show in additional production which could be credited, but it provided excellent security.

Rufus and his men stripped and padded naked to the wall of showers. Pressing in among other brawny laborers, they quickly washed under the spanging needles of warm water pumped continuously from storage tanks below, over bodies, and then down through the sewers to the recycling and filtration units before being pumped again into the storage tanks. A little refreshed, they then dressed and went to the reporting unit, where Rufus's men lined up behind him while he punched into the computer their names and numbers, hours of work, estimated production, and down time.

As Rufus was punching the buttons and the items showing on the display console, one of his men stepped forward quickly, touching his arm.

Rufus turned, irritated. "What is it, Jarrett?"

Jarrett was a tall, thick-shouldered man of about twenty, a rookie. His curly hair matted to his forehead made his angry scowl seem more threatening. "You punched in thirty-six minutes of down time for me, and I had only twenty."

Rufus glanced at his stylus pad. "You stopped four times for water. Six minutes. Fifteen minutes for lunch. Twenty-one minutes total. You broke your shovel and reported for a replacement. Fifteen minutes. Total: thirty-six."

Jarrett's face went slack. "No one else reports equipment repair as down time against an individual!"

"I do," Rufus snapped.

"What is it about you?" Jarrett asked bitterly. "Does it make you *happy* to be the worst foreman on the farm? Do you know no one wants to work for you? Every man out here hates you and everything you stand for. Nobody else follows the letter of the law the way you do. You seem to delight in hurting all of us. *Why?*"

Rufus felt the glares of his other men, and sensed the danger. He had learned to live with it. He showed nothing. "Step back in line, Jarrett."

"The day will come," Jarrett muttered shakily.

"What was that?" Rufus snapped.

Jarrett stared at him sullenly.

"Say it again," Rufus taunted coldly. "I want to have it correct for a special report."

"I didn't say anything," Jarrett replied, fear taking the edge out of his voice.

"Are you sure?" Rufus goaded him. Then he let his eyes sweep the others, aware that men of other crews were standing nearby, witnessing it. "Do any of the rest of you want to say something?"

His men didn't speak. They kept their eyes averted.

"All right," Rufus said finally, and turned his back on them to finish punching in the codes.

His skin prickled with his back turned this way. It took effort of will to keep from glancing backward. They could kill him. He knew this and they knew it as well. But he had spent ten long years building his reputation. The man who killed him would be wiped out, and his family would be wiped out and scattered to avoid possible re-contamination with old memories. They knew it. They didn't dare touch him.

It was the heart of the system, one Rufus had learned by cautious trial and error. As he finished punching in the codes now, memory touched the surface of his mind and he remembered again how it had been so long ago, when he first reported here to work. He had been terrified of discovery. He had vowed to learn, and learn well. He had succeeded. There

was no more better foreman than he, and he was secure because of it.

The codes finished, Rufus led his crew to the data room. The computer read each man's card and totalled his credits and debits. Rufus, checking his own coded card, saw that food and lodging payments had been deducted today, along with taxes and assessments. The computer had chosen to deduct also thirty-one percent of the price he had agreed to pay for his new suit. This left his balance against future expenditures at fourteen full credits, almost a month's food. Mentally he congratulated himself.

Leaving the data room, Rufus and his crew separated as they went outside once more. In front of the giant assembly building was a great, flat, wind-whipped area of bare yellow earth, trampled by the feet of thousands of men over decades. The wind made the area brown-red with dust. Thousands of men filed from the various exits of the building and began the walk down the slight hill toward the plain, and the city, obscured by blowing dust and haze on the horizon.

His skin already again gritty with blowing dust, Rufus trudged down the old highway with all the others, but alone. Men's voices rumbled all around him, and the lines of workers stretched all the way to the distant city. Most workers walked in small groups. They studiously ' avoided Rufus.

This was fine. He had decided long ago that he couldn't afford friends. Friends grew too close. They learned things and made guesses. He was in no position to trust anyone. He had to remind himself of this every morning and night of his life. If they caught him, they would wipe him out. He had to be so careful, so good, so loyal and so alone that this chance never arose.

He walked on. Minutes passed, and as the city began to be nearer, the sun slowly settled behind the mountain ridge to the west. The thin atmosphere began to chill. Rufus wondered if the scientists were correct, and the earth was again starting to get cooler. There had been two days this year when the sky was very milky, not at all green as it was normally, and increasingly the sun was quite clear, and not only a vague bright spot in the overhead murk, as it had been clear today. Clearing of the atmosphere, the news said, was a good thing. Rufus took their word for it, even if it meant cooler weather.

When he reached the city, Rufus walked his accustomed route to the apartment. He made it a point, as usual, to smile and wave to the Lawvisor lenses standing on posts here and there on the route. Some ninety thousand people lived in the city, and Rufus was a nonentity, as he wanted to be. But the monitors of the law screens along his neighborhood streets knew him on sight, and he was always careful to salute them in a friendly, docile, lawful fashion. They liked him. He had to be careful to keep people liking him... people in power.

When he reached the apartment it was quite dark. Selda wasn't home yet. Rufus showered again, quickly, holding the charge to less than a half-credit on the meter. Then, after dressing, he went to the kitchen and set the meal to preparing. Going into the living room he took the news from the slot, developed it, and sat down to read it. The government said the wars were all going very well, and would be over soon. They had been saying this for seven years, so it was obvious that the wars were really quite close to being concluded, and only bad luck was keeping the final peace from being negotiated. Crops were good, the news said, people were happy, the atmosphere was clearing, and the executive was on vacation.

Rufus put the news aside. It was good to know what was happening. He remembered the old days of his youth on the family plateau. How had he ever imagined himself happy in that kind of primitive atmosphere? He had been lucky to escape.

As often happened when he thought of the escape, he remembered John and Joseph. He recalled that he had never given Joseph a decent burial. He wished he had done that. Had it only been youth that made their relationship seem so unusual? Was it only old and youthful innocence that still made him wonder sometimes in the night if there was just the barest chance Joseph had escaped too?

Rufus did not have a chance to pursue these thoughts because the door of the apartment opened and Selda came in, carrying a small bag of groceries. She looked tired, but she gave him the usual brief smile. Rufus got to his feet, met her, and embraced her.

"You're late," he observed.

"Shopping," she explained, hanging her coat in the closet.

"What did you get?"

She opened the sack and took out the wine.

"Good," Rufus smiled. "We can celebrate."

"What will we celebrate?" Her hand trembled as she folded the sack for recycling.'

"My account has a credit surplus."

"Oh." She turned away.

"Doesn't that make you happy?" Rufus asked, hurt.

"Of course."

"I worked hard for that surplus. Why act as if it's nothing?"

She turned and faced him with flat, featureless eyes. Her face was drawn and she looked thinner. He saw that tonight, when she was so tired, she had aged. She was beginning to grow old.

"It's fine, dear," she said tonelessly. "We'll celebrate."

Without realizing it, Rufus had been waiting for her to come home. He had known he was going to tell her proudly about the surplus, and he had imagined her happy reaction. Now she was not pleased at all, and somehow he felt it was his fault, as if her happiness depended totally upon him, and he was angry. First the thing with Jarrett after a hard day, and now this.

"Don't bother," he snapped. "We'll celebrate some other time."

"I'm just a little tired," she said, coming toward him with a look of tenderness. "I'm sorry. We'll celebrate—"

Rufus pushed her back roughly. "No, I said! To hell with you, Selda! I work hard and have something to celebrate, and you act a hundred years old! Forget it!"

Selda recoiled, shocked. "I offered—"

"And I said to hell with you!"

Anger flicked at her eyes. "So that's how it's going to be now?"

"After all you've done for me?" Rufus shot back bitterly. "After all your help and all your instruction? Is that what you mean?"

"I didn't say that, Rufus! I—"

"But you meant it!—Well, for years I sniffed around here being humble and little and quiet. For *years*. But now I'm a foreman. I work hard. The managers respect me. I've earned things, too, Selda. I've helped *you*, too. I haven't been the only one sleeping in that bed back there these years. I haven't been the only one having pleasure."

Selda stiffened, and her face drained slowly of all color. "Is that it, then?" she asked huskily. "You think I helped you because I wanted you... *that way?*"

"You *got* me that way," Rufus said, driven by a rage he didn't understand.

"So you've finally changed that much," Selda said icily.

"I've made my own way. And you've given no more than you've gotten from me. From *me*! Rufus! I've done what you said to do and you've had a man all these years because of it! So don't act like it's all been one-sided!"

"Stop it," Selda choked, her eyes filling. "I don't even know what we're fighting about. We've been fighting all the time for a year and I don't want to fight—"

"No! You just want to dominate me and have me in your bed!"

"Don't say that! That's not why—"

"*Where else* would you have gotten a man?"

Selda's hand shot out and cracked across his face, bringing tears to his eyes.

"You're not the man I brought here," she sobbed. "You've spent all these ten years being someone else. You've worked and worked to hide yourself out of fear, and now you've finally succeeded completely, and you're no good, Rufus. You're a rotten person. You're riddled by fear. You cry out

with fear in your dreams. Then you swagger and browbeat your men to prove you're strong. But you're not strong. You can't live the way you've tried to live, never being yourself. You think you can prove your manhood by hurting me, when you've destroyed yourself out of fear—"

Rufus hit her, then. Swung without knowing it, with his fist, and hit her on the mouth so that she cried out brokenly and careened backward, falling over a table and lamp before she hit the floor.

Turning, he rushed for the door, knowing nothing except that he had to get out of here, get away from her for even a little while, run or hide or drink or move, but *be away from here*.

As he slammed the panel of the apartment behind him, he heard her choking, broken sobs. It was a deep, ugly, shattered sound. He plunged down the stairs into the dark of the streets he had once feared.

* * *

HE WALKED for a long time without knowing where he was. He left the apartment complex and plunged into crowds, then through a park where there was music and children played, and then into darker areas. These were the lower class house and apartment complexes he had never before visited, and he hurried through them now, driven by some obscure fear of the dark that still persisted from the old days with the family. He did not breathe easier again until he was standing in the foyer of one of the city's biggest arcades, which had once been an indoor shopping center. With air conditioning outlawed, the roof had been torn from the structure, opening it to the night. Minimal electric lighting made the long corridors and open gardens ivory-colored and pleasant, and late shoppers strolled from place to place, occasionally pausing at computer stations to see whether their credits would allow certain charges. The center was the city's biggest, and a resident could see anyone in the area, it was said, if he stood in one spot and watched the passersby long enough. For this reason the arcade was another place Rufus had visited infrequently.

Tonight, however, the crowds were somehow reassuring. There were so many people he felt totally alone. He stood against a wall and tried to calm his breathing— and his mind. Along past his position flowed constant streams of people: women and children in pale burlap, farmers and technicians, barge captains and doctors, professional men of all sorts mixed with the common laborers of the area. The faces, as Rufus stared at

them, were waxen and calm, outwardly, and they began to have the desired calming effect upon him.

She was wrong, he thought, still angry. She had no right to speak to him as she had. He had done everything she ordered, and he had taken all the risks—once her initial risks were over—and he had won. He had succeeded. No one suspected him now. He was accepted. He was a good citizen. He was safe.

But the memory of his fist striking her face, and the broken way she had fallen—and sobbed as he left—came back to him in all their horror. He remembered and was awe-struck. Had *he* done that? What kind of man had he become, to do a thing like that to Selda?

It was the heat, he told himself hopefully. It was so hot. He had been tired and hot and nervous, and she had been tired too, and they had simply lost their minds for an instant. If she had had no right to speak to him the way she did, he had had no right to hit her. He had been wrong, too. Perhaps more wrong than she.

Thinking this, Rufus ached inside. Selda was the only person he really knew. She was all he could truly count on. They had no friends. He had no business associates. They had been alone together so long, and depended on each other so much. Was it true that people who leaned on one another would always end up with moments of hate?

But that implied their relationship wasn't healthy, Rufus thought, rejecting the idea as it came to him. Their relationship *was* healthy. Oh, perhaps he didn't love Selda, and perhaps she didn't love him. But they were good for one another. They helped one another. They formed a small, enclosed, mutually beneficial support system. And through the years their love-making had been good. She had been so good...

And Rufus began to regret more painfully. He saw that she had been under pressure. All these years—how many times had he seen her go to the little desk in the living room and take out that folder of identification documents she had had forged for him? She would take it out, stare at it, fold the cover more carefully, smoothing it with tender fingertips. She worried about him. She loved him.

She loved him.

Rufus knew, in this moment, that he had to go back. He had to make it up to her. They had talked before. They could talk again. He owed her too much—loved her too much, too. If it took a moment of blackness like the blow to make him realize it fully, then that blackness itself might be good.

But how could he make her see his repentance? Would she simply accept him again? What had she *meant* when she criticized his life and habits? Had he really changed so much?

He was standing there against the wall, trying to penetrate this puzzle, when he first saw the man coming through the crowd, walking with all the others, yet alone, his head high, his thin face straight ahead.

He was a man of perhaps thirty, or a little beyond, slender and handsome, and he wore the cloak of a forager, and his eyes were familiar in a way that struck chills down Rufus' nervous system.

Was it possible?

Rufus stared, transfixed. The man walked closer— was going to stroll right past him, not ten paces away. He walked this close, and was going on by without seeing Rufus, and Rufus stared at him, unbelieving and stunned and delighted, and then he was sure.

"Joseph!" he called brokenly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Joseph—clearly it was Joseph—paused for an instant and then turned to the sound of Rufus' voice, his eyes finding the source of the call to him. His eyes as they found Rufus went keen with recognition.

Rufus pressed through the milling crowd. "Joseph!" he gasped, clutching his friend's hand. "My God, it is you! Do you remember me? I'm Rufus!"

"What are you doing here?" Joseph asked huskily. "I live here! I've been here for years! I thought you were dead, Joseph! I live here and—"

"We can't talk here," Joseph said suddenly, glancing around. "Look. We'll walk into the restaurant."

Bubbling with pleasure, Rufus followed Joseph across the arcade and into the small restaurant, where they took containers of milk from the counter and punched in their credits. They went to one of dozens of tiny wood tables, near a corner. The nearby tables were not occupied.

Rufus sat facing his old friend and simply stared at him, not knowing what to say first. Joseph was older. But God, they were all older now. Yet it was the same Joseph. And he was *alive!*

"I found John's body," Rufus said, launching into the middle of things. I thought you were downstairs. I buried him. Then I went back, but I didn't stay. Something else happened. I ran. They chased me. I came here." He paused and reached over to grasp Joseph's arm and squeeze it, just to reassure himself that this marvelous luck was true. "It's so good to see you!"

Joseph smiled, but he seemed somehow tense and restrained. He kept glancing around. "I'm surprised too, Rufus."

"How did you get away? What happened?"

"We had our supplies at the old library," Joseph muttered. "We had selected our night to leave. Somehow they learned about it. Maybe they had us followed. We went there and they were waiting. I was out in the street. We had rebuilt two old bicycles. We were going to travel on them. I was getting them out of the hiding place, and John had gone inside to start bringing out the sacks. I heard the voices and then the whine of Patrick's arrow, and the impact of it. John screamed. He called for me to run." Joseph stopped, staring at Rufus with the same unbelieving fixity. "And you live here in the city too?"

Rufus laughed. "You don't seem happy about it!"

"It's not that," Joseph said quickly, frowning. "I'm— of course it's good to see you, Rufus."

"And you live here too?"

"Yes."

"All this time?"

"Yes."

"It's so wonderful," Rufus said, wanting to laugh and shout and run. "Joseph, I've been so lonely, and now we have each other again—a real friend!"

"Where do you live?" Joseph asked.

Rufus told him, and then because Joseph was impressed, he went ahead and told him of his own escape, of the pursuit, of how he had gotten into the city and been found by Selda—everything.

"You're a foreman?" Joseph asked, impressed again.

"I have forged papers Selda got for me," Rufus grinned. "But I've never had to try to use them. Being a foreman makes me safer. And I'm a good citizen, Joseph. I've learned. I've studied hard. I know a lot, but I pretend I don't know much. That's better. People like you better that way. I don't stand out. I do my work and people like me and I drive my crews. I drive them hard. That's good too. No one will ever find me out because I do what I'm supposed to, all the time. I'll never do anything to make anyone dislike me, suspect me." But then Rufus' delight broke through again. "Oh, Joseph, I thought you were *dead!*"

"I'm very much alive," Joseph murmured, with a thin smile.

"But tell me about yourself! Where do you forage? Are you living with someone? How did you find an identity?"

"I live alone," Joseph told him, looking out occasionally over the crowd with those eyes that were seeking something. "I made it here easily, and then I found an old man who took me in. There are many people who take in wanderers. That was how the old man spoke of us: wanderers. The old man died not long after I started living with him. I buried him—took his papers."

"So you're as safe and free as I am!" Rufus said gleefully.

"Yes," Joseph said.

"Joseph, can you come home with me? I want you to meet Selda. She's heard so much about you. Where do you live? I hope it's on our side of the

city. We can be together again and visit and compare experiences. You know I might never have broken away if it hadn't been for you."

"Me?" Joseph repeated, startled. "The things you said. I remember everything you said. You were so far ahead of me then. I bet you still are. Remember when you showed me about the Learner? That was my salvation. Will you come home with me right now? Please!"

Joseph glanced around again, seemingly nervous. "I have some errands to run."

"Of course—" Rufus agreed excitedly.

"And it might be better if we went separately," Joseph added.

"Of course," Rufus said again, chuckling. "I should have thought of that. Tell me: what time can you come over?"

"In a little while," Joseph said. "An hour. Possibly two."

"Are you sure you know the way? I could wait for you. You go down Avenue Central—"

"Yes, yes, I know the way," Joseph said, frowning again.

"I know you're busy," Rufus said. "All right. I'll go home right away. I'll have wine, and I almost forgot, I left a meal preparing. Don't have supper. Eat with us. We'll wait for you."

Joseph smiled and got to his feet. "I'll be there directly."

Rufus also stood and held out his hand. They clasped arms.

"I'm so glad, Joseph," Rufus said, husky with emotion.

"Until later," Joseph said.

"Yes!"

Joseph turned and walked into the crowd.

Wanting to laugh aloud, Rufus had to force himself to walk quietly, sedately, back the way he had come. He was more than halfway home

before he remembered the fight he had had with Selda.

Sobered by the recollection, he walked more slowly, planning what he would say. She would be very angry. He was guilty. He had to say the right and proper things.

He reached the apartment and could see the light from the street. Walking up the stairs, he realized that he was very tired, but his mixed dread and elation would not let his nerves calm down. He reached the door panel of their apartment, took a deep breath, and tried the lock. It was opened and he went in.

Selda sat at the little table in the kitchen. She looked very small and alone. She had changed her clothes, and her averted face was pale, making the battered spot on the side of her chin look more hideous and purple. As Rufus entered, she turned and her eyes met his. "I'm sorry," he blurted out. "I'll never do anything like that again. I was wrong. I'll listen to you and do what you say. Please forgive me."

