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The Black Roads by J.L. Hensley

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

1769: Construction and testing of Cugnot's vehicle, a large, heavy, steam-powered vehicle, a realization of the earlier dreams of Homer and da Vinci, and the attempts of de Vaucanson, Medhurst, von Guericke.

1885: Benz tests his first internal combustion three-wheeler. Within three years Benz employs fifty men, two years later converts to four wheelers.

1908: Ford's Model "T" mass-produced.

1925-35: The age of the classic gasoline cars. Electric vehicles vanish except as curiosities.

1930: The building of the first true express highway begins: The *Reichsautobahnen*.

1945: End of World War II. Frantic rebuilding of gasoline cars resumes.

1961: City riots spread. Special motorized patrols of key areas begin.

1973: The oil-scare years begin in earnest.

1980: Big four abandons oil diplomacy, adopts oil-by-right policy.

1982: Practical Elecar in mass production.

1987: Peace treaty signed in Cairo at end of World War III, the last, limited "gentleman's" war.

1987^{1/2}: City riots begin again. Elecar theft made capital offense. Congress passes emergency laws allowing peace conservators and police to shoot looters on sight. Stop and search laws implemented.

1988: World War IV begins. Europe and China wasted, all countries poisoned with fallout.

1989: Automatic launchers continue loosing bacterial and germ warfare. In scattered areas immunes adapt, survive.

2012: Reoccupation of roadway above by survivors from cave area. Discovery of cocooned Elecar storage. Survivors fence and protect themselves, seek and find power sources.

2036: Foundation of the Road School and development of the policies.

2037: Development of the fastlane theory of punishment by road hierarchy made up of police. Elite Red Roadman group established.

2128: Furthest expansion of the roadworld.

2129: Destruction of power sources, fall of roads.

Sam Church could see "hellies" hunting in the sky to the south, rotary blades swishing bright, deadly sieve guns at the ready. He was no longer sure it had to be him—them—they sought, but it was worth conjecturing about. There were three of them up there, boxing the sky in quick methodical search, but moving away just now.

Doc had also seen them. He stopped and gave them a long look, his foxy face alert, his faded eyes brighter in the presence of danger.

"Sam!" he said, and pointed warningly.

Sam Church nodded. Up there they moved along almost silently except for the swish-swish of their rotary blades.

Dawn had arrived almost an hour before and the day was cold, still sunless. The two men moved on needing no further communication, quickening their pace a little. Sam knew what they sought— a place to rest—a place to hide for the day. Conversation could wait for such a place.

They found a ruined village just when it seemed they must chance the day in the comparative open of the scrubby trees. They picked their way carefully through the discovered village, alert for the unexpected. The act of walking was still difficult for Sam, but the leg they'd crippled badly in prison camp seemed better after almost a week of forced marches. It was the leg that had fooled them. The leg had turned him from a solitary case out into the open wards of the prison. They'd, thought he couldn't run.

The village had been burned out long years back, and now, in the quiet of the morning, it appeared devoid of life. All that remained were the ruins. Now and then Sam could see the fate of at least some of the inhabitants, for there were bones, including one great pile of bones where perhaps survivors had been massacred. Reminders of one of the old wars which had never really begun and might now never end. It had come here with quick and terrible ferocity and eaten the life of the village.

They heard sounds again and Sam saw Doc's eyes examine the steel grey sky. The unmistakable sound of the hellies grew nearer, although they were not yet within sight.

Doc gave him a swift look. "Come on," he said. "Time to find some deep cover."

They found a roofed, sunken basement and burrowed in there. Sometimes the hellies, if they thought their quarry had gone to earth, would spray their faucets of bullets into any area which seemed suspicious. Sometimes also they would drop whip bombs, or containers of fire, or lethal gas, but now there was no reason for them to do that unless they spied quarry. Now, after a week, they'd lost the scent. A routine patrol.

Yet they hovered suspiciously over the village for a time. Sam could see them through a small hole in the ceiling. He watched them wheeling and turning, very graceful in the heavy, morning air. Doc also watched them for a little while, but then he turned his head away and noisily slept. Sam envied him that quick ability, that gift for blessed sleep.

Those hellies were from the secure world, the road world. Once Sam had owned a place in that world, a high, enviable place, but now that was gone. He had thrown that place away because the price to hold it was too high. Now he had no place in this new world, no place left in the old. He'd grown more and more moody as the days of running passed. It was funny

without being funny, but he could not put down the feeling of despair. He knew that he was better off than he'd been in those months in prison, but he'd never suffered from despair in prison, only from hate, which is a far different and more satisfying emotion. In the prison he'd despised the ones who'd inflicted pain, who'd tried over the long months to break him. In prison there had been time to hate Jackman, whose acts had caused Sam's imprisonment and quick fall from grace. And sometimes in the prison there'd been time also to hate himself, to hate Sam Church, to understand reality and his own flaws. More than Jackman he knew he'd caused his own problems, opened, closed and locked the gates of the prison behind himself.

That time had now passed. He'd never really gotten used to the prison just as he'd never gotten used to being a Red Roadman, but he had endured both, lived through both. The weak men and the old men had died around him all his life, in road school, on the fast lanes, and in prison. Sam was young and he'd survived. Survived to sleep badly, to see dead eyes, remember fiery crashes.

In the morning's despair there just was no luxury in the new found freedom and sleep wouldn't come to relieve him. He only knew he was tired to death and that his bad leg ached.

Finally the hellies flew away, and the sun came out, and it seemed to get a little warmer in his blankets. He went into an uneasy sleep and dreamed a familiar dream of a long ago spring, a spring that he was no longer sure had ever existed.

That was a spring before he'd known fear. He remembered it now as the "picnic" spring, the last year his father had been alive. There'd been a long walk in a woods where the road was wide, far enough away so that traffic noises were almost gone. There'd been good things to eat out of a knapsack his father had carried. Twice they'd gone through a tiny village about the size of this day's dead village. Now he knew that his father had premonitions of death, known that someone wanted him for something, some matter that had gone wrong in petty officialdom, some matter of so little importance that only one life was needed to settle it.

But the thing that came back to Sam in the dream was not a sense of father loss, but a memory of that state run village. It had seemed a place out of the past. There'd been tiny houses and a little store with ice cream and cookies. There'd been crowds of people on brief holiday around him,

smiling, walking and talking cautiously in the warmth of the spring sun, obeying the signs of course, although authority—law— seemed absent, or at least camouflaged.

Somehow in the dream that childhood village became this day's village of disaster.

He came awake and realized that he had mixed dreaming and reality and then sleep came again. Several times he awoke and shivered and drew the cover tight against bone penetrating cold. A fire was what he needed, but there could be no fire, not with hellies prowling about. Then, finally, full sleep came head on and he fell into the abyss it created and it was good, but Doc shook him awake before he was ready.

"Wake yourself, Red Roadman," he said, referring to Sam's late profession. "Sun's almost down. Time to move out."

Sam nodded and rubbed his eyes. He got up reluctantly and rolled his blankets into a pack and strapped them on his back.

They plunged out into the sunset and Sam was grateful to follow Doc. The world outside the fences was Doc's world, known to him. Doc knew which streams were probably safe and which were surely deadly. Doc knew what roots were edible and where to find wild onions and potatoes. Sam watched and learned, but had early resolved that the outside would never be his world. Somehow he would make it back up to the world of the roads.

They went on at a wearying pace, Doc never hesitant, always sure. And so, finally, they came to the road.

From atop the rise Sam could see well in the cloud filtered light of half a moon. He lay high above the road in a place where Doc had cautioned absence of movement so that no chance observer watching the tops of the hills might see them. It was a place where the sparse, second growth trees hadn't been trimmed or burned away. Doc lay next to him. Doc's last name was Davis, but Sam never thought of him as Doc Davis, but only as Doc. There was a smile on Doc's face now, but the smile was an habitual expression, seldom put away. It meant little. Doc was lean and muscular and 44 years old, 15 years older than Sam.

Down below, inside the heavily fenced area, inside the alarms and

lights, was one of the myriad areas where you could program yourself into a pull-off lane and, with permission and the correct papers, park and hook on for power and water. This one was outboard of the traffic lanes, but most were in the median areas. Sam inspected it and the feeling of loss was strong within him. Some past or present resident-agent had erected an ancient set of swings and a rusty merry-go-round at the edge of the trailer town, and children played there, although the hour grew late. The adults were having some sort of communal party. Normally gatherings were prohibited where there were more than twenty people, but Sam could see black uniforms here and there in the crowd, and the wearers seemed relaxed, not trying to stop the party, but instead joining in the festivities. Sam could see one of the black dressed ordinary roadmen dancing with a bare breasted, pretty girl and another blowing into some sort of paper horn that made a wailing noise. Other people yelled at each other, laughing, eating and drinking.

Up from the road there arose a familiar odor, the smell of living, of elecars, of food and of people. It all mixed together and assailed the nose, but it was not unpleasant.

Beyond the pull-off area lay the road lanes. Traffic was somewhat light on all lanes, including the wide, treble-sized "fast lane."

An instructor in the road school, one who fancied himself to be a philosopher, had once told Sam that if a visitor from a far star (if there were such visitors) ever saw the roads that such alien would never understand them. They had begun on the interstates decades back. The survivors of the quick wars and the later long ones had fenced away the rest of the world. What Sam was now seeing from his oblique angle was the final result.

There were a lot of cars running loose, without trailers attached, but the road traffic also contained many elecars pulling Beavers, some old, some new. Those Beavers were the issue trailers, normal equipment for workers, year of make and degree of citizen ownership contingent upon job held and seniority. The pull-off park below him contained Beavers exclusively.

Sam looked over at Doc. Doc continued to study the terrain below them with careful eyes. Sam turned back to the road again. As he watched the travel lanes two Antelopes went by. Those were the larger trailers where some highly trained executive and his family lived in far greater comfort

than Beaver comfort. Sam had heard stories that many families got them when the breadwinner had to retire and the children were emancipated, but he'd never seen any real evidence of it. Of course he'd also never made the sun runs through the restricted southern areas. It was possible.

It was only that he no longer believed it was probable.

Far out in the fast lane, moving very quickly, he thought he glimpsed an Elephant. Only the big ones were ever issued those and the issue was for life. Heads of departments sometimes got them, senior Red Roadmen. One day maybe Sam would have had one. Sam knew that one did not attack them, no matter what offenses they committed. He'd been with Jackman once when one weaved down the fastlane and Jackman, always the stickler for adherence to the laws, had pointedly ignored it.

He thought about the Elephant in his future and the sense of loss came back upon him strongly. To stop the feeling he decided that seeing the Elephant in the fast lane might have been an illusion because he'd subconsciously wanted to see one—craved the sight.

Doc leaned toward him and tapped his shoulder bringing him back to the now real world outside the roads. Doc's voice was low: "The old rail tunnel goes underneath right down there," he said. He pointed to a low place, where the shadows seemed deeper, down and almost out of the light and away from the edge of the huge road complex. His eyes were wary. "Let's be a little careful going down there. I think I see something." He shook his head. "Wouldn't be the first time your friends have tried to set up something outside." But he shook his head, not believing it.

"Someone in there waiting?" Sam asked.

Doc shrugged. Sam looked again at the pull-off area, fascinated by the sight of the familiar world that he'd not viewed since he was taken to prison, lonely again for that world despite its dangers and imperfections. He'd seldom seen so many people having a good time, and he wanted to be a part of it suddenly. He knew the road world was a lie and a cruel trap, but he wanted it.

Doc gave him an impatient look. "Come on, Sam. Let's get going. It's only a New Year's Eve party."

"Sure," Sam said, calculating and coming to that result with some

surprise. It was New Year's Eve. They'd escaped from the prison a week before, on Christmas Eve, when the brown-out came and the guards partied drunkenly. The first few days were a little fuzzy in his memory for the pursuit had been desperately close. Then they'd swum a cold river and shaken that pursuit, and, by holing up during the days, as they'd done today, and running at nights, they'd eluded the now fading search. It was still a time for caution and care, but Sam figured they'd now fallen into a new category. They were in the same position as all others outside the road fences. They were to be killed if seen, but they were faceless. Maybe not quite faceless. It still got down to how badly the people up there on the road, the senior Reds, the ones who ran things, wanted him, Sam Church. He knew they probably wanted him quite badly. He was one of their own. To their way of thinking he'd "gone bad." They'd reminded him of that harshly and painfully in the prison.

They'd know he'd try to find Central Control.

He shivered in the cold air. It was safer just to act as if pursuit was still close behind.

Sometimes he wanted to die, to be dead and out of it, but he didn't want to die in any way they could claim credit for.

Doc was watching him and Sam realized the man was impatient to move on. He nodded at the other man and they went down the side of the hill together. They made the advance with great care, keeping to cover and shadow where possible and making the journey last a long time. A cold rain began to come down, wetting them, cutting the pungent odor of the road.

They stopped near the tunnel entrance. They lay there in the dampness and watched, searching for any sign.

Doc put his mouth close to Sam's ear. His voice was a whisper. "See," he said. "There's a light that flickers now and then."

Sam inspected the mouth of the tunnel. It took imagination to see what Doc saw. It wasn't apparent, but it was there. He upgraded his estimate of Doc as a traveling companion for perhaps the fifteenth time.

"How now, leader?" Doc asked, returning to the fiction that Sam led and he followed.

"We need to go through," I said. "They say the way is south. *An ancient road in a hot land...*"

"Legends," Doc said.

"No. More than that."

"All right," Doc conceded without surrender. "If we keep moving parallel to the road we'll find another tunnel or a stream or some way to bypass your road."

"I suppose," Sam said. He shivered. "But it's cold and wet and I'm tired. We need to get under and hole up, rest up for a few days. I hate to give up easy." He took another look at the tunnel entrance. "Wonder what's in there?"

"Probably not law," Doc said. "Law wouldn't start a fire." He smiled without meaning. "Could be some hungry wayfarer. Someone waiting and watching for travelers." He gave Sam a sardonic look. "Got to watch yourself out here in the big open, Red Roadman. People out here live and die different. Sometimes, when the hunger is bad, they also eat different."

Sam nodded. He'd heard a thousand tales back in the days on the road. The people of the road feared the outside even more than they feared the inside. Sam had heard stories of people going out into the land beyond the fences, but few about safe returns. He'd heard about hellies going down and whole crews disappearing when darkness came. He'd been told of armed expeditions that had bravely ventured out and vanished. Now he was outside. He shivered again. According to the stories somewhere to the south along an ancient road in a hot land lay Central Control. From other childhood stories Sam believed that a roadman who did something very brave or brilliant was ordered there to help command, usually when he approached retirement time.

Sam was going to find that base. It was a quest that helped keep him sane, that gave him purpose. He'd convince them that it had gone wrong, that the figures were altered and the lie grew.

What gave him pause was that he knew there must have been others who'd tried. Men vanished from sight, many men. Men went to prison. Sometimes men fled beyond the fences.

The road world had remained the same. Nothing changed. Confused psychopaths still cruelly led.

Doc asked: "If we go into the tunnel and there's trouble do you think you can take care of yourself?"

Sam wasn't offended. Doc knew him. "I have an acquired allergy to killing, Doc, but I think it only extends so far. I think I can kill to protect myself, to save my own life, even if it has little value." He looked away. "But I'm not certain."

Doc nodded, very deadpan. "How about if someone was trying to kill *me!*"

Sam said carefully. "I don't know. I hope I could extend it that far."

Doc grinned hugely. "I hope so too." He shook his head, marveling. "A Red Roadman who can't kill. Your whole life has been spent in learning to kill and then in combat and killings. I find you very hard to believe, Sam."

"Sure I killed people," Sam admitted. "A lot of times. It was my job. It was the way I was taught." He shook his head. "But I believe now that life shouldn't be taken lightly, Doc. It shouldn't be taken for violations of petty rules, foolish laws. It shouldn't be encouraged and gamed for."

Doc said coolly: "What you mean is that somehow you lost your taste for blood?"

"Say it that way then," Sam said.

Doc looked back at the tunnel, losing interest. "Come on," he said. "I'll chance it. Sometime I'm going to have to find out for sure. I'll lead and you follow."

"No," Sam said. "It's my place to go first. You're only traveling with me. I appreciate it and I'm grateful for your help, but I must go first."

Doc raised his eyebrows. "Your choice then, leader." He waited.

From atop the hill, from the roads, there came the sound of many voices raised in unison, mixed with the sound of horns echoing in the cold, wet night. Sam stiffened and then relaxed. The sounds were of celebration

and not of discovery and pursuit.

Doc said: "Happy New Year."

"Yes," Sam answered. "Pure water."

They clasped hands for a second.

When that moment was past Sam crept closer to the tunnel entrance, knowing Doc would follow closely behind. He bellied himself at the entrance and crawled over the cold ground. Once inside it was at least dryer. The interior of the tunnel smelled of rust from the old rails. That odor was mixed with the sharp smell of predator animals, fox and weasel. Rats squeaked reassuringly at each other from their holes, watching Sam, their red eyes unafraid, hungry.

The tunnel went straight back for two hundred feet or so and then curved. The fire was beyond the curve. It was a wide tunnel and still seemed solid.

Belly down, very carefully, and taking a long time, Sam moved up close enough to see the fire itself. It was a tiny fire, now mostly embers. There was no one near it.

Doc touched his leg, startling him a little. He hadn't heard him that close behind. Doc could move like a ghost. He moved up even with Sam and his whisper was so low it almost had to be imagined.

"See the rocks on back of the fire? That'll be the place. Only room for one there, but there could be others further on in the tunnel, reinforcements." He smiled and Sam could see his teeth shine in the dim firelight. "If it's permissible I'll stay low and get to this side of the rock. When I get there you yell out. Yell loud. That might flush our would be ambusher. It's an old trick learned from my departed granny." He made a tiny motion that burlesqued prayer. "Gone to the good lands now. A hellie caught her in the open."

Sam felt apprehension about the plan. It seemed risky, even hare brained. But finally he nodded. Again, it wasn't his world. It seemed brighter and more right that he bow to Doc's superior knowledge. Doc seemed indestructible and he had style. Besides there was a need to get through. At least Sam believed they needed to get through.

Doc read acquiescence and smiled again. "Move a little back around the bend. That way a wild shot won't get you. Go back until you can just see the fire."

A retreat. Sam nodded.

He crawled back as ordered. By the time he'd done that and gotten turned around Doc had disappeared. Sam watched, trying to spot him. Once he thought he did, but it was only the fire flickering and causing shadows to form and fly.

They had no real weapons. Doc had a hunting knife and Sam also had one. Both were old and had been found rusting in the basement of a deserted town store, now five days back. Not much to attack with.

Sam waited.

Finally he did see Doc. The older man almost materialized at the rock, seemingly coming from the shadowed walls. He lay there waiting.

Sam remembered an old dream flick. "Charge!!" he yelled. "Charge!"

Sound blasted through the tunnel, deafening him. He felt a spray of rock chips. A shot.

There was a squeal and the sound of thrashing bodies. Sam went at a run. Past the fire, to the rock, pounding as hard as the bad leg would allow.

Doc was standing there holding tight to someone.

Sam could see Doc's face. It was animated.

"Rose?" Doc said to the figure he held. He let go with one arm and beat Sam on the shoulder with exuberant blows. "It's Rose, you crazy honker."

It was a girl Doc held.

She said reasonably: "You could have gotten yourself killed, Doc." Her voice was low and good. "Or killed me."

"I thought you were already dead," Doc murmured. "I thought you were up in the mountains and maybe buried someplace by now." He picked her

up and whirled her gayly around.

She laughed again, but now her eyes were on Sam, curious and wary all at one time. She pushed Doc a little away, as if a stranger witnessing their reunion was something she didn't want.

"You'll be the dead one. Not very many can sneak up on me," she said. "I thought I heard something. I was waiting to hear it again." She looked at Sam. "Then this one let go with his wild screeching."

Doc winked solemnly at Sam. There was something more than the usual mockery in his eyes.

"Rose," he said formally, "this is Sam Church, who once wore the red hat up on the roads. He got put in prison when he started reading too many books and computer tapes and asking questions." He looked at Sam, then nodded at Rose, offering them to each other for bids.

"She's something," he said to Sam admiringly.

Sam nodded. She was something. She was a tall girl, perfectly made, hauntingly striking. Sam had seen and known many women in the promiscuous world of the roads, but he knew that he would remember this one's face for all the time he had left. It wasn't a bored face, it wasn't eager, and it wasn't under the influence of some drug. It was alive, really alive.

A little color came into that face as he inspected her, but she looked back at him too.

Sam saw that her features really weren't exactly the way they ought to be for perfect beauty. Her nose was slightly and delicately hook-curved. Her mouth was over generous and her eyes were very large, slightly ex-opthalmic, questing.

They looked at each other until she seemingly grew tired of it and threw her head back and glared at him. He smiled at her, vaguely remembering the girls of the road. Up there fat was in this year, maybe because so many girls were fat from lack of activity, from placing and keeping rumps in fitted elecar seats. The food had been better over the past few years.

Rose wasn't fat.

"Careful, Sam," Doc said. "She can't exactly read your mind. She's not a mutie. But she feels things."

The girl looked at Sam again and he met her eyes and held them, not trying to hide anything from her.

She flushed a little and said: "I'm not sure of this one, Doc. He could be using you. Maybe he's got something going you don't know about, something up there. They could have sent him out— they could be up to more dirty stuff. Lots of hellies buzzing around recently. Too much activity."

Doc shook his head and grinned at Sam. "No, Rose. I met him in prison, in one of their total security camps up north of here. The guards pushed him around good. I'll get him to show you his scars sometime." He watched her carefully until she flushed a little. "Or maybe you can get to see them on your own." He stopped and thought. "I think they'd have killed him someday, either by edict or unofficially, the way they mostly do. I know they'd have done the same to me— and maybe soon. All we were there for was to break us, to find out what they thought we knew. But Sam here didn't have to admit to me he was a wearer of the red. I didn't know it. I don't think anyone did except maybe the top camp officials. He could have had any cover he wanted, but he never once tried to hide what he'd been. And once they found it out the camp guards didn't try to hide it either. A couple of times prisoners who'd lost somebody to the red force tried to work off their grudges against Sam. The guards just stood around and watched while that was going on. He got no help."

"Red Roadmen can be tricky," she said stubbornly. "You know that."

"No," Doc said again with finality. "I'm sure." He waited until she grudgingly nodded.

"Tell us what you're doing here?" Doc asked.

She gave the men an evasive look. "We had a little trouble."

"You're camped around here?"

She nodded toward the far end of the tunnel. "The tunnel exits where you can't be seen from the road. Eight or ten miles back into the woods there's what used to be a town. We've been digging out the basements,

finding stuff in cans and glass jars. Some of it's still okay. We've got a camp near the town. There's good water." She nodded to herself. "The old ones say it'll be a bad winter." She smiled. "But they said that last year too."

"Anyone there I'd know?" Doc asked.

She considered. "Some I'd guess. One for sure. Black John runs what needs any running." She nodded back toward the near entrance. "There's a wild tribe out there someplace near. Bad ones.

They think we're food. They've come through the tunnel a couple of times and raided us. But you know John. He isn't much for offense. He keeps hoping trouble will go away. So I sneaked in here alone. I thought I might catch some of them trying. Maybe they'd think someone was asleep back of my rock. Show them the game has two sides."

Doc nodded. It apparently seemed rational to him, but it didn't seem rational to Sam.

Rose gave Doc a curious look, ignoring Sam. "How'd you get into a prison camp up there? And how'd you get out? And what brought you this way?"

"That's too many questions," Doc said. He winked obliquely at Sam, but did not smile. "The answers would take too long for now. All I am is a follower, anyway. Sam here is seeking Central Control. He's going to tell all the nice guys there about all the bad people up on the roads." He smiled sardonically. "Sam thinks Central Control is to the south."

