

Dean Koontz – Nightmare Journey

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NIGHTMARE JOURNEY

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Dean R.Koontz



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The First Journey:

THE BLACK GLASS

IN the crisp morning, before the worst of the fog had lifted, the Pure humans came into the village, descending the narrow winding road from their fortress, which perched on the edge of the alabaster cliff. In the lead was their General, dressed in milky robes and seated on one of the soundless floating sledges that only the Pures possessed. Two guards sat before him, two behind, all of them well armed.

Yet, from a distance, it was not the General who commanded attention, but the ranks behind him. Fifty Pures walked after the craft, not of the station to warrant the expenditure of a sledge's irreplaceable power plant for their own ease. Their cloaks were not radiantly white like their General's clothes, but a chalky, color that hinted of blue. Their capes flapped about them in the perpetual wind that scoured the cliff wall, and their boots crunched on cinders and gravel. The size of this contingent was what fascinated the people of the village, for no more than a dozen Pures had ever congregated in public before. They numbered so few these days that they could not risk massing in too confined an area beyond the unbreachable fortress walls.

The procession reached the bottom of the descending trail and struck across the half-mile of open land separating it from the village, which nestled in a hollow between two arms of dense forest. It moved past the monstrous formation of bacteria jewel-els, whose light guided travelers by night, and each of the marchers was stained fantastically by the glittering fingers of violet and emerald that reached two hundred yards in all directions from the landmark. The Pures seemed, in the instant, like mechanically gay puppets, chameleon dancers with a certain military grace.

More than 25,000 years earlier a nation whose name was now as unknown as the name Ozamandius had engineered a lethal bacteriophage related to the botulinus family but flourishing in a crystalline form. In such a state it could not infect men. However, a second bacterium, utterly harmless in itself, was engineered to break down the crystal and release the killing botulinus in a second state that *was* deadly to mankind. They seeded their enemy's land with crystals, allowed them to grow, then infiltrated the catalyst to bring destruction. Because the lethal bacterium had not been given reproductive capabilities in its noncrystalline form, and because the catalyst was a short-lived, sterile organism, biological warfare could be conducted as cleanly as if a gun had been used. Plague death could be applied in doses, destroying just so many of the enemy as necessary to bring them to their knees—leaving most of them to be ruled after the occupation.

The faces of the marching Pures were shattered glass images, a thousand shades of green and blue. Their cloaks exploded with rich luminescence.

Jask watched them from the second-floor room he had taken in the village inn, his face concealed by the shadows of the thrusting eaves on the many-gabled structure, further obscured by heavy umber drapes, which he had pushed open only far enough to have a view. He monitored the progression of the Pures both with a sense of wonder at the stately picture they made and with a growing terror at the understanding that they had descended from their fortress to find him and destroy him.

His respect for his own kind was such that he knew they could not fail to find him. In hours he would be captured. Certain of this but still unable to abandon all hope, he drew further back from the window and continued to watch.

From a distance it had been the ranks behind the sledge that had been arresting, but as the party moved closer, the General was the focus that drew the eye. He was larger than most Pures, a full six feet and weighing perhaps two hundred pounds. His shoulders were broad, supporting a head at once imperial and barbaric. His eyes were set under a shelf of bone that was actually slight but nonetheless primitive in effect. His face was wide, deeply creased and tough, though his nose, delicately boned, was an anachronism that softened the brutal force of that countenance. His mouth was tight, thin-lipped; when he spoke, Jask knew, his voice was harsh and deep. The man carried an air of authority with him like expensive baggage; inside those bags was the lingering odor of death.

The procession halted outside the inn itself, almost directly below Jask's window. To choose the inn

for their first stop was only common sense, for an inn was the center of the town and the source of information. Still, Jask could not shake the conviction that the General was an unnatural precog who had *sensed* his game.

The General and soldiers made no sound to announce their arrival. The visual spectacle alone was sufficient to draw forth a representative of the village.

The innkeeper, a creature named Belmondo, came outside, wiping his hands on his apron and watching the General with a mixture of contempt and fear. His eyes, as large around as Jask's palm, rolled independently of each other in a long, lupine skull. Belmondo's appearance was the result of previous generation gene damage caused by radiation rather than the product of the genetic engineers, for he did not follow any of the patterns most favored by patrons of the Artificial Wombs. Children of Wombs were always beautiful, despite their tainted heritage; Belmondo was simply ugly. His thin, bony hands—with three fingers and two thumbs each—pulled greasy, yellow hair away from his forehead. He licked his lips with a raspy, black tongue and said, “Yes?” His tone suggested a dislike of Pures, which was natural but dangerous in this situation.

“We are looking for a man,” the General said. “His name is Jask. Have you heard of him?”

“No,” Belmondo lied.

“Have you seen him?”

The General was aware of what tricks could be played with words.

Belmondo considered for a moment, then said, “Perhaps it would be better if you could tell me what manner of man you seek. Is he furred or scaled? There have been a few fishy cousins in town of late. Is he one of the cyclopes? They find themselves in disfavor with everyone sooner or later—as if having one eye narrows their mental vision as well. Perhaps he is a feline man? If you could be a bit more specific, you see, I could more likely tell you of him. I know all the business of the town.”

Belmondo, Jask thought, was either foolish or brave—or possessed of a bravery generated *by* foolishness. He knew as well as anyone that when a Pure used the word “man” he meant another Pure, not a creature with altered genes. A Pure refused to acknowledge that the quasi-men of mutation—whether accidental or made by design—were men at all. If Pure theology were to remain intact, such mutated specimens could be considered nothing but animals.

Though Jask, raised in the teachings of the Pure church, would normally have despised Belmondo for his impudence, he welcomed it now that the quasi-man was protecting him. The saucer-eyed Belmondo knew only that Jask had fallen into disfavor with the other Pures of his enclave; that was all the mutant needed to know to justify lying for the sake of a man who might in any other circumstances be considered an enemy.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” the General said. “You may feel quite smug and superior in your cunning now—but if this Jask should go his way unhampered, we will all eventually suffer, Pure and mutated alike.”

Belmondo looked skeptical, but his curiosity had been aroused by the sudden confidential tone in the General's voice.