Without a word, she rose from her chair and fled to him. She came into his arms crying, clinging to him with a fierce strength.

"You were right and I was in a bad mood," Rufus told her. "Tell me what you believe and I'll listen properly. We help each other. We always have. I'll go to my death regretting what I said and did a little while ago."

"No," she choked, laughing and crying at the same time. "I was wrong. I had no right to criticize."

"But you'll tell me again. I want you to. I want to learn."

"Only if you really want me to say anything," she whispered.

"I do. I do. You'll help me and I'll help you."

"Yes."

"And we'll be together."

"Yes."

"And we love one another."

"Yes, oh, yes."

Rufus felt like bursting with happiness. "Selda, I have more wonderful news."

She leaned back in his arms, her tear-streaked face curious. "What is it?"

So he told her about finding Joseph.

She was radiant. "After all these years! And he's been here all the time?"

"Yes."

"And now you located one another again! Rufus, it's beautiful, and I know how glad you are."

"It's amazing luck to find him," Rufus grinned.

"No. The marvel really is that you found him this particular day. That's all. You could have found him five years ago just as easily. The city isn't that big. But you've found him now, and that's all that counts."

"He'll be here within an hour or two. I told him we'd have supper."

"Heavens," Selda cried. "I have to straighten the place up. I'll start more food. I have to change clothes." She patted her hair. "I look terrible—"

"You look fine," Rufus grinned, hugging her.

"Do you know how fine this is?" she asked him. "We have a *friend*."

"I know. We both have a friend now. A true friend."

"I have to get busy," she fretted, pulling away.

"I'll help. What shall I do?"

"Recycle those news sheets, if you've finished them. Then you could check the larder for an extra portion. I hope we have something nice on the inventory yet. Oh dear. I'll have to dust, and then I'll change clothes."

So they hurried around, moving the familiar furniture, adding food, calling to one another gladly, from room to room, like children. Selda laughed and hurried faster, teasing Rufus that he was making her do most of the work. Finally they finished, and both had changed, and they looked at one another breathlessly in their spotless home.

"He'll be here any minute," Rufus said.

"Yes," she said gladly, and kissed him.

They waited.

Two hours passed.

"I don't know what's keeping him," Rufus said. "He might have lost his way," Selda murmured. "It's raining again. He'll be here soon. Don't worry." So they waited again.

Another hour passed, and then another, while they talked idly. Rufus's nerves began to get more and more on edge, and finally he began to subside inwardly, and he began to suspect: Joseph was not coming.

"It's too late now," he said finally. "He won't come."

"Something happened," Selda said. "He'll come tomorrow."

"I don't understand. He was glad to see me too. He had to be. He should have been here long ago."

"He'll be here tomorrow, dear. Something must have happened."

"If he's in trouble—"

"He isn't in trouble, Rufus. He probably ran into some business associate and had to delay, to help keep us safe. Or he might have had some problem. Is he married? Was he going to bring his woman?"

"I don't know," Rufus admitted. "I didn't ask that."

"Does he live nearby, or far?"

"I don't know that either. I asked, but he didn't answer."

"He'll come tomorrow."

"I told him all about us," Rufus said, suddenly realizing, "but he didn't tell me anything about himself."

"Well," Selda sighed, "it's late. We have to rest. Come to bed. Joseph will come tomorrow. I know it, and then he'll have a good excuse, and we can laugh about it."

Rufus got to his feet. He was shot through with fatigue deepened by bitter disappointment. "All right," he said, putting his arm around Selda.

At that moment there was a sharp rap on the door.

"He's here at last!" Selda beamed.

The rap was repeated, hard now and loud, almost pounding.

"He wouldn't knock like that," Rufus said, panic gusting in his belly.

"It has to be him. We don't know anyone. Open the door, Rufus!"

He went to the panel and pressed the stud. The door slid back. Three heavy-set men pressed into the room, bowling him backward. They had weapons and they wore brown uniforms of the army.

* * *

"WAIT!" Rufus gasped. "Stop—!"

One of the men, an officer, shoved him against the wall. "Is this the man?" he called over his shoulder.

Only then, between the men, did Rufus spot Joseph, standing pale and frightened back in the corridor.

"That's the man," Joseph said in a reedy voice.

The officer leveled a tube-like weapon on Rufus. "You are under arrest as an alien and a runaway. Say nothing to preserve your rights to trial."

"I haven't done anything wrong!" Rufus cried. "Joseph! What have you *done* to me? I'm a citizen! I work hard!"

"He has papers," Selda said.

The officer gave her a hate-filled glance. "Move to the side, woman, and keep silence."

Selda moved as if to obey, sidling nearer the door.

Then, as the officer began patting Rufus down for a weapon, Selda no longer moved slowly.

She darted past the men into the corridor, almost knocking Joseph down.

"Stop her!" the officer barked.

The other man swung his tube weapon. A ray turned the air purple and then blasted a smoking hole in the corridor wall. Selda was not touched, and scampered out of sight.

"Run, Selda!" Rufus yelled.

The officer swung his weapon, crashing it into Rufus's skull. Rufus was plunged into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER NINE

On the third day of his imprisonment Rufus met his attorney.

Davis Eight was young, surely not more than twenty-five, and he stood over six feet tall and weighed about 140 pounds. He wore his dark hair in fashionable ringlets. He brought an armload of file folders into the conference room where he met Rufus, but only one folder had anything to do with Rufus.

"I'm a public attorney," Davis told Rufus across the table, blinking nervously all the time. "I'm assigned by the court to make sure your rights are protected."

"When do we go to court?" Rufus asked woodenly. They had been feeding him through a tube; the cell they kept him in was a barren steel room with no features whatsoever, simply a smooth metal cube with a hidden door panel. The shock of his betrayal had almost prevented his

thinking of his own fate. It didn't seem to matter.

"We go to court later today," Davis told him. "That's why I'm here now."

"Don't you study the facts and get people to testify for me?" Rufus asked.

"All waste of time," Davis told him briskly. "Your rights are the important thing right now. Do you know your rights?"

"I think so. Yes."

"Good. That saves more time. You're charged with sedition, false registration, anarchistic behavior, impersonation, perjury and conspiracy. Of course they told you that."

"No," Rufus said woodenly.

"Oh," Davis said. "Well, they should have. No matter. Those are the charges. I advise you to plead guilty on all counts."

"Why?" Rufus asked.

"Because they've got you dead to rights."

"Aren't you going to try to defend me?"

"Of course. That's what I'm doing now. I'm showing you the best course. Plead guilty. They'll give you the minimum sentence."

"What's the minimum sentence?"

"Intellectual re-establishment and relocation."

"You mean they'll wipe me out."

Davis blinked furiously with surprise. "You know about that, do you."

"I know, and—"

"It's not so bad, you know. You don't remember. It's painless and you're always happy afterward. They see to that."

"No." Rufus shook his head. "I won't plead guilty."

"That's foolish."

"Why? What more can they do to me?"

"They can kill you."

"Then let them."

"That is foolish."

"They made my woman a fugitive. My only friend betrayed me. I've lost my work and everything I tried to have. If they kill me, it doesn't make any difference."

Mottles of pink showed on Davis' cheeks. "That's a vain and arrogant way to talk! Don't you see that you have a patriotic duty to let them wipe you out so you can become a useful member of society again? What good are you to society if they kill you?"

"Isn't that their problem?" Rufus cried.

"It's your problem, as a citizen, because we're all free men!"

"Free to do *what*?"

"Why, to do as the state orders, for the common good. What else could any loyal citizen ask?"

Astounded, Rufus stared at his attorney. "You're crazy."

"I'm speaking of the law and the duties of citizenship!"

"I won't plead guilty," Rufus said bitterly.

"Will you allow me to plead guilty for you?"

"No!"

Davis sighed and closed the folder. "I'm afraid this is going to be a difficult case. Are you sure you won't reconsider?"

"There's no reason I should."

"Think of the court's time."

"The court's *time*?" Rufus echoed.

"The courts are overcrowded. The judges are overworked. You could save an hour or more on the docket if you'd just—"

"No!"

Davis stood. "Very well," he sighed again.

"Aren't you going to hear what I have to say?" Rufus asked.

"I know the case thoroughly."

"How? You haven't talked to me."

"I've read the police reports."

"What about *my* side of the story?"

"You have no side," Davis told him. "You're the defendant."

"All right," Rufus spat. "Forget I asked."

"I'll see you in court," Davis told him. "I have other clients to see now, and you have another visitor anyway."

Rufus momentarily forgot his anger. "Another—?"

"I'll send him in," Davis called over his shoulder, and left the room.

Rufus waited, his brain a maelstrom of conflicting thoughts. What chance did he have now? What difference did it make? He had tried. He had thought he was free. And then the rapping—that hissing sound as the weapon tore bone from flesh, killing Selda—

The door of the conference room opened again and a guard stepped inside, holding a weapon. He leveled it on Rufus. Then another figure appeared in the doorway. Joseph.

Pale, his lips tight, Joseph strode across the room to confront Rufus, who rose numbly to his feet.

"They let me have this minute," Joseph told him in a tense whisper.

"Why?" Rufus choked.

"I wanted to tell you I'm sorry, Rufus. Genuinely sorry."

"Why did you do it, Joseph? I loved you!"

"I have to protect myself. By telling them about you, I've won a full pardon. I have my own identity now, my own number. They'll let me remain myself. I'm a free man."

"Selda is gone," Rufus said. "She could be dead." He sobbed and the sobs sounded loud and broken in the hissing silence. "I trusted you and loved you and you've destroyed me."

"I'm truly sorry," Joseph said. "I had to save myself."

"I'll get even. I'll tell them all about you, too."

"You can't say anything they don't already know. And even if you could, they wouldn't believe you now."

"I'll tell them everything. I think you betrayed John, and it wasn't the way you said. And the old man whose name you took. I'll tell that, too. I'll get you, Joseph. I'll tell them."

"They won't listen to a word," Joseph said, still pale and grim.

"Why? It'll all be the truth!"

"You've been charged with crimes. You're a criminal now. They'll pay no attention to anything you might say."

"I'm innocent until proven guilty! I've read the law!"

"Ah, God, Rufus," Joseph said sadly. "Are you still really that naive?" And he turned and walked out of the room, shaking his head.

* * *

RUFUS HADN'T SHAVED or bathed since his arrest, so early in the afternoon the guards came and took him to a washroom where two attendants stripped him, cleaned him up and shaved him, and then put him in freshly laundered gray trousers and shirt with CITY PROPERTY printed on the back. Rufus submitted numbly.

"We have plenty of guards around the courtrooms," one of the guards told him as they left the wash area. "You'll be at your table with your lawyer, but don't try any outbursts. We can silence you in a minute, and it will just go harder on you afterward."

Rufus nodded and said nothing. He was very busy, mentally, trying to decide what he could say to the judge and how he could try to defend himself. The judge, he thought, wouldn't know about Selda or his years of hard work or the way Joseph had betrayed him. He could make the judge see. Every man was entitled to his day in court; Rufus had read this. And now, although his future in the best of circumstances yawned before him as a gray, deathly existence, he felt the old urge to struggle rising feebly inside him, and he knew he had to try. He owed it to himself.

The guards took him to the courtroom. It was on an upper floor of a huge building. Rows of mahogany pews sat empty and filmed with dust. The judge's bench—up at the front, draped by flags just as it was shown in the books Rufus read—was also empty. At one of the tables before the bench sat two men, middle-aged, wearing expensive-looking black togas, the desk before them piled high with folders, record manuals and recording machinery. At the other table, alone, sat Davis Eight.

The guards took Rufus up to Davis Eight's table, uncuffed him, and left him standing there.

"Sit down," Davis told him.

"Hear ye, hear ye," a woman called shrilly from a front doorway.

"Stand up," Davis told the startled Rufus.

The judge, an enormous ebony man in flowing white robes, swept out of the side door and mounted the bench. He sat down, glowered over the room, and rapped a little wooden hammer once, sharply.

"Court is in session," he said.

The woman at the doorway, reed-thin and grayish-faced, opened a scroll. "The People Versus Unidentified Savage."

The judge nodded and glanced toward the men at the other table. "Is the state ready?"

The bigger of the two men, with impressive flowing gray hair and a massive chin, rose ponderously to his feet as if about to make an important statement. "Yes, your honor," he said, and sat down.

"Is the defense ready?"

Davis stood and cleared his throat. "Yes, if the court please," he said meekly, and sat down.

The judge opened a folder on his desk and scowled at it. He looked up at Rufus. "Your name is Rufus?"

"Yes," Rufus said.

"Stand up!" Davis hissed.

Rufus stood. "Yes sir," he repeated himself.

"No need to repeat yourself," the judge said.

Rufus said nothing.

The judge read a while while the recording machines whirred. It was very quiet in the high-lofted old room. The flags were dusty.

Finally the judge said, "You know the nature, of the charges against you?"

"Yes" Davis prompted.

"Yes," Rufus said.

"And your attorney has entered pleas of not guilty on all counts?"

"Yes," Davis hissed.

"Yes," Rufus said.

"Sit down," the judge said.

Rufus sat.

"The prosecution may proceed," the judge said.

The bigger man in white robes stood. "Your honor, the state will be brief. Your honor already has the particulars of the matter in the file before him. The defendant fled a savage commune on or about the date indicated in the last decade, thence made his way to this city, and thence to a relationship with a woman hereafter identified for brevity as Selda Four. Said defendant lived with said fugitive and improperly domiciled within this city since that date. Said defendant filed untrue registration and employment papers and otherwise deluded and deceived proper and lawful authority as to his true identity and occupation, probably for reasons of subversion. By sworn documentary testimony from the key state witness in this case, said defendant is notoriously unstable and, in point of fact, a dangerous personality under the provisions of the rehabilitation statutes. The state demands IR&R."

The judge made notes. "Defense?"

Davis got to his feet and Rufus waited to see how the procedure of justice would proceed. Davis cleared his reedy throat.

"Comes now the defense," Davis said, "and demurs to the evidence brought forward by the state on each and every allegation, and requests a verdict of not guilty on all counts."

The judge glanced at the other side. "Comment?"

The larger man rose. "Demurrer is invalid on prima facie evidence heretofore produced by the state."

Davis argued, "Hearsay evidence."

"I direct learned counsel's attention to statute revisions on hearsay evidence and applicability," the state said. "Parts Sixteen and Seventeen, paragraphs five through thirty-one."

"Granted, if the court please," Davis responded. He glanced at notes. "But precedent exists for demurrer finding for the defendant in cases of

IR&R, for example, State Versus Landings, Pacific Twenty."

"Pacific Twenty," the state said, a slight smile curling his lip, "applies only to minor children."

"National Statutes Forty-Two," Davis countered.

"Part Sixteen, Book Eleven, Criminal Code," answered the state.

"Billingham Versus John Six."

"The Outlaw Code and Codex, Chapters Eight through Eighty-Four."

Rufus understood little or none of it, but he saw sweat gleaming on Davis's brow as his lawyer answered weakly, "Uniform Listing of Criminal Precedents, Twelve."

The state triumphantly played his trump card. "Part Forty and the Amendment," he roared, "National Sedition Act and Supreme Court Rulings of 1971!"

The judge was amused. "Demurrer denied. Proceed."

Davis bent over the table. Sweat dripped off his nose.

"What happened?" Rufus whispered.

"We lost that round," Davis whispered back. "But we have a fight left!"

Rufus watched with mounting curiosity as Davis stood straight again and returned to battle. He filed a demurrer to the information, but the state came back with an amended declaration. He brought out a request for jury trial, but the state produced the non-jury clause ruling. He asked for a continuance, but the state noted Nationals Parts One and Two, Amended. Allegation of Inspecific Accusation: General Disclaimer. Use of forged documentation: codified rules of evidence and sworn affidavits. Disclaimer: Rejection. Time to reconsider: Motion for Speedy Docketing. Motion to quash: denied.

Dripping wet from exertion, Davis took each legal blow like the stroke of a mighty sword. Each brilliant maneuver was parried or slashed back. Each small defeat brought a gleam of appreciation from the judge's eye as he saw alternatives narrowing.

"All right," Davis gasped finally. "All right!"

Staggering from fatigue, he stepped across the aisle and extended his hand to the prosecution. "Brilliant argument."

The state smiled. "You too, old man."

The judge touched his gavel. "Proceed."

Davis glanced at Rufus and shrugged. "The defense rests."

"Wait!" Rufus cried.

"Order!" the judge said sharply.

"I want to tell you how it all happened!" Rufus said.

"I have the evidence," the judge said. "Silence."

"But please—!"

"Sit down," Davis whispered, upset now. "You'll make it worse." He tried to wrestle Rufus down.

"Please!" Rufus called to the judge.

"You wish to change your plea?" the judge asked hopefully.

"I want to talk with you."

The judge scowled. "The court can't talk. The law is the law. Your case has been argued, and, I might add, argued brilliantly. There's nothing more you can say."

"I didn't do anything wrong," Rufus said. "I ran from the family because they were bad. They were keeping me on a machine that made me hurt every time I tried to *think*. And then I came here, running, and Selda took me in. I learned. I worked hard. I was a good citizen. Ask the people at the farm. Ask anyone. Ask the police. I always did what I was supposed to do. I never questioned anything. And then I met my oldest friend, Joseph, and he betrayed me. They came to the door and Selda ran away, and she might be dead. I'm all alone. Now I have no one. I haven't done *wrong*."

The judge was touched. He leaned forward on his elbows, his dark face compassionate and even troubled. "The law," he said softly, "is the law. There is in the law no place for questions such as you raise. We must have a city of laws, a nation of laws, a world of laws. The law is a demanding mistress. The questions you raise have been raised since time immemorial, and always with the same supposed justification. Your individual rights, you say, place you beyond the law. Your own conscience, you infer, must be obeyed before the law. Your years of effort, you argue, places you out of the law's reach for earlier transgressions."

"I just want to talk," Rufus pleaded. "Man to man. I want you to hear me and *understand*."

"The law," the judge said sadly but firmly, "must stand. Society must have law and order. Those who break the law, no matter how well-phrased may be their personal justification, must be rehabilitated or punished. If the law were to allow for individual whim or preference, there would *be* no law—only anarchy. The law must apply to all. Only in this application can there be justice—if not, perhaps, for an individual here and there, then for the good of the society."

"But if you'll only *listen*," Rufus pleaded.

"The law," the judge said, sitting straight again, "is the law."

Rufus stared at him, unable to believe what was happening.

The judge glanced at Davis. "Do you have anything further to offer before I pronounce sentence?"

"If we may infer, if the court please, that the judgment will be guilty," Davis said meekly, "may we petition for reduced penalty."

The judge looked at the state. "Does the state wish to address a petition for reduced penalty?"

The state got to his feet, holding a thick sheaf of documents. "The state will resist reduced penalty, your honor. May I state reasons."