"I've heard about a so-called Central Control," Rose said. "The old ones say it's a fairy tale."

"No," Sam said. "Messages have come in. I've heard about them. Orders. Once, when I was just out of road school, a man got detached from road duty to Central Control."

"Did you ever see that man again?" she asked. "No. I wouldn't because he went there. He was up at retirement age. It was an honor. They had a ceremony for him with all of us lined up on the grinder."

"Someone up above him probably used the Central Control ruse to get

rid of him. That's why you never saw him again."

"I've heard about a lot of messages and orders. There's a special place for them on all the barracks bulletin boards."

"Convenient."

"I know there were messages," Sam said.

She shook her head in disbelief.

"I'll find it," Sam said.

"Does no good to argue with him, Rose," Doc said. "He's crazy in several areas. Central Control's just the most evident one."

She looked again and Sam saw her expression change a little. He thought she was examining him the way a woman will sometimes examine a small, ailing child. The look cut him deeper than disbelief. He endured it without comment, but suddenly it seemed overwarm in the tunnel.

"Let's move on out of here," he said to Doc.

"Sure. Rose can show us the way."

Rose nodded. "All right." She reached down behind her rock and picked up an old rifle, seemingly well oiled and impeccably cleaned. She jacked a new shell into the chamber and sighted down the barrel professionally.

"Are you all right?" she asked Sam. "You don't look very good."

"I'll make it," he said. "Just tired. Worn out." She nodded at the men and started. They followed her out the far end of the tunnel. Once out Sam could again hear, but now no longer see, the road complex above. After they'd walked for a time the sound vanished and it was as if the world was all forests and streams. The country they walked through was cold and beautiful. Sam missed the beauty, but shivered in the cold and in the continuing drizzle of rain. Clouds scudded across the moon. If it had been ten degrees colder it might have snowed.

Sam tried to remember when last he'd eaten, but couldn't remember whether it had been yesterday or the day before. But there'd been good water and he could moisten his lips now by merely lifting his face to the

rain. He didn't think he was actually sick, only so tired and hungry that it imitated sickness.

They walked for a long time, until the dense forest around them thinned and they came upon the outskirts of what once had been a middle-size town. Dawn approached as they crossed a group of disintegrating asphalt roads and moved quickly past two rotting motels. They skirted the skeletal pumps of an old ruined station which had pumped liquid fuel to vehicles in the dim days before the elecars. They kept an eye on the skies for hellies. Then, into the woods again. Five minutes walk farther on Rose stopped.

Sam stopped gratefully behind and leaned against a tree.

"Hello the camp," she called loudly. "Rose coming in. Doc Davis is with me. And a stranger. All okay."

They went in carefully, staying close behind Rose. There wasn't much visible except for a shielded and small fire built in a pit. Two ancient women turned a wild pig on a spit slowly. They watched the small caravan enter with the curiosity of the old.

Sam saw that most of the camp was underground in dug out hideaways. A few people lounged here and there, weapons handy. There were no children in sight, but Sam could hear child voices.

The smell of the roasting pig brought back hunger pangs.

A huge black man appeared quickly near the fire. His hair was wild and bushy and streaked with gray. His arms were oversize and very muscular. His face was angular and handsome except for a scar over his right eye. He nodded at Doc.

Sam stared and knew he was staring, but could not stop. Black people were scarce. Someplace back the line one of the wars had been a war of white versus black. When it was finished there were a lot less whites and a lot less blacks, but there had been more whites at the beginning. Intermarriage had lightened the color of those few who remained in the roadworld. Only once did Sam remember seeing a truly black man, a man as black as this one. That man had been one of a group that tried to breach the fence near a granary during a winter when things must have been bad outside the fence. That interloper and his cohorts had been cold

and dead by the time Sam arrived at high speed with a reinforcing group.

"Long time, Doc," the black man said. His voice was deep and cultured. He eyed the three of them without expression. "More mouths to feed?" he asked Rose.

She colored a little. "Doc's been with us before, John. I'm sure you remember he can be useful in a lot of ways. The other one's with him."

"The ancients say bad winter," John said. "I don't want any winters and springs where I have to see the kids eating dirt pies so that their stomachs won't hurt. People we take in have got to carry themselves." He looked at Sam and Sam could read nothing in his black eyes. "You a hunter?" he asked.

"Perhaps," Sam said. "What do you hunt?"

"He used to be a Red Roadman," Rose said.

One of the huge, black arms came up and out in a move that seemed intended.

"Don't," Sam said.

"I saw him take a guy about your size and build at the prison," Doc intervened. "Broke his right arm first. Then, when the fool kept coming, Sam broke his left arm. Been me I'd have broken his damn neck after the first arm, but Sam's kind of funny."

John's face was mildly curious. "You think he could handle me?"

Doc's face was cold. "He might. If he didn't get the job done then I guess I'd try to help him. If you don't want him here then the two of us will move on. I vouch for him. We're together."

The black man smiled the tiniest of smiles. "Sometimes I wonder who vouches for you, Doc." He hesitated and finally broadened his smile a little. "Let's eat and I'll listen to your lies, Doc. I always liked your stories." He turned to Sam. "He lies good, Red Roadman."

Sam nodded and let himself go loose inside. He looked over at Doc and Doc winked.

Food of sorts came and Sam ate gratefully, fighting to stay awake, but tired all the way down.

Then sleep...

* * *

GAYLE JACKMAN, at the same time Sam slept, ran high speed in the south fastlane. He was driving a dusty, five-year-old Carnivore hauling a Beaver two years older than the Carnie. It was nondescript looking equipment, but he liked the car. His kill ratio was up since he'd adopted it. The Beaver was a special, stripped model. Even with the Beaver attached, with the extra power assists built into the Carnie Jackman could give any elecarr on the road a hundred yards and catch it in a quarter mile.

The fastlane was usually the outer wide lane, although sometimes it was in closest to the median strip. The fast lane and the computer lanes looped in and out on each other with cunning tunnels, double bridges, overpasses and underpasses. Some of the hot kids called the fastlanes "no man's land" and that was a good name for the territory where the elecarrs ran free. The safe lanes were set up for computer control and most used those lanes, but there were times when such usage was not allowed to a citizen. Major violation of road or work rules could result in the temporary or permanent loss of computer right and so, of safety.

In the fastlanes a driver ran without computer. Some ran there by choice, some by chance, some as punishment. The fastlanes drew the violater and the venturesome. You could accelerate to speeds that would tear your eyes out if the bubble blew. It was a land of excitement and fear, of desperate courage and despicable cowardice. It was a cult thing for many drivers.

For every million miles in the computer monitored lanes the death rate was negligible. In the fastlanes it was 2.2 people for every million miles—accidentally. No agency reported the number of disciplinary deaths, the number who died in duels, the number who died in speed contests.

But the number rose. Jackman knew that and was satisfied with it.

The complex roads crossed each other and webbed the land. Law constantly assigned construction personnel to extend the domain, build

more roads, more fences. Those roads and fences enclosed a society that was not austere. It was rich and complex and without a lower class. All men worked. All men followed rules, obeyed the law. The fences widened to enclose factories and farms, power plants, water sources, thousands of rest areas and parks. A land of order, but not without compensations. Authority licensed the tens of thousands of road palaces that coupled together in the medians. There the traveler with time, the traveler between jobs, or off duty could eat and drink and enjoy the pleasures that each varied place afforded. Credits to spend provided by authority, taxed by authority. The good life. Obey the law. Work and play.

Jackman parked the Carnie in a vast parking lot by a complex of buildings. Inviting signs winked at him. He dismounted and threw his cloak around him.

The man at the door took his credits and motioned him on inside.

The first room was a dream room, where wired in men and women enjoyed handpicked experiences. There was a curtain across the door. A nude woman watched Jackman. "Dreams, sir?"

He shook his head and penetrated the building farther. He passed the voyeur room, where two crazed couples copulated while an audience cheered and jeered.

The last room was a club room. Those who frequented there called it the Ace Room, a place where connoisseurs of the fast lanes gathered.

A solitary bartender served him a scotch at an inflated price. Jackman nursed it, watching. Around him men and a few women drank and sniffed and smoked and injected, each to his own.

Jackman knew that if he was discovered there, found out to be a Red Roadman, that the crowd would cheerfully tear him into five uneven pieces and that they could do so without fearing penalty. This place was licensed. Authority had no right to enter it without notice and warrant.

All of that made it even better. Jackman knew he was getting old. Someday soon he would die. He had lived his life by intrigue, by cat and mouse. He knew he could not and would not change.

Besides, he'd been in before and not been discovered. He ordered

another scotch.

A boy beckoned him from a table.

"Come drink with us?" he inquired. Two others sat with him, one boy, one girl. The girl was heavy, but lovely, nude from the waist up. She smiled at Jackman when he sat at the table, saw that his hair was white, and gave him up as a prospect.

"You know my friends, old one," the boy said. His hair was light in color, worn long. The pupils of his eyes were tiny.

Jackman smiled at the three and exchanged names again.

"My time is up in five more days," Jackman said. "My bondwife wants me back in the computer lanes." He shook his head. "But I don't know. I'm old to be in the lanes, but age isn't all."

The blonde boy grinned. He said to the others: "He got a Red a hundred miles north." He nodded at Jackman. "Tell them how you did it, old one."

Jackman smiled nastily. "A trade secret," he said.

"No," the boy said amiably. "You told me the other night. Of course you'd had some more of those." He pointed at the scotch. "That stuff gives bad mornings," he said. "Tell them."

"I built a shotgun into the back," Jackman said. "It fires up from underneath the Beaver. Accelerates me and blows hell out of anything fifty feet behind."

The girl smiled at him, her eyes without belief. "Sounds good, but most of the Roadmen don't get up that close. They can kill you from further back."

Jackman shook his head. "He pulled up alongside me once. I guess he thought I'm just what I look like: An old man who's never been out of the computers until now. Must have lulled him. The blast took most of his head off I heard later."

The boy smiled. His eyes held a little contempt. He said: "A lucky time for you old man. Finish your sentence and go back to the computers. Soon

you'll retire to the Seasouth. If you stay in the lanes you may not be so lucky next time."

Jackman shrugged.

The boy said: "I run there all the time. Almost a year now." He looked at the others. "You know how it is out there. Watch your mirrors and live. Something unknown starts moving up unexpectedly then you drive careful until you're sure. It's a chop, a fun." He smiled, drugged by his own prowess, drugged by what he'd been served, which didn't give bad mornings, but sometimes gave bad nights. "Go back, old man. It isn't for you, but it's the only place for me."

Jackman smiled without rancor, playing his role. But when the boy departed and the two left ignored him he followed the boy on out. He was anonymous about it, being good at playing the half drunk. He'd bought his share of rounds.

He thought about the boy's long, blonde hair with real affection. A pretty boy. A boy who made brave toasts.

He gave the boy a minute and then followed him out onto the road after checking his armament lights. All was well.

The boy's machine was a crisp and sleek Batwing, a heavy credit article, a lovely machine. Jackman had tested one once on the grounds near his North Central Barracks. At low and medium speeds he'd found it to be a stable machine, but on air bubble, wheels up, he'd felt it lacked a little in stability. There was a mushiness in tight turns. But it was a good machine. There were no perfect machines.

Jackman smiled and whistled softly to himself. His eyes were alight. His face was a good face, always with an easy, tolerant look, a face automatically to be trusted. He peered out through the bubble, his excellent eyes seeing all that happened around him.

No one rode with him now that Sam Church was gone. He'd heard that Sam had gone through the fence, gotten away. He'd smiled when he heard it. There were worse things than quick death.

Jackman could have requested a riding partner and the request would have been instantly granted. But he had not. It was better alone.

He considered himself to be a hunter with the lanes being his hunting preserve. He no longer had questions within himself that he had to answer, no longer challenged his own motives and decisions. He had, in his lifetime, now killed so many people that the numbers had no real meaning to him anymore. He lived for each new day, each new hunt.

Jackman had rules for his hunts that he kept to rigidly inside the rocks and shoals of his head. He never deviated. He would, sometimes, void a hunt for a worthwhile opponent. He never punished the merely careless or the seldom-reckless. Such was unsporting. He never pursued an Elephant, refusing large game. Elephants were operated by senior men. When they moved in the fastlanes there was a *reason*. A man was foolish to tamper with a good thing just for the joy of seeing one of the hugies strewn down a lane.

Jackman knew he was good. Red Roadmen die. They die in a multitude of ways. They die in wrecks after driver miscalculation at high speed. They die in careful ambush when someone avenges a loss or settles a grudge. They die in combat with violators, for the game can go either way. Jackman knew he was good because he had run the lanes for a long, long time. And lived.

They say a Red never dies in bed.

He stayed carefully behind the boy from the road palace. Jackman knew that the boy had something of his own for armament. That made it worthwhile.

Jackman drove and waited, laying fairly close behind, letting other traffic blend past, some fall behind, keeping pace, trying to lull the boy into complacency.

The boy maintained his even speed. Jackman saw him look up into the mirror now and then and knew he was noted. After a time he saw that the boy had quit looking and now considered Jackman to be but another vehicle.

Jackman fed more power to his motor and pulled up even with the other elecar and then let the Carnie slide past the Batwing in a searing, but legal pass, using only that part of the lane where the Batwing ran. In his mirror he saw the other driver quicken pace behind the Carnie, stung at being passed.

Jackman increased speed when the boy pulled even, matching speed with him, refusing him an easy pass. As he stayed up he whistled his tuneless whistle and kept his smile. It was now a contest.

Jackman had no feeling at all at that moment for the boy. He knew he was dealing with an adventurer, a game player, another semi-psycho who loved what now was happening.

"Watch him!" Jackman chortled to himself. He pushed the Carnie up to what would normally be top speed for the model, then slacked it down, as if in some confusion, letting the boy slide past. The Batwing's rear end wavered a little, but the boy kept fine control. It was, by a length or two, too close a pass, an illegal one. The law clearly stated that a pass in the lanes must be executed by pulling out at least fifty feet behind and pulling back in fifty feet ahead. But it also said that the driver being passed must reduce speed to aid in the maneuver. At fast lane speeds the wind of passing could set up problem patterns when wheels were up. That meant little to a vehicle without haul, like the Batwing, but a car with full Beaver and passengers could come upon quick disaster.

Jackman laughed out loud and played the game as if he was in trouble. He let the Carnivore slew a little from side to side.

He punched an inquiry into the transcoder with his free hand, license number, violation. A light glowed red on the control console in front of Jackman. *Your decision.* Always the same.

The boy in the Batwing, the one who did not quite yet know he was soon to be dead, wasn't satisfied. He quick flapped and dropped his speed dramatically. Jackman was prepared. He spun awkwardly out around the boy and decreased speed. Jackman waited for the other driver to draw even again, knowing the boy figured he'd won a bloodless victory, but nevertheless a victory. He would now force Jackman to stop, to berm it. If Jackman didn't then maybe there'd be other methods, maybe he could panic Jackman into a really bad mistake. If Jackman showed armament then the boy would also show his. But even if no armament was used at close to two hundred miles an hour, riding the fans, a driver could wind up in a pile of bloody metal against the retaining walls or become a pinwheel of flashing sparks, turning over and over.

But this time, knowing that he had his man, when the other driver drew even and edged over,

Jackman kept even with him at a speed in excess of the Carnivores rating.

He flipped the dome light switch. The law said he must show himself to an offender. The great red circle of light raised from the plastic roof so that there could be no mistake. Right now the boy could quit and some did. There would be prison, but some survived prison. Some did survive. Jackman held his breath. The two vehicles continued down the road side by side at high speed.

Jackman reached down beside his seat. There he kept his dress, red hat. He put it on and looked out the side. On the chance that the boy could see him he flipped an insolent salute.

Jackman full flapped and the Batwing yawed in front of him. Something dropped from underneath it.

Jackman turned away from the track as spots of fire appeared in the road. Torpedos of some kind. If Jackman had run up over them he could have been hamburger.

He closed again, wary, but intent. He pressed the firing button and a bright line of fire sped from the Carnie into the Batwing, a rope of death. New shells fed into empty chambers and Jackman waited to see if he must fire again.

Ahead of him the Batwing began to slide. The front wheels came down, but, by some trick of the road, the vehicle did not spin, turn over, or break apart. It continued its way into the wall, upright, slightly sideways, with little spurts of flame coming from the front tires as they ground against the road at speed beyond their tolerance. When the car hit the high retaining wall it fractured like a thrown egg.

Jackman smiled and braked. He bermed the Carnie and slid out of the seat. He hit light switches along the wall, and left the red bulb turning from the top of his car. For half a mile back the road lit yellow along the retaining wall, warning approaching traffic. Some place in maintenance a crew had picked up the signal from the thrown switch and was probably already underway to pick up the debris.

The boy was dead. Jackman satisfied himself about that. Lovingly, sweetly dead.

He remembered, waiting there for the clean up crew, that Sam Church had once told him that someday he was going to grab at the controls at a critical moment and smash them both.

When the clean up crew came he went back to his own car. Traffic proceeded slowly by. In the last of the vehicles that passed, Jackman saw the fat girl and the other man who'd been with the boy earlier.

He smiled at them, wrapped his cloak tighter about himself, doffed his red cap and bowed as they proceeded past nervously.

He decided that he'd better put the haunt of earlier evening off limits for a time.

He was tired. He was getting old and now he was tired.

After a busy night there was sleep.

* * *

WHEN SAM CHURCH awoke it was like coming up from a sea where gentle waves carried him along with them. It was very pleasant to stay down under the waves, to be warm, but a man could drown down there.

He came awake and he hurt in his body and in his brain. An all over pain. But the leg seemed no worse and he wasn't sick.

He stretched carefully and then went limp again and looked around in the half darkness. He was in one of the underground nests and he didn't remember arriving there. There was a source of light and he could see dimly. The girl, Rose, sat primly on the far side of the nest watching him.

He pushed the blankets back. He felt a vague excitement, but nothing more.

"Hello," he said.

She nodded at him. She examined him intently.

"You look like a small child when you sleep," she said. "I wonder how it can be that way with you. You groan and move in your sleep, but you look very young. I know you must have hurt and killed many people. You're one of the one's I've learned to hate. Your people take whatever you want of my

world, the good lands, the sweet water. And you kill those outside the fence on sight and those inside in your road games." She shook her head and looked away and then back. "I used to have a brother. He died when I was very young, but I still remember him and miss him. You look like I think he would have looked. Why is it that way?"

She really wanted to know. Sam could see that.

"I don't have many answers," he said. And then because he was male and she was female: "*You look the way I want you to look.*"

She made a gesture of irritation. "It isn't the way here that it is in your world, man. We know about things you do. I've seen your half nude roadworld women. I'm not something for you to play with."

Sam shook his head. "It isn't always the way you think or have seen," Sam said. "People in my world still can love. There are forms of marriage."

"Can you still love?"

He thought about it. Too much had been bled away from him. "No," he admitted honestly.

She tossed her head a little. "That's all right. I don't want to marry you or any man."

"Were you Doc's woman?" he asked curiously. "Do you belong to him?"

She smiled. "No. Some hereabouts say that Doc's my father, my real father. I don't know about that. Doc comes and goes. He's restless. He's been having his own bout with life for all of my years." She gave me a curious look. "How'd you become friends? He likes you."

Sam shrugged, remembering the bad days. The two men had gravitated to each other because they were the worst treated. When Doc had been tortured and whipped Sam had treated his back for days. When the white hot iron had been put through Sam's leg muscle, Doc became his crutch.

"He came after I got there. The guards tried to make all the prisoners miserable, but they tried very, very hard with Doc—and with me." He stopped. "Why do they say he's your father?"

She looked away. "He was around here, around this group, when I was born. He lived with my mother before that. After my father vanished on a hunt—he never came back—Doc helped raise me for a few years.

Sam nodded. It was a bad time to be jousting with a woman, to be playing answers. This girl could not be for him. He couldn't take her back to his roadworld. And yet it was good that Doc wasn't competition. The thing to do was to settle back and go along. But she made him forget the days of blood, the days on the road. And so she might be a straw to grasp at.

"You want to go topside?" she asked.

"Sure."

They crawled around a curve and Sam found the source of light. There was an opening to the surface. They skirted a pit dug to catch unwary invaders and exited to the surface. The fire burned nearby. It was hooded against sight from the sky and Sam saw that the old women who were tending it fed it carefully with dry wood, so that almost no smoke arose. Something cooked over the fire in a large pot. Sam followed Rose to the far side of the fire, where a little warmth could be felt. The sky was gray, without sun, but the wind was gentle and it seemed not as cold as the day before.

"Where are the men?"

"Most hunt. Some are in the city digging, looking for food caches. A few still sleep." She smiled at him for the first time, exposing a slightly crooked tooth that bent against the white others. Sam was excited about it.

"You slept a long time," she said. "What did you dream of? Toward the last you moved and you groaned and you cried out."

He looked away, not answering.

"Do you want some food?" she asked finally, thinking he might be hungry.

"Please," he said. "If it's permitted."

She went to the fire and took a bowl from a rack and spooned it full and brought it back. It was a soup of some kind.

Sam took out his knife and speared pieces of meat from the soup. He offered the best to her. She politely took one piece and then declined the rest.

The soup seemed to be made of several kinds of wild meat and from a dozen kinds of roots and vegetables. He ate it slowly. The emptiness inside him declined, but the sense of loss grew. He was lost, without any chance of ever finding home.

"Is Doc with the hunters?" he asked to make conversation.

She nodded. "Doc can find game in the scantiest winter. He's a great hunter."

Sam nodded and sat there looking at her, seeing her without seeing her. She was very beautiful, but Sam was rested and ready to move on.

"You'll never find what you're looking for," she said, reading his eyes. "If you leave here to search you'll die even if Doc helps you." She looked at the fire. "I can see that."

He shivered.

She shook her head. "Maybe you'll die if you stay also. The hellies keep coming around, snooping. A few months ago they spotted one of our fires and it was bad. That's when we moved here."

Sam tried to decide what to do next. He was anxious for Doc to return. The sleep and the food had restored him, regained his body resilience, but his mind had acquired a dependency on Doc. Doc would come with him and lead. With Doc there was a chance to make it all right, to atone.

"Go with us," he said to her.

"No," she said. She sat there watching him for a time, then shook her head. "I don't know," she said.

She got up without looking at him again, as if avoiding the sight of his face. She vanished down one of the holes and Sam, after waiting for her to

reappear for a time, finally went back to fire watching, knowing that she would go.

The fire mesmerized him.

He remembered:

He was born in a pull-off area, near where a large city once had been. They called the city Indy. He never knew his mother, although his father boasted to him once that he was the child of a "legitimate marriage." His mother died in the last of the strikes, the one the roadmen put down. Once he'd owned a picture of her, set in a small metal frame, but the picture vanished during an inspection in road school.

He remembered her face. It was a small face with deep eyes, very strong. When he saw himself in the mirror he could see her face in his.

His father was a minor functionary in the administration of courts. Sam never knew how the man died either. One day his father was there, the next day he was not. Then, very soon, Sam was shipped on. A roadman with finance insignia came and repossessed the Beaver the day after the funeral; another man in a gray uniform came for Sam. Sam was either seven or eight years old. He was no longer sure about the date and not curious enough to try to ascertain it.

There was nothing unusual about his treatment. It was the way it was done. The years were hungry years. There was a place for everyone, but a man or child must work, must conform.

The next ten years were still the most vivid years of his life. He remembered them better than all the rest except the last.

He was enlisted at seven or eight. He graduated at age eighteen. He survived the road school. About thirty percent did not. They died.

Those years were years where a boy learned to watch and to obey. A boy learned to wait, to obey swiftly, but make no single swift decisions. It was a period of strict discipline, harsh punishment for any transgression, clean uniforms, standing at attention on the familiar grinder for hours. It was years of hard study, years to learn and remember.