Upstairs, at the open window, Jask felt ill, chilled by a premonition of disaster. He had not believed that the General would divulge the reason for his flight and for their pursuit of him. The Pures were too closely knit, too snobbish ever to share their inner secrets and shames with those they thought of as a lower species. If they broke the rule of silence now, if they told Belmondo, it was only a measure of how desperately the General wanted to get his hands on Jask.

“The man we seek . . . is an esper,” the General said.

In the quiet, fog-shrouded morning, the words fled the length of the street like a knife drawn across the wet cobblestones, echoing, echoing, hard and urgent.

Standing by the window, Jask received the distant echoes of fear in the minds of the Pure soldiers and in the minds, as well, of the mutated villagers who listened from doorways and windows in other buildings. He could not block the receipt of such agonizingly sharpened emotions.

“You're certain?” Belmondo asked.

Already, as he stood there, his eyes began to stray betrayingly toward Jask's open window.

A ripped open brain . . . cracked like a nut . . . with long, pale fingers stirring through the meat and picking out the choicest morsels . . .

Jask received the terrified visions radiating from Belmondo and knew the mutant feared espers too much to protect one of them. Turning, stumbling clumsily over an ottoman, he fell, taking the floor square against his chin. He almost passed out as a hard twist of pain ground through him, and he tasted blood as his lower lip split open.

He stood, holding to the bedpost, tried to regain his usual calm. This charging off like a damaged power sledge was no good at all. He was a Pure, one of the Chosen, and he must always remember to act with dignity that his heritage demanded, even if he had been rejected by his own kind.

He opened the door of his room and looked both ways down the musty hall of the inn's sleeping quarters. When the search party had arrived, Belmondo had been downstairs preparing the dough for breakfast pastries. If he had accomplished no more than that in readying to feed his boarders, the average guest would not yet have arisen—unless stirred by the General out-side. The corridor was empty.

He stepped out of the room, closed the door quietly. Reaching out with his esp power, he touched the minds of the Pures and of the General, found that they had not yet entered the inn but that they would do so in a few moments. He walked swiftly to the stairs. Holding to the rail, prepared to retreat if necessary, he went down each squeaking riser as if there were a poisonous snake coiled upon it: cautiously.

The steps ended in the public room. No lanterns had been lighted here, and the candles were cold as well. Most of the large, brick-floored chamber was in a soft, purple darkness. The grimy, stained-glass windows filtered the poor morning light even further; amber light spilled through one pane, crimson through another, green through a third. But it was all cathedral decoration, not genuine illumination. The heavy wooden tables, gleaming now and then with a reflection of foggy, early light in their waxed surfaces, the chairs racked atop them, seemed like a strange array of alien sentinels waiting to be entertained by the chase and the kill.

Abruptly, as Jask was trying to decide which of the doors behind the bar might lead to the kitchen and the rear entrance to the inn, his mind was inundated with a fury of emotions, images of blood and death. Belmondo had told them: The flush of emotion he registered with his psionic brain was evidence that the General and the soldiers knew he was trapped. He had killed three men already, had given them special reason to be care-ful—since those first three had died without a mark on them. No Pure could say what ethereal weapon Jask had brought to bear, though all were aware that it was part of his telepathic talents.

He walked toward the counterman's gate in the long ma-hogany bar, wondering if he could sneak out the kitchen door.

Outside, someone barked short, harsh commands; others ran to obey, the sound of their footsteps hollow and cold.

Without time to round the bar now, Jask placed his hands flat on top of it, muscled up and crashed over it ungracefully. His thin, weakly bred Pure body ached with the effort and gave him an ugly premonition of just how long he could expect to survive if the chase grew hot. He lay with the smell of sawdust and the taste of blood, quite aware of how lucky he had been not to break any bones. Then he pushed up and staggered weakly through the nearest door behind the bar.

The kitchen lay immediately behind the public room, a blazing fire chattering in its stone hearth. Sheets filled with pastries were lined on heavy, crude tables, cooking instruments scattered about. The odor of flour, sugar and cooked apples permeated the air. Jask did not pause to enjoy it, but crossed to the rear door and looked onto the dirt alleyway behind the inn. To either side Pures ran to cut off this avenue of escape.

His deadly esp ability, with which he had killed three men in the fortress during the night, could not help him here. It worked slowly, very slowly. At least two of these soldiers would bear him down before he could take care of all of them. Besides, he was weary of murder, sickened by the transgression of molest-ing Pure lives.

Turning away from the door, he looked around the kitchen, willing to make do with whatever he could find. If there were knives here, he might be able to fight his way free without wreaking any permanent damage. He hefted a weighty, wicked-ly curved butcher knife, then dropped it, angry with himself for his slow-wittedness. He could no more fight Pures and their guns with a knife than he could fight the Wildland beasts with bare fists. And, unlike himself, the soldiers would feel no reluctance when the time came to destroy him; he was, after all, nothing but an animal, tainted now, unfit.

On his right, near the fireplace, an open door revealed de-scending stairs. He hurried to them, looked into the gloom of the hotel's cellar. He hesitated, certain that this could not lead him anywhere. At most he would find a tiny, street-level window that looked onto an alleyway that the Pures already controlled.

Then he heard the soldiers in the public room. The Pures in the back alley had reached the locked kitchen door and were rattling it experimentally.

Without pausing to consider his fate any longer, he stepped through the door, shut it behind, and went quickly down the wooden steps.

THE cellar was nearly lightless. A single window faced an alleyway, perhaps large enough to leave by though effectively barred by thick iron pipes. What little light there was found its way through the dirty glass beyond the bars, casting impenetrable shadows in the subterranean chamber. In this chia-roscuro chaos, it was impossible to find a way out in time. Even if there were a way out. Which was doubtful.

He was about to turn and leave, to take his chances in the occupied upper floors, when he felt light, teasing mental fingers working along the surface of his own mind, the fingers of an esper. They were weightless fingers, yet sharp and insistent, like the spidery cracks in crimson pottery glaze.

He turned and examined the shadows, frightened and yet curious. He knew that his only chance of survival lay in the unexpected, and he had certainly never expected to meet another esper here, now.

On your left, the voiceless voice said, the crisp metallic whisper of telepathic conversation.