"Proceed," the judge said. "Sit down," he said to Rufus.

Rufus sat down.

The state paced slowly, frowning at the papers in his hand. "The state will resist reduction of penalty," he said finally, "because of the severity of the crimes, but also—and more importantly—because of the background of the defendant."

"I see," the judge said. "Proceed."

"The defendant," the state intoned, "knows himself as Rufus, a member of the Taos area commune. In fact, however, said defendant had another identity earlier. Complete psychological screening and physical typing have established beyond all doubt that said defendant, Rufus, was given IR&R sixteen years ago, in the city of Paterson."

Rufus gasped aloud. "I was *someone else*?"

"Quiet!" the judge rapped.

The state glared. "Documents available to the court will establish beyond argument that said defendant Rufus was indeed born Jeffrey Nine, in the city of Paterson, on or about the eleventh day of August, Year 416, N.E. Said Jeffrey Nine, the defendant in this case, evidenced dangerous and revolutionary behavior at an early age. At age fourteen, said defendant Nine was discovered reading outlawed documents. He was given a five-year probation. At age sixteen, said defendant Nine was one of a band of youthful marauders who attacked a Paterson State Militia unit closing an illegal press; said band attacked the legal militia with rocks and sticks, forcing militia to return protective fire from armored vehicles, killing all but three of the band and wiping out an estimated four hundred bystanders. Subsequent testimony and investigation developed that defendant Nine was the leader of the band, one of several revolutionary guerrilla groups then active in the Paterson area. In the year 432, defendant Nine was tried and convicted and sentenced to IR&R, said treatment being carried out at the military hospital in Annapolis. Said defendant, given the new title of Rufus, number not assigned, was placed with the Taos commune for the remainder of his life."

The state paused and closed the folder, giving Rufus a long and thoughtful look. "Said defendant has now, for the second time, broken out of the mold of social behavior," he said heavily. "There can be no lesser treatment than massive IR&R, with intensive follow-up to assure no further deviations."

It was utterly silent in the room. Davis slumped, wholly beaten now. But Rufus hardly had eyes for him now. Shock, excitement and outrage pumped sickeningly through his veins.

"*I was someone else!*" he cried. "I was another person before—and you wiped me out then, too—and now you want to do it *again!*"

"Order!" the judge called angrily.

"I just came back to life!" Rufus screamed. "I just started to learn how to live! I just became a person again, *but you can't allow persons*, and you're going to destroy me—"

"Guard!" the judge bellowed.

The guards swarmed from every door. Rufus ran at them, trying to break through. They knocked him down and sat on him and chained him, then stuffed wrapped gauze in his mouth so he could hardly breathe. They picked him up and slammed him back in his chair like a mummy. Sobbing, Rufus couldn't move or make more than a muffled sound.

"The court believes," the judge said darkly, "that antisocial behavior of the defendant has been amply demonstrated. Let the record show it." He turned back to the state. "Had you concluded?"

"One more fact, if the court please," the state said seriously. "It should be duly recorded that the stock of this defendant is good stock. Patriotic, hard-working stock. Stock that has risen to the highest offices of our beloved republic. For this reason, the state recommends a healthy environment given to useful labor after the IR&R has been performed. The state recommends road-building in our sister state of Mexico."

The judge nodded. "The court will take the request into consideration. May the court be informed of this defendant's forebearers, whom the state believes are of sufficient caliber to warrant special handling after IR&R?"

The state nodded with gravity. "The full index of said defendant Nine, if the court please, was Nine Seven Four Eight Eight."

Davis, in the chair beside Rufus, gasped.

The judge started backward in shock, and then looked at Rufus and

shook his head in saddened bewilderment.

Rufus tried to turn to Davis to ask the obvious question, but the cuffs and the gag prevented it. Davis, seeing his curiosity and desperation, leaned over to him and blurted out what it meant.

"My God!" the lawyer whispered. "You're the prodigal son of the Executive of the United States!"

CHAPTER TEN

Five days passed after the trial, and the only person Rufus saw, before the priest came, was the attorney, Davis Eight.

"We'll appeal, of course," Davis told him the day after the trial. "We'll use every legal maneuver in the book. I'm confident there are extenuating circumstances that ought to assure a new hearing, at least.—And no, there's no word on Selda. She has vanished."

Then, four days later, Davis came back.

"We've lost," he said. "I'm sorry. I tried. Goodbye."

"I won't see you again?" Rufus asked sharply.

"You may," Davis said. "But you won't know me, then."

So it was settled, and they were going to do it to him. There was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

At first he had simply been in shock, and then he had told himself that it would take a long time, all the legal maneuvering, and he had time yet. But then after Davis had gone, the evening meal came, and it was only a thin soup and bread. With a little chill, Rufus saw they were emptying his stomach; they did that before medical procedures. The stew, with a faint medical aroma about it, he poured down the drain of the recycling unit in the corner of the room.

If the last meal was doped, he thought bitterly, to make him more docile for the procedure, or treated in some way to begin the erosion of his mind, he could at least thwart them in this. Tomorrow, he knew, they would do it to him. But he had this last night, at least, to be himself.

He lay on the draw-out sleep platform of the dark, featureless room and stared at the blackness.

The great and over-riding sensation of it was stark fear. It was hard to believe that tomorrow they would strap him down somewhere, attach machinery to his body and brain, perhaps cut into his head, and destroy him as Rufus—make it as if he had never lived. They would *end* him.

But then, he saw, there would be another person down in Mexico, working on a road somewhere. He would have another name. He would have no memories, and wonder about this sometimes, but whenever he wondered dangerously, he would have horrible pains in his skull. He would, perhaps, be docile all his days, a beast of burden, smiling, working, whistling, copulating with a woman stripped of the ability to bear—

His mind recoiled from annihilation.

There had to be a way out. He was the son of the executive. *He* was Rufus. In an earlier life which they had ripped out of him by the bloody roots, he had had a father who directed this country. He had had wealth and opportunity and power. He had been clever. Smiling, he recalled that they said he had been a revolutionary.

And his father was still executive today. The news sheets told him this much. His father, Calvin Nine— "Wise Old Cal," they called him in the media—had been executive longer than any man before, and no one had ever come forward to challenge him. He would, it was said, be executive forever.

Rufus lay in the darkness and wondered about his father. Did "Wise Old Cal" know what was happening to his former son? Did it give him anguish, anger— any feeling whatsoever? What would the executive say if confronted by Rufus, formerly Jeffry Nine, of Paterson?"

It was bitter knowledge, but precious. At last he knew who he was. He understood how he had gotten to the family, why they had used the Learner on him, what, perhaps, in his essential personality had made him first break away. He was a rebel, he thought with pride. He was a fighter by nature. He was strong. He was *worthwhile*.

But in the morning would they take it all away? He had bent every facet of his mind to trying for any desperate escape scheme. He knew that his

room faced a barren steel corridor, and at the far end of it there was a heavy door which led outside, onto a street or sidewalk. He had seen a flash of amber sunlight there once, when both doors were open simultaneously for an instant. If he could get outside, out of this prison and free to run in the city—

But the distance to that door was eternity. Guards stood perpetually in the corridor. There were, he suspected, alarm systems.

How many doomed men and women had spent this night, trying desperately to figure an escape? Had *any* of them *ever* escaped?

Rufus lay wide-awake through the night, his mind racing down blind pathways to new frustration. If he could get out, he thought. *If he could get out!*—What then? A life of hiding? A new bogus name and identity somewhere, if he was very, very lucky?

He thought back over his years on the farm, and living with Selda. He winced as he recalled the person he had become. He had been *safe*, yes. But at what a cost! For it was clear to Rufus now, in the last hours of his existence, that he had spent the years of freedom as no man could ever spend his life if it were to be lived. He had responded, planned, acted as a part of a defensive system. He had expended all his energy in trying to anticipate what he should say, what he should do, what he should think, what he should even feel, in order to be safe... acceptable. No man could live a life this way. To *live*, a man had to be himself, truly.

It was a good, essential, very simple, and yet very profound thing Rufus had learned. It pleased him beyond expression. Yet, even as he saw how all of existence tied to this simple reality of psychic existence, he remembered that now—in a few minutes or hours—he would cease to exist again, forever.

There had to be some way, he told himself for the hundredth time. He was the son of a powerful man. He was from good stock. He was strong and smart—stronger and smarter and better than he had *ever* imagined he was, because he was—*himself!* He could manage some way. This spark of himself couldn't be snuffed out, shocked out, drugged away, gouged out by a knife. He existed!

Finally, in the very late hours, Rufus fell lightly asleep, his mind still racing for answers and solutions as he fitfully rolled on the sleeping layer.

He would find a way, he tried to tell himself in his dreams.

But then he was no more asleep than he was startled rudely awake. The door had shuttled softly open.

Startled and terrified, he blinked open his eyes. Sunlight flooded into the cell. A guard stood at the door, along with another man.

The other man wore a green cloak, and he was a priest.

The time had come.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"My name is Father Zachary," the priest told Rufus. He was a middle-aged man, thin but with a slightly bulging paunch, of about Rufus's height. He wore the hood of his green cloak over his bald head, which gave his soft face the look of an elf. "Would you pray with me, my son," he asked.

Rufus blinked at him as the terror came back. The priest turned to the guard. "Does he recognize my words?"

"He's all right," the guard murmured. "The medicine in the food last night made him groggy. That's all. He can think well enough. Just no fear, and he couldn't run or hurt himself if he wanted to.—It's more humane, you see, Father."

The priest nodded with a little frown. "Yes. I see."

"I'll leave the door open," the guard said deferentially. "When you're through, just come on out and call me."

"Yes," Father Zachary said.

Rufus sat there and watched the guard leave, with the door open. He could see down the front corridor to the empty guard station and the door to the outside. He was trying to cope with the horror and at the same time understand what had been said about his food.

Father Zachary stood over Rufus and put his hand on Rufus's head. "I have come to give you solace, my son. You understand?"

The insanity of it brought tears to Rufus's eyes. "Do not weep," Father Zachary said with real com-*passion*. "Repent your sins and be of good cheer, for the Lord watches over all his children."

Rufus kept his head bent under the priest's moist palm. The door was open, he thought. *The door was open.*

"I know you feel great fear," Father Zachary was saying in that calmly sepulchral tone. "But in this existence the goodness of your heart has been troubled, darkened by passions and desires against your fellow men. You will feel no pain, my son, and in your new existence you will be better adjusted, happier, more at one with the Lord."

The door was open.

"It is not an end," Father Zachary went on, "but a beginning. For the Lord saith, 'He who would be with me must put off the old ways and follow me.' There will be no death here, for the soul is immortal. Your immortal soul will live on in a new, fresh, untroubled consciousness. God in His wisdom and charity has given to you this unique opportunity to repent transgressions and begin life anew, pure and rilled with the love of the Holy Spirit."

The door was.

"Do not, then, my son, feel anger or fear. Your soul will live on until that happy day when it is joined with the Sacred Heart. Repent now, pray with me, and be of good cheer, confident in the Lord. For you will lose only a sickened and wearied consciousness; your soul will live on, refreshed and renewed. Thus there is no loss, only the greatest gain."

The door.

"Thank the Lord in his goodness!" Father Zachary urged with heartfelt sincerity. "Hurl out all fear and place yourself in his hands, for he saith, 'The meek shall inherit the earth.'"

Father Zachary nudged Rufus slightly. "Fear the Lord. Pray with me, my son."

Rufus braced himself and then shot bolt upright, bringing up a devastating punch from the floor. His balled fist exploded on Father

Zachary's chin, dropping him like a monstrous cut string bean.

With desperate haste, Rufus ripped open the fasteners on the priest's cloak. He pulled it out from under the inert form and wrapped it around himself, re-fastening it with fingers that trembled. Flipping the hood over his head, he stepped over the priest and peered into the hallway.

No one was in view.

Rufus stepped out and walked down the long corridor toward the distant doorway to the outside. Every fiber of his being screamed for him to run. He battled the impulses down, and maintained a slow, steady pace.

In a moment, he thought, there would be a shout. Then the weapons. All right! They would have to kill him; it was preferable to being someone else. He wanted to run. He wanted to get away. He wanted to be free. But the very thought of *accepting death*, as a logical outgrowth of his actions and preferable to being someone else, made an icy calm slip over part of his being like the cloak itself.

He reached the far guard station. Beyond the desk, a guard leaned in a little cubicle. Rufus kept his face averted, flinching.

"See you, Father," the guard grunted.

Rufus nodded and shuffled by. He had ten steps to go to the door. It occurred to him that he had no idea precisely what lay on the far side. No matter. If he could get there, he had a chance.

He took three steps, then five, then two more. Almost there. It was an agony. Sweat poured from every pore of his body. His mind was yelling exultantly. He could make it now.

Oddly, at this instant, he remembered something Joseph had told him long ago. "*Every man has to face a choice eventually*," Joseph had told him that time so long ago, before his own escape. And now Rufus understood. Until this moment he had not, perhaps, ever really seen the truth about commitment. He didn't know yet where he was going, or why, or how far he would get, or what the results of his escape might be. But he was going. And that, in itself, had already freed him.

He reached the door and stepped through it.

It was a city street. A few people walked here and there. A grayish sun looked down over ancient tall buildings, warehouses. The building he had left was huge, granite, faceless except where they had cut windows here and there in the once monolithic face.

Rufus closed the door behind him. Across the street was an alley. He headed across the street, holding to his easy, forced pace.

Behind him, inside the building, a siren wailed. Shouts came from behind the door he had used.

He broke into a run for the alley, hiking the green cloak up around his waist. He heard people on the street yelling, and a horse drawing a cart bolted in fear as he darted in under it to hide. The door behind him had flown open and guards spilled out. One of them yelled hoarsely and pointed. Rufus reached the alley mouth and dived headlong for shelter. Something zapped through the air inches behind his head and knocked out dozens of bricks from the wall.

* * *

STUNNED for split-seconds by the impact of the weapon blast behind him, Rufus rolled on the dirty floor of the alley and scrambled blindly to get footing again. His brightness-shocked eyes made out the shape of the alley, running between tall buildings, as if he were seeing down the length of a shining tube. He staggered away from the alley opening, knowing that the guards would race in behind him and have him within seconds.

He had run only a few paces, however, when he saw an old double doorway in the building to his right. It looked loose and he threw his weight against it. The doors slid sideways, letting out a gush of coolly rancid air. Rufus threw himself into the dimness inside and pushed the doors closed firmly behind him.

Outside came the yelling of the guards and the pounding of feet as they ran by.

Turning, Rufus tried to make out where he was. It would take them only a few minutes to determine that he was not in front of them, and then they would be back. He had only bought a little extra freedom. He had to find a better way out, not only from this building, but from the area before they could cordon it off. How?

He was in an old warehouse, now deserted. The ceiling stood black a hundred feet overhead, and lacing the huge area were great wood bins and storage vaults that had once contained things he could only guess at now. There was no one around. Off to the left loomed a dusty staircase, going up.

Rufus ran to the stairs, stared at them for a moment, and then saw how they rose to the next higher level by being supported between metal poles rising into the ceiling overhead. Grasping one of the poles, he leaped, digging in his feet, and shinnied up the pole toward the landing overhead. His hands, slippery with sweat, began to bleed from the rough, rusty metal, but he kept shinnying. When he reached the twisted landing almost under the ceiling, he swung his legs painfully onto the stairs and clambered on up.

The second floor was like the first, with bins and dust and emptiness, except the ceiling was of more normal height. He knelt on the dusty floor, catching his breath and wiping the blood and sweat off his hands on the green cloak, which he now stripped off and stuffed into the corner of a bin.

In the cavernous lower floor, metal grated against wood and then something banged backward, clattering. The sound of heavy boots rattled against the old wood flooring. It sounded like many men, running. Rufus huddled against the floor, peering through a chink in the boards supporting him. He saw the guards running.

"He had to come in here!" one told another near the door, pointing. "Nowhere else he could have gone!"

"Maybe you're right," said the other. "He might have made the next intersection, though. But we'll search this first." He raised his voice. "You men search every corner!"

"There's a second and third floor," the other guard reminded him. "See the stairs?"

The first guard walked to the stairs. Rufus couldn't see him, but heard the moment's silence. His skin crawled.

"No need checking up there," the first guard's voice said.

"Why not?" the other asked sharply, walking over.

"Look at that dust. Undisturbed. Nobody's been up those stairs for years."

The other guard grunted. "Must be down here, then."

The first guard raised his voice again. "Check those back stalls!"

Very carefully Rufus eased his body along the board floor to the ladder that went up to the top level. He climbed with great care, testing each old round rung before asking it to bear weight. But it was a good ladder, strong. He climbed up onto the top level, an attic with great cobwebs and mounds of ancient dust. A broken window flapped in the slight breeze, and sunlight flooded onto the dirt.

He wanted to rest. His heart was beating too hard and his breath was ragged, his arms and legs trembled. It was very tempting, the idea of staying here: perhaps the guards would go away.

But he knew better. His goal was still the same. He had to get out of this area fast. Then he had to get out of the whole city. There was no safety for him now, not here, perhaps not anywhere but certainly—and never—here. Selda had escaped; he could, too.

Crawling, he made it to the window and saw to his surprise that it looked out not upon an open expanse, but upon another building roof. The warehouses had been built side-by-side, wall-to-wall, and from this window which had once, perhaps, looked out onto open space, he could easily drop the eight feet or so to the roof of the adjacent building.

And beyond that roof line was *another* roof, that one peaked, but not severely, and he got a glimpse of how he could traverse an entire block on the rooftops.

He climbed out of the window and dropped lightly to the hot black roof next door. Running, he went to the far side and hooked a leg over a drainspout, getting up on hands and knees on the ancient, slippery tiled surfaces. He worked his way painfully across this roof, too, and found another flat one on the far side.

The farthest building roof he could reach, before the line broke against the canyon of a street, was a very long block from the jail. Rufus saw that the street here fronted one of the many small parks around the city, areas

where old structures had toppled and been carried away, and the earth turned over and filled to allow grass and trees to grow. Children were playing in the park. It had many shrubs and trees. Far beyond it, another block or two away, the streets resumed. This entire section of the city was twisted, ugly, perfect for a man fleeing someone or something.

Rufus tried to get down into the corner building from the roof, but the roof trapdoor was nailed firmly shut. He had to retrace his path to the next building before he found a stairwell that he could break into. Leaving the roof door open, he quickly descended the old stairs into what he imagined was another warehouse.

He came out of the stairwell at another closed door. He opened it, expecting to find a bin area, or abandoned , machinery under dust. To his surprise, he stepped out into a narrow hallway with some sort of thin carpet on the floor. The building smelled musty with age, but there were human odors, too—the cooking, laundry and sweat of daily living.

This, then, was some sort of apartment building.