Most hated it. Many failed. Some, with influence, got out and away.

Almost one in three died. It was a sort of survival of the fittest. In those lean years there was just enough food for the survivors.

Sam thrived on it. He grew strong on mediocre food, on long hours, on occasional punishments he wasn't nimble enough to avoid in the early years.

He learned fear. He learned there were givers of fear and takers of fear. It was better to be a giver.

In a way it was not really a bad time, because he survived it.

He graduated with thousands of others. All were sucked into the monstrous machine of the road world without rippling the surface.

Some went into maintenance (most), some engineering, and some into advanced skill courses combining further schooling with practical application. A few went into enforcement, the top few.

Sam graduated into enforcement. He climbed the ladder from black to red. He was raised in the awesome ceremony of the Red Roadmen. He was given there the right to kill without trial. And when they raised him he believed every word.

He peered deep into the fire and remembered the ceremony. He'd been up all night the night before. He had been grilled for days. He'd been tested and tested by machines and men. He was, most of all, tired.

The senior Red presented his cap, a crimson cover with a trimming of bright, red gold. He swore the fearsome oath that was required and listened to the speech about being now a part of the thin line that separated the world of roads from the savage world outside, a speech about protecting the many by killing the few who broke the laws.

And he knew he was part of the elite.

The speaker said: "One must be constantly alert to protect what we have saved from a ruined world."

He'd said: "Without the threat of instant death hanging over him the lawless man would take this good world just as once he took the cities and threatened to destroy us all."

He'd said: "Kill then so that the rest may live."

And when he was done saying, Sam was a part of the dread ones, the Red Roadmen. He had new rules to live by, but now they were his rules. He could interpret them. But he believed the stated rules, believed the speaker, believed every law, every word. The Reds were the line that made the difference, because once, when the world was younger and in turmoil, the wild ones ran free, did as they desired, took by strength.

He studied the assigned texts until he could almost repeat them. He read the history that was the bible of the Reds. Outside, the years of chaos, according to the books, continued and grew worse.

Only in the roadworld was there a sane answer.

The lesson was clear. A citizen respected government and its laws only when that government could exact instant judgement for transgressions.

Sam became a fine killer.

Careful planners added conditions. There were semi-sanctuaries, places where a citizen could, within the laws of reason, be safe. Law could not enter an establishment holding an unlimited license for the purpose of search or arrest without a hearing. Law could not arrest a citizen while he traveled on the safe lanes with a computer permit.

There were thousands of laws and rules for work and play.

It all seemed very right to Sam in those early years. Even the killing wasn't so bad then. But the years multiplied the dead ones, so that it was like having a disease that constantly grew worse.

* * *

SAM LIFTED HIS HEAD and saw them approaching. Black John led. He carried a short spear tipped with metal. It looked like a toy in his huge hands. Other men followed him. Some carried old guns in various states of condition and repair. Some had more rudimentary weapons, knives, spears, bows.

Two of the men carried a small doe.

Doc nodded at Sam. "A fine hunt," he said. "Rabbits, squirrels, and the deer. Plus a cache of glassed goods in a ruin we dug through." He smiled at Sam. "And all while you slept, Sam."

Black John clapped Doc on the shoulder, his dark face split in an affable smile.

"You did good, Doc. I forgot how you can smell things out." He eyed me. "I hope your friend here works out."

Doc smiled at him and at Sam and Sam read a warning in his eyes. *No problems.*

Sam heard something. Doc heard it too.

The others came out of the woods, running, attacking. The lead man stopped and aimed a gun at Black John. Sam kicked the big black man's legs out from under him with a quick lunge and fell rolling away from him. A slug whined over him and he scratched at the ground.

The invaders called brave and obscene words to each other.

A woman screamed.

Sam caught up John's loose spear and rose with it. A man carrying a long, curved sword came running at him. His eyes were huge and he was thin to the point of emaciation. He wore a necklace of bones. They looked suspiciously like the finger bones of a man. He twirled the sword high above his head and slashed at Sam.

Sam went inside the arc of the sword. He could not bring himself to use the spear end and so he caught the man with the butt end of the spear in a glancing blow at mouth level. The man ran two more steps and fell. He got up quickly, shook his head in bewilderment, and ran on.

John was up, Sam lobbed him the spear.

"Thanks, man," he called. He screamed something Sam didn't understand and ran heavily toward where the action was heaviest.

Sam caught a glimpse of Rose. She was emerging from an underground nest. A big, waiting man laughed and caught her by the hair as Sam

watched. He began to drag her out. Another invader, this one with long, straggly hair and a bushy beard, lunged to help him with the prize.

Sam launched and burst among the pair, taking care not to be lethal. He kicked the man who held Rose in the throat as he tried to rise. He fell away, gasping. The other man had a hand gun and he snapped it at Sam, but it misfired. Sam caught his wrist and broke it with a quick twist and pull. The invader dropped the pistol and fled, screaming. Sam turned. Rose had already put her knife into the chest of the one Sam had kicked. The man lay dead and Sam wondered if he must add that face to the ones who wandered his head in sleep.

The sounds of battle had died. Things seemed mostly over as Sam looked around. He could hear the noise of running men as the invaders fled away and the screams of the wounded. He picked up the fallen hand gun, looked at it without feeling, and put it in his belt. He was completely calm.

It had been very quick. The deer was gone, but the rabbits and squirrels still lay there on the ground.

"Did they take any prisoners?" John asked, looking around.

People materialized from the ground nests and from the trees, more people that Sam had known were in John's group. Sam stood a little away as the nose count went on. He saw Doc and the two men waved and nodded.

Five men and one woman were hurt. The only serious injury was to one of the men, a thin, little man with graying hair. His wife or companion sobbed and held his hand. The man had taken a bullet in the chest in the exchange. Sam could see a small entrance hole in front, up high, near the shoulder. When others roughly turned the man he could see no exit hole. The man lay gasping on the ground, the wound bleeding copiously.

"No one missing," John said loudly, announcing it to all.

Rose moved close to Sam. "Thank you," she said simply.

He shook his head.

"Can you do anything for Oscar, Doc?" John asked, nodding at the

wounded man.

Doc bent and examined the man with practiced care. Oscar's eyes were now slightly glazed, out of focus. His breathing was slower, labored.

"He's bleeding internally," Doc said, without looking up. "Maybe with instruments I might be able to do some good. The bullet ought to come out or there'll be infection." He looked up at John. "Without instruments..."

The woman whimpered.

Doc said: "We'll just have to bandage the wound and hope there's no infection. Maybe I could try getting it out with makeshift gear. About the same chance either way."

Rose said quickly. "I've still got your old bag of instruments, Doc. I've carried them with me all these years."

Doc brightened. He turned to her and saw Sam standing next to her and smiled suddenly at both of them, as if seeing them together revealed something to him.

"Get them quickly," he said. "Put a pot of water to boiling. I'll need to sterilize them."

Rose hurried away.

"Can you help me, Sam?" Doc asked.

"I can try," Sam said. He remembered rough and emergency things he'd done on the road. No formal training.

John shook his head. "I want Sam with me," he said, making it an edict. "They keep coming back and raiding us. I kept hoping it would stop, but it hasn't..."

"You're going after them?" Doc asked. "And taking Sam with you?"

John nodded ponderously, looking at the trees where the invaders had vanished. "There'll be no peace until they know we will follow them. We've never done it before. They won't expect it this time. A few good men." He nodded, convincing himself. "We can be on them, hurt them, and be out

before they know what's happened."

"Sure," Doc said. His eyes warned Sam. "But I'd like for Sam to stay here with me and help. He has a thing about killing people, John."

"I'll go," Sam said. He took the hand gun out of his belt and examined it. It was a Moseley Auto. He'd seen its picture in the ordinance books, but he'd never seen the actual weapon before. It was old and squat and ugly. A long clip in the handle held thirty slugs. It was half full. He ejected the misfire and looked at the bullet the invader had meant for him. It was green with mold. He threw it up into the air, caught it, and pocketed it. He checked the other bullets. They seemed little better. He handed the gun to John.

"Not for me," he said to the black man.

"You don't like guns?"

"No."

Doc said: "Stay here, Sam."

Sam smiled at him and shook his head.

Black John inspected Sam. He said: "You saved me in that fight. You're pretty quick." He put out a hand toward Sam. "I don't know what this is all about, but I'd like you to go."

Doc still watched and waited. "You keep pressing at it, Sam, and someone will get you into a place where it's you or them." He shook his head. "You'll let it be you instead of them."

Sam smiled again.

"Maybe that's the Central Control you're looking for then, Sam," Doc said.

Sam felt nothing. "I'll go with you, John."

Rose came back. She carried an old suede bag. She handed it to Doc and he hugged it to him as if he'd found a friend. But his eyes were still on Sam.

"Are you a real Doctor?" Sam asked to cover the awkwardness.

"My father was," Doc said curtly. He gave Sam a little nod and turned to his patient.

Sam saw the expression on Rose's face. She knew something was wrong, but not what it was.

"Come on," John said to his back.

"All right," he said, feeling numb about it.

He could feel the girl's eyes on his back until they were into the woods. At the edge he turned and waved to her.

* * *

THERE WERE EIGHT in the war party. Sam carried a spear that John gave him.

The party went back the way that Sam had traveled before, back past the ruined town, back to the tunnel. Sam had little chance to inspect his roadworld when they passed under and beside it this time. When they drew near the road the sky was dark and they waited at the mouth of the tunnel until full dark so that it was safe to climb the hill on the far side.

The pace John set was very quick and hard on Sam's leg, but he stayed up, making too much noise as he stumbled along. Now and then he could see John watching him dubiously. The leg seemed strong enough, just stiff and not completely mobile, so that it was hard to make it work as once it had worked. He couldn't really run with it, but he could shamle and move very quickly for short distances.

He walked along remembering again all the people he'd killed, remembering his own decision not to kill again.

The weather turned colder and the night sky spit snow down at the band. There was no moon visible, but the sky was light enough so that its reflection upon the snow made travel easy.

They traveled on. At the front a man led who paused now and then to examine the ground, to sniff the air. John followed behind the tracker.

They passed a place where a huge building had stood by itself. Something had taken it down violently and now there was only a massive pile of stones and the twisted skeleton of steel against the sky. The men rested there and then moved on.

An hour later Sam could tell they were close. The tracker was moving slowly now. John held up his hand and slowed his party even more. Sam smelled something in the wind, the smell of fire and smoke and something burning. The party moved toward the smell quietly.

Their village lay in a tiny valley. Once that area had undoubtedly been a small town and there were still some ruined houses with burned out roofs and teetery walls. Streets could be recognized, but the undergrowth had taken them over. A stream of water ran near where they had built their fire boldly in the center of the town.

There were people lazing around the fire. Sam counted about a dozen of them. He saw the man he'd hit with the spear butt. He squatted near the fire fingering at his swollen face and his necklace of bones.

A deer roasted over the fire.

John halted the men. He whispered to various of his followers and they deployed into the forest, spreading themselves out for the attack.

Sam's heart pumped hard inside him. His chest ached and the world seemed to have slowed around him.

John moved close to him. He whispered: "Stay with me. Move with me." He nodded confidently. "I figure there's some more underground. We'll move through and out quick."

Sam nodded and felt himself begin to sweat, despite the cold. There was fear, but it was mixed with a sort of anticipation, as if something long awaited might now come true.

John moved quietly closer to their fire and Sam trailed him.

"No, guns," he whispered to Sam, perhaps forgetting that Sam had none. "I told everyone no guns. They won't be expecting us. We'll use guns only if they try to trail us." Sam nodded, not caring.

They moved to the edge of the ruined houses, John first, Sam behind. John waited there for a moment, watching carefully. Finally he was satisfied.

John rose up in one quick motion and ran at their fire. Sam stayed behind him. John screamed something when he was at the fire. It was something wild and in a language Sam didn't understand.

Sam loped behind.

The enemy group around the fire seemed mesmerized. Sam saw one of the eight attackers arrive ahead of John, the one who had been the tracker. His knife flashed in the light. John thrust hard with his spear. There were screams of pain and those around the fire fell back. Sam followed John on through, guarding the black man's back with his own.

Suddenly they were in possession of the fire. Only the eight were left.

The deer was just beginning to roast. Sam took it, cooking pole and all, laughing a little. He slung it over his shoulder, feeling its heat.

Faces appeared at holes in the ground. Someone shot and the sound of the shot alerted John. "Back! Back into the woods!" he ordered.

Sam stayed behind him.

At the edge of the village the man with the bone necklace came around the corner of a rotting building at them. His face was horrible with rage. His mouth made mewling sounds, the noises of blood rage.

He threw something from a sling and Sam heard it strike Black John. John dropped his spear.

Sam ran at the man while he tried to reload the sling with another stone. He caught the man with the bone necklace in the stomach with the spear butt and felled him. He started to turn back and felt John at his side. John prodded the man with his own recaptured spear and then led into the woods at a run. He held his arm. Blood flowed from it.

When they were in and the sounds of pursuit did not immediately begin John stopped and turned to Sam. His eyes were bright and alive. He laughed.

"I knew about you that you would be a good man at my back. I had the feeling." He eyed the deer Sam carried easily. "And a recapture." He laughed some more.

"A lot of them down those holes, John," Sam said. "They may follow. You lead and I'll guard the rear. Best move on."

John nodded and turned again into the forest, leading Sam toward the appointed regrouping place. In a little while they came upon the others and, together, they continued.

If they were pursued there was no sign.

As a precaution John left two men at the tunnel exit to wait there for a few hours and see if there was pursuit. The rest continued on to camp. Around Sam the men were boisterous as they drew near home, but Sam felt no real joy, only a sort of somberness.

Rose waited by the fire with the other women. She smiled at Sam and looked expectantly at his face, trying to see what was there.

He looked around uneasily: "Where's Doc?"

"With his patient," she said. She moved close to him, but did not touch him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said. He looked at her and knew she was thinking of all the years he'd been what he was before his fall—a Red Roadman. He knew that she wanted to forgive him for that, but knew no real way because his sins were only anonymous sins and forgiveness wasn't something she could confer.

He shook his head trying to clear it. Rose was wearing some sort of subtle perfume. She had on a cloak he'd not seen before. It was much too large for her, making her appear suddenly small.

Suddenly, now that he was back and safe for the moment, he was cold. He shivered a little.

He saw her nod to herself, coming to a decision. She took his right hand in both of her smaller hands and said: "Come." She drew him toward her and opened the cloak and spread it so that it partially covered him also.

He kissed her for a long moment and he was warm again, no longer caring whether the sun ever came out. Nothing, at that moment, was important, not roadwork, not Central Control, not Doc, not Jackman.

He knew she sensed that, but there was no triumph in her eyes when he looked deep into them.

"Come," she said again and led him to her private place.

* * *

THERE HAD TO BE TALK afterward. There had to be a binding, disclosures, secrets.

She asked: "Why were you in the prison?"

He thought about it, remembering. He said: "I found a room. It was down in the sub-basement where I slept. It was behind a row of old lockers, dusty ones that had been there a long time. I dropped a coin and it rolled underneath and when I pushed them out there was a door. It opened to an old room, there were a few ancient books." There was more than that, he remembered. "There was a sort of typewriter on a metal pedestal in the middle of the room. You could type questions on it and it would go into the computer and feed back answers."

She moved closer to him in the blankets and held his hand.

"No one else stayed down there in the sub-basement—only me. They moved me after a while, but I'd started reading the books by then. I didn't know how to work the machine at first. That came later. After they moved me I still would come back when I was off duty. I'd read some of the books. They were very old and very wise. One of them was a history book, but it wasn't what I'd been taught in history."

He stopped for a moment. He had told her enough. But then he remembered the fear. He said: "They get to you on the roads. Unless you have a lot of seniority you ride with another man. I rode with Jackman. After a long time I was afraid of him, afraid of death, afraid of pain. But I made him afraid, too. I knew what he was going to do—he was easy enough to figure. He was going to kill people. He was born to do that, like a perfectly formed weapon. His problem was that he never knew what I was going to do. He was afraid, I think, that some night I would wreck us.

And I asked him too many questions and laughed too much at his answers. I got to the place where I didn't care anymore. Maybe it would be better to be dead. He didn't like it when he could see I wasn't afraid anymore. But, you see, I had the refuge, the books. I knew the answers I was getting from the machine were the truth. The machine told me that the road society has more crime than the society it replaced, kills more people, accomplishes less." He shook his head. "But it wouldn't tell me anything about Central Control. I'd feed in questions and there'd be no reply."

He remembered the final, flaming night. It was time to end it.

"He tried to follow me many times. He knew I was getting the ideas from somewhere. I was cautious. I never went to the library when he was following me. It frustrated him. He had men search my room when I was on patrol with him. I just finally got careless. They found me. They made me watch them burn the books. They cut off the wires to the computer and sealed the door and I went to prison. They'd have killed me right then, but they wanted to know if anyone else had read the books, asked the questions."

"And then you met Doc?" she asked.

"Yes." The answer was slow in coming. He was tired, very tired. He could feel sleep winning out. And he hated sleep because sleep usually brought dreams.

This time it was better. There were still dreams, but when he would come awake she would be there, her hands tight on his, fighting the dream devils away, making it possible to fall backwards into the pit.

He slept.

* * *

DAYS PASSED.

They sat around the fire. Sam said: "I've got to go on tomorrow."

"It would be smarter to wait for the spring," Doc said. "Food can be a problem this time of year. And even though I respect your instincts about the direction your supposed Central Control lays, I've never seen or heard

anything to make me feel any confidence in it." He nodded, attempting persuasion. "It would be better to wait for spring, Sam."

"Maybe it would," Sam admitted. "Maybe I should go on alone, see if I can find it, then come back for you in the spring, Doc."

Doc shook his head. "I'm going with you, Sam. You remember the prison? That's where I signed on."

Sam nodded. He was five pounds heavier than when they had appeared in the camp, but there were still shadows around his eyes.

"I have to go out and look for it now, Doc— Rose," he apologized to both of them, but watched her.

She said: "I'm going with you." Her eyes were on his and, once more, he saw her search his face for something, some sign, then turn away without finding it, not really disappointed, but only patiently waiting.

Doc smiled. "That's not faith," he said. "It's something more." He shook his head. "John says that there are many tribes to the south of fallen men, men who hunt and eat each other by preference. Are you going to expose Rose to that?"

"I'd rather she wait here until I come back," Sam said softly.

"No," she said. "I know the woods better than you do, Sam. I feel things out there. Sometimes I know what is going to happen before it happens. I can be of use. And I won't stay behind."

"What do you see in your mind about this trip, Rose?" Doc asked.

She hesitated. "Nothing definite."

Somehow Sam knew that she was being untruthful, but it meant nothing to him.

"We'll need to take some things," Doc said, giving in, surrendering.

So it was decided, then planned.

* * *

SOUTHWARD they proceeded. They stayed away from the roads as much as possible, but it wasn't entirely possible to avoid them, for they crisscrossed the land, ballooning out here for a lake, there for cultivated fields. There were ways to get past the roads, old tunnels underneath built in the days of interstates and lengthened with the road widening, streams, rivers.

The weather grew colder despite the fact that they were headed south. Snow came thinly and vanished soon in slush and mud. It was early winter and many days went past when the sun could not be glimpsed.

Once the land they traveled had probably been broad, cultivated fields, but the years had changed them so that now the fields were mostly weeds and sparse timber. Now and then they passed what once had been a town or came upon the remains of an old bituminous road, lost now in the takeover of forest.

At night, when there was no place to hole in, no abandoned building, they slept in the open and without fire.

Sam did not sleep with Rose at first. The strain of traveling, of fighting the cold and mud, of stealing through deserted towns, and the constant watching for enemies in the air and on the ground drained them, so that nothing remained for them. And Sam reasoned to himself that it was also bad manners because there was no one for Doc.

Yet sometimes at night he walked hand in hand with Rose as small children walk. And that was good. With her warm hand in his he felt more sure, more determined to go on.

They saw few signs of life. In the daytime, as they lay hidden, hellies sometimes flew over, hovering here and there suspiciously. Once they heard the sounds of distant thunder, but done in such a measured way that Doc and Sam were sure that it was the hellies bombing somewhere.

Of tribes they saw nothing. Now and then there was drumming in the night, and once they spotted a far away fire as they traveled the bank of a small river.

At the sight of the fire Rose whispered: "A fire should mean people. Do you want to go see?"

Doc shook his head. "I've been this far south before, I think. The tribes aren't safe. Friendly people probably wouldn't build a fire that big, a fire that anyone could see."

Sam nodded. "Someone built it to attract travelers. Cheaper to do it that way than hunt them."

"All right," Rose said. She took Sam's hand and looked wistfully toward where the fire burned, its flames such a welcoming sight.

They traveled for eleven nights, sleeping by day, moving by night. And then they were stopped.

They came to a place where three great roads joined, so that there was an enormous crossroads body from which protruded six legs.

Sam knew the place, recognized it instantly from where they viewed it from a hilltop.

They came upon it early in the morning, just as it began to turn light, and the only real illumination of the great junction was the illumination that it shed upon itself.

In the center of the huge complex lay Sam's barracks, the barracks where he'd stayed when not on temporary orders. Jackman's barracks. Senior Red Roadman Jackman.

The leader.

The three of them lay on their hill and watched. Traffic was very light in the early morning. Most of the windows of Sam's barracks were dark.

He knew Jackman's room. The windows there were dark. Jackman was either out of the room, engaged in his perpetual hunt or he was asleep.

The barracks building was five stories high. There was a basement and a sub-basement beneath.

They moved back away from the top of the hill for a council.

"See the problem, Sam?" Doc asked.

"Yes," Sam said, thinking. "There's some kind of a tunnel under our

nearest road. I can see it from the hilltop. Assuming we can get through it then we would be between roads. We'd have to look for a way under the next road in a dangerous area."

"Right," Doc said. "Only thing I can see to do is head up the first road, away from the crossroads. We'll go until there's a substantial distance between the first road and the next one and then start looking for a way under, head north again, aiming for the next road and passage under it."

Sam looked up at the sky. It was growing gray. Daylight impended. He had not realized how tired he was. He looked at Rose. She smiled at him, but he could see that she was also tired.

"For now," he said, "let's find a place to sleep out the day."

They retreated again from the road area and into thick woods. There was a trace of snow on the ground, making it unappealing to spend the day in the open, but they found no buildings. They settled finally into a copse of trees as the sun made a brief appearance and then hid again behind clouds. They made cold camp, ate frugally from their stores, and eyed each other in dull, but satisfied fatigue.

"We're getting low on food," Doc said. "Maybe we ought to move on back into the woods a ways and see what we can find.. There ought to be some old towns around here, farms gone wild." He sniffed the air. "I can almost smell them."

"Let's get through these things in front of us and then see what we can find on the other side," Sam said. "I know the area some. The big building right in the middle of the road junction is the barracks where I lived. When I was based there we sometimes got calls about trouble on this side of the fence, but seldom on the other side. I think if we can once get through and on the other side we can run free for a while. More game, more abandoned towns, less people."

They bundled themselves in blankets and Sam tried hard for sleep.

* * *

AS SAM SLEPT Gayle Jackman was engaging in his own form of therapy.

That morning, early, he'd gone to the gymnasium in the east wing of the barracks building and there he spent about two hours testing himself against the equipment and his own records.

The walls of the exercise room were mirrored on three sides and Jackman liked to watch himself as he chinned, did push ups, and the rest of the routine.

He was satisfied with the results of his tests. The years had not yet robbed him of his strength.

He was and had always been a very strong man. He dreaded the day when his muscles would begin to sag, when his reflexes would slow, and when there would be the final desk job.

Last night there'd been a good and successful hunt with a competent driver.