Jask turned, squinted into darkness.

Someone waited there, though he could not discern the nature of the man.

Come closer.

He went closer, and his eyes adjusted to the intense blackness. But the moment he saw the creature, he stepped rapidly backward, his throat constricted and his heart thumping in terror.

You have nowhere to run. Help me instead.

“Can you speak?” Jask inquired.

“You do have it bad, don't you? You're as prejudiced and snottily superior as those upstairs hunting for you!” The voice was deeper, harsher than even the General's voice, and it made Jask sound like a woman by comparison.

“What are you?” Jask asked.

“Don't you mean—*who* am I?”

Jask did not reply. So many years of theology and custom did not fall away so easily. If he used the word, “who,” it implied that he considered the beast a man, that he had rejected all he knew to be holy and certain.

The mutant snorted. “I'm a man.”

More silence.

Jask saw that it was his place to speak, though he could not find the right words. His eyes roamed the creature. Flickering impressions in the dim light: huge, seven feet tall . . . thick of body, with arms like branches, legs like trunks of oak . . . chest as big around as a barrel . . . a dark and almost snoutlike nose . . . broad face . . . deep-set eyes . . . a well-matted, rich cover of fur all over a body otherwise naked . . .

“Like a bear,” the creature said.

“Yes.”

“I'm a man, nevertheless.”

Jask said, “The Artificial—”

“—Wombs.”

Jask nodded. The beauty was there, even in the dim light, the pleasant line and functional structure that random mutation lacked. Still, this was not a man, could never be a man.

“Damn it!” the bruin growled in frustration. He spat on the floor with a great, wet hawking noise, shook his head in disgust at Jask's hesitation. “Can't you *hear* them up there?” He spoke in an inordinately vicious whisper.

“What do you want?” Jask inquired.

He had momentarily forgotten the threat of the hunters above, far more concerned with the hulking being that stood in the shadows so close at hand.

“Set me loose, and I'll get us both free from this predicament,” the bruin promised.

It was the sort of guarantee made in a moment of desperation with no possibility of fulfillment. Yet he sounded sincere enough.

Someone overhead shouted. A door burst open, and automatic weaponry chattered loudly. The soldiers had entered Jask's room. When they found him gone, they would sweep through the hotel in short order, shooting ahead of themselves, frantic men with frantic solutions. To them, he was an esper, a man who could never be permitted to live in peace. He was no longer a sacred vessel of Pure genes, but tainted, unfit, touched by mutation.

"How can you get us free?" Jask wanted to know. "They're everywhere in the hotel."

The bear laughed. "Release me, and I'll show you."

"Tell me your plan first."

"And have you use it and leave me here?"

Jask was shocked by the suggestion. "I am a Pure. I have my scruples, my dignity."

"Sure. Right."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The bruin said no more.

It was Jask's turn to be angry. "Are you honestly suggesting that a Pure cannot be trusted?"

The bruin was quiet.

"Pures," Jask informed him hotly, "are the ultimate of human evolution, untainted by impure genes, the sacred vessels of the primary creation, Nature's most excellent design. It is therefore clear that a Pure would not attempt to deceive you—"

"Bullshit," the bruin said. His gravelly voice was perfect for invectives.

For a time they were stalemated. Spiders crawled in the dark corners of the stone room, and mice scampered along the floor searching for chinks in the mortar. Overhead, the Pure soldiers cried out to one another as they searched the inn.

"You would kill me and leave by yourself," Jask protested.

The creature's simmering anger metamorphosed into something else altogether; bitterness and distaste. "I'm no killer. Leastwise not by preference. If you want to die here because you are too goddamned good and pure to help me, that's your affair."

Jask heard footsteps on the stairs from the second floor, more shrill commands, the General's imperial voice thundering like a call to judgment. A table in the common room crashed out of the way of the soldiers, eliciting a cry of anguish from Belmondo.

"What can I do?" Jask asked.

Perhaps even death was worse than putting himself in the hands of a quasi-man. If the General and the soldiers were correct. Jask had already been denied salvation and everlasting life-after-death. A little bit of consorting with the beasts could hardly make his situation any more dire than it already was. Having lost immortality, his mortal life had far more value than before, was worth the breaking of a few taboos.

"I'm chained," the bruin said. "The key to these manacles is on the shelf behind you, near those jars of pears."

Jask found it: a big metal skeleton key corroded and pitted with age. He returned to the bruin, his spine cold, his hands trembling. Even with Belmondo, a comparably mild mutant, he had kept his distance, the distance prescribed by holy writ. In the kitchen, last night, he had prepared his own meal, preferring not to have the innkeeper place fingers to his food. Now, with the musky odor of the animal-man all about him, his mind teetered on the brink of total revulsion.

He wanted to run.

Only: he had nowhere to go.

A man left without a course of action is a man who will discard his dearest morals to find or create a new path.

In a moment he freed the manacled right wrist. At the same spot on the left wrist, however, he encountered only a slickness without the restraining band. The slickness was blood.

"I broke that manacle," the bruin said. "But I couldn't manage the rest of it."

"Who chained you here?" Jask asked.

"Later," the bear-man said.

Jask wiped his bloodied hands on his slacks, knelt and freed one of the chained feet. He found the

other unencumbered and rose quickly so that he would not be kicked in the face and then trampled by the beast's heavy feet.

The mutant chuckled.

"You read minds better than I do," Jask said. "You're reading mine right now, without any trouble, and I can't really feel you doing it."

"True enough, though that isn't what amuses me. You forgot that if I had wanted to kill you just then, I could have broken your neck with one blow while you were getting up fast to avoid my feet."

Jask shuddered but said nothing. He would not permit himself to be terrified by a quasi-man.

The bruin chuckled again, then said, "If we're going to get through the next couple of days together—and I think it might be that long until we can safely split up—you're going to have to develop some cunning—a quality most of you Pures sadly lack."

"What makes you think we have to stay together once we leave here?" Jask asked. He had slowly begun to accept the fact he was not going to be killed immediately.

The bruin shook his head. "A real lack of cunning," he said sadly, much as he may have commented on another man's status as a cripple. "You don't, for a minute, think they'll stop looking for you when they find you gone from the inn, do you?"