It was too late to turn back. Knowing his risk of apprehension had just multiplied many times, Rufus hurried quietly down the hall anyway and found the staircase. He went down one flight, and then another. One more to go. Looking down between stairs, he could see the lower foyer and sunlight from the street.

He plunged downward, taking the steps three at a time, turned the landing, and almost collided with a man of about his own age, coming up with a sack of groceries. Bread and potatoes spilled all over the wood floor of the landing as the man reeled back from the impact.

"Watch out!" the man bawled angrily. "Look what you've done!"

"Sorry," Rufus muttered, trying to push by.

"Hey!" the man yelled, his wide eyes comprehending Rufus's uniform. "That's a *jail*—"

Rufus spun him against the wall and knocked him out with a wide-sweeping blow of his already swollen right hand. The man groaned and fell limp. Thinking he was getting very good at this very fast, Rufus started to step over the man, but then got another idea.

Tearing off his own clothes, he swiftly unbuttoned the man's soiled brown tunic, pulled it off his shoulders, and slipped it over his own. Then he went on down the stairs fast.

He stepped into the street. The street was much narrower here, more crowded, in the deep, musty shade of the buildings, and along the street were little shops with people buying things. It was fifty yards across the intersection to the park.

Rufus walked across the street to the park, skirting within a dozen paces of two guards who stood idly on the corner, paying no attention to him as they sought the crowd for a glimpse of a jail uniform.

It was luck, Rufus realized with a heady sense of destiny. It had all been luck, and the luck was still good. He had crossed the street now, and was in the park, and was walking briskly, as fast as he dared without drawing attention. He would make it now. He would be free.

He crossed the park, worked his way through a housing district, cut through a main intersection with mounting boldness, and reached the fringes of the city before nightfall. He mixed with crowds of night workers walking out for their toil in the fields, and when the caravan neared the fields, he slipped away from them and made it into the edge of the woods.

He walked deeper into the woods for more than two hours, getting to higher ground until finally he could look down from a hiding place and see the big city below him, against the backdrop of sullen rainclouds gathering on the western horizon. The sun was going down and he was on the loose, free.

His stomach panged. He hurt in every muscle of his body. He needed food and he needed rest, but he knew they would still be after him and he couldn't rest. Not yet, and perhaps not for a very long time.

He pressed on into the woods, heading generally east, into desolate country. It got dark around him. He hunkered against a big tree, chilled and hungry and tired, and thunder rumbled overhead and the first big drops of rain spattered down against him.

Shivering, he remembered the other time he had felt this way. He had been lost and pursued then, too. But now they would chase harder, and he was not a youth now, and his situation was infinitely worse. *Selda, will I*

never see you again?

But then he felt a soft burst of pride, and rejected defeat. He was infinitely *better* off now, he thought. He knew who he was, and he knew about the world, and he had made free choices. He had faced dying and lost his woman. He would endure.

CHAPTER TWELVE

But where to go? And what to do? They were questions that nagged at Rufus even in the earliest days after his escape from the city, and by the time he had been alone and on his own for a month, the same questions plagued him. He couldn't and wouldn't live out his life wandering alone, every moment fearing capture. Somehow he had to come to terms with his situation and find some sort of goal—for his isolation quickly taught him that a man without a goal was already a prisoner, no matter his physical freedom.

"Freedom," however, was a strange term for Rufus's condition at first. He quickly learned that, despite the hard work on the farm, he had gotten soft for the kind of existence required to travel hard, alone, over unknown terrain. In his years with Selda in the city he had never ventured far away. Now, intent on putting as much territory between himself and the city, he worked steadily eastward, traveling much at night. Daylight was too hot and offered too much risk of capture.

Food was no great problem. Small wild game abounded, and he reverted to his old trapping skills. Staying to woods and ravines, he made steady progress, day by day, and made it a point to avoid by a wide path the occasional towns he came upon, even though they appeared deserted. Once he spotted a small band of shaggy-haired men walking along a crumbled old highway, but could not guess their purpose. Another time he heard distant shouts, probably of a band of hunters. He hid for hours, and avoided them, too.

Walking through the country, Rufus began to have an inkling of how densely populated and complexly developed the nation had been in centuries past. Every day he saw towns in the distance, and as the terrain became flatter and plainer, he could always see one abandoned house somewhere against the sky. The vast land had once teemed with human life. Now the towns were empty, and evidently the city-states were few and

far between. Rufus wondered if there were families scattered through this area, too. If so, he saw no sign of them. He hid well.

As he traveled, his body hardened and he got back into top shape. The first shock of his imprisonment and narrow escape also began to fade, and he grew increasingly restless and ill-at-ease. He was heading east; this was primarily an accident because the mountains had blocked escape to the west, he had feared the south because it had been his original home, and he knew there was another city a day's journey to the north. To the east, the way he was heading, was the great bulk of the continent; he had headed for this land area instinctively, hoping somehow to be swallowed up.

Now he had succeeded. But he couldn't wander all his days.

What to do? Find another city and try to set up another bogus identity? Move into one of the deserted old homes on the prairie and hack out an existence alone? Neither course looked good to him. He feared the cities and hated the thought of becoming a faceless drone once more. But his isolation had already begun to gnaw at him.

One day he was pondering this problem when he realized he was being followed.

He was camped on the shore of a huge, dead lake. Like all the streams and lakes he had ever seen, the great body of water lay gleaming, turgid, silent brown-green under the hothouse sky. The water was drinkable, with a strong, unpleasant flavor of decayed green matter. Characteristically, the lake teemed with minute plant life; great filaments and strands of the stuff wafted in the shallow areas, here and there clotting like cotton fiber, choking on its own richness. One drank from a natural body of water by beating at the furry surface with his hands until he had created a little whirlpool in the green fluff, and then he sipped the relatively clear yellow fluid that oozed up out of the murk.

Rufus was so drinking, lying on his belly, when he caught the distant reflection that tipped him off.

It was behind his route, and on a wooded hillside several miles back, higher and in a position to survey the lake. One glint of sunlight on yellow metal—then two more, quickly, as the person up there moved around, carelessly letting the sun glitter on some article of his clothing or

equipment.

Rufus saw the glitter over his shoulder as he lay flat, and although he stiffened involuntarily, he gave no other sign. He finished drinking as if he knew nothing.

His impulse was to run. He was badly scared. But he had been a fugitive enough now to have the fugitive's curious discipline. He made every movement casual and slow, to convince the watcher that he suspected nothing. Surprise now was on the side of the pursued.

As he worked his way around the great lake, staying to the easily traversed beaches, Rufus realized that he might be reading too much into the presence of another person nearby. His first reaction had been that another person was near, therefore the person was watching him, therefore the person was after him, therefore the person was an enemy. That didn't all have to be true, Rufus told himself hopefully.

To test whether the other person was following him,

Rufus devised a simple strategy. He walked across a long, sandy stretch of beach, then cut into the brambles and scrub oak woods that lined the beach. He struggled up the side of a hill, down the far side out of sight of anyone, and then quickly doubled back, running low through a gully that evidently carried water into the lake during high rain periods. He came out at the lake's edge again a mile or two below the beach he had earlier traversed, and ran back to it.

There, going across the pale sand, were not one set of footprints, but two. The other person was following him.

Allowing himself a moment to check the other footprints, Rufus saw that his pursuer wore beat-up boots and left a stride shorter than his own, and had crossed this area at a hunter's lope, by the way his heels dug into the sand. He had been hurrying—

Which was the point where Rufus was thinking when a man's voice startled him from nearby rocks:

"All right. You tricked me. Why?"

* * *

HUNKERED in the sand as he was, Rufus tried to spin toward the voice and only succeeded in falling off balance onto his hip. Helpless, he located the source of the voice, which had been quiet, masculine, almost amused.

The man stood on a huge, craggy rock at the edge of the beach, with the brush which had hidden him as a backdrop. He was tall and well put together, with dark, curly-hair and a broad face and beard that tangled below his throat. He wore not a tattered cloak, like Rufus's, but a rough brown shirt and trousers hitched around his hips with a piece of leather and a buckle. It had been the buckle, Rufus saw, which had glittered in the sun.

The man was grinning at him, but he had a heavy length of timber in his big right hand, clearly carried as a weapon.

"No answers?" the man grunted. "I'll ask again: Why did you try to trick me?"

"You were following me," Rufus said.

"All right," the man said surprisingly. "But why this trick?"

"I wanted to see why you were following me, and what you looked like."

The man sighed and came down off the rock, walking nearer with an almost careless grace. "Have you known about me long?"

"Yes," Rufus said.

"That's a lie," the man said in the same easy tone.

"No. I—"

"I've been following you for five days. You just noticed it. If you had noticed me sooner, you would have reacted sooner. So don't lie about it."

"If you knew that," Rufus said bitterly, "why did you ask?"

"Testing," the man shrugged.

"Who are you?"

"I'm not a guard or a spy, if that's what you fear."

"Why should I fear that?"

"Because you're a fugitive," the man said matter-of-factly. "That's obvious. That's why I followed you. To make sure."

"I'm not—"

"Of course you are," the man smiled. "Don't bother to deny it. It's all right. I'm a fugitive too."

Rufus stared at him. The man's quiet ease and certainty bothered him far more than aggressiveness might have. The open declaration that he also was a fugitive sounded too pat and too casual. Rufus didn't believe him.

"You're suspicious," the stranger smiled.

"Shouldn't I be?" Rufus countered.

"Of course. You wouldn't be here if you hadn't learned that much. But where are you going?"

"I don't know," Rufus blurted truthfully.

The man sighed and let himself down to a squatting position. He glanced at the club in his hand and casually tossed it aside, then turned back to Rufus to continue the conversation.

Rufus, however, had already reacted to the instant of opportunity. He threw himself across the space between them and crashed into the bigger man's body with his head and shoulder, bowling him over backwards. Sand flew as they fell tangled together.

The stranger grabbed Rufus's arms and pinioned them. The strength in his hands was—incredible. Rufus groaned as he felt the strength, like steel bands cutting into him, paralyzing him.

The stranger tossed Rufus aside like a sack of seeds, came up to his feet with fluid grace, and knelt over Rufus, one knee on his chest. The man's eyes glinted with a softly amused, dangerous deep light.

"Don't try that again," he warned gently.

Pinned and helpless, Rufus struggled for breath and couldn't say anything.

The stranger eased off, got to his feet, walked a few yards away, and leaned casually against a big rock.

Rufus sat up, his fear going to anger. "Why are you doing this to me?" he cried bitterly. "What do you want from me?"

"I don't want anything," the stranger said. "I had to verify your status at first. Then I got curious. And I haven't talked with anyone for over a year. That's all. Now are we going to talk? We might as well, you know. We seem to be traveling in the same general direction anyway."

"I go alone," Rufus said.

"I do too," the stranger sighed. "But let's talk for a little while and then go on, shall we?"

Rufus hesitated, and their eyes met.

"I'm mad," Rufus burst out finally. "But yes. I'd like to talk, too."

* * *

HIS NAME was Sloan. He began talking with his usual soft patience, but as he told some of his story, Rufus interrupted with questions, and the conversation became more animated. Sloan needed badly to talk. He admitted as much. He understated, but seemed to hold little back.

He was an engineer. His original home, in a city near the western ocean, was a research center where scientists were engaged in trying to find ways to purge the salt water bodies of the world of their mercury and petroleum contamination. A few creatures still lived in the oceans, he said, which surprised Rufus and gave him a little thrill down his back which he didn't fully understand. If science could ever devise a way to purify the oceans, the creatures might multiply and become a source of food.

In his years as an engineer, however, Sloan said he had grown increasingly disillusioned. Trying to purify the oceans was an impossible dream; no chemicals worked, and even if generations could have devised filters gigantic enough and powerful enough to do the job, the filters

would only dump purified waters back into waters so deadly that the clean would instantly become rotten again. And all the rivers of the world spewed out their centuries of pent-up wastes, and in the countries where the wars were being waged, nuclear weapons stripped new vast areas to be rinsed by the cobalt rains, stripped of nutrients, carried down to the seas in new ravages of silt. The planet was a closed system, finally, Sloan said, and there was no place left to pump off the corruption.

Seeing the futility of it, Sloan had joined a small group of scientists arguing for new and more stringent regulation of civilization's output. They had drawn up comprehensive plans for new cutbacks in production, including elimination of war machinery. They had prepared to present their papers at a scientific meeting.

At the same time, however, and not known to them, another faction of the scientific community had been working in a different direction. Arguing that present contaminations were the heritage of earlier generations, and that only vastly improved technology could eliminate the problems, these scientists were preparing a scheme for renewal of ancient technological processes.

"One discovery leads to another, they argued," Sloan told Rufus, "and they said only a return to the ancient technological society offered us any hope of ever solving our problems. Start building engines again; search for new petroleum and uranium supplies; emphasize long-distance transportation and communication again, to bring the world together, a single society working on the common problem.

"We presented our arguments, they presented theirs. Because of the wars, and the army's desire for more and better weapons, their viewpoint prevailed. Without making any general public announcement, it was decided to begin limited re-development of aircraft, power production, and so forth. We branded this what it is, a return to the old technological heresy. We were told to keep quiet and accept the will of the majority."

Sloan and a half-dozen of his colleagues had tried to go along. They had witnessed a test flight of a turbine-powered transport airplane, and had even contributed expertise to research into new methods of electric power generation. But they had continued to speak out against what was happening.

"Government operatives came to see each of us, finally," Sloan told

Rufus. "They said we were damaging the effort. They ordered us to keep still and voice no opposition."

"It was a lesson in radicalization," Sloan said.

"What is radicalization?" Rufus interrupted.

"It's the process of becoming radical."

"Is it bad to be radical?"

"Most people think so."

"Why?"

"Because a radical is a man who will fight for what he believes."

"That's *bad*?"

"It is if you're the man the radical is fighting."

"You fought?"

"We might have. They saw we might, though, and arrested us before we could."

"All of you?"

Most, Sloan said. There had followed medical testimony, hearings, personal background screenings, and trials. Sloan and four others had been ordered relocated, and re-trained to non-technical positions. Sloan had been told he would become a baker.

The night before his shipment to a training center, he and two of the others had fled. Ironically, they used one of the experimental land cars to escape in. After putting several hundred miles between themselves and their city, they had wrecked the car in an accident which killed the other two and left Sloan badly hurt.

Sloan said a group of people who lived in the mountains to the west had taken him in and nursed him back to health. The group was one of a dozen or more in the country, he believed, which was planning some sort of attack on cities and overthrow of the established system. The group

learned Sloan's background and wanted him to design them weapons. He escaped from them and had been alone ever since.

Almost ten years.

There was much in Sloan's story that Rufus did not fully understand, but he believed it and it excited him. By the time Sloan had told it, night was falling around the lake, and by tacit agreement the two of them gathered dry wood for a tiny, smokeless fire and then hunted together for their evening meal. After they had eaten, and extinguished the fire, they sat together in the dark and Rufus told him his own experiences.

"We're alike, you and I," Sloan said when Rufus had finally done.

"Neither of us has any place to go and nothing to do," Rufus agreed tiredly.

"Perhaps that was true," Sloan said. "But it isn't now."

"Why?" Rufus asked, surprised.

"Fate threw us together," Sloan said, watching Rufus intensely. "Fate has its reasons, sometimes."

"I don't understand."

"You were the son of the Executive. If there's any man in the world who might listen to me—who might see what's happening, after hearing your experiences and mine—he's the man."

"He wouldn't listen to us," Rufus said, aghast. "He would have us killed! Wiped out!"

"Would he?" Sloan asked quietly.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In the morning, Sloan said nothing more about his seemingly casual proposal about the Executive. Rufus, disturbed by the idea, was relieved that the issue was not pressed. They had a meager breakfast of berries and prepared to set out.

"Which way will you go?" Rufus asked the other man.

Sloan allowed himself that slight smile. "North and east, I think." The way he said it was clear indication that it didn't make a great deal of difference.

"I think I'll head that way myself," Rufus said.

"Shall we travel together?" Sloan asked.

"Yes."

So they began. As they worked through more rugged country, often traversing broad hills, they talked little except in making minor decisions on route. Rufus waited for Sloan to re-introduce the topic of visiting the Executive. Sloan didn't do so.

The idea, however, continued to rankle in the back of Rufus's mind, and he couldn't wholly understand it. He felt a great resentment. After all, his father had allowed them to arrest him, put him through IR&R. The Executive could have done something. It might have been an alternative prison term or banishment to some far part of the world, but he could have done *something*. Rufus did not want to see this man who had refused to use his power for his own blood, whether the inaction had been from fear or callousness. The result had been the same.

And yet there was a morbid fascination to the idea.

—What did his father look like? Would seeing the man break through the barriers to memory—let Rufus recall when he had been another person? Would his father recognize him now, and how would he react? With fear? Horror? Anger?

Sloan set a strong pace and said nothing about it all day, even though Rufus began toward the end to wish he would bring it up, so they could talk about the questions that had begun to plague him. They pitched dry camp near a stream too poisonous with algae and chemicals to allow a drink. They talked a little about the day, and what would come next, but in steadfastly ambiguous terms. Rufus told Sloan about Selda, and the pain came back as he told it.

"She might be better off, you know," Sloan told him softly.

"Dead, do you mean? No. I refuse to accept that! She's *not* dead."

"She would have peace. Rest. If there's another existence—"

"No," Rufus said. "Why should there be another life?"

"People have said there is."

"People lie. They delude themselves. There's nothing else."

"But there might be, Rufus, and if it helps to think so—"

"It doesn't," Rufus said passionately. "It makes my body sick to imagine it. How could there be another life?" Savagely he hammered his fist against his own arm. "This is life. This body. This place. Now. Nothing else could be life. It could only be insanity."

Sloan watched him with those quiet, thoughtful eyes. "No God, then?"

"God is in me," Rufus told him. "There's no other."

"And when you die, God dies?"

"Of course," Rufus told him. "How else could it be?"

Sloan sighed. "I'm going to sleep now."

"I will too, soon," Rufus said.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

In the morning they moved on. They saw a populated city on the horizon, against the banks of a twisted river that flowed silver-slick with oil and wastes, dead under the greenish sky. They talked it over arid skirted the area widely, and then talked about it in the afternoon while they rested.

"Would that city be like the other one?" Rufus asked.

"I think they're all much alike," Sloan nodded.

"They say they have a system, but none is really free."

"Oh, they're free enough, Rufus."

"No, they're not. I was one of them, remember. They're not free even to think what they want."

"They're free," Sloan pointed out, "to think what is conceivable."

"Is that freedom?"

"It's about as free as any man ever gets."

"I think even the people in the family I came from were freer than that."

"Possibly," Sloan shrugged.

"You disagree?" Rufus challenged.

"The people in the city," Sloan said, "live packed together. They depend on their laws. They burrow under structure. They act and react as they think they should.—The people in the families live separately, in a looser structure, and they say they do as they wish. But I think they're no freer. It's just that their chains are a different kind."