This afternoon he planned to go to a favorite spot along the road, a place where he never took his work, and have a few drinks of scotch and watch the girls perform with each other and with the whips they used. For an additional fee a man could get himself right into the act and today might be a good day for that.

He smiled at himself in the mirror and didn't like the result. In repose his face was still young appearing, but wrinkles came when he smiled. Still, in dim light, he could pass for any reasonable age he chose to assume. If he bent a little and walked hard and kept the smile on he could be sixty. If he straightened up, threw the shoulders back, stayed in the dim light, and kept his face without expression, then he could be forty again.

He shook his head at himself. The years had been long.

He'd been born of farm people. There'd been a lot of brothers and sisters and he'd been apprenticed to the roads before the road schools began, when he was twelve.

Ten years later he'd been raised to the red hats and he'd been on the road since that time.

It had been a good life. He was a born Red Roadman.

Next year he'd be sixty. Mandatory desk age. He smiled at himself in the mirror. He had a few promises from up the line, from men he'd been useful to. His age would be ignored. He could stay on the road until he was ready to quit. But promises were made to be broken. He would have to be wary. In staying on the road after the age limit he'd be ignoring a rule. Someone could use it.

He began to do sit ups, each time making his head touch his raised knees, almost as if he was praying.

"... nineteen, twenty, twenty-one," he counted.

He kept doing them until all doubt vanished.

* * *

SAM WAS RESTLESSLY asleep dreaming of a place on the road that he no longer wanted to remember when Doc touched him and brought him awake.

"Listen," Doc commanded, when he saw Sam was fully awake.

Far away something was transpiring. There was the whooping sound of sirens. There was the sharp sound of gunfire.

Doc asked: "From the road?"

Sam nodded.

"Let's move up and see what it is."

"If we get spotted we could get right in the middle of it," Sam said.
"There'll be hellies."

"We'll stay close to cover," Doc said.

"All right."

They woke Rose and moved carefully back toward the road complex. They saw no hellies at first. None seemed to be in the sky.

They found their previous vantage point at the top of the hill near the road and settled into it and watched.

A very few elecars whirred up and down the fastlanes in front of the watchers. All computer traffic had been halted. A group of black clad roadmen lay and crouched here and there at strategic places. Each man was armed with riot weapons. Shells whistled down at measurable intervals. They fell onto the road area, keeping the black clads pinned down.

Doc moved close to Sam. "Mortar of some kind. I'd guess it would be from that big hill up there." He pointed. "But it isn't a real attack. Looks like a diversionary action to me." He nodded to himself. "I remember being asked a lot of very harsh questions when I was picked up and when I was in the holding camp with you. Questions about a group that hits and runs, then hits again. Takes the war right up to the roads."

"They call them 'wreckers,'" Sam said. "I've been around a few times when they've hit before. Not very effective. A lot of noise."

Overhead a squadron of hellies approached.

"Let's move back out," Rose said nervously. "If we're seen they won't be friendly with anything down here, involved or not." She shuddered a little, remembering. "I've seen them in action too many times." She nodded at the hellies.

Sam thought for a moment. An idea which had been at the far edge came into Tightness. "I wish we knew when and where they were going to hit again. If we could get inside somehow and steal a car we could save a lot of time."

Rose looked down at the fence and the world it enclosed. "Looks more dangerous down there than it is out here."

"Only if you don't know it," Sam said.

"It was dangerous for you and for Doc before," Rose said. "I don't think I could live very long in a prison cell."

"I'd still like to try it," Sam said. He added confidently. "We won't get caught." He looked down at the road. "Maybe we could find out where the wreckers plan to make their next serious attack?"

Doc gave him a thoughtful look.

The hellies paused over the next hill. A column, of smoke arose.

Sam and Doc and Rose moved away from their own hilltop very carefully. The hellies worried the next hill with fire drops and crackling whip bombs.

They paused in deep woods. Sam said: "Maybe we could try to find the wreckers. I keep wondering how far we're going to have to go back to get through this complex, how long it will take. We might save weeks—even months."

"A big risk," Doc said sourly.

"No more than out here, at least to me. I'm a Red Roadman. You two are my prisoners. We appropriate a car if we can, steal one if we can't. We drive south. Once on the road if we stay in the fastlanes no one can or will stop us—if we're lucky. We drive carefully and make a lot of miles—miles when we're sure we won't wind up on someone's dinner table. Maybe make it all the way to the Seasouth Interchange. Stop there and abandon the car and find a way out."

"You're a dreamer, Sam," Rose said, but her eyes were shining.

Sam nodded. It was a dream. He'd made it sound too easy. Getting in and getting out wouldn't be that easy. But it also wasn't easy trudging down the miles in mud and cold.

They went back into the woods and found their previous camp and settled back into it and waited for the night.

Rose spread her blankets next to Sam's. She moved close to him and said: "I feel eyes on us."

Sam surveyed the forest. There was nothing to be seen and yet he felt something prickling down his back at her words.

Doc was already asleep, snoring lightly in his patented way.

Sam took Rose's hand. He fell asleep holding it. Sometimes, when he was holding her, no bad dreams came, but this time it was without efficacy. He dreamed of a land with good water and good food, but cars with lights like eyes chased him every time he paused for food or drink.

He awoke when he was prodded with a spear.

A dozen strangers surrounded him. They were all dressed in white to blend with the snow.

A fat man with a broken toothed smile held the spear which most closely guarded Sam. He jabbed Sam very lightly, without rancor.

"You sleep bad, man. You moan in your sleep. What bites your dreams?" He smiled at Sam. "Now rise carefully and join us, for we have wasted enough time tracking you. You shall accompany us. Our Leader directs that we be kind to all passing strangers. It is also directed that all strangers be taken to the Leader."

Sam got up. He spied Rose and Doc. They were all right. Doc winked at him.

Sam fell in with Doc and Rose and the trek began. Sam saw that they were not being guarded closely and he relaxed a little. The wind came up and more snow fell and the weather grew colder.

Only once did the party pause. That was when hellies appeared in the sky to the northwest. When they had vanished the fat man led them on confidently.

In two hours marching time they came upon the base of the white-clads. It lay in the ruins of an old city. As they entered the city the party passed between huge, concrete pillars. Resting on those pillars above them was what Sam had first taken for a road. But when they drew near he could see that the lanes were empty and the road was pockmarked with holes. In the distance it was even more badly damaged, with missing pillars and vacant spots.

The fat man who led smiled. "They tried to bring their road in here many years back, but we destroyed it. The Leader directs us to do that. And so we continue to do it."

"Tell me your name?" Sam asked.

The fat man stroked his heavily jowled face. "We are directed to take the names of the ancient saints. I am called Gabriel."

As they passed through the city Sam could see that many people lived there in the basements and in those buildings which were not too badly damaged. Children played rough games in the streets.

They were escorted to what once had been some sort of an athletic field. In a dugout area near warped bleachers a fire burned. A young man, who had walked close to Rose, brought her food and watched her eat with fascination. She looked at Sam once and he nodded encouragingly.

Gabriel brought Sam and Doc food and they ate. It was a bread pastry or some sort, hot and good, filled with meat.

Gabriel announced as they ate: "The Leader sleeps. You shall go there later."

Doc asked: "Are you the ones who attacked the road yesterday?"

Gabriel nodded. "It's a constant mission with us."

"Why?" Doc asked.

Sam listened and wondered how long he'd last in captivity if they found out that he'd once been a Red Roadman. Maybe it would mean nothings but more likely they'd tear him into pieces. It didn't bother him much thinking about it.

"The Leader will tell you all that you need to know," Gabriel said easily. "For now I will tell you that we have been making our attacks on the road since they attempted to rebuild the one in the city we have chosen. They come here no longer."

Doc nodded. "Someday soon they'll find your hide-away and fry you all."

"So far that hasn't happened. We fight back. And perhaps our Leader keeps us safe."

The guards let them unroll their packs and Sam slept for a time. When he awoke Gabriel had vanished, but others remained on watch. Small children came and played games in the field. Others peered in at the prisoners from vantage points in the wooden stands.

Rose nodded at Sam confidently. "All will be well," she said.

He looked into her eyes and was elated. He looked again and was afraid.

* * *

THEY HAD BUILT their Leader a temple in the basement of what once had been a library. Its domed, upper roof was gone, a victim of evident shell fire. The rest of the upper part of the building was mostly ruins, but the basement was lighted with carefully placed torches and guarded by an army of white clads.

The walls of the basement, in many places, were covered with shelves of old books, now carefully wrapped in some sort of clear wrappings. Sam wanted to stop and see what the books were, but the guards urged him on courteously. Sam figured that there had to be thousands of books in it and he had a surge of nostalgia as he walked past them, remembering his own small library.

Inside the central chamber it was lighter than the outer halls. Bright lanterns burned from the ceiling. Old paintings, many of them damaged and weather beaten, lay in stacks where there was not room to display them on the bedecked walls. The Leader sat in a massive chair on a dais. Guards stood nearby, watching intently.

The Leader was a girl, a child, no more than sixteen or so. She was very thin, just budding into the contours of womanhood. Her skin was almost translucent. She wore a simple white robe dress. She smiled and her face was lovely, but child lovely.

She spoke inside Sam's head: "I know about you, Sam Church. I know what you have been and what you seek."

Sam looked around to see if anyone else heard.

No one watched him. Rose and Doc watched the girl, seemingly caught in their own dreams or conversations.

Sam looked back at the girl. She laughed a little inside his head.

"They hear us not. It makes no difference. Don't worry about them or about my people. You are safe here, Sam Church. You can find peace here if you seek it with enough zeal. My people would not harm you if they knew what you'd been. We don't hate the people of the roads, but only the

concept of the roads themselves. They steal the land from us and hunt us like beasts. But break down the fences and tear down their roads and all will be well."

Sam waited.

"You see it not, Sam Church. You miss many things. There is no room in you. You cannot love though you are loved. You are obsessed with something which is a fool's quest. Once you were intelligent to hate your world and the place you held in it enough to cause your own imprisonment, yet now, deprived of your road toys, you want to go back." She laughed again. "You think me very young, but you will always be younger."

"Will you help me—us?" Sam asked, without speaking.

"No," she said.

He sensed that this was not her final answer.

"Let me think on it for a time," she thought to him. "Let me worry this thing of Central Control that you believe in for a time, wrestle with it. Your friends have no belief in it, but only in you. Doc follows you because he seeks a place for himself, a place to use his knowledge and to learn more. Rose follows because she wants to follow. But they are rational people and so do not believe in your Central Control."

"Would any rational being, not having seen you, believe in you?" Sam shot back.

"A point well made," she thought. "But I am real and both of us know it." She closed her eyes for a moment and it almost seemed as if she was asleep. "This tires me," she admitted. "Once it did not. Now it does. And sometimes I grow very weary of it all and must go down old paths I know without deviation."

She stopped and Sam again had a chance to inspect his companions. He wondered if she could carry on simultaneous conversations and decided she could. He conjectured about the limits of her gift, assuming it was a gift. He'd seen muties before. But this girl had presence and power. He had a sudden moment of insight and shuddered at the picture of himself able to read the minds of others.

She laughed tinklingly inside his head and said: "Sam, I like you. I wish..."

Nothing more came.

She waved her hand wearily to the guards and smilingly they took Sam and his companions from the chamber.

As they walked back up the corridor Sam took Rose's hand and asked, low voiced: "What did she tell you, Rose?"

Rose gently withdrew her hand. She gave him a searching look. "She said to be patient with you, Sam. And I think she wished that her visions were like my visions, cloudy rather than acute." She shook her head. "There was something more, maybe only a feeling I got. I think she would like for her gift to go away so that she could be normal."

Doc said: "She has ten thousand people here and more coming all the time. She hates the roads. They killed her mother somehow—I don't know exactly how. She wants me to stay."

"She's only a mutie," Sam said.

"No," Doc said. "She's more than that and less than she wants to be. These people believe in her, but she won't let them believe she is some sort of deity, but only a prophet. She tells them when and where to plant and harvest and hunt. And once she's been inside your head she knows the way back."

Sam heard and was uneasy. Was she there inside his head now?

They were led to an abandoned building and they settled into it. Most of the basement was unusable, wet and crumbling from the long years, but a part of it, raised up two steps, was still dry and snug.

Gabriel took charge of them, showed them the remainder of the city, and put them into the city's routine. He showed them when and where they could obtain food and water and even led them to an underground warm spring area where hot water flowed from the ground and children and adults sported.

There was room in the basement for separate sleeping areas. For the

first two nights Sam stayed alone, but on the third night he knew that Rose had forgiven him for the faults picked out by the Leader and solitary sleeping ended. And with Rose the nightmares again retreated. Now and then they began, but with her there, he would come awake, find her watching, and drift back down again.

The days settled into a procession. Sometimes Sam hunted the adjoining forests with Doc and others, or dug in old city buildings for stores buried there. Sometimes he lolled the day away by a fire. He tried, several times, to find the library where the Leader presided so that he could inspect the books there, but he was not allowed to enter it.

He found himself growing more and more restless.

There were compensations for his idleness. There was the hot spring area. He took Rose there often. She loved the warm water and he could thresh away in it for hours until he was dead tired and sleep came easier.

He found it curious that no hellies ever flew over the old city, no searching parties appeared, no black clad warriors attacked.

When he asked Gabriel the why of that the fat man laughed.

"She blocks them away. Let us say they send a squadron flying this way. She tells the pilot to turn away. He does not know he has been told, he only knows that he has, for some reason, turned away. The same applies to ground searchers. We have had some who came this way. They wander here and there, but they never find this city."

"But the hellie found the spot from where you were attacking the roads," Sam said.

Gabriel shook his head. "No. They found what we let them find. No one was there when the hellies attacked. No one was killed or even injured.

"If she has that much power why doesn't she just command them to tear down their fences and stop building the roads?"

Gabriel frowned at him. "That isn't the way," he said. Then he added: "I really don't know, Samuel."

Sam thought about that for a long time and privately decided it was

probably because she could not control large masses of people all at one time.

* * *

THERE CAME A TIME when the restlessness grew to be too much for him to easily bear. He quarreled with Rose. He refused to hunt. He lost interest in water sports and warm fires.

He sought out the Leader's place and found it.

A guard challenged him.

"I need to see the Leader," he said.

"All who are allowed by her to come this far may do so," the guard said. He nodded Sam past and into the entryway. Again he proceeded down the book laden halls. This time he could inspect the books, but he had no desire to do so.

She was inspecting some sort of rough, metal contraption in her private chambers. A group of her advisors stood courteously near. There were guards.

The metal thing looked vaguely like an elecar with wheels full down, but it was longer and had too many axles, too many wheels. The front was torpedo shaped and sharp metal fins stood out from the sides. The back was heavily vented.

"What do you think of this thing my engineers have dreamed up for me, Sam Church," she asked in his head, without turning to him.

He looked it over carefully. He decided it could not be a vehicle for the carrying of personnel. There was no place for a driver to sit. It was perhaps twenty feet long, crudely smithed, but strongly put together.

"It has to be a weapon of some sort," he said.

"A rocket. It will pierce their fences and blow great holes in their roads. As it crosses those fences it drops a chain of explosives so that whole areas will be destroyed. If it works well we will build hundreds of them." She turned to him and smiled, but there was cruelty in her eyes. "It should

excite you, Sam. It is a thing which will bring those you hate to their knees. You will help me with it."

Sam shuddered involuntarily. He could see it at rush hour when the road people traveled from work area to park area, when the roads were black with travelers. He shook his head.

"Not at the time you think of," she thought to him. "My strategy is merely to sever the road in two places, miles apart, then destroy the cut off center part. It would be easiest to do that when traffic runs light, most effective where it cuts between a work area and a park area." She nodded to herself, her young face and old eyes a mixture of concern and cruelty. "And that might be the time for you to try the scheme that's in your head, Sam." Her ghostly laughter tinkled. "I see you've not discarded it. I thought to keep you near me for a time, suppressed and captive, but each time I free your mind you turn again restlessly to your dream quest, your Central Control."

"Will you help me?" he asked.

She patted the infernal machine in front of her. "Beautiful," she said.

He knew he was dismissed. He waited for a time, but she did not turn back to him, or speak in his head. She went on admiring and inspecting her machine, reminding Sam of a forgotten day when Jackman had been given a new car and spent hours in silent admiration of it, in fingering its toggles and switches, like a child with a new and complicated toy.

He walked to the basement he shared with the others. Doc was still off after wild pigs, but Rose was there sewing a torn shirt.

"In a few days," he said with a smile, "perhaps we'll be up on my road and heading again to the south."

She looked at him for a very long moment and then burst into tears.

* * *

FOR A TIME Sam thought that Doc would stay.

"There is work to do here. One of her people who has seen it happen said that the Leader helps those who are hurt or wounded or sick. She can

see into them, see to tell others what is wrong. If I stay here perhaps I can learn."

"You should stay then, Doc," Sam said.

"Let me think on it," Doc said. "I started out with you."

"You owe me nothing," Sam said. "It was always a partnership of equals. If anything you have given more than you received."

"I can always come back," Doc said. "When your quest is over I can return. I'll know the way here. She will show me." He turned away.

Sam found that when he thought on it he would have preferred that Doc stayed, that Rose stayed. He would be able to move faster without them.

And yet he fought the idea of leaving them, knowing that if he forced them away from him that he was doing something that was almost as bad as the killings he'd once done.

He said nothing. He waited them out. Rose had cried. Doc was dubious. Perhaps they would both stay behind.

And they both decided to go.

He protested, but it did no good.

They made the necessary preparations. Sam and Doc dyed their clothes road gang black. Rose fashioned a black cloak for Sam. She cut her pants down to shorts, fashionably snug. She kept her blouse, but Sam told her she must discard it at the road.

And they waited.

* * *

FROM THE HILL above, near the south edge of the area to be isolated, Sam could see the road below. He knew that to the north, a mile away, other white clads waited. The hour was late. There was no moon and the stars were frosted with clouds.

Sam blew on his hands to warm them. Rose was tense beside him. Doc

watched the road complex below with careful eyes.

He saw a rocket hit the first fence. It sliced easily through it, only slightly slowed. A second rocket whistled down the hill from nearby and Sam knew a third was being readied. The first rocket smashed through another fence, then faltered, some inner malfunction slowing it. It blew itself to pieces like a giant firecracker, lighting the night, taking fence and a cloud of earth up with itself.

The second rocket fared better. It cut all the fences and, as programmed, proceeded up the gentle rise to where the outer road berm began. It cut on across the road. Traffic halted. The rocket spewed out a chain of bright explosives. They chewed holes in the road surface, toppled elecars, and filled the roadway with smoke and flame. Already, from the south, Sam could see defenders approaching. He could hear the whine of distant sirens. He knew that hellies would be speeding here, ready to avenge the invasion.

The white clad guerillas swarmed down the hill, following the last rocket. It sliced its way through its segment of fences and laid explosive eggs behind it on the road.

"Come on," Doc yelled.

They followed the dense crowd of white clads, males and females. Sam saw that drivers of elecars on the road, caught between the spot of invasion and the more northerly route, were abandoning their vehicles. There was now no power and therefore no light in the cut off area and so he knew that the northern attack had gone as planned. But lights still burned brightly to the south. Drivers and passengers scrambled back that way, instinctively heading toward the light, but impeding the reinforcements coming up from that direction.

At the far edge of the fencing the three threw off their white coverings and split away from the white clads and headed directly south. They ran hard, Sam's leg impeding him only a little now. They stayed on the berm. They caught up with and passed a group of dispossessed drivers and passengers.

Two hundred yards south of their point of entry a road truck loaded with black clad troops slowed to a stop in front of them and a voice challenged them.

"Back there," Sam called, pointing. "Someone blew up the fences. The power's off."

Five cars rolled to stops behind the truck. From the lead car a man emerged, his face angry. Although Sam could not remember the man's name he recognized him as a former associate. The man put on a red cap and took command of the blacks as Sam kept his own face in shadows, lest he be recognized.

The attack group charged to the north and began firing. Return fire scythed them down and Sam saw the Red Roadman fall. He fell hard, as if he had no bones. Sam approached the vehicle the Red had arrived in. The door was locked, but it yielded to the normal combination which had been in force when Sam was imprisoned. He urged Doc and Rose through the hatchway and into the stripped Beaver behind.

"Take your blouse off," he ordered her. "No female up here wears one."

She nodded.

Sam moved the car out carefully, wrong waying it until he found an opening in the wall and could turn south. He moved up onto the south-way and let speed build gradually. At one-twenty the wheels retracted with a tiny lurch and the car bubbled along. There was nothing behind them, nothing at all, but a mile down the road it was as if nothing had happened. Gaudy roadhouses beckoned with neon from the median strip as the road widened. Most were all-nighters and their lights still bloomed invitingly. Vehicles were crowded near them. Sam could almost hear the sounds of revelry emanating from the roadhouses.

He kept moving in the south fastlane. With a little luck, in half a dozen hours, he could be close to the Seasouth entrance. He'd never been nearly that far south before, but the maps showed a check point and retirement lanes moving south from the check point. If he could get close enough to that place he thought he could either bypass it and move off the road or steal another car on the far side of the checkpoint.

He passed Jackman at the barracks. Jackman was entering the road heading north, ready to go probably to the scene of the fighting. Other vehicles accompanied Jackman's, including one huge truck with a huge cannon bed mounted.

Sam knew that Jackman could not see through the windows because he'd opaqued them, yet he crouched down a little. There was a chance that he would know the car, know it shouldn't be going in the direction it headed—south.

Jackman slowed a little as Sam passed. Perhaps he sensed something. Sam forced himself to remain calm and drive on south, giving Jackman nothing more to be suspicious of, neither slowing further or speeding up.

Sam calculated he had half an hour left. They'd find the dead or badly wounded Red Roadman and then not find his vehicle. Jackman would add things together and start back along the trail. By that time Sam would need another vehicle and a hiding place for this one.

He ran sedately for sixty miles more, keeping a watch for a likely area on the median. Fast lane traffic around him picked up, but the cut off to the north had slackened it some.

He edged his way from the fast lane into a cut off lane and into a glut of roadhouses, their bright lights advertising their wares. He parked the car at a busy one, picking a spot in the shadows, a spot where more than a casual search would have to be made to be effective. He cracked the door for outside air and smelled the road smell, sweet and sour. From inside the roadhouse he could hear the beat of big music—a dance place. Inside there'd be many people, three rooms, males with males, females with females, and normals, all semi-nude in the fashion of the year.

He tapped on the trap door of the Beaver.

"Let's leave this one here and try to steal another one."

"You're the head thief," Doc said.

"You two move up here in front. I'll find the right one and then come back past. Be prepared to abandon this one and jump in."

They moved up into the front. Rose covered her bare breasts with her arms.

"You can cover yourself with a cloak," Sam said, taking pity on her. "It's just that no female your age would be caught dead in any kind of blouse."

She put her cloak around her.

Sam disembarked. The lot was full of quick items. The problem was to find the right one, find one the owners wouldn't be coming back to for a time.

Near the back of the lot he found what he wanted. An old Amicar, motor covers still slightly warm. That meant hopefully that the driver had recently arrived and would not soon be leaving.

The Amicar was unlocked. He entered it and moved the necessary switches and got the motor switched on. It whistled a little and smelled of ozone, but it seemed reliable enough. Not that it made much difference.

He drove back through the lot and took on his passengers.

"Now to move it," said Doc, inspecting the old Vehicle.

"Not yet, Doc," Sam said. "We'll do this one more time at the next place up the road."

Doc nodded, comprehending.

Sam found a cut-through lane that led from the dance palace to the next roadhouse south. The second roadhouse was smaller, less bright. A dream palace, Sam decided. The back lot was well shadowed. He traded cars again, leaving the Amicar for a Walkwheel, six years old and nondescript, with an attached mini-Beaver, bachelor size, full of nude photos and porn lit. It was a good trade. Sam doubted either owner would appear much before dawn.