"Well—"

"They'll spread the search and pick up your trail. You'll never make it on your own. Your chance is with me. Now come along."

"Wait."

"We have little time for argument," the bruin said.

"Why would you want to help me? What do you care whether they catch me once we've left here?"

The bear-man hesitated a moment, then said, "Maybe I just want to get some gratification from having a Pure who's de-pendent on me. Maybe I would enjoy lording it over one of your kind. Satisfy you?"

"For the moment, I guess."

The mutant shuffled across the cellar floor, his padded feet hissing on the stone. Behind a row of old clothes trunks he peered down a Stygian well set in the basement floor. "A storm drain," he said.

Jask could barely make it out, a blacker spot on the dark floor. Apparently his eyes had not adjusted to the gloom as well as the bruin's eyes had. He said, "You first." His paranoia told him not to trust the hairy stranger, even though there was nothing else for him to do *but* trust.

In a moment the quasi-man had lowered himself into the sewer and disappeared. Jask heard a faint splash of water, nothing else.

He waited, reluctant to commit himself to such a comradeship as this, even if it were only temporary. After all, he was a Pure, even if he had fallen from grace. His blood flowed in a straight stream down the centuries from forgotten ancestors, a proud line of Pures.

A burst of gunfire tore the cellar door into thousands of charred pieces that rained down from the top of the stairs.

That made up his mind for him.

He followed the telepathic mutant, the double outcast, into the stinking depths of the public tunnel, wondering how long and in what condition he would survive. . . .

THE General held the broken manacle in the light of the hand torch. He could see where the iron had cracked like plastic before the chain links had been able to separate. Whatever had broken free was not a thing to be taken lightly. He dropped the iron, brushed his hands together briskly.

“Lieutenant!” he commanded.

A Pure, robed in blue-white, hurried to him, carrying a small case from which wound a flexible steel cord that terminated in a ring of brassy metal. He activated the device for his superior. The air hummed with the resonances set up inside the compact machine.

The General passed his hands through the brass circle, with-drew them, effectively sterilizing the flesh that had touched non-Pure artifacts.

The lieutenant switched off the machine and retreated to stand at a respectful distance. His own lineage could be traced back a dozen or more generations to a straggler named Bomark, who had come to the fortress on the white cliff and was given shelter after the proper testing of his genes. Perhaps one of his de-scendants, two or three centuries from now, could hope to become the General of the enclave.

“What was it like?” the General asked Belmondo.

The innkeeper said, “A great, bearlike man, Your Excellen-cy.” He used the word “man” to irritate, though he knew the General's tolerance could swiftly give way to anger—and that anger could be deadly. “A child of the Wombs, if you ask me.”

“But you were not asked.” The General's tone made Bel-mondo cringe and realize, suddenly, that he could not afford any more rebellion, no matter how low-keyed it might be. “You were asked only for a description,” the General said, “not for your uneducated suppositions.”

Belmondo nodded penitently.

The General was pleased with the tainted man's reaction. Now that he had been elected to the highest position in his enclave, a post that carried with it a lifetime term, he did not care especially to impress the living. What he wanted most, now, was to impress future generations, to become a moment of history far above those others who had served as the enclave's General before him. It was not altogether vanity that made this his motivation. If human history judged him favorably and named him as a great General, he could be almost certain that his descendants would supply at least one or two future Generals and that his family line would always know plenty and respect. Belmondo's obeisance was a sign that this entire affair would shortly be stabilized and finished with and that his own reputa-tion would thereby be increased.

He crossed to the storm drain and stared into the inkiness, aware that danger might very well lay only inches away, in those impenetrable shadows—but equally aware that bravery was expected of him. “This?” he asked Belmondo, indicating the drain.

“For the rain waters,” the innkeeper explained. “When there is a storm, or when the river rises, the cellars gather water; they are imperfectly made. The sewer bleeds off the excess.”

The General smiled and clasped both hands behind his back, pausing to deliver a few theological observations. “A human town, a Pure enclave, fashioned by the hands of untainted men, is never plagued by such problems.”

Belmondo said nothing.

“We see here,” the General added, turning to his soldiers and sweeping them with his forceful gaze, “another indication of the supremacy of the Pure strain. From a distance this village appears clean and quite efficient. Closer, one sees it is filthy and somewhat deteriorated, though one still feels it offers adequate shelter for the animals who built and live in it. Inside, at the core, however, one discovers that it is painfully flawed, as flawed as were the hands and minds and genes of the tainted creatures who constructed it.” The General was a wise man with complicated philosophy in every sphere but religion. Re-ligiously, he was terribly naive. But then so were all his kind.

Belmondo said, partly in defense of his people, partly because he felt he was expected to play the devil's advocate, "But the village is very old, and all things fall apart in time."

"Not all things," the General said. "The enclave is countless centuries older than this place. It dates back to a time just after the Last War, perhaps twenty-five thousand years. Yet it is in as excellent a condition as the day it was finished."

"But," Belmondo said, "it was constructed with forgotten machines, with the tools of the prewar men."

"Exactly," the General said, pleased with himself. "That is just my point, you see. It was built by Pures, built to last."

"Yet," Belmondo said, rolling his huge eyes, his black tongue flicking nervously at his lips, "the machines that built the enclave, and the others like it, have all decayed and been lost. If they survived, our own village could have been built with them, could have been made to last. I'd say it is not so much the fact that we were tainted that led to our constructing an im-perfect town—but that we simply lacked the knowledge that man once had, the same knowledge even you, Your Excellency, now have no access to."

The General stared at him for a long moment, his eyes hard as bits of ice, his lips parted to show the sharp edges of perfect, white teeth. When he spoke, the good-natured, philosophic tone had vanished, and his voice was gruff and mean again. "You begin to bore me and to insult," he said. "I expect the former, from a tainted creature, but never the latter."

Belmondo was quiet, though he longed to speak.

The General returned his gaze to the open drain. "The sewer continues beneath the entire town?"

"Yes," Belmondo said.

"And where does it empty?"

"That is not known, Your Excellency."

The big Pure turned and stared hard at the tainted, his fierce eyes the brightest points in that dank chamber.