"I know about the Learner and the elders," Rufus agreed. "But people in the families are freer because they don't have so many laws telling them what to do."

Sloan smiled. "Rufus, suppose you went to a meeting, and they told you where to sit and what papers to hold in your hands and what to say. Would you be free?"

"Of course not," Rufus said.

"Even though all the rules made it easier for the other people in the room?"

"No! You don't need that many rules."

"All right." Sloan smiled again. "Now. Suppose you go into the room and no one tells you anything, and everyone just mills around, sits down, stands up, lies down, crouches in the corner, dances, yells, does anything

he wants to do. Are you going to be free?"

"Maybe so. Maybe not. It depends."

"That's right, Rufus. In the one case your freedom depends on rules. In the other, it depends on people. But it still depends."

"But you forget the only important option," Rufus said.

"What's that?"

"The option to walk out of the room."

Sloan chuckled appreciatively. "Yes. But that's not the real freedom. That's still superficial. There's only one real basis of freedom—for anyone. And that's inside himself.

"Non sequitur," Rufus said.

"I hope not," Sloan said. "I sincerely hope not. Because it's the only thing I've ever learned in my life that's really important."

So they went on, drifting. They got past the city and back into the broad areas of desolation—abandoned towns, old farmhouses gone to rubble, blight-stricken fields, dead rivers and lakes, killed woods, deserted schools, burnt-out way stations, emptiness. Sloan knew history, and in the passing days he gave Rufus glimpses of what the nation once had been. They were now in the twilight of a race, he said: a pathetic handful of beings clinging, here and there, like animated scabs, to the rotting crust of the planet they had destroyed. If they survived another five thousand years, there might be hope again; the air might regenerate, the rivers purge themselves and begin to run clean. In fifty thousand years the oceans themselves might again support life.

But the wars had to stop, Sloan said. Somehow, some time, men had to learn not to kill. And the band of men in this country—and others—seeking a return to the earlier ages of opulence had to be stopped.

"But the only way they might be stopped would be in a bloodbath," he told Rufus one night after the tiny campfire had been extinguished.

"How can there be a bloodbath?" Rufus said, stammering over the

unfamiliar word.

"There are people we haven't met yet," Sloan said.

"What do you mean?"

"The people in the families and the people in the cities are both part of the organization, Rufus. But there are others out here in the heart of this country. I've heard of them. They belong to no one. The army hunts them, and sometimes kills many of them, but there are always more. They're against both groups. They would destroy all organization."

"You know this?" Rufus asked.

"Of course."

"Do you suppose the Executive knows about it?"

There was a long pause. It was the first time they had heard that word since the first night, when Sloan made his suggestion.

"I don't know if he's aware of it or not," Sloan said finally. "Some people in the government must know about it in detail. The extermination programs go on sporadically. But he might not know the extent of it... what it could mean. They might insulate him from some things. He is getting old, you know."

The idea was strange to Rufus. "Old?"

"Seventy."

"I hadn't thought of him as that old."

"You were his youngest son. Your brothers—"

Rufus trembled. "*Brothers?*"

Sloan stared at him.

"I have brothers?" Rufus choked.

"You had three," Sloan told him quietly.

"Three brothers!"

"One served in the war. He was killed in Guatemala. Another vanished... there were rumors he took his own life."

"I had brothers!" Rufus breathed. Curiously, he felt his throat filling, choking him. It hit him hard, and he didn't know why. Brothers he didn't remember, as if he had never known them. "My other brother," he added. "He's still alive?"

"He is," Sloan told him with a penetrating look.

"I'd like to meet my brother," Rufus said, yielding to some impulse that welled from deep inside. "I'd like to meet my *father*" he added passionately.

Sloan said nothing, but only poked at the dead fire with a stick.

Rufus thought about it, and the loneliness overwhelmed him. He remembered Joseph and John and Mari—and Selda. He had never really had anyone, had never *belonged* to anyone. He might have belonged to anyone. He might have belonged to Selda, but he had been too busy with himself, and then it had been too late.

He said, "I don't want to stay alone. I want to go where my father is, and see him. And see my brother."

Sloan said nothing, his head bowed.

"You know the way," Rufus said. "You can show me the way."

"You were wiser before," Sloan said softly. "There's too much danger."

"You can show me the way," Rufus repeated doggedly. "I'll see to it that my father listens to you, and you can warn him. They say he's a great man. He's been executive a long time, longer than anyone. I'll get to see him, somehow, if you get me to the right city. I'll make him see me and listen, and then it will be all right and I'll have him listen to you, too."

"No," Sloan said. "It's no good, Rufus."

"I don't want to be alone any more. I want to find him. I want to go there."

Sloan looked at him with those keen eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure now."

"It's far. It will be hard."

"We can go together."

"You're sure."

"Yes!"

Sloan rubbed his eyes. "You trust me that much?"

"A man has to trust someone," Rufus said.

"All right," Sloan said after another long silence. "We'll go there, you and I."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They reached the city in the winter, and it was very cold. Muddy snow blew, obscuring the dim lights in mostly blackened buildings. The streets were nearly deserted, and the parks, their heaps of rubble covered with the gray snow, looked dead. It was the largest city Rufus had seen, extending for many miles, but great pockets were empty. In one of these areas, in the ground floor of what had once been an apartment building, Rufus and Sloan found shelter. The flooring was rotten with mildew and trash littered the big room that had once been an elegant parlor, but heavy planks covered the windows and they felt safe enough to build a chip fire on a sheet of metal to cook the lank rat they had captured.

Sloan sat back on the ruptured cushions of an old sofa, his bare, cold-swollen feet extended toward the little fire as Rufus turned the skinned rat on the spit. He had gotten thinner and he looked very tired, but he had the old slight smile. "We've made it," he said softly. "We're in the city," Rufus corrected him. "The hardest part starts now."

"I've been here before. We're less than two miles from the palace. It's on Constitution."

"What is constitution?" Rufus asked, frowning. "The name of a street."

"Aren't the streets numbered here?"

"Most are. Some are very old, and are named after ancient things."

"Was a constitution an ancient thing?"

Sloan seemed to lose interest in the subject. He rubbed his cold-reddened hands together. "The palace has been moved several times. The important thing is that we know where it is right now. I do. I think we have to rest a while. But tomorrow night I'll go outside and look things over—try to devise a plan."

"We've thought of hundreds of plans these last few months," Rufus pointed out.

"I know," Sloan admitted. "Now we'll just have to choose one after I reconnoiter."

Rufus delicately removed the cooked flesh of the rat from the spit and pulled it apart with his fingertips. He handed half the carcass over to Sloan. "It's too bad we don't have bread," he said with a smile.

Sloan grinned in return. One night, in what had once been Ohio, they had found a hunter's cache, a portion of a deer. Taking it along an ancient roadway to a place that might be safe for cooking it, they had come upon a man and woman living in a mud dugout. They had met, face to face, before anyone could hide or devise lies or reach for a weapon. The man had quietly offered them shelter for the night, and the woman had had corn bread, and they all shared the venison. It had been the finest night of their months' journey.

"We have to be sure of our plan," Rufus said now, eating and remembering. "It's not just our own lives, you know."

Sloan nodded.

"There are a lot of people out across the country like the Ohio people," Rufus went on. "We owe it to them to make sure my father understands clearly. Those people don't understand, but they're good people. If they knew the facts, they'd make their wishes clear."

"Yes," Sloan said. "I'm sure you must be right."

Eating, Rufus shivered.

"Are you sick?" Sloan asked quickly.

"No," Rufus smiled. "It's just that I'm excited, and it's fine to be warm and safe, and have good food. And be with a friend."

* * *

IN THE NIGHT they took turns sleeping. One slept while the other climbed to the second floor and hunkered beside a window from which one of the covering planks had been splintered. It was a good station for watching the city streets.

The view looked down onto a broad paved thoroughfare with a little island in the center where trees grew. The street met another within view, and in the broad intersection stood a statue of a man on a horse. He had a sword. Two feeble streetlights glowed, illuminating the intersection and the statue. Now and again a man or woman hurried along the red-snowy streets, bundled in rags against the harsh wind. A little child, bare-footed, limped by, shuddering and half-naked in the snow. The child was a little girl, and following her was a bony, half-dead dog, dragging one of its hind feet. Rufus watched them vanish, and wondered if they had a place to hide from the storm.

In the middle of the night the patrol came by.

Rufus was sleep-dazed at the chink in the boards when he heard them coming, the rhythmic thumping of boots in the snow which first sounded like a machine. Tingling awake, he peered into the intersection, trying to see what was making the muffled racket. He saw an old man, naked except for a tattered shawl clutched around his skinny body, run frightened across the square and cower in the deep shadows of the statue.

Then the patrol came into view from the right side of the square: four men abreast, a dozen rows, marching smartly in cadence, with an officer at their side. The soldiers wore pale blue uniforms, trousers, heavy coats and mufflers, helmets that covered their ears and gleamed metallic when the dim light struck them. They carried weapons, long tubes and some sort of sidearms as well. The light glittered on their insignia and their heavy legs stomped through the snow and they were darkly powerful and well-outfitted. They were silent. Rufus felt a chill not of the cold room.

They were the first people in the city who looked warm and well fed and certain of their place. They kept to the middle of the street as if it belonged to them.

The patrol marched through the square and was gone. The old man came out from the shadows of the statue after a while and looked fearfully in the direction they had gone, and then ran the other way, bare old legs twinkling against the snow.

Twice more in the night while Rufus was on watch the patrols marched through the square. Finally in the dawn hours no other living being moved. But the troops moved continuously, following their pattern which Rufus could not understand.

"There's been trouble here," Sloan explained when Rufus mentioned it. "The government says the troops are necessary to keep the peace."

"Do they call it peace," Rufus asked, "when the streets are full of soldiers?"

"They do," Sloan said, "if the soldiers are on their side."

The city's streets remained virtually deserted during the day. There were not so many soldiers. A thin pall of smoke hung around the needle-like buildings. A few mule-drawn carts clattered down the street, carrying sacks of grain and packages Rufus could only speculate about.

For the first time, as the day dragged on, Sloan began to show signs of tension. He did not rest, but paced from room to room, peering covertly from cracks in the planks. He answered Rufus's comments in monosyllables.

"You're worried," Rufus finally observed openly.

"I'm planning," Sloan snapped.

"I could go out tonight. You could wait here, instead of me."

"No," Sloan said irritably. "I know the city. I'll go."

"You have to be careful," Rufus told him.

"Obviously," Sloan said.

"No," Rufus smiled. "It's not just that. I—what would I do, Sloan, if something happened to you?"

Sloan looked at him. "Rufus, I want you to remember one thing. No matter what happens. We've been good friends."

"I know," Rufus said, not understanding.

"We've had that," Sloan told him. "The friendship. It's been genuine."

"And we're going to be all right," Rufus said.

"Of course we are," Sloan said, and smiled tightly.

Then it was dark and they made arrangements. Rufus was to remain in the second floor room by the window, keeping watch. Barring a real emergency, he was to stay there and not move into other parts of the building. Sloan explained that they couldn't risk disclosure by accident now, especially with him out in the city. He would work his way toward the palace, he said, and watch from a park. He would try to see clearly which of their two plans would work the best. He knew he could slip into the secret entry tunnel in the park. It was lightly guarded because only secret visitors ever knew of its existence. He knew of it because he had once been brought to the palace as part of a scientific survey team. But if the tunnel guard system had been changed, he would study the way the walls were manned, and try to determine the chances of the more desperate gamble, going over the wall and into the densely shrubbed grounds on the far side.

Sloan said he would be out for several hours.

"You understand what you're to do?" he asked.

"Yes," Rufus said. "Stay by the window. Watch."

"Don't take any chances."

"I'll do as you said."

"Do you have a weapon of any kind?"

It seemed a strange question. "You know I don't, Sloan. There's a board near the window. It would make a club. But you know I have no weapon."

"All right," Sloan said.

"Why did you ask that?"

"I don't know." Sloan's smile was weak. "I'm nervous."

"We have to try this," Rufus told him, suddenly afraid he was waivering. "If we don't try now, we'll never be able to do anything."

"I know," Sloan said. He took a deep breath and met Rufus' eyes.

Rufus held out his hand. "See you soon."

They clasped arms, hard. Then Sloan turned quickly and was gone.

Rufus stayed in the downstairs room for a little while, listening for sounds of Sloan's departure. When the building was utterly silent again, he climbed the rotten stairs to the second floor. He stationed himself at the chink in the boarded window.

The snow had melted during the day, and the street glistened wetly. Everything else was as before. Rufus watched dumbly, his mind with Sloan. A lone soldier walked past the intersection and was gone. Rufus had not seen a soldier alone before, and wondered if it was unusual. But he dismissed it from his mind, thinking about Sloan.

Their chances of succeeding, he thought, were fantastically small. In the months of their journey across the big, dead land, they both had come to realize that, but neither of them had ever mentioned it. There had been many nights, when they talked of possible routes of action, that one or the other had played opponent, arguing all the obvious obstacles to success. On most of these nights they had looked at one another, finally, in silence. Rufus had been thinking, *We can't do it; there's no way; we're walking into failure*. He knew Sloan had been thinking this, too. But neither had said it, because to say it was admission of the one thing they could not admit.

They might have no chance. But this was the one thing a man could never admit.

Now, however, Rufus was trying to convince himself that there was that thin possibility of success. After all, he told himself, they had come so far.

He remembered the nights they had almost blundered into the midst of Army maneuvers in Kentucky, and the afternoon they had hid in a cave while the band of revolutionaries scoured the rocks below, trying to pick up their trail again. They had been lost in a dead city one day, and there had been that week when he was so sick, and Sloan watched over him in the delirium. They had gotten through all these things, and now they were here, in the same city. Only a mile or two away was his father. And his brother. Everyone had always said the Executive was a wise and good man. The whole business of his own past could be explained, somehow. His father must really love him, must mourn him. If they could come face to face it would be all right.

Three soldiers walked through the intersection below, and then another man, alone. Rufus watched them go. The street was busier tonight.

It was probably inevitable, Rufus thought, that soldiers had to be in the streets. He had seen most sides now: the family of his memory's false birth, the city, the band of revolutionaries in the hills. The family people were wrong, he thought, because no human could live on impulse, really loving no one in the name of loving humankind. The city people were wrong, because no human could live the existence of a machine in the name of order. The revolutionaries were wrong because they wanted only to tear down what little remained. There had to be some other way, a way in which a man could love and obey and yet express his own will truly, without fear.

Was his father, Rufus wondered, trying to find that way?

Pursuing this thought, Rufus again scoured his mind, trying vainly to find some trace of old memory, some sly tendril of earlier existence. Why had he fought his father? Why had he been one of the revolutionaries? Why had his father been forced to have him wiped out? What had happened between them? How had he become so different from his brothers?

The answers were all in the palace. If he was ever to understand anything about himself, he had to confront his father.

And it was all tied in, Rufus realized, with Sloan and his own paradoxical journey. The sicknesses Sloan saw were the sicknesses that had separated father and son. His father hadn't *wanted* to wipe him out, Rufus thought. It had been necessary. They had caught themselves up in a

swamp of claim and counter-claim, little escalations where someone always had to win and the other always had to lose, where it was one or the other.

Down in the square, several dark-clad men, well dressed against the chill night, hurried along and out of sight, their long cloaks flapping against their knees. Rufus watched them with a moment's tension because he wondered what they were about. But then they vanished and it was all still again, preternaturally quiet. Sloan was out of the neighborhood by now, Rufus reassured himself. It was nothing.

For a little while he continued thinking about his father, trying to convince himself that all would be well. His mind idly drifted back over the pain of Selda and the months with his friend Sloan. It was, he thought, as if fate had taken over his life and brought him to this moment, inexorably. Sloan would find a way. They would manage. No matter how wild their scheme, they would manage.

Time passed. Once a sound in the building below startled Rufus badly, but he realized it was only a big rat somewhere, hurrying. He relaxed a little again, and watched.

It was more than an hour now... and then more than two. Again a few soldiers walked through the intersection below. Rufus waited, imagining where Sloan was by now, and what he might be learning.

He was groggy from need of sleep a little later in the night when he heard the sound.

It frightened him wide awake—the definite sound of a footstep on the stairs to the room. Chills rippled down his arms as he came quickly to his feet, looking around for the board he had earlier spotted as a possible club. The board was gone. It had been removed.

But of course the sound on the stairs had been Sloan, Rufus tried to tell himself. It had been a long time. It was the deep of night. Sloan had come back.

But they had agreed that Sloan would call softly to him from the floor below, warning him.

Faintly—perhaps his imagination—another sound came from the stairs

or from the hall outside the shattered door that hung crazily from broken hinges. Rufus' nervous system went wild. Someone was out there and it wasn't Sloan and there was nowhere for him to go.

Rufus backed against the crumbled surface of the wall. He stared at the door, an opaque rectangle in the dark. He heard another sound, louder and closer, and he wanted to cry out in terror and anger because he knew now it was happening, what he had feared most of all these months and years.

"No," he choked. "No. Oh, God—?"

And then they came into the room, the soldiers and the men in the dark clothing, and took him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

They carried him, trussed and gagged, down the stairs of the old building and out to the alley. A bulbous black van of some kind waited, two tiny yellow lights pulsing on its rounded top. Three of the soldiers put him in the back and climbed in with him. They sat on a bench on the side of the compartment; he was on the floor, unable to move or make any sound. A motor hummed in the van and it moved off, softly sprung so that it rocked like a boat over the crumbled pavement.

The thin cords cut into Rufus's arms and legs, breaking the flesh. Every attempt to move only made it worse. The gag, shoved halfway down his throat, made him continually start to retch, but he fought it because he knew he might strangle. The motion of the van rocked him around slightly. The soldiers sat on the bench with their heads and eyes straight ahead, their tube weapons between their knees.

At first Rufus's feeling was simply shock and despair. They had seemed so close, he and Sloan, but somehow it had been ruined. Had Sloan been captured too? It seemed likely. This was no casual discovery; it had been planned and carried out with precision, a military operation. Nothing had been spared in the planning. Sloan surely had been captured too.

So it was over... *over*. He had escaped once. He wouldn't be so lucky a second time. He wondered how long they had been watching—what he or Sloan had done wrong to make it so easy for them.

The van rumbled over tracks of some kind, and then, by the slope of the floor, climbed a steep incline and then pitched down, halting and rocking slightly on the springs. The rumble of power beneath the floor made it impossible for Rufus to hear anything else clearly, but he imagined he heard distant voices, and the clatter of metal on metal. The van moved again, sliding downhill steeply, not picking up any speed.

Had they been warned by authorities all the way in the west? Would he be sent back to the city for IR&R, or was his offense more serious now, punishable by death? Rufus hoped for death. There was nothing left. He wouldn't see his father now. There was no hope.