He wheeled back up to the roadway and took up travel again at an easy one-twenty. Other fastlaners sliced contemptuously past him, but he maintained his speed, eating up the miles.

Behind him Doc snored in the Beaver. Rose had moved up to the seat beside him. The car heater was working well and she'd thrown back her cloak. Her upper torso gleamed like old ivory in the reflected road lights.

"You're enjoying this, Sam," she accused. "So, for that matter, is Doc."

He shook his head, but she was at least partially right. For the first time

in a long time he felt fully alive. The goblins that pursued him were silent.

He dismissed that.

It was of more use right now to think on what was transpiring behind them. Undoubtedly they'd discovered the abandoned Red Roadman's car by now, sorted through things, and discovered the second stolen car. Immediately abandoning that second vehicle where they weren't likely to look and taking the third car might confuse them. Once Sam had chased a juvenile thief who'd adopted the same ploy. He'd switched numerous times before they'd caught and burned him. He'd been riding with Jackman that night. He wondered if Jackman would remember the ruse and hoped he wouldn't. If he did remember it, then wouldn't Jackman begin to figure who it was ahead of him?

Sunrise was approaching. In the sky there would soon be hints of dawn. Another hour and the roads would bulge with workers.

Only those who were forced ran on the fastlanes in the daylight hours. They would be watching all who ran there carefully on this day. Jackman and the computer together would determine that "someone" had come in when the fence was breached. The worry would be on how many "someones" and why they'd entered.

Sam knew that he must hole up for the day, abandon the car where it would be unlikely for it to be found, and await the return of darkness.

He cudgled his memory and had a sudden inspiration. There was a place that might be right, if he could find it. It was a dangerous place, but better than the road itself.

A junkyard.

He dug deep in his brain. It had been years. As it came back to him he remembered there was a cut off lane that led down and under the opposite north lanes of the road and on out to a huge area where the fences bulged away from the road. That was where the elecar graveyard lay. Once he'd been there. He'd been with Jackman that day, also. The junkyard was mostly computerized, operated by robot machines. There, they could hide the car against a backdrop of cars and rest the day through. Then make a run for it at night.

He slowed a little more, dangerously near wheels down. Few cars traveled the fastlanes as slow as he was traveling. Like excess speed low speed was a red flag to other drivers.

He was lucky. A few miles up he found a familiar down lane. The lane came just in time. Far ahead he could see many blinking red and blue lights. He suspected a road block had been raised up ahead and all vehicles were being checked. Tonight, if it still existed, they could try walking around it, abandon one vehicle and take another.

The down lane entered a tunnel. The wheels came out and burned against the road surface and his outer lights brightened. Dim lights shown from the roof of the tunnel. The roar of overhead traffic was muffled by the walls.

He saw that Rose was watching him, no longer questioning, just watching and waiting. He had a sudden moment of empathy with her. The world she was seeing was brand new to her, confusing and terrifying. He was the reason why she'd come and he hated himself a little for ever putting her into the situation she now inhabited.

Too late now.

The downward tilt had awakened Doc. He slid the cover back on the small door.

"We're under the road," Sam said. "And just in time. We were coming up on a road block. Maybe I could have talked us around it, maybe no, but we need to get off the lanes until dark again. There should be a junkyard up ahead. Help me watch for it."

"How far?" Doc asked.

"I hope not far if this is the right road. Maybe a few miles." Sam shook his head. "It's been a long, long time."

They exited the tunnel. There was no sign of another vehicle traveling their road. Ahead lay fields where the crops had been harvested plus a few dark farm barracks. Sam eased past them on the road, driving very carefully.

Then, when Sam thought he'd taken the wrong road, they found the

junkyard—miles and miles of it. Skeletons of old cars lay at the very edge of the road they traveled. They lay in clusters, separated as to make, model, and design. Far to the interior of the junkyard Sam could see a mountain of elecars which had been picked clean and were now stacked, waiting their turn to be melted down for re-use.

Sam drove along slowly, looking for an area containing Walkwheels like the one he drove. He had to turn and come back up the road before he spotted the correct place. He turned into it. The power cut away from the car as they left the road as he'd known it would. He let the vehicle coast to a stop, its gyros whining down to silence. If they were to use it tonight they'd have to push it back to the road.

All around them were old and wrecked vehicles. Tiny robo-servs prowled up and down the lanes between vehicles, searching the wrecks for ordered parts with their automatic eyes.

"Now what?" Doc asked.

"We abandon the car and try to find a car somewhere else around that's been fairly well picked clean, but not clean enough for melting. Maybe we can get some sleep. When it gets dark we'll move on."

Doc looked toward the east. Far away, on a rise, the fence area could be seen.

"Why not try to dig out under the fences?"

"What for?"

"Safer out than in," Doc said. "I don't much care for your world, Sam. I wandered into it once looking for knowledge, looking for change. I wound up in a prison with no one believing why I'd entered your world, thinking some kind of plot. I was lucky enough to get out. Now here I am back again." He sighed.

Sam smiled at him. "Just stay down and out of sight, both of you. Don't let the robos see you. They aren't very complex, but they feed information back into a computer that issues their orders. They surely would give some signal showing something out of the ordinary. People aren't supposed to be in the pile. But men work here now and then. We might be taken to be part of a work force—except for Rose."

"No women?" she asked curiously.

"No. The road society is male dominated."

Doc nodded. "You probably don't know why, Sam, but I'll bet I do. The emancipated woman was a part of the bad years, the years the road society grew from." He looked at Sam. "Didn't you ever read anything about those lost years?"

Sam shrugged. "My few books were from before that time." He looked around. "Let's move," he said, feeling the old restlessness return.

They crept back and found a nest of abandoned vehicles. Other creatures had preceded them. Rats and insects. A few cats. The rats fled at the approach of the three, but the cats only hung back and watched curiously.

They found a wrecked vehicle, a Carnivore of the old, four door, four wheel variety. The bubble was unbroken and the inside was dry. Rose and Sam took the back area and Doc stretched himself on the front seat.

After a time, in the warm sun, Rose and Doc slept, but Sam could not sleep. And then, finally, he did.

* * *

ON THE ROAD Jackman had spent a sleepless night. First he'd made the trip north to the area which had been attacked. He'd viewed the mile of wasteland to the north where great gaps had been blown in the road and the fences surrounding it, he'd seen the white clad guerillas as they'd moved back over the first hills.

He'd talked to survivors, issued orders for repair crews, and, in the midst of all, gotten the report on the missing elecar.

The moment of exit from the barracks had come back to him, seeing the familiar vehicle, slowing, being suspicious, but then hurrying north.

How many were in?

Why?

He wondered how saboteurs from the out-worlds would know enough

about his world, about its laws and complex rules to steal and operate a vehicle out on the fastlanes.

He inspected the deceased Red Roadman who lay where he'd fallen, got his name and number and fed them into the communicator. He got back a description of the vehicle, its irremovable license number. It matched, to the best of his memory, the vehicle he'd passed when he exited the barracks.

He enlisted Tadee, a Red Roadman who usually rode guns with a younger man, but a good man on the guns.

Together they headed south.

* * *

HIS FIRST BREAK came when a boy and girl sought the seat of their vehicle at one of the dance dives on down the road. Their trysting place wasn't where they remembered it being and the boy had already reported it stolen when the girl, searching the nearby areas, thinking it might be the work of pranksters, found the missing car parked in semi-darkness on the lot of the next place south, a dream palace.

The boy waited for law to arrive. After making his complaint he knew it could be quick death to take a vehicle reported as stolen on the road.

When Jackman wheeled in the boy said: "Maybe it wasn't stolen. Maybe someone just moved it. But I didn't park it where we found it. That's for certain." He weaved a little, his very fat girl friend holding tight to his hand. It was mildly illegal to indulge in sex on ground rented or taxed to another. There were rooms available inside for that pleasure, rooms that could be rented and tax collected.

Standing there in the cold parking lot and listening to the half intoxicated boy Jackman had a moment of memory. He remembered when he and Sam had chased a thief who'd switched cars by stealing one and then abandoning it in a nearby lot and then stealing another there.

He nodded to himself, remembering. A hunch.

"We'll go into the dream house and have them cut all power," he ordered Tadee.

Tadee was almost useless without his guns. "We can't do that," he said uncertainly.

"You do as I order," Jackman said coldly.

Tadee nodded.

They moved in the front door of the dream place. The lights were dim. A nude clerk looked askance at them. Tadee giggled at her.

"Someone inside this place has had their vehicle stolen by an enemy of the roads," Jackman began reasonably. "I'm going to ask your help. I want you to cut the power to the dream machines so that we can have your guests check their vehicles."

The nude clerk grimaced at him. She was older than she'd first looked. The dim light was kind to her. She knew the rules. She gave Jackman a shrewd look.

"Will you compensate us?" she asked.

Jackman hesitated. He had no written authority, but it was an emergency. "I promise the state will compensate you and your patrons," he said formally.

Beside him Jackman heard Tadee suck in his breath sharply. Binding the state without authority was not intelligent.

The clerk nodded at Jackman and Tadee. She found the power switch and cut it off. Jackman watched as she accomplished the act, then guarded the door.

There were only nine dreamers. Two of them came out screaming, cut back too swiftly from unreal to real, from dream to actual nightmare. The first one of the screamers was a huge man, no longer young, but not yet old.

He yelled at the clerk: "You bitch! I paid for the night, not for half of it." He looked around, eyes wild. There was a tic above his right eye. He spied Jackman. "I'll sign a fraud complaint."

Jackman shook his head. "Please go outside and check to see if your

vehicle is where you parked it. When you've done that then you can go back under."

The huge man pointed to the license on the wall. "No," he said. His eyes were red from crying in his dream. Jackman wondered what the dream was—mother, a past love, wild sex? The big man's hands clenched and unclenched.

Jackman smiled fondly at him. "Ten seconds sir. Then I'll order my associate to shoot one of your legs away."

"I promise you a formal complaint," the man said ominously. "You don't know me—know who I am—but you will know."

"Five seconds left," Jackman said. "Are you ready, Tadee?"

Tadee grinned and nodded.

The huge man went into the night.

* * *

THE MISSING CAR was a Walkwheel, permanent license EJ3194.

Jackman's hunch grew. It was foolish, but it was not impossible. Whoever the invader was he knew how to operate an elecar, knew how to throw off pursuit.

He thought it might just be Sam Church.

He fed the information into control and ordered roadblocks, three of them to the south. He started up his Carnie and let it set, idling softly. Outside the sky grew a little lighter. Day was coming. Sam Church, if it was him, would go to earth.

Jackman drove slowly south, thinking, remembering the days with Sam Church, trying to remember all. Something came inside his mind, an old chase, an old memory.

* * *

WHEN SAM AWOKE and raised his head a little he could see the automatic machines at their work. All seemed well. He dozed a bit more.

No cars drove past on the road outside. The sun came out a little and warmed the top of the old car where they nested and it was almost pleasant inside.

Rose lay on the seat, her face solemn in sleep, her fine lips set in neutral lines. Sam thought she was dreaming of a better place and time. He watched her and wanted things for her, wanted her away from him, wanted it over for him and beginning for her because he cared for her, but it was all ruined for him inside the place where he cared.

He frowned and daydreamed. Central Control was only that far away—a dream.

The sound of an elecar moving carefully, wheels down, brought him back to awareness. He raised his head cautiously.

A car crept down the outer road, moving very slowly, searching. The bubble was dark, but Sam knew who was in the car. It had to be Jackman. Three other cars followed the trail the first car made.

Somehow Jackman had smelled them out, known it was Sam, remembered the same things Sam remembered. Sam decided that if he made it away this time that he must improvise from now on, do nothing which Jackman might dig out of his ferret-like memory.

It was running time again.

He woke the others.

Jackman went on past where they were, stopping now and then for inspections down the rows of cars. Sam waited until the last car was lost to sight.

He opened the door on the opposite side of the bubble and the three of them crawled out.

"Maybe we ought to split up," Doc said. "I could make a run for it back up the road on foot."

"They'd catch you in a minute," Sam said.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Doc said. "I could try." The recklessness that

never ran far from the surface in him bubbled in his eyes.

"No," Sam said. "The thing to do is to head on back into the dump. I don't think he can know for sure we're in here. He's just checking this place because it's a place we once came together. Sooner or later he'll find the Walkwheel we abandoned. He still won't know for sure we're here, but only that we left a car. He may think we've picked up another. But we can't go out the way we came in. They'll surely be watching." Sam thought for a minute. It was late afternoon. "We'll stay here in the dump until it gets dark. That won't be long. We'll walk to the other end of the dump and try to make it out there."

Doc nodded agreement. Sam looked at Rose.

"Whatever you say," she said.

"Hold it here a minute," Doc said. He crept away while Sam and Rose waited.

Doc returned. His hands were grimy.

"I tore the seats out of the Walkwheel and battered up the bubble a little. Then I put dirt on the license number. Unless they look things over thoroughly they could miss it."

Sam grinned at him. Privately he knew they would look things over thoroughly, but the ruse might still add seconds to their lead.

They moved away from the road, toward the end of the dump. The far end could not be seen. The world around them was composed of row after row of wrecked vehicles.

Towering high above the dump they could see giant cranes. As they passed one of the huge machines it lifted an elecar body and deposited it in a melting vat, where heat would first of all melt the plastics and bleed them off, then melt the metal parts of the car.

Here and there they saw robos off on automatic errands, rolling here and there on wheels, long screwdriver and plier arms at ready.

The three avoided the robos as well as they were able.

From far behind them Sam heard a faint shout and the whistle that roadmen sometimes use for signalling because it could be heard over the road roar. One of the searchers calling others.

Ominously, it seemed to Sam to be from the area where the Walkwheel had been abandoned. There was nothing to do about it now.

They continued on.

Sometimes they crawled, sometimes they ran. Rose stayed up with them. Doc and Sam tried to help her over the rougher areas, but she waved them away. Sam decided that she was more nimble than he was.

The spacings of the vehicle piles became more sparse. Far away, in the growing gloom of the end of day, Sam could see a fence line. A road ran inside it.

"Hold it," he called in a low tone. He froze against an old wrecked combine-truck.

A car patrolled the road.

It had grown dark enough for the distant driver to turn on lights. Sam watched the patrolling car. It drove slowly up the road to a turning point, then slowly back to another. Perhaps a mile.

"That road's our only way out," he said in a low voice to Doc. He pointed to the left and upward. "Up there on top I imagine it leads back into the main lines. If we could hike that far maybe we could find a walkway over the median area. We could try to steal something there. And I'm hungry and I know Rose is and you are also."

Doc nodded.

"They want you pretty bad, Sam," Rose murmured to Sam, coming into the conversation.

"I guess it's Jackman," he said to her. "I was always a sort of a personal loss to him. He believed I'd fall into his mold. Instead I went wrong." He shook his head. "In a very little bit it'll be full dark. We'll try moving up the road then."

"What would happen if I ran out of the dump and waved that car down?" Doc asked.

Sam smiled without humor. "You'd probably get shot, Doc. And the driver of that vehicle would notify the other cars before he opened to talk to you."

"Even if I was wearing this?" Doc asked. He reached inside his cloak and brought out a Red Roadman's cap, all red and gold.

Sam saw it without believing it. "Where did you get that?"

"In the trailer of the first car we used," Doc said. "I brought it along."

It opened up a whole new vista.

"I could wear it and if I worked it right the man in the car would think I was one of the searchers," Sam said. "He just might stop for me without communicating with the other cars." He nodded. "It's worth a chance." He looked to the area where the road left the dump and twisted up the hillside. "If we try to walk out, once we leave the dump and get into the open we'll be exposed for a long time."

"I'll do it," Doc said. "It's my hat."

Sam shook his head. "Not this time, Doc. Remember please that I used to be a Red Roadman. I'll stand a better chance than you of fooling our friend out there on the road."

Doc said: "It's still my hat." But he was smiling.

Sam put the hat on. It was a bit large, but it would do.

"How about if I ran across the road in front of you? Would that help make him stop for you?"

"No, Doc. What I'm going to try is to edge up near the road and be in plain sight when he makes his turn. I'll act like I'm examining some of the wrecks. I'll give him a wave, then ignore him. Maybe he'll stop. If he doesn't then I'll flag him down."

Doc fell silent.

"If anything goes wrong go back into the dump for a while. They don't know how many of us there are. Maybe you can dig out under the fence some way in a deserted spot." Sam stopped. "You never did tell me exactly how you got in you know."

"Found a place where they were repairing the fences. It was easy. I was a poor seeker of knowledge put upon by your bully boys. Instead of knowledge they gave me a cell."

"Just a little darker," Sam said, looking up at the sky. "And pray the moon doesn't come out from behind those clouds. This cloak isn't very regulation, but it will have to do."

"It will be all right," Rose said.

He kissed her and shook hands with Doc. He melted himself into the reef of old vehicles.

When the elecar on the road next turned he arranged it so that the lights caught him. He peered down beneath a bubbleless wreck and gave the car a wave.

The car stopped on the road and opened.

"Find anything?" a voice called.

"I think Jackman's got the hot track," Sam called carefully keeping his head averted. "All I keep getting along this row is rats, lots of them." He moved closer. "Could you maybe run me back around to where we're parked? I'm dead on my feet."

He shook his head. "No way. I've got orders to keep constant patrol on this part of the road. But I'll take you up as far as I can."

Sam nodded. "That would help some." He moved two steps nearer. All he had going for him was the darkness and the hat.

The patrolman said: "Where did you get that cloak?"

Sam hit him very hard under the shelf of the jaw and caught him as he fell backward.

The Red was unarmed, but many didn't carry personal weapons. The

ones mounted on the car were usually enough.

Sam rolled him off the edge of the road after confiscating his money purse.

He waved the others up to the car.

"Quick," he said. He shoved them on inside and into the stripped area behind that simulated Beaver. He eased the elecar on down the road and then up the road where it bent. He turned the lights off when he got to the end of the patrol area.

"That was easy," Doc said from the trap.

"I hope not too easy," Sam said. He flipped on the dash light and glanced through the money purse. A red identification card told him that he'd appropriated the vehicle of Andrew Gadben. He flipped on the communicator.

He said: "This is Andy. I think I've spotted something up at the south end of my run. I'm in pursuit. Someone take over my area."

He didn't wait for an answer. He gave the car more speed. The road still went up. Maybe they could abandon the car now and make it, but Sam was reluctant to give up this rolling battleship now that he'd captured it.

He kept driving.

In a few minutes they had passed the far end of the dump area and left it behind. The road continued up and above him Sam could hear the noise of the road when he opened a vent. Then there was a fence across the road. A gate across the road they traveled was closed. On the far side of the gate two cars were parked. A cloaked and red hatted Red Roadman standing in the middle of the road on the far side of the gate waved casually at Sam and held up his hand. Sam slowed so that he approached the gate at low speed. The Red opened the gate and moved a little aside. Sam hit the accelerator hard and spurted through the cars and on up the road. He had three hundred yards on the cars at the gate before they began pursuit and half a mile before they got up to his speed.

He figured Jackman was in one of the cars.

Sam rocketed along at top wheels-down speed. It could be disastrous to retract wheels on this kind of secondary road. Anything could be on it.

The lead car had gone above critical and was riding the bubble. He moved up on Sam quickly. Sam could see fire flash underneath his car and pebbles rose from the road and sparked against his underneath sides. But he continued to gain and set a long shot at Sam's car from extreme range, a shot which apparently did nothing.

That would be Jackman.

Sam saw the entry tunnel ahead. He cut on all lights and kicked up over critical and felt his wheels retract with a small lurch. The tunnel dived under the road and then up into a double lane, one north entry one south. He took the south entry and moved out into the fastlanes and gave the accelerator all it had. The car boomed up the road.

Sam remained sure that the first pursuer was Jackman. He was still very good. He came out of the tunnel a quarter of a mile behind and slowly began to gain on Sam, no matter what Sam tried.

There was traffic in the fastlanes and Sam used it to advantage, dodging in and out between vehicles, keeping cars between him and the pursuer, giving no clear shot. But the other car crept up.

Up ahead Sam saw the signs indicating a cloverleaf. He edged toward the entry and cut into it, flapping hard, cutting speed back below critical. Following it around in the usual way would let him off the road and into a median or send him into a connecting road or let him reverse his direction to north. But there was another way.

Behind him Sam could see his pursuer make his turn into the cloverleaf and begin to full flap. Sam braked hard and spun the car into almost a full stop and turned sharply and illegally into a return lane. Now the pursuer was coming head-on toward him and Sam was heading back toward the south lane.

Sam fired a low burst. The other car fired almost simultaneously, but wildly.

Sam's car lurched from recoil and then steadied.

He saw he'd damaged the pursuer. The other car had slowed and was smoking a bit as they passed. In the rear mirror Sam could see two men bailing out of the vehicle.

One was, as Sam had thought, Jackman. As Sam gained the south lane he saw heavy smoke burst from the disabled vehicle.

Sam knew they weren't out of it yet. Distantly, in the mirror, as they again entered the south lanes, Sam saw the second pursuing car stop, then lost sight of it as he rounded a curve.

He said to those behind the trapdoor: "Everyone all right back there?"

Rose stuck her head out. "We were watching out the rear window. What did you do?"

"Used a new trick on an old dog," Sam said. "And we got lucky."

She climbed down and sat in the other seat.

"I thought they had us back there," she said.

"I made my prayers." She reached over and took his red hat, which he'd forgotten. She put it on her own head at a nervous rakish angle.

"What are the plans now?"

"Someplace up the line we'll ditch this car. Maybe we'll find someplace where we can eat." He remembered the purse and jingled it. "We've got money. And I know you've got to be hungry because I know I am."

"Yes, I'm hungry," she said.

Doc put his head through the trap. "My bet is that your friend will get smarter next time, Sam. He'll put his road block in some deserted area with no way to get off when you spot it."

Sam thought about it. It was logical. But they still needed to go south. A thought came to him— an idea.

Up ahead he spotted a group of restaurants, some exotic, some plain.

"We'll pull to the far side and try to eat." He thought for a minute.

"We'll abandon the car here. We'll eat inside of the last restaurant north. You two will eat together and I'll eat alone. They'll be showing pictures of me around when they find the car. If we eat together they'll know there are three of us."

He pulled in and parked the car in plain view on the far side of a wildly neon restaurant. No one seemed to be watching.

"Come on," he said. He opened the bubble and they crawled out. They walked rapidly north.

Sam was glad when the abandoned vehicle was out of sight.

They ate in a stand-up, a place for tourists on annuals, or second class job holders out for a night on the road. The food was adequate. Doc and Rose stood on one side, Sam on the other. He ignored them. At his side a silk cloaked lover looked Rose over longingly, but said nothing after eyeing Doc's build.

Later, they met in the semi-darkness outside. Down the way, as they watched, they could see some excitement in the area where Sam had parked the car.

"I believe we've been found," Sam whispered.

It was cold outside. Anyone seen walking for a long distance would be suspect. The thing to do was to find a place where Jackman would be unlikely to search and stay there for a time until the search moved past them.

Sam looked around. To the north there was a sort of outdoor carnival area, with rides for children and adults, bright booths where skills could be tested for prizes, and side show areas. The midway was crowded and the lights were bright—too bright. But at the back of the area, in the only permanent building, there was a dance place.

He took Rose's hand. "Shall we dance?" he asked her, trying hard for gaiety.

She looked at him and nodded.

All night things had been going wrong for Jackman. First off he'd been

notified that his intrusion into the dream palace the night before was a breach of regulations and that a disciplinary hearing would be held. Privately he'd been told not to fear the hearing, but he'd been lied to before. The huge man and others had complained. He wasn't sure how far the complainers influence went, but he'd have to make sure it didn't go far enough.