Soldiers shifted, waiting for the worst.

Belmondo said, hastily, fearfully, "That is the truth!"

"I find it difficult to believe. Convince me."

Belmondo said, "The town was built some thousand years ago. Many generations have passed through it, lived and died in it. And the public records were burned during one of the Pirate sweeps through these parts—a hundred or more years ago. Since then, the knowledge of the subterranean system has been lost. We know the drains work, and that is all we wish to know, for we suspect that beasts of various sorts live in them."

The General reluctantly accepted that. Pures held the tainted in such low regard that they always underestimated the mutated folk. This misjudgment was the sole reason the tainted had survived at all. If the Pures could have seen through a true perspective instead of through the colored prism of religion and theocratic distortion, they would have hastily exterminated all who carried impure genes. This time, however, Belmondo told the truth. Rebellion still flared in him, but he was intelligent enough to understand that he would not survive the morning if he allowed it to surface once more in the General's august presence. A devil's advocate was appreciated only when his arguments could easily be cast in doubt and swiftly discredited altogether.

"If there are beasts below this floor, in the sewers, then they have little chance of escaping, anyway," the General said.

"Except for their—power," Belmondo said.

The General grunted, thought on it a moment more, then dispatched four armed men into the storm drain, two teams to cover either direction the fugitives might have gone. The other soldiers went outside at his heels, prepared to take up other positions throughout the village in order instantly to apprehend the espers, wherever they might appear.

To this end the Pures had the complete cooperation of the tainted, a rare event indeed.

The fog was gradually lifting. A large, red sun burned down on the strange landscape, a single frightful eye anxious for the spectacle of battle.

THE huge storm drains that lay beneath the tainted community, made of stone and mortar and slimed with thick coats of moss and fungus, were the apotheosis of everything that a Pure most feared: unrelieved darkness on all sides, stench, dampness, the unknown, the presence of things whose genetic backgrounds were radically damaged and unclean. In the enclave on the white cliff—or, indeed, in any enclave scattered across the con-tinent—the walls, ceilings and floors were all of the same, smooth alabaster substance, hard as any material known to man, self-cleaning and unflawed. Too, everywhere in an enclave, except where one slept, there was light, an abundance of light which played an unconsciously symbolic role in the minds of the Pures, who endured it and reveled in it. An enclave was almost painfully clean—unlike these underground passageways—kept spotless by its self-repairing maintenance systems; no un-pleasant odors permeated the corridors or rooms of a Pure dwelling. Everything in an enclave was known, too, familiar and safe, with more of a history than most of the Pure families could claim for themselves. And, of course, no enclave harbored genetically damaged beasts, species of a blasphemous nature; those were quickly dispatched with when, rarely, they became known. Here, perverted life crawled beneath the moss, fed off the fungus, clung to the ceiling, skittered silently away from them as they advanced—and the bruin, the worst of all the taintededs here, was leading him deeper into this place of shadows.

Jask was certain that each step would be his last, that at any moment, he would no longer have the nerve to advance. He would either freeze where he was, his muscles knotted, nerve ends frayed apart—or he would turn and bolt, try to regain the cellar of the inn and, there, throw himself on the mercy of the General and of his own kind. Yet, step by step, he did go on, his whole body stiff with tension, his heart thudding like a mallet against a block of wood. He wondered where he got the strength to take each additional step.

From fear.

What? Jask was startled by the thought pressing at him.

From fear, the bruin repeated. *There's no use wishing the fear would be gone, because it's the fear that keeps you going.*

“Let's talk aloud,” Jask said.

“Your reason?”

Jask said nothing. He did not want to use telepathy because, in employing it, he was making an admission of his own status as a tainted, something he had accepted intellectually but had not learned to deal with on an emotional level.

“Aloud, then,” the bruin said, apparently having properly read the confusion of thoughts that even Jask was unable to sort out yet.

“How can you see where you're going?” Jask asked. His feet slipped on a wet patch of cobblestones even as he spoke. He reached out, flailing for a handhold, felt his fingers touch a slimy growth on the tunnel wall, jerked back, slipped again and fell. His face struck a puddle of dank water, the odor of which served to propel him swiftly to his feet; he brushed ineffectually at his cheeks and nose with one cold hand.

“I suppose that it's simply that my eyes are so much better than yours,” the bruin said. The creature had not paused to wait for Jask to wipe his face and recover his dignity; the sounds of his heavy footsteps grew increasingly distant as Jask sputtered to rid his mouth of the foul taste of sewerage.

The Pure, terrified of being left behind, alone, hurried for-ward without regard for the treacherous floor, his hands held out before him like a blind man seeking obstacles. He collided with the bruin, jerked away from the feel of matted fur, breathing heavily and falling into step once again. He thought that he heard the creature chuckle, but he could not be sure, because he was making so much noise himself.

They walked on.

A few moments later, composed again, Jask said, "What you said about your eyes—"

"Yes?"

"That can't be right."

"Can't it?" the bruin asked. If he did not chuckle aloud, the humor was implicit in the tone of his voice. He said, "What was it that I said?"

"That your eyes were much better than mine. But I'm a Pure, and you're a tainted, and no eyes can be more efficient than what Nature, in Her Great Plan, originally intended for the Chosen Species to—"

"I was formed in an Artificial Womb, or at least my ancestors came directly from the altered genes of someone who was. That first bearlike ancestor of mine was made by genetic engineers, which means he was not only the exotic and decorative child his parents wanted and paid for, but had been *improved* by the engineers wherever possible."

Jask rejected that notion without commenting on it.

"Aren't I stronger than you, little man?" the bruin asked.

"That means nothing."

"If I'm stronger, what's to keep me from having better eyesight? Clearly, my muscles are better than yours. Why not my eyes as well?"

"The very fact that you are gargantuanly muscled is evidence of your inferiority in comparison with Pure men. A true man can create machines to do the work his muscles once did. A true man can create weapons to destroy enemies a hundred times his size, weight and strength. Muscles are the sign of a throwback, indicating genetic damage."

"Muscles are worthless, then?"

"Yes."

"But don't you wish you had them now?"

Jask said nothing.

"And don't you wish you had my eyesight—even if it is no better than yours? I seem to find my way well enough. And here, be careful now. We're making a turn into a side tunnel."