Still, when the van stopped in a few minutes, and he heard voices, Rufus numbly took notice of everything. The back doors of the van slid open. Several more soldiers appeared. Those in the van got out, and stood stiffly at guard. Two men in dark civilian clothing got heavily into the van and lifted Rufus to the ground, on his feet. One of them slashed the cords around Rufus's ankles and legs, and two others tightly grasped his bound arms to make sure he didn't try to run. He was too shaky to run, but they didn't know this.

They were in a long, curving underground tunnel. The walls were pale yellow concrete, the ceiling some kind of low, white-textured stuff with lights glowing behind flat glass panels. The narrow road was stained black by passage of vehicles. Studded into the walls along the tunnel were little cubicles where soldiers stood with weapons.

"This way," one of the dark-clad men said. He was gray-haired, beefy. He was pointing toward a sliding steel doorway in the tunnel wall, a doorway guarded by two soldiers.

The agents walked Rufus to the door. It sprang open to reveal a small cubicle. They went inside. The door closed. The cubicle moved, startling Rufus. It seemed to be going up with a slight whispering sound. The two agents held him tightly and the chief agent stood by the door, weapon in hand.

The cubicle stopped. The door slid open. Another corridor, narrower, with carpet on the floors, stretched before them. It looked like the corridor of a large house. There were paintings on the walls here and there and the walls were covered with some kind of faintly printed material.

Two soldiers stepped smartly in front of the door. They checked a card the chief agent handed them, and then moved out of his way. Down the hallway, at the far end, was a double doorway with two more soldiers. The chief agent walked toward the far end of the hall, and the others pulled Rufus along behind him.

They reached the double doors. The soldiers opened them. The chief agent motioned the others into the room and they led Rufus inside. Then the chief agent followed, closing the door behind him. They were alone, the four of them, in a great living room with a vaulted ceiling. Brightly colored old carpet covered the floor. Heavy furniture stood in formal arrangements. Lamps glowed. A fire flickered in a stone fireplace. More books than Rufus had ever seen lined two walls.

"Put him there," the chief agent murmured, and the others sat Rufus down in a chair.

They waited. Silence hissed, and occasionally a bit of log in the fireplace sputtered and popped.

Rufus was dazed. It was not at all what he had expected. Why was he here, and where was *here*? What had happened? What—or who—were they waiting for? None of it made any sense.

Finally a door at the far end of the room swung open. A soldier in a different kind of uniform stepped in and came smartly to attention. After a slight pause, two men walked in from some other room. The three agents in the room stiffened. Obviously the newcomers were men of power.

One was middle-aged or older, fleshy around the middle and with little hair on his rounded skull. His facial flesh hung in pockets under his eyes, giving him a sick, fatigued appearance. His cloak and tunic had once been expensive and fine, but they were rumpled and dirty as if he had slept in them.

The other man was younger, perhaps Rufus' age or a bit older, slender, Rufus's height, with tangled curly hair. His dress was immaculate and his face was coolly controlled, patrician. He led, as if he were the superior of the older man.

This leader walked to the couch area facing Rufus's chair and stood for a moment, looking down at Rufus. The man's smooth, hard face showed a

touch of color.

"I don't think that gag is necessary," he said sharply.

"We had to prevent outcry," the chief agent said nervously.

"You can get it out now. We're not barbarians!"

The agent hurriedly removed the gag from Rufus' mouth, and Rufus coughed with relief. His mouth felt like a dry riverbed, but he was much too startled to pay much attention to either the relief or remaining discomfort.

"Get him a drink of water," the leader snapped, and one of the agents went to a pitcher nearby, poured a glass of water, and held it to Rufus's lips. Gratefully, Rufus drank a little.

"All right," the leader said then. "You can wait outside now."

"Excellency—" the chief agent remonstrated.

"Outside," the man said with steel in his tone.

The chief agent nodded, gave his men a signal, and they left the room the way they had come. The door closed slightly behind them.

At the other doors, the soldier had already departed. Rufus was in the room with the youthful leader and the older man, who had remained near the fireplace, his fatigue-battered eyes never leaving Rufus's face throughout the encounter.

The leader put his hands on his hips and looked down at Rufus. "Well, Rufus," he said softly.

Rufus looked up at him and said nothing.

"Did they hurt you in any way?" the man asked.

Rufus shook his head.

The man's eyes pierced him again. "You don't know me," the man said finally, with regret in his tone.

"Know you?" Rufus echoed.

The man glanced at the older man. "Of course he wouldn't. You were right."

Rufus asked bitterly, "Why should I know you or anyone here?—And what is this place? What are you going to do with me?"

"You won't be hurt, Rufus," the leader said softly. "You don't have to be afraid here.—If you remembered me, you'd know that."

"Are you saying we've met before?" Rufus shot back, confused.

"Indeed we have."

"In my earlier life? Before they wiped me out and sent me to the family?—Are you someone I knew before then?"

"Yes," the leader said. "My name is Paul."

"I know no Paul. It means nothing to me. You've captured me and brought me here and now you mock me. Why? Don't I even have the right to know that much?"

"You have the right to know everything," Paul said sadly. "That's why you were brought here."

"Then tell me first who you are and how we met before," Rufus challenged.

Paul looked down at him, and the sadness in his eyes was keen and deep. "I'm your brother."

* * *

RUFUS HAD IMAGINED meeting his father... and his brother. But it had not been anything like this. His capture had put such ideas farthest from his mind. So now, when Paul said with such obvious sincerity these words, Rufus's first feeling was of stunned incredulity.

"No," he muttered.

"I'm your brother," Paul repeated solemnly.

"You can't be!"

"Why?"

"I—I would remember you!"

Paul smiled thinly, glanced at the older man. "Even the shock fails to bring back any of the memory. It's as you said."

The older man replied, "The procedure was very thorough, by the medical record. I'm not surprised. His power of recall will never be repaired."

"Who is *he*?" Rufus demanded, half-thinking the other man might be—might be—

The older man walked to the couch and rested thick hands on its back. "No, you don't know me," he said gently. "My name is Niles."

Paul told Rufus, "Niles is secretary of state."

"I don't understand a lot about government," Rufus said simply.

"You will," Paul told him.

"But if you're my brother," Rufus cried, "why did you have me captured? Why was I brought here this way? Where are we?"

"We're in the security wing of the executive palace," Paul said. "We had to bring you here this way. We had to be sure no one saw you enter—none but our trusted few, of course. We couldn't risk having you hurt."

"I don't understand any of this!"

Paul grimaced. "Rufus—it's difficult to call you that, since I know you by the other name, but perhaps it's easier for you this way—I hate to see you tied up, a prisoner. We're going to explain everything to you. You aren't going to be harmed. After you understand everything, you'll see why we had to proceed the way we have. Will you promise not to try to escape? There are guards everywhere and you would only be recaptured, you see. But we don't want violence. If you'll give me your word, I'll cut those bonds."

"How do you know my word is any good?" Rufus countered, still baffled by it all.

"I know all about you," his brother told him.

Rufus looked at one man, then the other.

"Do we have your word?" Paul insisted.

Rufus wanted to hear it all. He saw that he would hear it one way or another. The ropes cut his arm. "I promise," he said huskily.

Paul nodded, and Niles came forward with a little knife and cut the cords.

Rufus rubbed his cut arms and wrists, teasing circulation back into them. "If you're really my brother," he challenged, "where is my father? What's happening? I had a friend. What's happened to him?"

"Sloan is all right," Paul said.

It was another shock, their knowing the name. There was no doubt now about the completeness of their information and capture.

"He did nothing wrong," Rufus told them.

"We know," Paul said.

"It was all my idea—"

"Rufus, Sloan is in no danger. Believe that."

"You ask me to believe things I can't understand!"

"You'll understand it all soon. That's why you're here. We want to tell you everything so you can see what must be done next."

Rufus stared at the two solemn men. Were they lying? Was he part of an insane nightmare? Had they killed Sloan? Was Paul his brother? Were they really in the palace? What did they want? So many questions swirled in his brain that he couldn't utter any of them—merely sat there, staring, his head in a whirl.

"We're all in terrible peril," Paul told him seriously. "You've become aware of some of it. Our atmosphere is still loaded with fallout and industrial waste. We've made little substantial progress on cleansing waterways. Until we can handle those problems, we can't hope to reestablish an industrial base for any kind of viable economy—"

"I don't care about any of that right now!" Rufus retorted. "If you're my brother—and if *you're* secretary of state—tell me why people are starving and dying. Tell me why they have the Learner in a place like my family lived in. Tell me why one city doesn't contact the next, and there are gangs of half-wild men in the countryside., Give me answers to problems I've lived with!"

Paul and Niles exchanged chagrined glances.

Paul replied finally, "We can't give all the answers, Rufus. If we had them—if answers could be found— things would be different."

Niles cleared his throat. "We face amazing burdens outside our territories, too, Rufus. You have no way of knowing about them. Our way of life is locked in a death struggle with another philosophy—"

"Don't talk to me about philosophy when people are dying!"

"We must," Niles replied somberly. "We are fighting for our very existence as a way of life."

"To protect our way of life we fight other nations?"

"Of course."

"But the fighting poisons the globe and reduces us to animals?"

Niles flushed. "Unfortunately, yes."

"So in fighting for a way of life, we kill that way of life!"

"I can see," Niles said slowly, "where you might look at it that way."

"You ask me to understand insanity."

Paul intervened. "Rufus, let me explain things to you. Listen, and argue only after we've finished. We can answer all your questions. You'll see our

side. You'll understand. And you'll see why you were brought here and why we have a plan."

"What will happen to Sloan?" Rufus demanded.

"Nothing."

"How can I believe this?"

Paul turned and exchanged thoughtful glances with Niles.

"It's inevitable anyway," Niles said.

"All right," Paul said.

The older man left the room.

"Where is he going?" Rufus asked nervously.

"He went to fetch Sloan."

"He's here too, then? In this building?"

"Yes. He's quite nearby, actually."

"Was he hurt?"

"No."

"If you've hurt him—"

"You'll see for yourself," Paul said softly, glancing toward the door.

Rufus turned, also, and looked. The door stood ajar. He could see the guard on the far side. It was silent. Rufus's heart pounded.

In another moment there were faint sounds of someone coming. The guard outside snapped 'to rigid attention.

Niles walked back into the room, a frown wrinkling his forehead. He walked to the couch and stood there, waiting. Rufus looked at him, and then back at the doorway.

A man walked into the room. He was clean-shaven, neat, freshly bathed, and his skin glowed with the aftereffects of a healing facial treatment. He wore the uniform of a high-ranking officer in the guard, the specially uniformed soldiers who worked in the palace.

He walked toward Rufus.

"Hello, Rufus," he said gently.

Rufus stared up at him, incredulous.

"It's going to be all right," the man told him.

The man was Sloan.

* * *

"THERE WAS no certain way to get you here safely," Paul said in the deep silence. "Once your record reached us and we had some idea of your direction, we had only two choices: to try to capture you by force, or to use an operative. We risked your death in a capture, and the expedition would have involved too many people. We would have lost security. We had to use the tactic we employed."

Rufus stared up at Sloan—so different in his uniform—and his vision was blurred by angry tears. "All the time?" he choked. "*All the time* you were working for *them*?"

Sloan put his hand on Rufus's shoulder. "You had to be brought here, Rufus. It was the best way. Once you understand—"

Rufus dashed Sloan's arm off his shoulder. "I understand when I'm betrayed!"

"He didn't betray you," Paul said. "You'll understand that."

"I *trusted* you!" Rufus told Sloan.

"I haven't betrayed that trust," Sloan said in the same quiet tone.

"And I imagined we were in danger," Rufus realized bitterly. "All that time, you were tricking me. All these months!"

"No," Paul told him. "The danger was real. Sloan had to accept the total experience. From the time he contacted you until today, we had no word from him. He was on his own, as you were. Everything about your journey was legitimate, actual. There was no trickery. Sloan accepted the most dangerous and difficult assignment any man has ever been asked to undertake by this country. He succeeded, and he's a hero for it."

"A hero?" Rufus's tone dripped sarcasm. "He pretended to be a *friend*."

"I was your friend," Sloan said. "I still am. You'll see that."

"No!"

"Remember what I told you when I left the building? I said our friendship was real. No matter what might happen.—I meant that, Rufus."

Rufus rocked on his thighs, his head down. Tears ran down his nose and chin and dripped onto the floor. Hate made his insides scald. He couldn't speak.

Sloan was telling the other men, "He'll understand." It was a soft, almost pathetic question.

"Of course," Niles replied.

"We really did become friends," Sloan said thickly. "I—I love him."

"It's all right," Paul said. "After he understands everything, he'll feel differently."

"Yes sir," Sloan said, his tone stiffening.

"I think you should go now."

"Yes sir."

Sloan walked to the door, and Rufus raised his head to watch, wonderingly, as the suddenly military man departed and the door swung shut.

Now, he thought, he truly had no one.

Paul said quietly, "I know this has been difficult, Rufus. You must be

very tired. We wanted you to know that you haven't been 'captured,' in the conventional sense. Everything will be fine. I think you need a good night's rest now. In the morning you'll be in a better frame of mind and we'll explain everything to you."

"I can hear it all now," Rufus argued.

Paul walked to a large desk. "Possibly," he said, showing by his tone that he didn't believe it. "But we have an emergency cabinet meeting anyway. In the morning you can be sure that we're as eager as you are to have a complete discussion."

He pressed a stud on the desk and the doors opened and the soldiers came in.

"They'll show you to your room," Paul told Rufus. "Technically, you're not a prisoner. But I know you might try to escape while you're in this confused state of mind, so let me inform you that the room is perfectly guarded. A physician will give you an injection. You needn't fear; it's only to assure you of a good night's sleep."

"But *technically* I'm not a prisoner?" Rufus asked savagely.

Paul sighed. "Goodnight, Rufus."

At his signal, the guards took charge of Rufus and led him away.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The injection plunged Rufus mentally screaming into a deep and dreamless sleep. When he awakened with a start, he was still in the small, featureless room where they had taken him. On his feet instantly, he felt terror dashing around his body as he tried to test himself mentally. He groped for memories and they all—all he had ever known since awakening with the family—flooded back perfectly. For an instant of horror he had expected to remember—nothing.

Fresh clothing had been laid out on a small table. Surprisingly clear-headed and refreshed, Rufus bathed and dressed. The clothing was soft, silken, and fitted perfectly. He tried the door to his room and found it was locked.

Trying to figure out the meaning of the things that had happened, he only ran repeatedly into dejection and the terror lurking on the outskirts of his mind. He had been betrayed. He was in the power of people far more clever than any he had met before. He knew nothing. The very ease and benevolence of his brother's attitude showed how fully their power enclosed him.

If Paul *was* his brother.

Rufus paced the room, waiting for developments.

Within a very few minutes a guard opened the door. Two others waited in the corridor.

"Come with us, please, your excellency," the guard said politely.

Baffled by the title, Rufus fell in between them. They walked him courteously down the hall to a cubicle which took them upward a moment. The doors opened, then, onto a small room which faced outward from the building and was flooded with murky sunlight. A table had been set there for one, flowers were on a sideboard, and a gray-haired woman stood by with a nervous smile to ask Rufus if he had preferences for breakfast.

Rufus mumbled something, then sat down alone at the table near the big windows. The guards stood nearby. Rufus paid no attention to them because he was enthralled by the view from the window.

The window looked out across rolling land studded with trees and hedges. Far beyond, a thick stone wall enclosed the grounds. The window was very high in the building, which had to be enormous. The sky seemed low and brownish, boiling very near the level at which Rufus watched. He was so high that his view extended for miles.

Beyond the walls were streets and buildings of the city. Smoke hung over an area near the walls. Startled, Rufus realized that some kind of fighting was taking place near the walls. Soldiers—little art figures in gray and blue—huddled and moved precisely near the walls. In the streets beyond the walls, clots of people surged here and there in the shifting smoke. Rufus could see the soldiers hurling or shooting objects into the streets which seemed to burst into smoke when they struck the pavement. Now and again the evil beam of a ray weapon slashed the murk. There were great self-propelled vehicles in the streets, trundling here and there

like hideous metal turtles. They spewed more smoke and beams.

At the distance, Rufus realized, and perhaps because of the thickness of the walls and glass, there was no sound. He watched with mounting fascination as the battle unfolded like a dumb show. The soldiers were winning. Broken bodies littered the streets, and once in a while a vehicle rolled over one of the bodies, splashing it into a crimson puddle. But from the streets came more attackers, and the smoke and beams continued to weave and intermix.

The gray woman brought a platter of food. Most of it was exotic, of a kind Rufus had never heard about. There were strange yellow-gold fruits with a sour-sweet taste and squishy pulp, long golden fruits, or perhaps vegetables, that peeled back to reveal gray-white meat of a soft, sweet texture, and slabs of meat more tender and delicious than anything he had ever imagined. Despite his fascination with the distant fighting, Rufus found he was ravenous.

In a little while he had finished. The woman took the dishes away. The soldiers politely asked him to come with them again. Rufus obeyed. To his surprise, they took him back to his room.

"Am I to stay here all day?" he asked angrily. "I don't know, your excellency," the guard said deferentially. "I will ask, sir." Then he closed—and locked—the door.

Rufus prowled the walls of his room. He found a little sliding panel. With his fingers he pried it back and it slid into the wall. To his surprise, behind the panel was a piece of what looked like pearly metal. As he touched it, it frightened him by glowing brightly. Then, to his amazement, a picture formed on the screen—a man standing before a map.

The voice, very realistic, came from the picture itself, or so it seemed.

"—report complete satisfaction nevertheless," the man was saying. "And now in the local news—"

Rufus realized he was listening to a news broadcast, but that here, somehow, the words came with pictures. He had never heard of such a thing in the other city. He stared at the screen in mute fascination.

"—another lovely day," the man was saying. "High will be in the

twenties with an overnight low of five below zero. Fallout level is sixty-one, and government sources report this continues to show a steady decrease from a year ago. Within a very short period, sources say, the level should be well within the maximum long-term toleration limits once more, and as we all know, we have top-level reassurance that brief subjection to higher levels is of no serious consequence.

"In other developments," the man continued as Rufus stared, "the city is very peaceful today. Police report apprehension of three wanted criminals, and the livestock report is favorable, with two hundred head reported, demand steady at six, and prices holding at forty-four-fifty. The Army reports no disturbances of any kind and the area around the palace is crowded, as usual, with tourists."

"That's a lie!" Rufus told the image on the screen. "They're—"

"A minor skirmish with a handful of radicals," the announcer added with a smile, "was quickly brought under control earlier. The office of the Executive pointed out that radical activity only hardens general public opposition to the radical cause, and the Bureau of Statistics reported that all the radicals on the streets of our city, if brought together, would make up less than one tenth of one percent of the national population."

"It's a *war* out there!" Rufus told the screen. "You're—"

"And that's the top of the news from the official wire," the announcer beamed. "A cheery good morning!"

Rufus slammed the door of the screen in anger and outrage. Had the world gone mad?