Then, just when it seemed that he had Sam Church, Church had stolen an issue car and escaped again, shot Jackman's car from underneath him, and now was out there someplace. Not good.

When the stolen car was found it was discovered in the midst of one of the complex's busiest areas, a place where there was no way to tell which one of thousands of available cars had been stolen.

Now, Jackman stood by the abandoned issue car and looked all around. Already men were circulating the area with pictures of Sam Church, trying to find what he'd done—Jackman suspected he'd eaten, stolen another car, and moved on.

Jackman looked out at the road. Two hundred miles to the south, close to the Seasouth Interchange, there was a long stretch of open area. Sam Church couldn't have made it that far south—yet. He'd slap an absolute road block there, stop and search everything in an area where Sam Church would have no chance to evade him.

He went to his car and made the arrangements. Then he got out again and looked over the area. To the north he could see the carnival area, which began a group of entertainment palaces, a whole string of them back north.

He sniffed the air, liking the smell of it. This was his world. Sooner or later he'd find Sam Church, find him because Sam was weak and he, Jackman, was strong.

Sam was in flight. Men in flight made mistakes. But what had brought him back up to the road-world? Having once escaped why had he entered into the one place where his liberty and probably his life would be forfeit when caught?

Jackman shook his head.

Just to be sure he thought maybe he should have men search this whole area. Particularly to the south. For some reason Sam Church inexorably kept returning to that direction.

* * *

THE DANCE PLACE was dark and crowded. Men and women played wire instruments loudly from the stage at the front and three unclad girls sang songs about the mixed fortunes of love.

The three found a booth far away from the postage stamp floor and sank tiredly into it. A waitress brought them ice and light drinks, suitable for mixing, and waited for pay. Sam paid her and added a small tip, neither small enough or large enough to make her notice them. He kept his head down and tried to give the impression of already being involved with some stimulant. When the waitress had gone he watched the door, alert to anything and anyone in that area.

"Have you ever danced?" he asked Rose.

She looked nervously at the dance floor. Out there, to the music of the times, men and women danced, their arms wound tightly about each other.

"Not that way," she said.

"Do you want to try?" he asked. He could see she was both attracted and repelled by the idea.

She nodded.

He took her out to the floor. She moved naturally into the dance, her supple body picking up the beat of the song, her eyes sparkling as she learned.

Other men watched her and Sam knew it was dangerous to have her here on the floor. Male-female relationships in the roadworld were easy things these days—inconstant, short lived. He could see other male eyes covet her, scheme to possess her. After that one dance they hid again in the booth.

"That was splendid," she said, not even breathing hard.

He smiled at her.

Doc said: "He had to bring you back, Rose. Someone out there might have knifed him for you if he hadn't."

Men came past the booth and tried to catch

Rose's eye, but she would not look at them and, after a time, they desisted.

"That wasn't smart, Sam," Doc said.

"Perhaps," Sam said, knowing Doc was right. "But I doubt that anyone on the floor knows what I look like. Those men only know about Rose."

"There were women there also," Doc said. He leaned toward Sam. "What course do we follow now, leader?"

Sam shook his head. "Keep running to the south. We'll wait here a few hours and then start again. Let things cool down a little. Mess up their time table."

"Where will we get a car?" Rose asked. "Won't most of these people be proceeding to work or to bed?"

Doc laughed. "With your permission, Sam and your cooperation, Rose, I think we can probably get us a car *and* a driver."

Sam raised his eyebrows.

"Let's just point Rose at a bachelor with a car. Instead of riding the fastlane south we'll travel the computer lanes."

Rose smiled. "Just tell me what to do."

Sam picked that moment to glance at the door. A uniformed black roadman stood there surveying the crowd. Two others stood behind.

"There's trouble," he said to Doc. "Don't look around at the door, but we have company."

Doc nodded coolly.

"We'll sit tight. It's dark in here. They may miss us. Probably they're only looking over the crowd." Sam thought for a minute. "It's not legal for them to ask for identification in a licensed place like this."

"That may be," said Doc, looking carefully toward the roadmen, "but they *are* checking identification."

Sam nodded. "Let's make it tough, then." He got up casually and went to the next booth. Two men and two women eyed him, all high on something. Sam said: "I guess they're raiding the place." He nodded toward the door. The three roadmen were moving down the line to the second booth.

The biggest of the men stood up. Sam ducked back to his own booth.

"Get them Roadmen out of here," the man screamed.

Other people stood up.

"Get out," someone started a chant. "Get out, get out..."

From a far corner someone threw a bottle toward the roadmen. It broke on the floor near them. Someone else followed with a glass. Suddenly the air was full of flying glassware.

The roadmen retreated to the door. A man, very high or foolishly brave, followed them there with an upraised chair, swinging it ominously.

The black roadmen moved to the door and out.

"They'll check people outside. They'll get reinforcements."

"Does everyone carry an ID?" Doc asked.

"A driver would," Sam said. "Most others wouldn't."

Doc nodded. "Then let me dance with Rose. I'll let some loner cut in."

Sam said: "Tell him you're her father—that I'm high and troublesome and you want to get back to your car. I'll try to sneak out the back and into the next lot south, behind the building. Tell him the car's there. He can bring Rose with him after he gets you to the car." He nodded. "Give me five minutes. I'll be there."

He got up from the booth and wandered toward the back of the dance hall. A homo gave him the eye and two women loners beckoned, but he stumped on past them.

In the relief room there was a window. He hoisted it high and climbed into the darkness.

Assistance had not yet come for the three roadmen. They stood uncertainly near the door, fingering hand weapons, their faces grim.

Staying in darkness Sam moved south.

* * *

THREE HOURS later they were a hundred and fifty miles farther south. In the attached Beaver a reviving and sober citizen lay trussed tightly.

On the median things were beginning to thin out. Now and then there was an occasional eating place, or a small pull-in area, but mostly there was a lack of anything.

It was growing light outside.

Sam moved to the fastlane and looked for a road off, afraid of what was ahead now that it was light, not really afraid for himself, but for Rose and Doc.

He found a road. It was marked with an "R." He pulled off the fastlane and stopped on the berm of the off road.

"The sign means there's a roadman barracks someplace along this road," Sam said. "Should I go on or try to find someplace to hide or get out down this road?"

Rose shrugged. Doc stuck his head out from the trailer area behind.

"Our sweetheart is riding well. Why the stop?"

"Looks like we're running out of interchanges and action on the median. And it's getting light. Maybe we ought to be off, find a place to hide or a place to get out," Sam said.

"We should be around where I came in. They took me to a police

barracks which wasn't far away from where I was caught."

Sam said: "There's a police barracks on this road."

"Could be," Doc said. "How many barracks would there be in this area?"

"Probably not another for a hundred miles."

"Try it then," he said. "I don't think we can last the day out here on the road itself. Somewhere they're waiting for us."

"Sure," Sam said. Doc was probably right, but there was always a chance. Maybe he could take Rose and melt his way into the mass of humanity that worked the roads and farms and factories, move back to the north where he was no longer sought. He'd need identities for both of them and identities were hard to fake good enough to beat the computer, but it might be worth trying.

Except that doing it that way would not change a thing. He'd still have to live out his life in subjugation, not daring to raise his head. The psychos like Jackman would still rule the world—this world.

He started the vehicle again and drove it on down the road. A patrol car came toward him from the other direction and Sam waved jauntily. The roadman driver, black or red, waved back.

Sam drove into a lighted tunnel. The road narrowed to two lanes, then went to four where the tunnel ended. He felt nervous on the road. There was nothing along it, no reason for him to be there. And no real room to maneuver.

Ahead of him, a mile or so away, he saw a building. He knew the familiar, blocky design. It was a roadman barracks, smaller than the one which had housed him during his tenure on the road, but still impressive in size. It loomed up and filled the day. Beyond the barracks the road continued, but there was a gate across it.

Sam slowed the speed of the vehicle.

"I'm going to pull into the parking area and we'll abandon this car and the driver there. We'll get out and then figure what comes next..." He gave

Doc a look and winked. "Tell our trussed up friend that we'll be in the area for an hour or so and if he makes any noise I'm going to have to cut his throat."

"Maybe I'll cut it before we leave anyway," Doc said fiercely.

There were many cars on the lot. Sam parked at the far end of the line, slightly away from the other vehicles, but not suspiciously so.

They got out. Around them the parking lot seemed void of people. The gate on the road was clamped shut, but there was an aperture at the bottom large enough for them to squeeze through. They did so and, keeping low to the ground, they continued on.

"That place back there is where they brought me," Doc said. "I'm sure of that."

They found a drainage ditch and continued south in it, staying with the road, but alert for signs of pursuit. None came. After a long time, when the barracks building was out of sight, they stopped to rest in a grove of trees.

Around them the country was farmland, unworked at this time of year, laying fallow awaiting the coming of spring. Somewhere, at the far edge of it, there were fences, but they could not be seen just now.

"How'd you make it through the fences, Doc?"

"Not fences—fence. I came in during a heavy rain. I suppose they were extending the territory, taking down fences, re-erecting them further out, clearing land as they went." He shook his head. "Maybe it would be as easy to get out."

"How far?" Rose asked.

"I don't know. And that was months ago." He looked up at the sky. "If we could find that place and have a lot of luck maybe we could make it out. But with your friends up there hot after us won't they be looking every place along the road for someone trying to get out?"

Sam thought about it. "That's right," he said. He reached inside the cape and took out the red hat. "Maybe we can use this again."

"Do we wait for dark?"

"No. We'll go on and try to find a likely place. Then we'll wait for dark."

"They'll find that man we left in the parking lot," Rose said.

"Maybe," Sam said. "He was tied. He doesn't know which way we went. And most people park only as far away from a building they need to enter as they have to park. It may be a while for him." He shrugged. "Maybe not."

"He worked someplace," Rose said. "Someone will miss him."

"Yes," Sam said. "But there's nothing we can do."

They moved on.

Halfway through the morning they passed many barracks, but they were empty. The only person they saw was a watchman patrolling the barracks area with head bowed, uninterested in his surroundings.

Around noon, when their hunger was growing acute, they came upon a quick stream of water, coming in from outside, flowing toward the road, good water. They drank their fill of it and it helped allay the hunger pangs.

At dusk they lay in a field of corn stalks. Above them, but far away, they could hear traffic from the road. The secondary road lay between them and the fence. They had crossed that secondary road an hour before.

In an area they watched busy workmen laboring on some sort of an interchange. The land for it had been cleared, machines had moved the earth and leveled it, and now hand work was being done to finish it before the laying of a surface. In the distance, behind Sam, piers began to arise from the ground, where the interchange would rise toward the road.

Sam estimated that in the area he was watching there were two hundred workers, plus forty or fifty guards. Black roadmen—ordinaries.

Sam waited until work was halted and trucks removed the workers and most of the guards. In the growing darkness he tried to count those who remained to guard. There were at least six of them, perhaps seven. They marched posts by a temporary fence. Two huge lights, aimed at the fence,

lit it as bright as day.

There had been time enough to plan.

Doc said to Rose: "Give us ten minutes. We should have the lights off then if this thing's going to work out at all. When they do go out you go under the fence and into the woods. We'll follow close behind. But stay out of sight."

She nodded. She took Sam's hand briefly. "I'll wait in the woods." She looked at his face, again searching. "It will be all right, Sam. It feels all right."

Sam nodded, adrenalin running high.

The two men left her waiting and moved confidently toward the fence, making no effort at concealment. It was now full dark.

"Halt!" a voice cried out.

"Keep it quiet," Sam ordered. He turned to Doc. "Is this where she's supposed to try going through?"

"Yes, sir," Doc said.

A black clad roadman turned his flash on and saw the red hat.

"Turn that damned light off," Sam ordered. "We're late and you're going to mess the whole thing up." He moved up closer to the man. "Who has charge of this watch?"

"I do," the roadman said.

"How many men?"

"Six plus me, sir."

"Get 'em here and make it quick. And tell them not to shoot if they see something moving from up there." Sam pointed back toward the road.

In seconds Sam and Doc were surrounded by seven guards.

"A girl is going to try to go under your fence," Sam ordered. "We didn't

know where it was to be until minutes ago. We think she's a link and has been communicating with those outside who've been attacking the roads to the north." He turned to the man in charge. "I'm sorry to give you short notice," he condescended.

"We can stop her, sir."

Sam shook his head. "We don't want her stopped. We want her through. She's carrying planted information that's to our benefit when passed on. And we're going to follow her—see who she meets, then follow them to find their camp."

"You're going to go outside the fence?" the watch leader asked in awe.

"Yes." He nodded at the man. He had to keep him under control. Someplace close there was a phone or a radio. One call and he was done.

Sam nodded again. "We know how risky it is, but we've got to find those savages out there before they do us serious hurt." He gave the watch leader a commanding look. "Now—I want your lights off. Part of the message she received was that there would be a signal. Turning the lights out ought to do it." He looked around. "My guess is that she's someplace right out there waiting now. She sees the lights go out and she'll head for the fence."

The watch leader tersely ordered a man to carry out Sam's instructions.

Sam turned to Doc. In a whisper loud enough to be overheard he asked: "You sure you can track her out there? I don't much like it."

Doc came to attention. "I'm going to try, sir. I've been trained for it. I'll do the best I can."

"See that you do," Sam ordered.

They led the guards back into the shadows. Along the secondary road Sam could see lights coming from very far away.

"That'll be the rest of the group," he nodded at Doc.

"She's at the fence," the watch leader whispered. "She's going under it now. There's a place in the center where there's a gulley and it's easy to go

under." He nodded at Sam, awaiting orders, fascinated that anyone would go outside.

"Come on," Sam urgently ordered Doc. The lights down the road were ominously closer. Sam turned to the watch leader. "There'll be others along. That's probably them coming now. Don't turn the lights back on until we're through."

He nodded at Sam. "Yes sir."

"And give me your name," Sam ordered. "If I make it back from this I'll write you a commendation letter for your record jacket."

The watch leader smiled. "Glensky, sir. Edward Glensky." He spelled his last name out.

Sam nodded and sprinted with Doc toward the fence. They found the gulley and bellied underneath the fence at its opening. They ran on toward the woods, pounding hard.

Back behind them the vehicle which had approached had now arrived at the interchange area. Sam heard angry voices. He increased his pace and heard Doc breathing hard beside him.

They had not reached the trees when the lights came back on behind them, bathing them in radiance. Wild shots whistled through the leaves and grass and distant men screamed harsh orders. Sam was sure he detected the sound of Jackman's voice over all.

The firing increased. A shot plucked at Sam's sleeve. And then they were into the woods and he saw Rose waiting for them. The firing died away.

"Move on," Doc said urgently. "They just might try to follow us."

Sam grinned at him, doubting it.

They kept going. Sam took Rose's hand and they moved quickly, confidently along. They could not help smiling at each other and at Doc's back.

They had no packs and no food. All had been left behind before they

entered the fence. Now they were out again.

They marched all night. If there was pursuit from behind there was no sign of it.

In the morning the sun was especially warm. They found a place of shelter in the storm cellar of an abandoned farmhouse.

"I think we're into good weather," Doc said, looking out the window. "And I don't think we're too far from the sea." He gave Sam an inquiring look. "Do you know your geography, Sam?"

Sam shook his head. "Only what I learned in the road school."

"How about that library you found?" Doc asked. "Didn't you learn anything from that?"

"No," Sam admitted truthfully.

"Well, where we are right now is probably into the Florida panhandle area. I'd bet the Gulf of Mexico isn't much south of here. We'll keep going that way tonight." He gave Sam an inquiring look. "Isn't there supposed to be some kind of retirement area in this area?"

Sam nodded. "They run their own area. It's at the end of the road we were traveling, which means we should be heading that way."

Doc gave him a dark look. "Soon there ought to be a lot of water for you to see, Sam."

"All right, Doc," Sam said sleepily. He leaned back gently against Rose, keeping her head on his shoulder. "Right now let's sleep."

Doc was excited. "We got out, Sam."

"Sure."

Sam slept. No hellies came to disturb his sleep.

He slept mostly without dreams, with only the constant eyes that watched inside his head to disturb him. He slept a long time. It was going on toward dark when he awoke. Rose still lay next to him, her eyes open, watching him curiously.

"You're nine years old sometimes when you sleep," she said. "Other times you're a hundred and nine."

Sam looked around the room, rubbing his eyes.

"Doc's up. He went scouting, looking for something to eat." She touched an old ragged shirt she now wore. "I found this—or Doc found it for me."

He kissed her lightly.

"You've never grown up," she said, her eyes thoughtful.

He remembered a hundred girls, but he said nothing. It didn't seem the thing to do.

He got up and stretched hugely and looked out the window and saw Doc coming. He'd found food, some wild apples, and a jar of something, label long vanished, stuff put up by farmers before the farms had been swept away over the long years.

There was no fire to cook over and nothing to cook in and so they ate the stuff from the jar cold, speculating about what it was, fighting to keep it down. The fruit was better.

"What will they be doing up there on your road?" Doc asked.

Sam thought about it. "There'll be a meeting. Someone will bear the blame. They'll suspect a plot. More men will watch the fences." He looked out at the sky. It was close to dark. "I'm surprised that we aren't swarmed under by hellies."

Doc smiled. "I imagine the hellies are patrolling the fence lines. They've been breached from inside and outside hurtfully in the past few days. They may feel a little nervous in there."

"Yes," Sam said. The jails would bulge as the pendulum swung. The questioners would have an orgy of a time.

* * *

TWO DAYS LATER they found the sea. For a long time before they got to it they could smell it, a combined smell of salt and fish and decay, not completely unpleasant, but different.

The weather had turned hot. They'd seen no signs of pursuit or of outworld inhabitants.

Along the shore of the sea there were hundreds of deserted and ruined motel buildings, vying with each other in size and fallen splendor. They stood, like phantom soldiers at attention, along the beach. Winds and water and old wars had sent them into ruins, but they were still impressive in defeat.

The three slept the day away in one of them.

Sam dreamed of the road, an uneasy dream, and came awake in the late afternoon to the sounds of booming surf. The waves were breaking in four or five feet high as they crested and rolled over in foam.

"Someplace out there a storm's brewing," Doc said.

Sam rubbed his eyes. "Is it safe to swim out there?"

"All of these abandoned palaces wouldn't be here if they hadn't used to swim," Doc said. "I'd stay close to shore. And I'd be careful. There are sharks."

"You want to go?" Sam asked.

"Not me. I want to search the near buildings and see if I can't find something for us to use for cooking."

"I'll help you."

Doc shook his head. "You're useless at that. I have to waste time watching you." He grinned and took away the sting. "Wake your Rose. Take her swimming. She's never been in an ocean either." He looked at Sam and Sam tried to read his eyes without success.

He woke Rose.

"Would you swim with me?"

He saw her comprehend where they were and hear the sound of the surf. Her eyes sparkled and she nodded.

They removed their clothes unselfconsciously at the upper edge of the

beach and ran nude to the foaming water. They picked their way over debris that the ocean had left on the beach.

"It's like white cream," Rose said.

They walked out into it. The waves were rough and rolled warmly over them. The sand bottom was mostly smooth under their feet.

They learned to dive up over the waves and then to let the waves propel them toward the beach. They laughed at each other and Sam reflected that they had not done that very much before.

When it grew dark they made love on the sand beach where the shadows hid them, taking a long time, not savage, but soft, in the way one should when one is young and one loves.

Afterwards they took one more dip into the sea, washing each other, and laughing. They dressed in the darkness and moved back toward the motel. A small fire burned in a pit in the sand. Above the fire Doc had suspended a pot. Something bubbled there, smelling good.

"Yam stew," Doc said to them, nodding at the fire. "I also found some bowls up there in one of the buildings," he pointed.

Sam ate. Perhaps the food was good, perhaps not. He didn't really taste it.

There had to be a way to take Rose back with him into his world.

He looked out toward the sea and admitted his doubts about Central Control. He admitted them privately and only to his own secret self.

Shouldn't there be hordes of oldsters out here along these sea shores? Wasn't this place ideal for the life they sold you up on the roads, a retirement place, a place of peace?

He fought confusion, refusing to let it grow inside him.

He would wait.

* * *

FOR THREE NIGHTS they followed the sea south and east. Once the

land around them had been a busy place, for they were seldom out of the sight of motel buildings. Semi-tropical growth was taking over the area back from the beaches themselves, sprouting and gouging its way through what had once been asphalt secondary roads, camouflaging the towns they carefully stole through during the night marches.

They saw no people, but they proceeded cautiously, marching only at night, sleeping by day.

By the fourth night it was apparent that the sea route now ran almost due south. Still, they followed it for a time, until Sam held up his hand.

The waves were coming in with the morning tide and it was almost time to hide themselves from the morning sun which fast[^] approached.

"Look out there," Sam said excitedly. "See! Right where the light is now best."

There was *something*.

"Sails," Doc said. "More than one."

They found shelter in a rotting beach house and watched, fascinated. As the light grew the boats drew nearer. There were three of them. Each boat carried a crew of about a dozen.

"Fishermen," Doc said softly, pointing at the nets which hung suspended on the boats.

The boatmen sang songs as they sailed past. They were close in to shore, heading for some point that Sam knew his threesome had already passed. They watched the boats out of sight.

"That might be a good life," Doc said. "But who knows what they vary their diet with." He sighed wistfully and looked at Sam. "We haven't seen any of your roads down here, Sam. Don't you think that if there was one this way we'd have intersected it by now?"

Sam nodded. "We'll head inland, east for a while," he said.

Doc shrugged. "All one with me. We follow your instincts."

"East then," Sam repeated.

"Is that all right with you, Rose?" Doc questioned.

Rose looked longingly at the sea, then nodded.

"All right. Let's look for a road that way, one that's not too far gone to follow."

"You want to start moving by day and sleeping by night now, Doc?" Sam asked.

"No. We don't know anything about the area we're in. We have no real weapons. Your roadmen don't carry them, they only equip their cars with them. Most people hunt by day and sleep at night. So we'll do the opposite and try to stay alive."

* * *

FOR FIVE DAYS of quick, all night marches they did not intersect a major roadway from Sam's world. On the sixth night they did discover one, or perhaps what once had been one.

They traveled those six nights on what had once been, in the days of the old ones, a four lane road. The years had pulverized it and it was, at times, almost lost in the wild vegetation that was slowly destroying its path. It had to be followed closely, for the road builders of the vanished time had raised it above the swamps that lay occasionally on each side of it.

Sometimes, in the travelling, in the night walks, they saw evidence that others had and were traveling the same road. Once, half into the night, they came upon the warm remains of what had been a small campfire.

The bones of a rabbit lay in the ashes and, off to the side of the road, where the land became marshy, Sam found the tracks of unshod horses and bare footed humans, many of them. A human skull, blackened by an old fire, was nailed to a low branch of a stunted tree which overhung the road.

They moved past that one quickly and cautiously, increasing their pace. The tracks paralleled the road for a time, easily visible in the moonlight. Finally they faded away and into the jungle that lay south of the road.

Game was plentiful. The land was abundant with fruit. The traps that

Doc and Sam set were usually successful and the trio ate well.

Now and then, at crossroads, there were remains of the old world, houses and hotels, small towns and larger cities, but remembering the blackened skull, they avoided them.

Life became a monotony of night quick marches and day heavy sleeping.

When they came upon the roadway which seemed to be from Sam's world they discovered it almost by surprise, for there was no sound emanating from it, and, although it was heavily fenced, there were no lights.

They came upon it at about midnight, when the moon was down. They were almost into the fence and the forest of concrete pillars that supported the road above before they knew it.

There was a double fence. The first one was high and barbed. They walked carefully along, following it, until they found where it was rusted through. The second fence was lower. There were huge gaps in it. They entered one of the gaps.