Jask felt his way around the twist in the stone and had to step up his pace to catch the bruin again, since the tainted man had not slowed down for him. He said, "A Pure must never place himself in a position—"

"To hell with that," the creature said, not nastily, just wearily. "I don't want to hear any more of your evangelism. You forget, anyway, that you're no longer a Pure, yourself."

Jask felt tears burning at the corners of his eyes and quietly cursed himself for his emotional weakness. He was relieved that the bruin could not see this final evidence of his moral decay, this ultimate, very unmanly weakness.

They walked for another three minutes, without speaking, listening to the brackish water splash under their feet.

Then the bruin thought to him: *It's not unmanly.*

What do you mean ?

Tears, crying.

Jask realized, bitterly, that with a telepath he had no real privacy unless the creature was gracious enough to grant it to him.

Men cry, the bruin said. *Men have always cried. If your holy Lady Nature gave you tear ducts, what else are they for?*

Keeping the eye clean.

The bruin said, *I hadn't realized the Pures practiced a machismo sort of—*

"Please cease speaking to me that way," Jask said. "I won't have a tainted in my mind like that. It makes me ill."

The bruin did not respond, and the attitude he took seemed to mean he had been hurt by the rebuff.

A moment later the creature stopped and said, "We'll be getting out of the drains now."

"How?" Jask asked.

"Can't you see the entrance cover overhead?" the bear asked.

The question had simply been meant to taunt Jask, to repay him a little for his brusque rejection of the quasi-man's sym-path-y. Still, he peered into the pitch darkness overhead, staring hard, desperate for a glimpse of the outline of a door. So far as he could tell, there was not even a ceiling above them, only unlimited, empty space.

"Here," the bruin grunted, gripping something heavy, straining upward, rattling a heavy stone slab out of place. A few seconds later he had lifted the shield out of the way and slid it onto the floor of the room above. Faint, gray light shone into the sewer entrance, doing little to dispel the darkness but enough to quiet some of Jask's fear. The air that came with the light was dry and warm, somewhat stale but infinitely preferable to the degrading stench of the drains.

"What's this?" Jask asked.

"A warehouse," the bruin said.

"Is it safe?"

"Perfectly."

"You seem to know the drains well."

"I've scouted them," the bear-man said. "Against just such a need as this."

He gripped the edges and muscled himself through the man-hole, collapsed onto the floor above and swung out of sight.

Jask jumped, gripped the edges of the trapdoor and strained for all his might, with little reward.

"Here," the bruin said. "I'll give you a hand."

"No," Jask said between gritted teeth, sweat dripping into his eyes and gliding slickly across his pale face like beads of oil across a sheet of plastic. "Never mind. I will be fine. Just fine . . . on my own . . . thank you, anyway."

The bruin snorted sarcastically. "Is this meant to prove something?" he asked, looking down through the hole, framed by the stone edges, offering his huge, hair-matted paw with the claws drawn back into their sheaths.

Jask grunted, grappled desperately for a second, felt his arms go limp, lost his grip and fell backwards, splashed into a viscous mess of water, mud and dark fungus. A heavy, bulbous spoor sac popped open before its time, casting out thousands of unformed, undried germ seeds like droplets of mucus. The odor, when it caught Jask square in the face, was like a rotting corpse.

The bruin leaned closer, stretching his arm deeper, and he said, "Are you all right?"

Jask rose out of the muck without speaking, without brushing himself off, and he jumped for the rim of the hole, grabbed it again, struggled with all his will.

"Look," the tainted creature said, "that posse we just barely avoided back there in the cellar of the inn is going to be close on our trail. They're sure to have put men down in the drains after us, and those men will have good, bright lights. Which means they'll be able to make very good time. If you don't swallow your stupid pride and take my hand, you'll get us both caught. You understand? You want that?"

At last, weary, Jask took hold of the bruin's massive paw and was lifted out of the dark drain into a much more pleasant place: a large, windowless room where hundreds of crates and baskets were neatly piled in parallel rows.

The bruin slid the flat stone slab into its niche, effectively sealing the drain exit. Even if the Pure soldiers followed the fugitives' trail, they would never be able to lift that heavy stone. For the moment, then, Jask and his tainted companion were safe.

TWO-THIRDS of the way between the floor and the ceiling, a walkway protected by a wooden railing circled the main warehouse room and led to a loft at the front of the building, which served as offices for the establishment. From this loft the two espers could look out onto the main street of the town, through two dirty windows, observing but unobserved.

The fog had all but dissipated, and the sun's golden fingers lay over everything.

"There," the bruin said. "Two of them." He pointed west along the dusty street. "See them?"

Jask could see them well enough: a pair of robed Pures waiting by a street entrance to the storm drains, their cloaks hanging in the still air, their skin so white they looked inhuman. Was Jask's own skin as pale as that? And why had he never noticed such things before?

"And over there," the bruin said, pointing much closer to the warehouse.

Two Pures loitered in a darkened doorway to a shuttered taproom, waiting anxiously for something to happen, their chalky faces almost brighter than their robes in the concealing fall of early morning shadows. They looked terribly tiny, frail and utterly ineffectual of themselves—but they carried two heavy rifles that appeared to be well-maintained and capable of causing damage on a scale that only the prewar humans could have planned.

"There, too," the tainted creature said. He pointed eastward to where a single Pure soldier, armed with an even more deadly looking weapon, patrolled the flat roof of a boardinghouse. "They must be everywhere in town."

"The General did not spare any effort," Jask agreed, remembering the length of the column of soldiers that had twisted its way down the white cliff from the fortress. "When a—a tainted creature is found among the Pures in an enclave, the community feels—betrayed, used. The proper disposal of the traitor then becomes a matter of vengeance as well as a religious necessity."

The bruin snorted and turned away from the grimy window. Head held low between his thick shoulders, he lumbered across the creaking loft floor and disappeared down a set of rickety, wooden stairs to the main warehouse level.

Jask followed.

Among the rows of carefully stored goods, the bruin located a crate that clearly had special significance for him. He grinned when he saw it, revealing a great many sharp teeth, and he said, "I'm still one step ahead of them."