* * *

IT WAS what seemed a long time later that the guards removed him from the room once more. Again there was a brief ride in the cubicle. This time they ushered Rufus through a narrow hallway and into a large but starkly businesslike office with no outside windows and little furniture beyond a desk and chair and two long couches arranged across a corner.

Rufus waited with one of the guards for moments, and then a door on the far side of the office opened and Paul and Niles walked in. A third man, older than either, was with them.

"Thank you," Paul told the guard, who then left. Looking fresher this morning, Paul sat behind the desk. Niles and the older man sat one of the couches. Rufus sat on the other.

"Rufus," Paul began, "this is Doctor Nelson. Did you sleep well?"

Rufus didn't give Nelson a glance. "I did.—Do you know people are attacking the walls out there?"

A frown creased Paul's expression for an instant, then was banished. "Yes. But it's under control."

"I saw a machine in my room," Rufus said. "It makes pictures. News. The man said it was a little bother, and it was broken up.—Is *all* news that kind of lie here?"

Paul smiled indulgently. "There's no way any news medium could report everything, Rufus. It has to select, and selection means bias. It was decided long, long ago that it's better to control the news and have the news be reported with the proper, truthful selection process, than by allowing just any private person to put on the air what he might think is the truth."

"So you control the news," Rufus said in astonishment, "and nobody ever really knows what's truly going on."

"What good would it do them?" Paul countered easily. "Why should people have their lives disturbed, be worried and angry and upset? Isn't it better this way?"

"It isn't truthful."

"What is truth?"

"It isn't lies!"

"We help the people be happy and satisfied," Paul said. "What's so wrong with that? Believe me, Rufus, earlier generations learned the hard way what it means when any fool can go out and publish or broadcast anything he sees fit. There's chaos, maladjustment, rampant disloyalty. This way the people are satisfied—and is there any higher function of government than to keep the people happy?"

Rufus's mind reeled. "This is unbelievable," he groaned.

"We're not here to talk about press theory anyway," Paul said. "You're going to have a briefing this afternoon, Rufus. It will explain all the background. After that, the three of us will meet with you again to fill in details. We wanted to see you now only to reassure you again. We're all your friends. No harm will come to you."

"What are you going to do to me?" Rufus asked.

"We're not going to do anything to you. We're going to do things with you."

"What does *that* mean?"

Paul turned, frowning to the doctor.

The doctor stroked his chin. "I think," he said finally, "any discussion at this point would be... premature."

"Where's my father?" Rufus demanded. "Why haven't I seen him? Doesn't he want to see me?"

"I think that would be premature, too," Paul said.

Rufus got to his feet, startling them and sending Paul's hand near a button that evidently would summon the guards. Rufus saw the movement and felt an instant's bitter triumph.

"I'm not going to do anything wild," he said huskily.

"I'm glad," Paul said, relieved. "Reasonable men can work out their problems. After the briefing, you'll see that."

"And in the meantime, any information would be— 'premature'?"

"Let me say this about that," Paul murmured. "You, Rufus, have a unique opportunity to serve your fellow men. Once you see this, I'm sure your fears will fade away."

Rufus stared at their impenetrable faces and then shrugged as they summoned the guards.

* * *

THE BRIEFING took place in a small auditorium. The doctor was there, a discreet two rows behind Rufus, and guards were nearby behind closed doors. The room was darkened and a wall slid back to reveal a broad pearly screen such as the small one Rufus had seen in his room. Before he could speculate on what was to happen, the screen lit up and a voice startled him.

"In the tenth year of your life, Rufus," it said as the screen showed the palace itself and the surrounding city as if from the air, "this was the situation."

At this point, the screen began showing other scenes from around the nation and the world. The narrator reeled off facts, observations, statistics, reports. Rufus watched, being drawn into the presentation, enthralled.

He had read, and he knew the outlines of much of the early part: the wars, the ravaged environment, the split in the scientific community about ways to proceed in the future. From what he could tell, the presentation was factual, too, about the way the families had been isolated, how the cities were ruled.

Then the presentation, after this long introduction, startled him by beginning to show scenes at the palace itself.

"This was your home, Rufus," the voice told him unctuously, "and your father was the executive of the mightiest free land in the world."

The scenes showed a tall, slightly gaunt man with graying hair. Rufus recognized the setting and knew the man had to be the Executive—his father. Tears sprang to Rufus's eyes as he saw a slender boy walk into the scene, which was in a garden. *He* was the boy.

The older man—his father—put an arm around the boy and talked with him. The words did not come through. The boy laughed and solemnly shook hands with his father. The father showed the boy pictures, and the screen filled with what was being shown, the face of an older man with a startling resemblance.

"Your family served this republic for generations, Rufus," the screen

told him. "Your grandfather had been executive—" The screen changed—"your father was Executive and your uncle—" another change—"was ambassador. Your brother died fighting for freedom in faraway lands." Here Rufus saw, for the first time, pictures of a great, solemn state funeral. For his brother. He saw himself in tears.

"For complex reasons," the screen went on as other pictures unfolded, "the death of your brother and other personal tragedies changed your own outlook. You began taking part in subversive activities." The screen showed meetings, evidently at a college, and Rufus saw on the screen pictures of *himself*, younger, angry-faced, lecturing to crowds of young people who rose and cheered.

"Your father attempted to guide you, overlooking much deviant behavior."

Rufus then almost lost track of the sound altogether, because the screen was showing him—*himself*. Words weren't needed. He saw himself publishing the documents that had later been used at the trial. He saw the crowds—the violence—the fighting in the streets and country-sides that made the scene he had seen earlier in the day indeed look like a minor skirmish.

As he watched, Rufus began to realize with mounting shock that he had not simply been a figure in some kind of revolt or movement. He had become—and the narrator admitted this—he had been the *leader*, and because of his position or personality or whatever, great throngs had been willing to follow him.

Then, while he struggled to keep up, the story changed to his arrest and subsequent trial.

"Your father had no choice," the screen told him. "For, bitter though the decision might be, he held the fate of the nation and the world in his hands. He finally—with grave pain—made the necessary decision."

Pictures of his father, horribly aged in obvious anguish, faded. The scene now was of a large white room with a table in the center, flanked by tall banks of equipment Rufus could not understand. From a side doorway another table was wheeled in, and the pale figure, unconscious on the table, was Rufus.

Rufus watched his own image with sickened fascination. He was wheeled to the central position, and one of the many doctors gently lifted him off the table and onto the central pedestal. Lights flared. Doctors moved forward and bent over his skull. Knives caught the light like diamonds, and long, snake-like cables were swung into place, linking his brain with the machines.

The scene faded.

"The procedure," the announcer resumed, as the screen showed enormous crowds and incredible destruction in the city, "was kept a complete state secret. But somehow word leaked out. The unstable populace of many cities rioted for weeks on end. The entire army was recalled in shifts in order to re-establish tranquility." The screen showed beams of weapons crisscrossing smoky fields, mowing down young people by the thousands. "Finally order came again."

"In the end, Rufus," the narrator went on, concluding, "the procedure was just and kind." The screen showed Rufus being taken into a courtroom. He was fighting the guards, his lips were drawn back, cords stood out in his neck, and he was a fighting dervish every step of the way.

"Consider," the narrator said, "how you yourself found peace."

The scene showed Rufus being led from a hospital room. He was thinner, pale and shaky, supported by a male nurse. His eyes were dull and he had a slight, vacant smile on his lips.—

"Thus was national catastrophe averted," the screen said, "and thus was your life changed for the good of humanity."

The screen went dark. The lights came on in the room. Rufus rubbed his eyes. His face was wet and he was shaking.

The doctor solicitously leaned over him. "You are all right?"

"How do I know?" Rufus choked. "How can I be sure of anything any more—now, after this?"

The doctor awkwardly patted his shoulder. "I know, I know. It is very difficult. Perhaps you would like to rest before we again meet with your brother and the secretary of state. An injection of brief interval—"

"No," Rufus said, saved a little by a spasm of rage. "I'm ready to see them now."

"As you wish," the doctor said gently. "They have much more to tell you."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

This time, Paul and Niles waited for Rufus in a different office on a different level of the building. The room was larger than the one they had used earlier in the day, the walls were hung with tapestries, the rug was deep and luxurious, the furniture heavily formal. Paul sat behind a great dark wood desk and Niles stood beside it as Rufus entered with the doctor.

"You've finished the orientation," Paul said. "Good." He gave Rufus a keen glance and then looked at the doctor. "All went—well?"

The doctor said, "Your younger brother is strongly put together, Excellency. Despite the shocks, he's ready to meet further."

Paul returned his eyes to Rufus. "Would you like some kind of drink or some food, perhaps?"

Rufus dropped into a heavy chair facing the desk. "I've seen it," he said with a sense of wonderment and confusion. "I know now for certain who I was. But I don't understand. Why have you done all this? And where is my father? Why haven't I seen him?"

"You had to see these things before we could reveal exactly why you're so important today," Paul told him.

"And my father?—Is he—alive?"

A shadow crossed Paul's thin face. "Yes."

"Why haven't I seen him? Surely he wants to see me. What is it you're holding back?"

"You can see him soon, Rufus. It's important for us to explain first what we now require of you."

Rufus's pulse thudded heavily. "All right." He sounded so calm!

Paul folded his hands on the desk and looked down for a moment almost as if in prayer. Then he raised his eyes to Rufus's once more. "The treatment had to be done," he began. "It was a horrible decision. My father—*our* father—made it because he had to consider the entire nation. As the views showed you, you had become a symbolic leader of all the elements that oppose our orderly society. Our father *had* to do what he did, Rufus. He had to allow the law to take its course.—Do you understand that?"

"I think so." It was a lie. But Rufus wanted now only to hear the rest of the story.

"After the treatment," Paul told him, "arrangements were carefully made. Your new life was selected carefully to give you maximum freedom to develop a new personality, together with proper supervision. You had to be placed far from populated centers where you might be recognized. Some leaders argued for changing your face as well as your mind. Father refused to go along with this, saying your new home would be remote enough to assure no one would ever identify you.—He fought for you on this point, Rufus."

Rufus felt a sense of irony. "I appreciate that," he said.

His brother missed the ironic twist and nodded with satisfaction. He continued, "The entire procedure was conducted in utmost secrecy. Someone, however, allowed word to leak to the public, or segments of it. We had circulated regular news stories saying you had done away with yourself. There was even a state funeral, using an empty coffin. But even during the cremation procedures, word was going through the cities like the wind: you were not dead; you had been re-established and relocated."

Paul sighed. "You were more loved, Rufus, than any modern man. When the traitor let people know what had happened to you, you became a martyr overnight. Students burned themselves to death. Enormous riots broke out, as you have already been shown. The organization you had helped to form, the Sons of Freedom, became the focal point for savage reprisals against all forms of our governmental apparatus."

With a brief pause, Paul glanced at what seemed to be notes on the desk before him. "We assumed," he went on, "that the furor would eventually die down. There have been signs, periodically, that it might. We had to take the unfortunate steps of arresting all the Sons of Freedom and

re-establishing and relocating them, and passage of stricter meeting laws was designed to stop conspiracy-making.

"It only drove the system underground.—It wasn't an accident that you saw the fighting outside the gates this morning. It still goes on. There's fighting today also in Boston, New York, the Chicago Ruins area and several other former city locations. Sabotage is everywhere. Half our energies are being devoted to keeping a semblance of peace.

"These revolutionaries," Paul added after another slight pause, "all identify with your memory. They carry banners showing your face. Their pledge of secrecy, which we intercepted during the IR&R of one member, swears each member on the honor of your memory.—You are their symbol, their rallying point, their god, if you will. Everything they do, they do for you. Or so they imagine."

Paul stopped, rubbed his eyes, looked at Rufus for what seemed a long time, and waited as if for comment. Rufus stubbornly refused to say a word. He was digesting facts—if, he thought, he could believe any of it. He remembered the news. Everything might be lies, even though it all rang sharply of truth. He had to be careful.

Paul resumed, "There were some in our councils who argued for bringing you back from your commune area to prove to the people that you hadn't been hurt and were actually happier and better adjusted. I argued against that. So did Father. We won out. The move might have helped. But you had a new life and we had no right to interrupt it as long as it was lawful.

"When word came to us of your trial recently, however, it was decided that fate might have handed us an opportunity to help our society through you.—You wouldn't have been relocated to Mexico, as that court ordered, Rufus. A change in orders from the High Court, ordering you transferred here for treatment, was already in transit when you escaped."

"You were going to bring me here?" Rufus asked, startled.

"Yes," Paul nodded.

"Why?"

"For the same reason we assigned Sloan to fall in with you and attempt

peacefully to bring you here after we had found your approximate position.—Because, my brother, you now have the opportunity to undo all the evil, cleanse your name before all the law-loving people of our nation, and help us re-establish true peace and order."

"I have?" Rufus said, boggled. "How can I—?"

"We ask a sacrifice," Paul said huskily.

For an insane instant Rufus thought they were going to ask him to go kill himself. He almost laughed as he realized how absurd that was. The tension relaxed slightly.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"We ask you to appear before the people—on the screens and in person, in various cities and localities. You will plead for peace, you'll tell everyone how the government is working on its problems. You'll establish a personal office of information through which people in need can seek governmental assistance. You'll recant your old errors—which really aren't yours anymore now anyway, since you became Rufus. In other words, you'll cut the props out from under the revolutionary groups and help us return peace to the country."

Rufus stared first at his brother, then at the secretary of state, and then at the doctor. He was flabbergasted. So *this* was it! Somehow the person he had once been had become a hero, a symbol of resistance. Now they wanted him to destroy that symbol... become a figure of the government.

"I can't do that," he whispered. "You must know that! I've seen too much—half of what the revolutionaries are fighting for, I probably would fight for too!"

Paul nodded sympathetically. "We know that, Rufus. And we would never ask you to go against your beliefs. But the country *needs* you! How much longer can our system stand up to this constant turmoil from within, while we fight international enemies in thirty countries? We stand in a time of crisis! You *must* help us, or our system may fall!"

There was deep silence in the room as Rufus sucked in his breath in surprise. "Is it really that serious?"

Paul's face showed that he regretted admitting so much. But he did not back down. "It is," he said simply.

Niles stirred and spoke for the first time. "We have been operating under full emergency restrictions for more than six years. The economy can't take much more. Already—and I can tell you this, Rufus, because we trust you—already we've snuffed out two dangerous *junta* plots within the Army. If we hold off the enemies outside, can we continue to hold them off at our very gates?— And if we hold off both, can we control our own Army much longer?"

Paul leaned toward Rufus intensely. "If you have any love for your country, Rufus—or for me or our father—you must consent to our plan."

"But I can't!" Rufus groaned. "Everything I believe is different! How can I tell people I've changed my mind? My mind was changed *for* me! How can I ask them to trust a government I see lying?"

"You can't," Paul told him somberly. "Not as Rufus."

The tone and the look, more than the words, sent deep chills through Rufus's body, and for a moment he did not comprehend. He could not.

"Submit to treatment," Paul urged softly, intensely. "For the love of our country, volunteer for a complete IR&R—there's a new kind just developed, and you'll be happier, your new personality will allow you honestly and with devotion to do what we require—"

It was a scream, a broken wail that started so deep in Rufus he did not recognize it.

"No!"

The doctor sprang from his chair and leaned over Rufus. "Here—let me help you—" He fumbled with a cassette of tablets.

"No!" Rufus screamed again, knocking the pills from the doctor's hand so that they sprayed all over the desk.

"Restraint?" Paul said quickly to the doctor.

"I don't need restraint," Rufus sobbed, controlling his voice. "All I need

is relief from this insanity. I can't let you kill me and make me into something else! Are you mad, to ask that? Would *anyone* allow that to happen to them?"

"For the good of the country—" Paul began earnestly.

"No. I can't!"

"It would bring you peace of mind—"

"Peace of mind? It would leave me *no* mind!"

"The new procedure is quick and painless. I know how you feel—"

"How can you know how I feel?" Rufus shot back.

"How can / know how I feel? I don't even know who I am! Now you want to change me again—you're crazy enough to think I'd go along with it—"

"Rufus," Paul pleaded, pain clear on his face and in his eyes, "the truth will be inscribed in histories to be opened generations hence. Your name will go down in the annals of the world as probably the greatest hero of all time. Think of it! The chance to be an immortal hero—"

"Hero?" Rufus cut in, on the edge of hysteria. "Be a hero? Do you really think it matters to me what people think of me long after I'm *dead*? Are you really that insane, Paul? Do you really cling to dead ideas like heroism? And how can I love a *country*? How can anyone? I can love people. I can love life. I can love good, hard work and my sweat and a woman. A country is dry earth and killed fields and rotten streams and trees that don't think or feel. A country is an abstraction. A country is a thing. How can you love things. How can you love an abstraction? How can you sit here in your madness and talk about loving an idea that never was and never will be?"

"You're tired," Paul said, obviously alarmed. "After a rest—"

"What does *he* say about this?" Rufus demanded suddenly, remembering.

"Who?"

"My father!"

"He doesn't know—"

"*Why* doesn't he know?" Suddenly to Rufus his father seemed the key to everything. His father had always been the key, he thought. It was desperately important to know about his father. "Where is he? Why haven't I seen him? What do you mean, he doesn't know? Why hasn't he been told?"

Paul looked worriedly at the doctor.

The doctor frowned. "I don't know if it's wise."

"It's necessary, evidently," Paul said.

"I don't know."

Paul looked at Niles. "What do you think?"

The older man rubbed his face wearily. "I think," he said heavily, "we must."

Rufus demanded shrilly, "What are you talking about?"

Paul bowed his head, again in a curious attitude like prayer. The weight of decisions suddenly seemed to slump his shoulders, and he looked very tired and human.

"I demand to see my father," Rufus said, not understanding why he said it. He only knew it was important—overwhelmingly important.

Paul raised a havoc-ridden face to him. "Rufus, Rufus," he said.

"I have the right," Rufus said. "You ask me all this, and then you hold back things from me, and I'm his *son*. Where is he? What's happened to him? Why are you all acting this way?—Tell me!"

Paul sighed thoughtfully, as if reaching some major decision. "We have to explain things more fully," he said.

"I agree," the doctor said. "There's no other way."

"What is it?" Rufus pressed, sensing that at last some things, at least, would become clearer.

"Ever since your original personality change," Paul explained solemnly, "great numbers of the people have revered your memory—made you a hero in their minds and the motivation for their continuing resistance to our lawful government. Now, somehow, word has leaked out that you are alive—and not only alive, but here in the living compound."

"Your secrecy is no better than that?" Rufus asked.

Paul's bitter smile returned briefly. "We have traitors everywhere. The word has escaped, and become general knowledge among the underground rabble. You have already seen fighting in the streets. Since the facts of your being here were spread about, more rabble have joined in the fighting. Elements in the army are discontent... as always. They even know your present name, Rufus, and your appearance at your present age. The guerrilla attacks are intensifying, causing us havoc—"

Rufus saw it in a flash. "The common people are trying to overthrow you! The attacks are to try to save me from this very process you ask me to submit to, voluntarily. It's not for *my* good; it's to save *your* regime!"