No elecars ran the road and there was nothing but weeds in the small median area. The surface of the road was pitted and old.

Doc nodded in the darkness. "This is one your people haven't taken over, Sam. I wonder why not."

Sam had a sudden inspiration. "The legends talk about an ancient road in a hot land. Maybe..." He felt excitement wash through him and, once again, he believed.

From far away they heard a sound and saw the reflection of distant lights.

"Come on," Rose said. She took Sam's hand. The three scrambled off the road and into the tall weeds near the fence hole they'd entered. They lay in concealment there and watched the thing which approached.

It came toward them slowly. It had bright lights at the front end. It was too large to be a typical elecar, but it could be a special custom built item.

Then, when it drew nearer, it had too many wheels and its lines were not alien, but different. The vehicle picked its way down the road carefully, trying to avoid the worst of the holes. It made a peculiar roaring noise, unlike anything that Sam had ever heard before.

They watched it out of sight. It headed straight south. When it had passed they scrambled back up to the road and watched its rear, red lights vanish.

"What was it?" Doc asked.

"Maybe what I'm looking for," Sam said. But he didn't believe it.

They followed its track.

Once that night they drew close enough to the sea to smell it and hear its waves. They ran to the far edge of the road and peered out. Even though the night was dark and the moon was hidden they could see the water.

"The Atlantic," Doc said.

No other vehicles came along the road they traveled. Yet having seen one they were alert to the possibility of others.

Every few miles, sometimes as often as twice in one mile, sometimes not for ten miles, they would come upon a ramp exit from the road, a place where six lanes became eight, and one departed on each side and led down to a secondary road below. Each time they went down the exit ramp and checked the road below to try to find traces of the passing of the phantom vehicle they'd earlier seen. Most of the secondary roads could be discarded without much examination for they were blocked with overgrowth.

That night they found nothing.

In the early morning they secreted themselves in an underpass and ate fresh oranges picked from trees gone wild along the road. The juice was tart and good, but not filling.

Doc awoke Sam in the late afternoon to forage for food. The two men set careful string traps with thin, strong ropes made from cloth and bits of

wire taken from ruined houses.

They moved inland in the foraging, alert to anything. Again, they could hear the ocean.

They ate rabbit stew that night, cooked in a pot with roots and vegetables, spiced with orange sections.

Sam had not grown contemptuous of the land around him, but he reflected, as he ate, that perhaps many of those who came out of the road-world and who singly vanished, probably starved in a land of at least seasonal plenty because they were unable to cope with finding food.

For the first time in a while, as he ate, he faced the night's march with a feeling of anticipation.

They finished the meal and moved back up to the road. They walked abreast down it. On this night the sky was brighter.

Six or eight miles along, when full dark came, they could see lights. Not a fire, but lights, lights high up and hanging in the sky.

"They've got to be on buildings, I'd guess," Doc whispered. "Let's stop and consider things a little before we go plunging on."

They sat in the road and admired the lights.

"Can't be too many miles away," Doc said. "What do you figure it for, Sam?"

Sam felt as if he was about to burst open inside. "Maybe—I hope—what I'm looking for," he said, daring to say it.

"At least it has to be someone who has the capacity to make real light," Rose said. "I've heard that there are some places left up in the mountains where they know lights. It could be someone like that."

Sam felt a touch of panic and buried it. The lighted place had to be Central Control. If it was not then there was no reason to his life.

"We ought to go slow," Doc said uneasily. "We know nothing about who or what it is yet. I suggest we move off the road at the next passable intersection and on toward the lights. We can find a place to hide and look

things over when daylight comes."

Rose nodded her agreement.

Sam hesitated. He wanted very badly to rush on up to those lights and take his chances, but they were right and he must worry about them. He could wait and see.

"All right," he said.

The next exit led down to a rutted, secondary road that headed east, toward the ocean. There they found the signs they'd sought in the previous exits, signs showing recent travel by a wheeled vehicle, tracks, in the dust, crushed vegetation.

They followed the road on east toward the lights and the ocean. The lights grew brighter, more numerous, patches of lights.

They found a causeway that led across from the mainland out to a large island. Sam tested the water the causeway crossed. It was salty.

They moved across it and onto the island. The lights were now high in the sky, and, as they drew nearer, there were other banks of them at lower levels, a forest of lights.

The lighted area was guarded by a high fence. Sam could see places where it had rusted through and then been repaired.

"Careful of the fence," he warned. "It might be charged."

"We won't try to go further now," Doc said. "We can see the building from here. Looks to me like the first lights we saw are on some kind of towers."

Flying insects surrounded Sam. He ignored them, knowing from experience that fighting them did little good.

They found a grove of trees and high weeds where the ground wasn't too wet. From there they could see the fenced area. Now and then they could even see beings moving about under the lights, but they were too far away and the light wasn't good enough for Sam to make out much about them.

They settled into the weeds for the night.

After a long time, with hopeful thoughts about the morrow, Sam drifted into sleep. On this night the eyes that watched him were dimmer, the screams less audible.

He came awake and alert with the coming of the sun. Doc was already stirring, watching the fenced area carefully. Sam moved carefully up beside him. Rose still slept, her face turned away from the light.

"The lights were on a tower," Doc said in a low voice. "That thing at the tower is some kind of ship, I'd guess." He peered into the distance. "I've heard old people tell stories about ships men used to have—ships that traveled to the moon and the near planets before things fell apart. I've even heard they sent out some star ships."

"Have you seen any people down there?"

Doc nodded. "Yes." He gave Sam a cheerful look, awaiting reaction. "On the basis of what I've seen this place isn't your Central Control, Sam. No uniforms, no military discipline. And some of the people I've seen down there are females."

Sam nodded slowly, letting the information soak in. "Are you sure, Doc?"

"No. But you watch for yourself, Sam."

He fell silent and Sam turned back to the fenced area, trying to fill the void within him with what he saw, still hoping, but no longer expectant.

A vehicle drove from a shed across rough terrain toward the tower area where the ship stood poised. Men got out of the vehicle. It was nothing like an elecar. The men went into the tower building.

Doc said: "I think that thing they're driving is fueled with some kind of chemical. The one on the road was that way too."

Sam felt a sense of shock and outrage. "No chemical vehicles," he said.

"That's one of your laws on the road, isn't it? Out here it's only another reason why what we're looking at can't be your Central Control."

"Maybe this is an outpost. Maybe Central Control is on further."

Doc smiled at him and Sam read pity in the smile.

"We'll ask," Doc said. "I guess the thing to do is for me to go up and knock on the gate. If they shoot me or knock me in the head and drop me in a stew pot then you can take Rose and push on."

"I'll go," Sam said, standing up.

"Not you, Sam. I'm older, tougher and stringier.

My job. You took charge inside the road and that was right. But just now I don't trust your instincts. You don't really give a damn."

Sam shook his head. "It's still my game."

Doc stood up casually alongside him, smiled once agreeably, and gave Sam a push backwards. Sam slipped in the weeds, fought for his balance and found it. By then it was too late. Doc was halfway to the fence.

"Just watch," he yelled back over his shoulder.

Behind him Sam heard Rose come awake. She rustled through the weeds and moved in beside him. Together they watched Doc move up closer to the fence, saw those inside observe him. Armed men ran toward Doc from inside the fence. Doc raised his hands amiably and walked toward a closed gate. Voices behind the fence called staccato commands in a language Sam did not understand.

Doc stopped in front of the gate, hands still high. He talked to two men with leveled guns. Finally the gate was opened and Doc went through it.

The men guarded him carefully. They walked him toward a complex of low buildings and Sam lost sight of him as they disappeared behind the first of them.

In an agony of suspense Sam and Rose waited. The sun came out and was warm on them and they grew hungry. Once quick, grey clouds scudded in from the ocean and they were pelted with rain, but the clouds blew on with the wind and the sun came out again.

"A long time," Sam said.

"It'll be all right," Rose said. "I feel it."

Sam nodded.

They waited.

The sun was almost down when Doc reappeared. The same two men were with him, but this time no guns were in evidence. The two men and Doc came out of the complex of buildings together, talking and gesturing—smiling. Doc led them back toward the fence and the gate he'd entered. When they were close enough for Sam to make out Doc's expression he could see that Doc's face was composed.

The two men opened the gate and lounged near it. Doc came through while the men waited.

"It's okay," Doc yelled. "You can come in. They're from South America—Argentina. They're friendly."

Sam looked Doc over carefully. His eyes seemed okay, his voice normal.

"Wait another minute," he said to Rose in a whisper. "Let him get up close."

They waited.

"It's okay," Doc said soothingly. "This place used to be some kind of space center. The people inside are part of an expedition sent here to inspect it, find out about how things are. They won't hurt us." He looked at Sam. "They're especially interested in talking to you, Sam. They have some pictures of your roadworld, but they've never been able to talk to anyone from it, and they've lost some people trying to make contact."

Sam stood up. He was stiff from the tension of watching.

They followed Doc back to the gate.

* * *

THE MAN they assigned to talk to Sam had five names. It was Ramon de something something Alvarado. Sam never could get the two missing middle names right, although he was told them several times. Ramon was a small man with very black eyes, older than Sam by ten years, but not so

old that he did not view Rose with the appreciation of the born art lover. He was a solemn man with a seldom smile and a soft manner. He wore clean coveralls. His skin was about two shades darker than Sam's. His gestures were very quick and coordinated. Sam liked him instantly.

He said to Sam, after they'd been at it for a time: "You then believe that this Central Control of yours may be on to the south of us?"

Sam sat there in a hard chair and realized how quickly Ramon had gotten the story and how little Sam knew of him and his world. He wasn't offended about it, only admiring of the technique.

"It should be in this area," Sam said.

Ramon shook his head. "There's nothing to the north or south of us until your road begins. It would begin about the place you last escaped from it."

"Along the sea, further north, aren't there places where old ones live?"

"No. There are three main roads. They cross where you have told me your barracks was. The roads run east to the mountains and west to what was once known as the Mississippi River."

"And there's nothing to the south?" Sam asked calmly.

"No. We've explored all of the area around us in great detail. We've flown over it, photographed it, and sent teams to look over any area which seemed promising. Unless your Central Control is underground then we've not found it."

"Maybe it could be underground then," Sam said stubbornly.

Ramon nodded politely. "How would one ever find it then? And surely there would be some sign of activity around it."

"I don't know about that," Sam said. "But I have to find it. Or at least try to find it."

Ramon opened a map. He showed Sam a finger of land jutting down, surrounded by seas.

"We are here," he said, pointing about a third of the way down the east

side of the map. "To the south of us exists only jungle and jungle people—a few tribes of flesh eaters—very dangerous. The same applies inland, over the route you traveled. You were very lucky to have made it through."

"We traveled at night," Sam said.

"That could help. But some men hunt at night."

Sam shrugged and looked at the map again. To the south of where he'd pointed the present location there were many areas designating cities.

"These cities are all gone?"

Ramon nodded. "For more than a hundred years. The ones on the west coast of Florida lasted a little longer."

"What did it?" Sam asked. "They taught us in road school that there was a time when the lawless ones became numerous enough and dangerous enough so that they were expelled from behind the fences. The roads were made and maintained for those who believed in the law. The old books I found and read predated that time and told me nothing about what actually happened."

"There was world famine," Ramon said. "There was a war over the control of energy sources. There was a short nuclear war. Then there was nerve gas and some germs that no one seemed to be able to do much about after they were loosed." He shook his head sadly. "In Russia there is nothing. Parts of China shine in the dark. In England a few men still live in deep caves. A few countries fared better, but no one survived without loss. We planned this expedition for years before we had the will and energy to accomplish it. Our population is now up to almost half a million, but we are still wracked, year after year, with epidemics which are caused by mutations of the viruses from those old wars. But it abates a little."

Sam nodded. He'd seen men drop on the roads from the brown flux, men whose vaccinations obviously hadn't "taken."

"Your people here must be more resistant to it naturally than mine," Ramon said wistfully.

"Perhaps they are outside the road areas," Sam said. "But do you mean the disease that brings high fever and brown spots? The one which clogs

the lungs with fluids?" Ramon nodded.

"They give us a vaccination shortly after birth which is ninety percent successful in controlling it," Sam said.

"And you have had that vaccination?"

"Of course." Sam bared his left arm. High up on the shoulder there was a tiny red weal. "Here," he said.

"Do you know anything else about the vaccination you can tell our people?" Ramon asked excitedly.

"No. I received it as a baby. It's routine."

"Would you allow me to take a sample of your blood?"

"Certainly you may," Sam said. "We've had a small flare up of it. We've lost a few of our people. It appears to have run its course for now, but one can never be sure. Over the years of my life it has taken my people like weeds take a garden." He spread his hands expressively. "But I know little of medicine. I will tell them. They will want to examine you, take your blood, examine it, perhaps do other things." He stopped for a moment. "It is urgent enough that I should tell them now. Will you excuse me for a moment?"

Sam nodded.

Ramon left and Sam stared around the office, aware of a dull ache inside. There was nothing to see, and no place to go now. *Perhaps.*

When Ramon returned he brought back steaming mugs of coffee. He smiled at Sam's reaction to the taste.

"I've had coffee before," Sam said, "but not like this."

"You've had some sort of substitute," Ramon said. He settled back into a chair.

"Is there any way to contact your road people?" he asked. "We've tried several times. They destroy our planes when they can. They shoot those men we send with white flags towards their fences."

"You're contaminated and unlawful," Sam said. "They want no contact with anyone from outside the fences. They'll meet any intrusion with force."

"But we must intrude," Ramon said. "There are things we can learn from them, things we can teach them."

"They'll fight you."

Ramon thought for a moment. "Where do they get the power that runs the roads?"

"Nuclear power plants. There are five of them.

No one knows how to build them now, but they do know how to service and maintain them. I've seen two of them. There are three others."

"Why are you out here?" Ramon asked.

"I broke the rules and went to prison for doing so. I read books that weren't authorized, I asked questions that weren't supposed to be asked."

"What questions?"

Sam felt a touch of irritation. What difference did it make now.

"Questions about how many people died on the road in the fastlanes. Questions about why people were sentenced to run there." He stopped and remembered another question, one he'd put away and not remembered even under interrogation. "I asked about my father, but I never could come up with the correct way to retrieve the information about him."

"And so they cast you out?" Ramon asked.

Sam shook his head. "Not that way. They put me into a prison. Doc was there, too. He'd gotten in from outside. We escaped together."

"I think you want to go back."

Sam was stung a little. "I want to change it. If I could find what we've been looking for it could be changed." He had a sudden inspiration. "It could also benefit you if I find Central Control. You could talk with them, obtain your information, communicate."

Ramon shrugged eloquently. "We'd be most happy to look further if you can show us a reason."

"The legends say a hot land, an ancient road. Could there be something you've missed to the south of here?"

Ramon considered it. "There used to be a string of islands south of the mainland connected by a road, but the road is gone. And if there was something we'd know it."

"Maybe only if they let you know it," Sam said.

Ramon shook his head. "I'm sorry, Sam. We fly drones at night. They register heat and so register life. There's nothing south."

"It has to be someplace," Sam said. *No Sun South for retirement, no Central Control.*

"It would be possible for them to tell you this legend of Central Control so that a person who was discontented, a person who dreamed, would have a specific place to think on. And they have also told you there were specific places for your old ones. There are not."

Sam tucked what Ramon said away. "All right," he said, giving it up for now.

Ramon gave him a worried look. "But you don't believe what I'm saying?"

"Not yet," Sam said. "I will think on it."

"I'm giving you evidence, not legends."

"I will think on it," Sam said again.

* * *

FOR SEVERAL DAYS a team of medical people probed and examined and sampled Sam. He put up with it stoically, following directions as closely as he could.

All around him people worked. Men laboriously picked apart pieces of old equipment, made copious notes about it, then put it back together

again where they could.

He saw Rose several times. She had been taken over by women who did delicate things to tiny bits of apparatus. She's discovered a gift in that direction and she pursued it tirelessly.

Doc worked with the medical people. Sam saw him constantly during those days of examination. For the first time since Sam had known him he seemed purposeful.

Sam thought about it. Doc had found what he really wanted—a chance to learn. Rose was happy and useful.

After the doctors released him Sam wandered here and there, watching the operation. He was welcomed everywhere, but his fingers were too large and clumsy to help with the work and there was a language barrier with much of the personnel.

He had lived a life of assigned tasks on the road, of ordered work. He found it difficult to seek areas of interest and work there.

He watched them drive the chemical powered vehicles, but he could not bring himself to try them. Such power was forbidden. It was deep in him that such was right and real that there could be no accommodation.

There was a library. It was small and technical. Most of it was in a language that was incomprehensible to him. The rest, the discovered books, were carefully preserved to be returned south.

And so he wandered the base, watching, seeing the things of interest without becoming interested.

Doc was busy. Rose was busy.

He reasoned that if he went on south on his own, searching the area along the old road, if he went places where groups of men couldn't and wouldn't go, that he could do it far better alone. Underground areas couldn't be found by air search.

When he found something he could come back for Doc and Rose.

* * *

HE WAITED for a night when there was no moon. He "borrowed" a rifle and a bag of cartridges for it, left a note saying he'd be back in a few days where Doc and/or Rose would find it, and scaled the fence at a place he'd earlier found.

By morning, following the decaying road south, he was fifteen miles from the camp, burrowed in deep, away from the sea side of the road.

That morning a small flying plane, one he'd seen before, flew over him, but, following some instinct, he kept the bole of a huge tree between himself and the plane. It flew on without significant deviation.

He moved on. When the rations he'd taken ran out he lived on the land as Doc had taught him.

He was not as good at it as Doc, but he didn't starve.

He traveled south, following the old road, looking for anything.

The land he traveled was level and sometimes marshy. There were the ruins of deserted cities and towns to be explored.

There were also people. With a cunning he'd not known he possessed he stayed clear of them, observing them without them observing him. They wore paint on their faces and some of them had filed their teeth to sharp points in front. There were black people and white people, some of the tribes all of one, some all the other, some mixed. They talked a language which sounded familiar to the ear and Sam, if he listened hard enough, could make out an occasional word. But it was a changed language. It owed its birth to street English, to hunts and hunting, to eating and being consumed. It was full of unknowable reference points, half extensive curse words to ward away the bad things around the speaker, and sex.

Sam lived a great deal in the trees during the long, hot days. He would, when morning came and it was dangerous to travel, climb a tree, belt himself in, and try for sleep.

At least at this season the tribesmen who passed below him seldom looked up. The game they sought was ground game, alligators, cranes, wild chickens that roosted in the bushes, cats and dogs.

He wandered the land, staying with the road, making sure to see it all,

to investigate every possibility. It took him far south.

There was nothing.

He found one other main road that connected, one which had come down the center of the land area. He traveled up that one, then back down it.

Nothing. More people, more hunters. The road was huge and deserted and crumbling back into black dust.

There were hundreds—thousands—of buildings, but no people lived in them now. To do so would have invited invaders who had no fixed homes. Besides, old wars and storms and time had ravaged those buildings, turned them into compost heaps occupied by bugs and snakes.

Sam thought that, from what he observed, no one could have built anything extensive underground. At least it couldn't have been built without making such plain to a careful observer. Underground water bubbled too near the surface of much of the land. There were huge swamps. The land was level, only slightly above the sea that strained to dissolve its shores.

When he was finally satisfied he wandered back out to the eastern beaches, attracted by the sea. Somewhere north a few hundred miles there was shelter. Rose and Doc were there.

He knew he should return.

He found a place off the shore. There was an old road that led out to it. When the tide was in the road was low enough so that it was under water. When the tide was out he could, if there was ever any desire to do so, walk ashore.

Someone had built a shack on the half-island in recent years. Whoever had done it had been industrious. Sam found a great hoard of food put up in glass jars. There were tomatoes, berries, beans, even some salted meat. There was some primitive fishing equipment and the waters were alive with fish. The eastern beach fell gently into the water and Sam could walk out and loll and play in the water.

He drowsed there for many days, dreaming. He dreamed of the books

he'd found in the library in the sub-basement of the barracks. Mostly it had been a library of fiction. There'd been a book about a boy named Tom Sawyer and Sam could equate what he did now with what Tom would have done on another stream and in another time. There'd been a book of poetry, which Sam had hardly understood at all, but the words had been lovely, full of mists that burnished his mind as he remembered them. There'd been a huge book called The Bible—a strange book. That was the one he'd been reading when they caught him. They had burned that one first.

He wished he'd had time to read more, time to read all.

He quickly lost whatever ability he'd ever had to plan and decide, to do what should be done. He knew he wanted Rose, but he lacked the ability to admit to himself that he could fail, to square within himself the fact that he couldn't give her what he wanted to give her, that it couldn't ever be all right and all well for her. No trip back up to the world of roads—this one a triumphant trip.

Sometimes he could almost laugh at himself for ever believing in anything, for nothing was as he'd thought it, all was sham and pretense.

It was just very, very difficult for him to begin to learn to live without dreams. And so, for a time, he substituted the memories from the books.

The days were hot and the sky was mostly blue. He ate from the stores and caught fish and dug clams. Once a plane circled the island for a time, but finally flew on. He was not sure whether they'd seen him or not, and really didn't much care.

Rose would forget him. Rose would be better without him.

He fell into a period when his energy seemed sapped completely and he would lay in the shack all day without ever moving much, without going out into the sun, then come to life later and prowl the night restlessly, unable or afraid to sleep.

The dreams came back.

To fight them he had days in which, with great bursts of forced activity, he would clean the shack, hammer nails into place, mend awnings, and sweep the sand back out onto the beach.

Now and then he would swim recklessly out into the ocean, swim out as far as he could, until his strength was gone, then see if he could make it back. Each time he went farther.

How long was forever?

* * *

HE DIDN'T KNOW what awakened him. Perhaps it was the same thing that drove him to turn about in the water before all strength was gone. Perhaps some sixth sense of danger, some racial thing. But in his restless sleep he heard them coming, heard *something*, and did come awake and was up and had the rifle in his hands in seconds.

They were coming over the causeway. The tide was out. There were a number of them. Sam counted a dozen. More moved down the beach on the far side of the causeway. They approached with great caution and quiet, intent upon getting out to his island. They were small people, male and female, all nude but for weapon belts. They were a mixed tribe, blacks and whites.

He had mixed emotions about them finding him. He found that he had no fear about it.

Some carried spears, some carried bows and quivers of arrows. He saw a few firearms.

One had to try. He put one bullet into the road in front of them on the off chance they didn't know he was there and would retreat when they did know. It was an unlucky shot. It ricocheted off the road and whined through the middle of the body of the leader of the group. He screamed a scream that seemed like a refrain from old memories to Sam. Sam screamed too.

The others turned back, retreating to the far beach a hundred yards away. They dragged the wounded man back with them, the leader. He screamed all the way and Sam covered his ears finally, thinking that the screams were of pain.

They were not.

On the far beach Sam watched the group surround the fallen leader. A

man was appointed. He butchered the wounded one with quick, sure strokes of a knife.

In a little while smoke arose from a new fire they built. They congregated around it and Sam could hear them singing old songs about a better day. He could understand the words, for the song was slow. He could smell the cooking that was happening.

He thought about putting the gun in his own mouth, but the accident of killing again had even ruined that for him.

Now it made no difference.

When light came the tribe vanished. They left two men along the beach, hiding back in the first row of trees. Watchers.

Sam waited until he could get a clear shot, then got the most careless of watchers with a head shot. That brought a shout of triumph from the other watcher and a new party that night. Cautiously they moved this one back into the jungle, where Sam couldn't see, but only hear and smell.

Sometime soon he knew they'd figure it out and swim to the island at various points, assuming they could swim. They would take him from all sides.