"Of whom?" Jask asked.

The mutant did not respond. The crate that drew his interest was stacked atop another exactly like it, in a row of fifty that matched. He reached up, put his thick arms around it, tilted it back against his chest, tottered backward and set it down in the middle of the aisle. Moving swiftly now, still grinning, though the grin appeared to be more of a rictus than evidence of genuine amusement, he slipped his wickedly sharpened claws beneath the plank lid and, straining upward, his muscles bunched mightily beneath his musty coat of fur, tore the crate wide open. He tossed the nail-studded lid aside as if it were a scrap of paper; it clattered loudly on the stone floor.

Curious as to what the box could possibly contain that might have any bearing on their predicament, Jask stepped forward and peered into it. In the dim gray light that filtered weakly down from the loft windows he could see nothing more than a dark, formless lump.

For a terrible, brief moment he thought the crate contained a dead man.

The bruin reached into the box, wrestled with the contents, and lifted out an enormous rucksack that appeared to be packed tight with all manner of gear. He put it down on the floor between them and checked the many straps and buttons. "Seems okay."

"What's in it?" Jask asked.

"Food, tools, maps, a book or two—just about everything you'd need to survive in the Wildlands."

"No one can survive in the Wildlands," Jask said.

The mutant did not deign to answer.

"You knew that you might have to run for it?" the Pure asked, slightly perplexed by the manner in which the tainted being seemed capable of dealing with any eventuality.

"Of course," the bruin said. "Didn't you?"

"No, I—"

The tainted bear-man did not wait for Jask to finish his reply. "I knew, when the talent first came to me—gradually at first, then with more power—that I wouldn't always be able to conceal it." He wiped a huge hand across his wrinkled, dark face, pushing at his blunt nose and snuffing as if to clear his head and think more soundly. "The talent becomes second nature to you. It would be just as easy—or difficult, rather—to hide the fact that you had two legs or eyes." Satisfied that the rucksack had gone unmolested, he stood up and stretched. "Besides, the power's like—a compulsion, a need. I tried to ignore it, because I knew it could ruin me, make me an outcast. But I learned it would never go away and that I couldn't suppress it. When it's not used, it sort of builds up, a heavy pressure inside—and then it manifests itself when you're not expecting it."

"I know," Jask said, sadly. He looked at the rucksack again and said, "Why did you hide your provisions here, in a ware-house?"

"It's my warehouse," the bruin said. "Or—it was. I doubt they'll permit me to go on with my business." He laughed sardonically. "If they hadn't come upon me by surprise, I . would have been gone six hours later."

"Where will you go, though?" Jask asked.

"I've already said."

"No one can survive the Wildlands," Jask said. "Nature isn't in charge there. She's been put out by the Ruiner."

"No theology, please," the bruin said. "We have to pack your supplies, and quickly. I don't imagine it will take them long to break in here on the off chance that we—"

"You expect me to go into the Wildlands?" Jask said, incredulous.

The bruin rooted industriously through a few nearby baskets, found a small, gray cloth sack, emptied its contents onto the floor and handed it to Jask. "I'll choose the stuff that goes in it," he said. "Come along, now."

Jask followed down the aisle and into another one, numbed but able to speak. He cleared his throat and said, "I am not going to go with you."

Casually the bear-man tore open another crate, which proved to be packed full of paper-wrapped lengths of dried, salted meat, the ends of the packages tied with larded string. He lifted out handfuls of this and put it in the sack Jask held. "This gets to be pretty damn boring as a regular diet, but at least it's nour-ishing."

"Look," Jask said, "I can't possibly—"

The bruin waddled off to another batch of containers, opened several baskets and poked around in them, came up with half a dozen pieces of fresh fruit, dropped those into the Pure's sack. "Now, let's see ... a few tools . . . certainly a knife . . ."

Jask dropped the sack.

"What's this?" the mutant asked.

"Forget it. I'm staying here."

"They'll have you in less than an hour."

"Nevertheless, I stay."

The bruin bent, picked up the sack and handed it to him again, saying, "You're coming along, so get used to the idea."

Jask dropped the sack again. He was shaking so badly that his teeth rattled in the still of the storage chamber. "No."

This time the tainted creature did not pick up the sack, but he picked up Jask instead, gripped him by the collar of his cloak and hoisted him off the floor, so that they were eye-to-eye. He peeled his black

lips away from his teeth and grinned that Satanic grin of his. His dark tongue licked the points of all those white teeth, as if he were anticipating the first bite. When he spoke, his voice was like a carefully controlled peal of thunder, all the force of his big lungs behind it. "Either you come with me, little man, or you die here, now."

Jask sputtered but could not find any words. He had begun to think he should never have resisted the death sentence that had been passed on him the day before, in the enclave court.

"I can't afford to leave you behind for those others to pick apart. You know I have a pack, well provisioned, and that I intend to set out across the Wildlands. When I reach the other side, I don't want to find that those Pure friends of yours have radioed others of their sort on the other shore. It would make the trek seem wasted."

"You'll never make it anyway," Jask said. "You'll die in the Wildlands. Therefore, everything else is academic."

The bruin's breath was not especially pleasant, and he let Jask have a strong whiff of it, square in the face. "One thing you've forgotten, though. It will take me the better part of the day to reach the Wildlands. If I leave you here, you'll have spilled everything long before then. I'll be caught before I enter the forbidden lands."

"I promise not to tell them," Jask said, swinging gently from the creature's clenched fist.

The bruin spoke with undisguised anger and disgust, his eyes squinted beneath the heavy, bony brow. "*You?* Hell, you'll squeal like a pinned pig, tell them everything they want to know. You'll break in ten minutes, you puny little bigot."

Then he opened his hand and let go of the Pure.

Jask fell in a heap at the tainted creature's broad, flat feet.

"Get up, now."

Jask got up, hating the big mutant but hating himself more. He rubbed his thin arms and wished that he *did* have a bit more muscle, enough to deal with the mutant.

Five minutes later they had packed the sack and were ready to leave the warehouse.

Jask said, "Where do you intend to go if you ever manage to get out of the Wildlands? No matter where you settle down, you'll be rediscovered. Your talent will flare up, unexpectedly. Or you'll use it too often to gain things you want and end up giving yourself away."