"The people can never overthrow us," Paul snapped.

"Then why are you afraid? Why are you so eager to change me again? The situation must be far worse than you're admitting!"

"Rufus, you owe the change to us, yourself, your country."

"I demand to see my father!"

Paul frowned more deeply and then pressed a button on his desk.

As the door opened and the two guards came in, the doctor said quickly, "It might be very unwise."

Paul's face showed sudden anger. "I know," he said in a voice like a file on glass. "But I make the decisions here." He stabbed his chest with his thumb. "*I*."

The doctor inclined his head with mute respect.

"Go with him," Paul ordered the doctor.

Rufus got shakily to his feet. "Where?"

Paul's eyes were like metal balls. "To see him," he said.

* * *

RUFUS COULD scarcely believe it as he and the doctor left the office with the two guards. It was, he thought, some new trick. His legs shook. Were they really going to see his father at last? And what would happen when they met? Why the delay and uncertainty.

The guards led the way down a corridor to a cubicle, and then upward. The place they were going seemed to be very high in the huge building, because the ride this time lasted many seconds. Rufus studied the guards' faces, but they were impassive, as if trained not to exist as humans in the company of their superiors. The doctor, too, looked straight ahead, his expression unreadable but very solemn.

The cubicle stopped and opened onto a carpeted hallway. Four guards snapped to attention, flanking a double doorway with an ornate seal and an eagle crest emblazoned upon it in blue and white. Rufus stepped into the hall with his companions.

"Wait here," the doctor said, and walked down the long, broad hallway. He disappeared into a glass enclosed alcove.

Rufus looked at the guards and the crest on the door. He sensed that his father was near. His heart hammered wildly. What was his father like? Was there something wrong, or was his uneasy premonition only a result of all he had gone through?

The thought of IR&R reared blackly in his mind. He tried to shunt it aside. His father would understand, he thought. No one would ask a man to go through it twice. Certainly not his father.

He waited, standing on one foot and then the other. The guards remained at rigid attention, unseeing eyes straight ahead into a vacuum. Rufus wondered if any of them had been wiped out. Could a man be a good soldier if he had his own mind?

But then he thought again of his father. He was so eager and excited he felt almost ill. What would he say? Would his father know him? Would *he* remember anything of his father?

It would be all right now, he told himself. It would work out.

The doctor came back. "All right," he said grimly. "We can go in."

They walked between the guards and opened the heavy doors, which buzzed as they did so, signalling some sort of alarm or warning monitor system. The doors led into a small, barren office. At a desk, a heavily armed guard sat alone, reading a news sheet. He leaped smartly to his feet and saluted.

"At ease," the doctor murmured, and led Rufus past the desk to another door. "Open, please," he told the guard.

The guard pressed two switches. The door hummed. The doctor opened it.

Rufus went with him, wonderingly, into a very large, high-ceilinged room. It was carpeted and draped, with heavy masculine furniture. A fire twinkled in a stone fireplace and there were books and paintings on the walls. It was a wealthy room, one of power and luxury.

It was empty.

"Excellency?" the doctor called.

"Yes!" a voice called shrilly from a room that opened through a door on the far side.

"Come," the doctor softly told Rufus.

Rufus followed him to the doorway. This room was even larger. It was tiled, with painted walls and bright windows looking out onto the brown afternoon sky. There was a gigantic desk in the center of the room, littered with papers. On the floor, Rufus was stunned to see wood blocks, unrolled blueprints, spilled writing styli, children's dolls, metal play soldiers, pillows, toy guns, and—in one corner—a large round sandbox. There was also a rowing machine, painted orange and black, and a metal boat, sitting crazily dry in another corner.

But he saw this in an instant, because this room was occupied, and he instantly recognized his father, although he was older, grayer, and heavier than the pictures had shown.

From thin, strong cords in the ceiling, a wooden swing extended. His father, wearing full formal evening wear, was swinging in the swing, kicking his lustrous boots high each time he kicked his arc wider.

* * *

"HELLO!" his father called to them. "Hello, hello! Have you brought papers to sign?"

"I've brought you a visitor," the doctor said.

"A visitor!" Rufus's father laughed. "Good! A visitor! I have few visitors." He allowed the swing to start dying in its arc. He leaned forward, the wind of movement ruffling his gray hair. His eyes glittered as he tried to make Rufus out. "Has he been checked? Does he have security clearance? Can he be trusted? Do we detect abnormality? Has the Bureau heard about him? Does he ever lie? Is he safe? We can't be too careful."

"It's all right," the doctor said. "You know him."

Rufus's father skipped out of the swing, laughed, straightened his coat tails, and swaggered across the room. "Good. Good. A visitor. Can't be too careful, you know. Hello, there. My name is Calvin Nine. You may have heard of me. Wise Old Cal. Do you have a security clearance? Have we met? Who are you going to—"

Then the old man stopped, and recognition dawned behind his eyes.

"Why," he said softly, "it's Jeffrey."

"Father?" Rufus said. He was crying.

"Why, Jeffrey," the old man smiled. "This is really very nice."

Rufus looked at him, crying. He was a very old man, and the years had worn grooves in his cheeks, and his eyes were sunken, with a hectic brilliance that was not quite right. Rufus knew him from the screen, but there was no memory. Nothing. Only the deep emotion flooding over him,

telling him that even this was too late. He felt cheated.

"Are you well, Jeffry?" the old man asked gently.

"Yes," Rufus managed.

"I'm well," the old man chuckled. He turned and ran to the desk. He hurled papers into the air. "You see? Important state business. Great pressure. A lesser man would break under all this pressure. Yes, yes, yes. But Wise Old Cal is too strong. Right. Yes, yes, yes. Grave disorders, Jeffry." He stopped throwing papers and turned to stare, bent over, at Rufus once more. "You *are* all right?"

"Yes," Rufus repeated.

"And do you have a security clearance? Can't be too careful, you know!"

The doctor said, "He's fine, your excellency."

"Have to be careful, have to be careful," the old man retorted, scowling as he rummaged through the piles of meaningless paper again. "Like to see it for myself. Must be here somewhere. Have to check everything. Few you can trust these days. Bad times. Hard times. Can't be too careful. We have the Panama Campaign, you know. Did I tell you I have a physical fitness program? Yes, yes, yes. Watch. I'll show you. Keeps a man fit. Have to stay fit."

As Rufus watched, horrified, the old man scuttled across the room to the rowing machine, threw himself into the saddle, and began pulling the oars at a frantic pace.

"*Hup*, two!" he grunted, rowing. "*Hup*, two! *Hup*, two! Got to stay in the best shape, *hup*, two! Got to stay right at your peak, *hup*, two! Got to be smart, got to be brave, got to keep peace through the week! *Hup*, two!" He kept rowing.

The doctor asked Rufus softly, "Have you seen enough?"

Rufus didn't answer, and the doctor led him out.

Behind them, the old man rowed and chanted happily. Somewhere, far in the distance, was the muted sound of weapons being fired. The house

again was under attack by the rabble.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Have you thought about it?" Paul asked softly.

Rufus looked up at his brother, who stood alone with him in the room that was also Rufus' prison. Paul was pale, but harshly composed, like a man using most of his energy to keep his emotions in check.

"I've thought about it," Rufus said.

"I didn't have them bring you back here yesterday, after you saw Father, because I was indifferent to how you must feel," Paul told him. "The doctor said you had had enough. He wanted you to have your rest."

Rufus nodded. "He drugged me."

"He only helped you sleep."

With a sigh, Rufus allowed him the point. Perhaps it had been better. He had been on the ragged edge of madness himself when he left his father's room yesterday. The injection, given him by the doctor, had given him deep and dreamless sleep through the afternoon and night. Now it was morning again and he felt alert and rested. But yesterday's revelations were a horror on the border of his consciousness.

"Is there anything more," Paul asked, "I can tell you?"

"You can change minds," Rufus said. "Why can't you help *him*?"

"Father?"

"Of course."

Paul frowned. "I don't understand all of it. It's a specialty. But the experts say they couldn't make him well again. The best they might do would be to make him an entirely different person. We can't do that to him."

"You do it to others," Rufus said bitterly. "You ask *me* to accept it voluntarily."

"That's different," Paul argued.

"How did it happen to him?" Rufus demanded. "What drove him out of his mind? When?"

"The pressure," Paul replied. "The years of strain. The worry. Planning and counter-planning, seeing things go bad."

"But no one knows he's mad?"

"Only a handful of the most trusted."

"The people don't know?"

"Of course not."

"The people," Rufus said incredulously, "vote again and again for 'Wise Old Cal,' when actually he's mad and *you're* running the nation?"

"I'm one of a board," Paul said stiffly. "It's best for the country. The people have so little to place faith in. If they knew his condition, it could cause further panic, deterioration of the situation—"

"And this way," Rufus shot back, "*you* get to play god."

Paul looked at him. "Do you really believe that?"

"No," Rufus groaned. "It would be so easy if I could. But I can see it the way it is—you're not an evil man. The others aren't evil, either, probably. They just do what they think they must, and they're wrong, they're trying to prop up a myth, hold together a dying nation—"

"The nation can't die," Paul hissed fiercely. "It can't *ever* be allowed to die! It has to lead the free world!"

"The free world," Rufus echoed bitterly. "God!"

"And you can help," Paul told him earnestly. "Say you understand, Rufus. Do this heroic thing for your country—for our Father!"

"I'll never allow you to wipe me out."

"You must, Rufus. It's not only for our country and our future. Don't

you see that you must pay for your own guilt?"

"My guilt?" Rufus repeated.

"Don't you see how your conduct in the past helped create the situation with him now? Don't you see how the anguish over the decision on your IR&R probably *started* the downward trend for him?"

"No," Rufus rasped. "I don't believe that."

"He was fine before then," Paul told him. "He was strong. He was whole. The horror of the decision and its aftermath began eating away at him. It started destroying him. You started him on the path to madness, Rufus. And the rabble attacking us cry your name."

"No! I didn't!"

"You did. And now you have to pay your debt. You have to say you'll agree to IR&R. It's the only way!"

"I'll never agree!" Rufus cried.

"We can do it anyway," Paul said, his face hardening. "We have the court ruling, you know. You might as well agree to it—make it a voluntary act we can all be proud of."

"And let you run from *your* guilts?" Rufus laughed.

"Guilts? Why should I have guilts?"

"I'll never agree to it," Rufus argued. "I'll never let you trick me into any submission. If you do it to me again, you'll do it to a prisoner. You'll have to chain me. You'll have it in your heart all your days. I'm telling you now, Paul—*no!*"

"It's not long until Christmas," Paul retorted quietly, with that strained, earnest expression. "We want to reveal you to the people just before Christmas. We want to give them something to have faith in again, so the season will be peaceful, the way it should be."

"I'm very sorry," Rufus responded, "that I won't allow you to put me in a crib for them beside the baby Jesus."

"Is your heart so hard?" Paul pleaded. "Will you force us to take legal action to get this done? We are under constant attack!"

"You may be able to wipe me out," Rufus said, his fists balled and tears streaming down his face. "But you'll never make me submit. You're as crazy as he is, my brother. You're not evil. You're simply crazy. You and this rotting society of yours. And I'll never give you the satisfaction of being able to tell yourself you did it with my blessing. Damn your idea! Damn your country! Damn all of it! *I won't submit!*"

Paul straightened up and looked down at him with sad, angry eyes. "You leave us no choice, then. We felt so sure you would react differently. We need your help, badly. Our forces are depleted—"

"You were wrong," Rufus said. "You're wrong about a lot of things."

"Will you reconsider? We can allow a few days—"

"You'd better call in your judge," Rufus shot back. "You'd better start writing the regulations and justifications. And you'd better be very careful that I don't get a chance to escape. Because I'll never change my mind on any of it. *Ever.*"

His brother took a deep breath, and his face cooled. "Then," he said slowly, "we'll have to change your mind for you."

"You always had that option," Rufus pointed out bitterly. "You could afford to be gentlemanly because you knew I never had a chance."

Paul turned toward the door. "I wish," he said thoughtfully, "the world were different, Rufus."

"Yes," Rufus said. "Blame it on the world, Paul. If it makes you feel better."

Paul left the room and Rufus was alone.

Rufus sat on the sleeping bench and stared at his hands.

So, he thought, there was no recourse and no escape. He knew it all now, everything that had happened to him, and he wished he didn't. He saw the state of the world, and he wished he didn't. He realized that he

was helpless, a prisoner, and he had no chance. And he wished desperately otherwise. Mobs might be attacking, but what chance had they?

He felt a deep, tugging sickness. He was at their mercy. He had no chance. Perhaps, he thought, he had never truly had a chance.

So he sat there and saw it, and could do nothing. It was odd, he thought, that the end of one's existence could be faced this way, without hysteria, with outward calm, almost matter-of-factly. His whole being screamed against the reality that he saw, and he could do nothing.

He had already tried everything, and of the future he had no doubt. If there had been desperation in his brother's eyes, there could be no real hope drawn from it. What chance did any mob have against the heavily armed central government?

And yet, try as he might, Rufus felt a desperate hope remain. He had had so much bad luck... was it too much to hope for, that just once the luck would turn in his favor?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

So the day came.

They strapped Rufus, naked and covered by a thin sheet, on a table with rollers. They wheeled him down a long bright corridor to a cubicle and took him to another floor. His vision was fuzzy and bright from the drugs they had already pumped into his blood, but he knew when they wheeled him into the great steel-white room with its central pedestal and banks of burning lights. There were a few guards, and many men in pure white smocks and gowns.

Feebly he tried to struggle as they unstrapped him from the cart, lifted him tenderly onto the pedestal, and strapped him down again. His struggle was like a wounded bird's, and they simply ignored him.

Then he lay there, looking up into the blinding gold of the lights, and a man loomed over the table and injected something into his arm. He felt the little prick and he felt the warm, soothing sleep begin to slide through his mind. And then other faces leaned over him and they were doing other things. To his head.

A little time passed. Then he was aware that another face was bent over him, and it was his brother.

"Rufus," Paul's voice said from a great distance. "Submit. Say it will be done voluntarily. It's to be done anyway. Now. Say you agree. Please."

Rufus had a great deal of difficulty in forming the single word on his lips.

"No."

Paul's face above him twisted in apprehension. A voice nearby said, "We have to hurry. The rabble has broken through defenses everywhere this time. We have reinforcements on the way, but my God, what if some of those radicals broke through *this* far?"

"Impossible," Paul grunted.

Through the drugged haze, however, Rufus saw the sudden fear cross his brother's face. It was like a jolt of lightning through his body. There was an attack... like the one he had seen the other day. They had broken through some of the defenses.

The thought gave Rufus a surge of new hope. It might not all be lost after all!

"Rufus," Paul said again. "Submit." Somewhere nearby there was a loud hammering sound. Rufus widened his eyes and saw the guards in the room turn, run toward portals with their guns. A yellow flash burst one of the portals open. The guards went to their knees, steadying their weapons.

"Hold them!" Paul yelled hoarsely. "Where are the rest of the guards? Where are the—" A crumping explosion covered over his words, several guards were hurled backward, and chunks of masonry fell from the ceiling.

Rufus struggled at the straps. A doctor restrained him. "No," Rufus managed. "Let me up!" Paul snapped, "The procedure has to wait. Release him. Get him out of here, back to the main security perimeter." A shower of fiery lights spewed into the room, more things were falling, guards' guns blasted, smoke thickened.

The doctor flicked the strap buckles loose from Rufus's arms and legs.

Two other technicians had some sort of wheeled table ready. Ready to wheel him out of here and back somewhere else.

Where the attackers could never reach him.

As the technicians lifted him off the table onto the cart, Rufus fought for control of his own mind. The savage noise and furor of the battle all around him helped. *You have to get away now*, he told himself dazedly. *Only chance—*

The two men placed him on the wheeled cart.

With a supreme effort, Rufus rolled over.

He threw himself off the cart and fell, hitting the floor with a savage impact. The men yelled and grabbed at him, and he heard Paul screaming orders. But the fall helped clear his mind, and he rolled, trying to get beneath the cart where the hands could not reach him.

He caught a fleeting glimpse of fighting at the portals. Men and women in rags were hurling rocks and smoke bombs at the guards. Bodies had begun to pile up. The vicious snapping of weapons filled the air.

The technicians caught Rufus' arms. He kicked at them, getting loose.

"Stop him!"

Rufus staggered to his feet.

As he did so, the men and women fighting in the portals all seemed to spot him at the same instant. From their throats swelled a single roar.

"Rufus!"

Rufus staggered, almost fell. They knew him—knew his old identity as well as the new. He saw, blurrily, that sight of him had inspired them. Screaming exultantly, they charged *en masse*. The guards tried to stand ground, tried to fall back in an orderly fashion, were bowled over and pulverized.

Paul darted through an exit panel and vanished as it closed behind him.

The rabble filled the room, and a dozen hands caught Rufus, holding him up. Everyone was laughing and crying at the same time.

"We have him!" a bearded man yelled with savage glee. "Now we get out of here before they can close us off!"

Shouting wildly, the people carried Rufus along as they charged out of the laboratory and into a long corridor. Despite the incredible excitement, Rufus could no longer fight the drugs. He plunged into darkness.

* * *

IT WAS TWO DAYS before the drugs began to wear off, four before they were truly out of his mind. Hidden deep under the city, Rufus sat in a ring of his new friends. The bearded warrior, whose name was Jan, had explained everything very carefully.

"There are not just a few of us, Rufus," he said now, the light of the torches crimson on his face. "The word has gone out. You are the true son of the Executive. In your memory the people have fought all these years. Now you are with us. The fight has just begun."

"I said once that war could never be just," Rufus said softly. "I don't know, now, whether I was right or wrong when I said that."

"We will fight until a new kind of order has been established," Jan said.

Rufus looked at them, and tears stung his eyes. He had come far... farther, perhaps, than his altered memory would ever let him know. But the way ahead might be even longer.

"I will not be a figurehead," he told the people around him. "You saved more than my life. I will live with you, work with you, fight at your side."

Jan clasped a strong hand on his arm. "As word spreads that you are with us, the fight will broaden. We will win!"

"You know my story," Rufus said, the tears choking him now. "All I could wish is that, somehow, Selda could have lived to see this."

Jan's face split in a great, glowing grin. "She did."

Rufus stared. "What!"

"Ever since your capture, we have sought for her, too. News came only a little while ago. She is ten days' walk from here. She is on the way, traveling by night, carefully, and guarded."

Rufus stared at the faces now glowing with joy as they saw his own dawning realization. He saw, suddenly and with great clarity, what it had all meant, and where it would all lead.

"We will have victory," he said simply.

The shouts of his people dinned through the cavern.