He waited until the middle of the next night and tried to swim away, going out to sea for a time, then letting the current carry him on to the south, thinking he might float in beyond them and make an escape. But they were watching.

A group followed his progress down the beach, calling to him, making no attempt to go to his island while he was off it.

He saw it was no use and swam back.

Things settled into a sort of siege, but not one that Sam understood. For example they did not bother him when he fished or ate. Sometimes they would send a single scout out toward him when he dropped into a tormented sleep, a sleep where all men died around him, but sometimes they would allow him whatever surcease sleep gave.

When he refrained from shooting at them for a time, trying to

withdraw, they would pick a volunteer from their number and send him out to prance up and down the beach, hair flying in the constant sea wind, luminous eyes rolling. Then out the causeway.

He would scream words at Sam, bowing and cavorting.

"Get away, get away," Sam would call softly.

Sam drew an imaginary line on the causeway and he would shoot when the invader crossed that.

But then he would allow the survivors to draw their fallen ally back to the beach and the jungle and the fire would be rekindled and the sounds of the dancing would begin, accompanied by shouts and drums.

Sometimes, when the night of feasting and orgy was done, the survivors would all come to the beach in the early morning carrying torches. They would line up along the beach in some kind of weird order, an order settled by the new chief. He was a man of ponderous girth and lank, grey hair.

They would all then genuflect toward Sam's island, vying with each other in devotion.

And Sam knew he'd made a godhood of sorts. He was their god of death, and yet he fed them.

The ammunition grew low.

Soon he would be their guest at a very great celebration. A very special guest.

* * *

HE REGAINED some kind of sanity, some ability to see what was happening and be rational about it on a day when the sky was very yellow and the waves were oily calm. He took the gun and put the barrel under a rigid cross piece of the shack and bent the barrel out of true. He threw the ammunition into the sea. He knew he should never have taken the gun. Without it he could have died, but that was not an answer to killing.

When evening came the sea had picked up, booming its waves in

against the sand beach, running high up onto the island, white water. The wind increased until it whined around him and a driving rain came.

He swam against the waves straight out, in the old way he'd once attempted, swam until the island could no longer even be imagined. Then he let the waves push him back toward shore, fighting them a little, not swimming, but only floating.

Somehow, as he'd instinctively known they would, they'd sensed that he'd abandoned the island. When he floated back in near to the shore he thought he could make them out. They moved restlessly along the beach in the night, shadows, spread out, searching.

The wind had begun to let up a little, but heavy rains still fell. Sam felt very tired. He wasn't sure that he could make it back into shore if the time didn't come quickly when he could try.

He floated on until he thought the time was right and that he'd evaded them for the moment. Then he swam leadenly toward the beach, waded out, and headed into the jungle.

He'd had an advantage while he was in the sea, but he thought they would soon overcome it. He figured that they'd search minutely down the beach. If the rain didn't wash away all his footsteps they'd find his sea exit. If the rain did wash his tracks away then they'd look for something else. Maybe they could smell him.

He would have to be clever. He moved on through the jungle, trying not to make noise, not to blunder.

He found the ruins of an old church and he slept there for a time, climbing high up into the remains of the bell tower. From there he could see all around.

In the morning he was still tired, but not so tired as he'd been. His resilient body was recovering. He looked through the apertures in the bell tower and saw them out there searching, still far away, but approaching.

He leaned back against the wall and daydreamed for a moment. There was still time. He thought of his father and that time of his life, of how his father had just been there one day and not there the next. He thought of the road school and realized again suddenly that to teach by fear of death

was bad. He remembered his tiny library, the books he'd discovered and gratefully read.

He thought momentarily of Doc. Mostly he thought of Rose.

The thinking of her, the remembering, made him get to his feet and climb down the church tower.

They were getting closer. As he stood at the church entrance he could hear them calling to each other out there.

He began to think again rationally. They would pursue him until they caught him or until he made absolute escape. But perhaps there was a way to make them lose interest, again trade persistence for fear.

He went back down his own trail as he best remembered it. Within sight of the church there was a huge live oak tree, thickly covered with branches. He caught at a low branch and made his way up the tree.

The thing was that he no longer had to make decisions to kill because he was being ordered to make those decisions. Out here what he'd been in training for was his life—not death. And if that life was threatened then he had to fight back— no matter how distasteful that was, no matter how weary of death he was.

They passed underneath his tree. There were about thirty of them, a motley group, ill armed, but moving silently. They spied the church and he heard them conferring about it without him being able to make out the outcome of the parlay.

He waited until they moved on and then came down from the tree carefully and shadowed them.

When they got close to the church they rushed at it. Some of them screamed, some of them ran silently.

Only one stood away, looking at the tracks on the ground, frowning. That one carried a short spear.

Sam watched him retrace steps until he got up to the tree where Sam stood shadowed. Then he caught the smaller man, took the spear from him, and transfixed him while the savage screamed.

Far away there were other screams as the pursuers searched the empty church.

He carried the dead one out into an open spot where they could not fail to find him. He took the spear and beat on a tree until he could hear them coming. Then he fled away.

Half an hour later, when he came to a tall tree, he climbed it and was rewarded by the sight of a plume of smoke rising from the jungle. The pursuers had stopped for a quick repast, having lost their number one tracker.

Sam nodded to himself and moved on. If they followed him the trick could and would be used again.

Now, north.

He would travel by night again. But for this time, when he was unsure of pursuit, he would travel both day and night.

He stopped for water at a flowing stream where the water ran quick and bubbly and good by the smell and taste. He laughed at his own reflection in the water.

I have learned something about myself, he thought. And I didn't have to die to do it.

* * *

FROM WHERE Jackman lay observing he could see the long, wide building which straddled the road past the Seasouth Interchange. A parking area at the building's edge held a crowd of cars. There was a splotch of planted ground in front of the building and there were palm trees waving in the stiff, cool breeze. There were welcome signs here and there and there were jovial attendants in funny hats who helped new arrivals unload. There was even a stand that dispensed free orange juice to the oldsters and visitors who parked and entered the building.

Jackman knew that the procedure inside the building was that you were briefed and equipped for the trip south, for the exit to retirement, the perfect, lazy life. Inside the building he could almost visualize the tearful goodbyes being whispered, for Seasouth was a separate nation and

unvisitable by the young lest they grow dissatisfied with their present lot. Seasouth was a new world to those who attained it, a world of leisure where all of the cares of regimentation and law could be forgotten. A good world, if the propaganda was to be believed.

Parked along the sides of the immense building, on service roads, there were Antelopes and a few Elephants, the sight of which would be enough to whet the appetites of the possible new owners.

Jackman had now been watching the building for two days. He'd been tireless about it, watching with that particular intensity which was a part of him. It was difficult to see all of the building and so he'd moved carefully from place to place. He was illegally outside the fence and he didn't want to be caught outside. So he'd stayed concealed as best he was able, taking only calculated risks.

There were guards below. They weren't dressed like guards, but they were guards. Jackman knew some of the guards by sight and could guess at the identity of others. All of the guards were senior Red Roadmen.

Jackman knew the way retirement was supposed to operate. When a man reached a certain age he could retire if his work record had been good. If he was bond-married and his bond-wife had been with him for a specified number of years and the marriage had produced the required number of children (or if the applicant could succeed in getting that requirement waived), then the retiree must sign certain agreements. He must sign over his roadworld property in exchange for Seasouth property. He must sign a written agreement that he/she would not interfere in the workings of the roadworld. That meant no letters, no visits, no communication. But families were now a rather loose arrangement and that was no real problem. In the building below the retirees turned in their old identity for new identities. No longer was he worker/technician/roadman. He was now a retired member of Seasouth—a beach loller.

And all that seemed good.

And it was something for Jackman to consider.

Now.

Jackman had been offered retirement. No desk job, no continuation on

the road, but retirement. He'd been promised an Elephant and unlimited mileage if he wanted to prowl the Seasouth roads.

And, instead of disgrace, he'd been given a medal, had a parade held in his honor at the road school, and been allowed to drive himself to the Interchange portals to warm heaven.

And only a tiny sixth sense of danger had kept him on keel, had kept him from believing that it all wasn't all right.

Plus conjecturing about *why* and *when*.

Number One: During recent days he'd made an illegal raid wherein he'd promised state compensation without having been given authority so to do. Pardonable, but not easily pardonable.

Number Two: An influential citizen, probably some kind of guild leader or a man high in the black hierarchy had complained about that raid. True, the complaint had been swept under the rug, but...

Number Three: He'd had a car shot out from under him in a losing battle with a fugitive, now positively identified as Sam Church.

Number Four: Sam Church had escaped through the fence back to the big outside with two confederates presumed to be wreckers.

Number Five: The attacks on the road continued and seemed to be growing in ferocity.

And so he was offered retirement?

Possible, but not probable.

He was under no strict time limit to report. He supposed that sooner or later, if he failed to arrive and report that someone would start looking for him, but not yet.

And so he'd poked along an access road and found a way to get under the fence. He'd hidden his car and gone outside and walked to where he now lay.

Down below him, on each of the two days, retirees arrived. They said their goodbyes, had their parties, then moved on back into the enormous

building for further orientation.

At night men came out of the building bearing title papers. They searched the parking lot and drove old Beavers away for reissue to new workers.

And no one ever came out the back of the building. The Antelopes and Elephants would have gathered dust except that they were hosed down each morning so that they were perpetually shining and ready for new ownership.

No one.

Jackman nodded to himself. "Perfect," he said to that no one.

It *was* perfect. A man who retired had finished those years which were useful to the roadworld. If he stayed someone must now support that man and his wife, pay him now for idleness, pay him to carp and complain, and clog the medical facilities. He must be allowed to retain and pass on what he'd gained over the years, his possessions, his elecar, his credits. Very untidy.

Down below Jackman the road came out of the rear of the building, one giant lane south. It ran straight and true until it was lost beyond the horizon. Jackman doubted it ran much farther than that.

Far be it from the powers to waste work.

Somewhere inside the enormous building they processed the bodies. The night before some large trucks had come and loaded boxes and left north. The side panels on the trucks said nothing to indicate what was being transported.

Fertilizer?

They would destroy all the private possessions. No one would ever know.

Jackman decided that it would have been a real joke on him if he'd blithely entered the buildings, had his drink or orange juice, shook hands here and there.

He didn't laugh about it.

Jackman wondered sourly if the orange juice was spiked. He decided not. That would be too obvious. Besides, some of those who came to see their old ones off for the new adventure, drank orange juice from the festive stand. There could be two kinds.

There was a big problem facing Jackman. He really didn't care what happened to the anonymous old ones. A man lived so long and then died.

Jackman was stoical about that. How the man wound up his affairs and what happened to his body thereafter was of little import.

But what was he, Gayle Jackman, to do? It was for certain that he wasn't going to enter the place below.

Was there a chance for him to continue in the roadworld, to hide someplace there? He thought about that for a long time and decided against it. He'd chased and caught too many men. Staying inside and trying to hide there just wasn't a usable solution.

That meant moving outside. He didn't much like that idea, but it was all there was.

Sam Church had made it.

Jackman grinned. If he knew Sam Church at all he was now sure that his ex-riding partner had gone looking for Central Control. That was laughable. Every senior Red Roadman with any brains at all knew that Central was a fairy tale to impress the young ones, the recruits.

So was Seasouth.

He wasn't a part of the Seasouth joke as he'd been of the Central Control myth. That angered him.

He wondered just how many of the senior Reds knew about Seasouth? And who decided who would know?

He could go back in and spread the word a few places, but what would that do for him?

It would mean nothing to him—nothing at all.

He checked his equipment. He had on semi-regs and sturdy leatherette boots. He had a knife in the right boot and he had his purse pistol, non-regulation, but useful at times. He had his red hat with the faded gold filigree. He had his best, double-sized cloak, the one which unhooked for sleep. It would be of use, for it was cool.

It would be warmer as he got farther south.

Someplace, assuming he made it back, there would be a use for his particular talents. And if not he could go out now or then as something other than farm fertilizer.

He was a hunter.

There was a thing to do first.

He hiked back to his exit point, watched it for a time to make sure that no one else was watching it and waiting for him. He moved bushes and slid under the first fence, found the dead spot in the second and climbed it. The third was the hardest, but there was a tree which could be climbed and dropped over.

He found his car and lifted the armament hood. The belts were two thirds full, enough to tear up a town.

He dialed the entry combination and entered and activated. Carefully, avoiding any overt or illegal or dangerous maneuver, he drove the fast lane to the Seasouth Interchange.

A smiling black roadman stopped him at the entry gate. He took the papers which Jackman proffered.

"Ah, sir, so good to see you. They've called from inside several times asking about you. I think you'll find some of your old friends both inside and in the good lands waiting for you."

Jackman smiled at the young black roadman who smiled back.

"May I enter?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Don't call ahead," Jackman said. "I want my arrival to be a surprise."

The black clad nodded his agreement, pleased to be of service to a retiring Red Roadman.

Jackman drove carefully on.

The first target was the orange juice stand. It really meant nothing, but it was offensive to him. He lined up on it very carefully and chopped it and its attendant to bits with one careful shot.

He wheeled the car around. On the side road, in sights of his guns, there was an Elephant. Jackman advanced on it. The old habits were hard to shake, but he conquered them and blew it to pieces with three shots.

Men ran toward their cars in the parking lot. Jackman recognized some of the runners. He got a covey as they sprinted through an open area where he could train his guns. Three at once, an assassin's dream. They fell together and only one crawled away and then collapsed bloodily.

He wheeled up and down the rows, catching others at their cars. He blew vehicles and men into red ruins. When no life showed he moved to the front of the building and fired into it, shooting at anything that moved inside, peppering the building with fire shells until flames burst out of windows here and there.

He continued to fire until the red light appeared on the armament board of the vehicle, warning him that his ammunition was at low.

He wheeled slowly out of the lot. At the exit north a guard was crouched low in the entry-return booth. Jackman drove sedately past the frightened man, not deigning to notice him. He stopped two hundred yards up the road, opened for a moment, and sat listening. Far away to the north he could hear the squee-squee of approaching emergency vehicles. A few minutes only now.

He took his red hat, fondled its familiar shape once more, then cast it out into the road, leaving it there, closing again. In the mirror he could see it, as he accelerated away, its red and gold glistening in the light of the sun.

He ran the car hard for the side road. He knew that his chances were bad, that they would probably catch him. He'd spent too much time at this latest work of love. But he was smiling.

Behind him he could see a few dazed survivors come out of the wrecked front of the building as he headed north.

* * *

IN THE SPRING Sam accompanied Doc and Ramon and enough others to be called an "expedition" back to the north, back to the land of the girl they'd known only as the Leader.

The trip was long and arduous, but Sam liked it. It was good to get back into the woods, back into a place where no one, not even Doc, now excelled him.

Around them, as they traveled north, the land was alive with game. Birds which once had been domesticated had gone wild. Some had prospered. And there were deer, rabbit, squirrel in the woods. Man had destroyed man, or at least cut his numbers. Other things, the wild things, had enjoyed time for recovery.

Around the expedition, as they slept and marched, as they explored, the trees burst out with early buds and with leaves. Song birds sang, harassed by what had once been domesticated cats, now larger, still tentatively friendly to man, but more careful. Wild dogs ran in packs.

They found the Leader's old city with ease, but nothing else was the same. There were many signs in the city of recent heavy attacks, there were new graves, some of them already dug open and robbed. The city was empty of live inhabitants, deserted, silent.

The expedition camped near the old city for several days conferring. Sam listened and smiled and slept by day.

At nights, when all was quiet, he prowled the old city, listening here, examining there.

On the third night he was successful. He captured an old man come to dig in a basement. The old man wore the tattered, but still tell-tale white robes of the Leader's troops.

"Where is she?" He questioned. He put away his knife for the old man was frightened enough.

"She became very sick," the old man said stiffly, his eyes still unconvinced that Sam and his friends weren't going to devour him. "After she got real sick they came from the skies and found us. Many died. It was chaos. I don't know for certain what happened to her thereafter. Some said she was killed. Some others said that a group took her away, inland, away from the roads and this city." He shook his head. "She was very sick when they took her, a fever in the brain."

Doc gave the man a bowl of food which was gratefully accepted and gobbled.

"The people of the city who survived have scattered," the old man continued. "They hunt now as the others hunt. When the hunger grows bad in the cold months now past they hunted each other again, although she forbade it of them. But it was a bad winter. A very bad winter."

"She went then, to the west?" Doc asked.

"I heard she did."

Doc smiled at the old man, who was not really so much older than he was.

"Have you a place to go?" he asked.

"Yes. I have family."

"Go back to them then," Doc said.

When the old man had gone they sat around the fire again.

"We must be back within three months," Ramon said. "The records say that the first of the starships is due to return then. Someone should be there to meet those who return. Someone."

"If the starship does return," Doc said.

"Yes. There is of course always that possibility," Ramon admitted." He sighed. "I am anxious to view such a one as you and Sam have described, anxious to help her if we can." He nodded at Sam and Doc. "We will proceed west for a time."

And so they proceeded carefully west. Away from the roadland there

was even more wildlife. The land was tangled woods and the ruins of old cities and towns, all of them looted by a dozen generations. They hiked, by night and slept during the lengthening days. The days grew warmer. Ramon wanted to hike by day, but Doc would not agree, even though the party was well armed. Instead he made them put out guards around the day camps, move carefully. Sam smiled his agreement. Doc had stayed alive for a long time that way. He was too old to change and Sam was glad. He had learned and lived in Doc's fashion.

Sometimes, as they traveled, before he drifted off into sleep during the days, or while they trudged along at nights, Sam thought of the way back, of Rose's eyes when she saw him.

"I knew you weren't dead," she said. "I knew it all along. When they could find no sign of you still I knew. There is a place inside my head that knew." She shook her head at him. "For a while I couldn't see if you would come back, but then I knew you would."

"I had to come back," he said simply. "Life is out here, with you and me, with Doc. It isn't up inside those fences. It isn't where the cars run."

Somehow, in the returning, they found what they'd had on the trip south, found a sharing and belonging that was good for both of them. And in the fall there would be a child.

Rose told him positively that it would be a son. Doc grinned about that. Rose was seldom wrong.

Sam had experienced no desire to see the roads on the way north with the expedition. That part of his life vanished with the winds of winter that had driven them south.

Doc said to him: "She's like her mother, Ann," about Rose. "I thought you were dead and you were not. I thought Ann's husband was dead, but she never believed it. I lived with her, but every-time the door opened, every time a stranger came, she looked away from me." He nodded. "But, in a way, Rose is almost my daughter. Almost."

A child.

Sam dreamed about the child-to-be and told Doc of the dream, as they traveled. He dreamed that the child's world would be far better than his

had been.

Doc only nodded.

* * *

THE WORLD they passed through was a ghost world, populated by spectres and goblins. Out here, away from the roads there had been real extermination. What man could not accomplish the weather had done. Floods had come as dams crumbled. Bitter winters had taken toll. The survivors had fought each other, died from disease, died from hunger, unable to cope with a world grown savage around them.

They passed through one city which had been almost obliterated by some one or some thing in the recent past. The buildings had been leveled to ground level, as if some huge wind had passed through and taken all above ground with it. It was not old bomb damage for there was no crater, no lava like residue of that ancient, deadly heat.

Sam and Doc checked cellars carefully. There was no life. No one had lived in the city for a long time.

"What is it?" Ramon asked Doc. "Why?"

Doc shook his head. "I don't know. Something took the city down and carried it away, piece by piece." He looked up at the sky. "Maybe someone or something came down and saw what was left and wanted a memento of us, something to remember us by."

They spent two days looking the area over, but there was no real clue as to what had happened. They took pictures, made readings, took soil specimens, whatever they could find to pore over.

Then onward.

At the edge of the plains they came upon a tribal society made up of thousands of warriors. The tribe believed that all who were not of the tribe were evil and must die. They built great stone pavilions for their own dead, using the residue of forgotten cities for material. They were ruled by a matriarchy, did not eat other men, and painted pictures with great talent in the old buildings they occupied.

Only by flight did the expedition avoid a confrontation of major proportions.

"We will begin to start back to the south, continuing to travel west at the same time," Ramon directed. "That way we will have a start toward home."

* * *

A WEEK LATER they came upon the Leader. Perhaps it would be more correct to say the Leader came to them.

She reached out, as they marched in the night. She touched Sam's mind in gladness.

"I see you out there, Sam. And I am glad to see you. You come at a very good time. I will speak with those you bring. I shall teach them what I know of the roads, let them examine what we have captured." She paused. "Proceed on and I will lead you."

Behind him, Sam heard Doc give a whoop of joy and the two men beat each other on the back, much to the puzzlement of Ramon and the others in the party.

"Contact," Doc called to Ramon. "Just follow us. She's alive."

And so, in a day, they found the new city of the Leader, a new population of white clads. The city was smaller, far away from the roads.

She'd taken over as her headquarters what must long ago have been a building of law. It was still in comparatively good shape, not heavily touched by the years of chaos that had destroyed all.

Guards allowed Doc and Sam to take Ramon inside. The Leader awaited them there, her face a little more wan and wasted than before, older, and more ethereally lovely.

Inside there were no guards.

"You still don't look well," Sam said to her. "You are very thin."

"It was a fever," she said inside him. "I could not cure it. Many things I can cure. When it got to its height I lost all control. I could not—see. Then

those of the roads came and destroyed my city and my people." She nodded. "Survivors brought me here. I am stronger now each day. Soon I will again be ready for them, this time in a new way. I went at them foolishly before. I tried to attack the roads piecemeal, tried to overwhelm their many with my few. That never would have worked. Now I have a new general. This time I won't be a mere annoyance. This time I will smash them completely." She looked up at Sam. "My general approaches now. I believe that he is an old acquaintance of yours."

A man entered. He wore a long cloak, a cloak that was regulation. Sam's heart jumped as he saw the cloak, saw the man inside it. The last time he'd seen the man had been through the window of a vehicle after they'd smashed his car.

"Jackman!" he said. He started for the man.

Jackman's huge hands opened and closed. He grinned at Sam, ready for anything, waiting to hear from his Leader.

"No, Sam," the Leader ordered. "He needs me as I need him. He's never had anyone to believe in. Now he believes in me. I tell him I'm only human, but it does no good. He realizes I can die, but that doesn't make me mortal to him. He is damaged by all of the years he's spent being what he was." She smiled. "It might be amusing to see the two of you fight. One of you would die because such is the way you are—both of you. And I can read him, too. He wants to fight you. You are an old disappointment to him. But you will not fight. He came among us and he was hungry and quite sick. I healed him as much as he can be healed. He is, in his way, a genius..."

"He kills all that he contacts," Sam said.

"Until now," she thought.

Jackman stared out at the three visitors with hooded eyes, waiting, still ready, but quiet.

"Shake hands with him, Sam," the Leader ordered. "Once you were close to him. Once you were friends. Now I want you to be friends again, as much friends as you can be. Circumstances made him your enemy. He knew then only how to live within the system. You threatened it. Therefore to him you were wrong."

"Why is he outside?" Sam asked.

She smiled. "Shake hands and I will let him tell you. It's a story you'll enjoy."

"I know of nothing he could say which I'd enjoy. I see no use in him. He's evil."

"To you—once. Perhaps not so much now. You are allies again." She nodded. "Shake his hand. Listen to his story. And remember, he teaches me things."

Sam nodded. He stepped forward. The two men gripped hands. It was not a contest. Jackman nodded at him.

"Hello, Sam. I survived also."

The Leader looked at Doc and Ramon and then fondly at Sam and Jackman. She said aloud: "You people will tell me of new weapons and refresh us about old weapons." She nodded. "Then Jackman will help me lead my people and their weapons, new and old, to the appointed places."

"Him?" Sam asked.

"Yes. You see the roadworld runs on power."

Jackman nodded.

"There are, Sam, these five nuclear plants..."