"I intend to find the Black Presence," the bruin said. "And once I've done that, I'll have no need to live anywhere on this world."

For a moment Jask was speechless. When he could find his voice, he said, "Foolishness! There is no Black Presence. Do you sincerely believe in all those silly myths about other worlds, that man once traveled to the stars and is still being watched by an—an alien who's waiting to judge him?"

"Why not?" the bruin asked. "It's history, not myth."

Jask grimaced, for he had realized that the bruin's world view was even more heretical, more unorthodox, than he had at first understood. "Then you must also believe that the Last War was fought between two different groups of men—instead of between man and the Ruiner, who had come to undo Lady Na-ture's work?"

The bear-man laughed aloud. "My friend, the Ruiner you fear so much is only a myth. It is *you* who must relearn history, the *true* history of this sorry world."

"Heresy," Jask said, apalled.

"No, nothing of the sort. It is merely the truth," the bruin said. "But all of this can wait until we're free of that pack of dogs baying at our heels. Let's go."

At the opposite end of the great chamber into which they had clambered from the sewer the bruin lifted away another stone slab, revealing a second drain. "It's only a different branch of the same system," he said. "This way, there's less likelihood of encountering those bastards hunting us." He dropped his heavy rucksack through, went in after it, looked up at Jask, who stood trembling at the edge of the entrance. "I could be out of this hole and on top of you before you had a chance to run very far," he growled.

Jask nodded despairingly, dropped his smaller sack, and entered the drain after it.

The bruin put the stone shield in place.

He said, "Come on, then. We have quite an arduous journey ahead of us, my friend."

Jask followed in the mutant's tracks, the fungus-coated walls close, the water splashing under foot, the odor almost over-whelming him. He was behind the creature, and he had a knife: two interesting facts that jelled into one crisp, violent notion in his mind. He should be able to kill it. Yet he knew that if he had the skill and strength to jam the blade into the bruin's back, he would find himself half-strangled in those brawny hands before he had time to twist it.

"You're perfectly correct, friend," the bruin muttered. "And unless you place that blade in one of two vulnerable spots, I'd hardly notice the pain."

"I must have privacy in my own mind!" Jask snapped.

"So that you can plot against me?" the mutant inquired, chuckling loudly, clearly enjoying the exchange and not the least bit frightened by the Pure's momentary thought of murder.

Jask said nothing at all, plodded on, miserable.

Something danced across his foot, squeaking loudly, terrified. He jumped, shivered at the thought of having been touched by the tainted creature. He was thankful, now, that the tunnel was in complete darkness. The bruin, if he had heard the tiny creature, gave no indication of concern.

The mutant chuckled again and said, "By the way, I do have a name. I'm getting weary of seeing myself referred to so vaguely in your thoughts—mutant, tainted creature, quasi-man, bruin, bear-man. I'd prefer to be called Tedesco. It's the name I was born with." A bit farther along the drain he said, "We've got a long, long journey ahead of us, Jask. It's best that we call each other by the right names and learn a bit of tolerance, if we can."

Heresy, Jask thought.

An animal had no name, no personality.

"The name's Tedesco," the bruin said. "And I'm no animal. I'm a man."

THE reluctant Pure was led into the presence of his General, where the great man rested on his power sledge beneath a giant, sprawling oak tree in the main square of the tainted village. The sun had fully risen now and had seared away the last floury clouds of white fog, baking the town like a muffin in an oven. The white cliffs reflected the sun like a mirror and nearly blinded the eye if one looked in that direction. The buildings, on all sides of the square, made of stone, thatch, hand-hewn timbers and poorly formed glass, lay silent and heavy beneath the oppressively warm blanket of air. Beneath the oak tree, the shadows were cool and deep, the silence even more complete than in the waiting streets. The oak and the General seemed to complement each other, two examples of Lady Nature's power, though the oak was almost certainly not a pure species. The Pure soldier, aware of the sin he had committed, trembled visibly in the company of oak and General, devoutly wishing he were dead.

"You are the coward?" the General inquired, nothing in his tone but disdain.

The Pure soldier nodded, unable to look at the great man or at any of those who had accompanied him here.

"You were sent with Dyson Prider to investigate one arm of the storm drains. You knew that your mission was essential to the capture of these two espers."

"Yes," the accused said.

A slight breeze rustled the leaves of the oak, only for a moment, died away again, as if it were Lady Nature's own comment on his lack of courage.

"You panicked and turned back," the General said, adjust-ing his cloak as he spoke, "forcing your companion, Dyson Prider, also to abandon the hunt in that arm of the drains."

"Yes."

"What is your name?"

"Ribbert Keene, Your Excellency."

"Are you an animal, Keene?"

For the first time the Pure soldier looked up, a glint of defiance in his eye. "I am a man. I have a fine family history with no trace of genetic damage."

"Would a man have turned back from a mission he knew to be of the utmost concern to his race and his enclave?" The General was not even looking at the accused, but upward into the thickly interlaced branches of the tree, as if he found it physically painful to direct his gaze on such a morally bankrupt man.

"The drains are pitch black, Your Excellency," Ribbert Keene complained.

"You had torches."

"Which dispelled the darkness only for a short way. Corrup-tion lay on all sides—things crawling in mutated fungus, tainted mosses underfoot, mutated-rats, insects, scampering before and behind . . ."

"Nevertheless," the General said, still staring upward into the cool, green leaves, his face a broad blandness that belied the fury boiling just below the surface, "you will submit to thorough genetic testing as soon as we have returned to the fortress. You will abide by whatever recommendations the genetic specialists make, based on whatever they discover about your gene patterns. Judging by your unmanly performance here this morning, I suspect the tests shall prove anything but negative. Dismissed."

To his guards, who fenced him with ready weapons to ensure his safety, the General said, "Now we have only one team of men in the drains, and we can no longer count on trapping the fugitives below ground. Since these are desperate creatures, neither can we rely on their proceeding rationally. Logic, of course, never has been a normal tool of tainted beings. With this in mind I believe we should widen our search pattern and not expect them, necessarily, to show up somewhere in the town itself. They may try to reach the forests bordering the Chen Valley Blight." He shifted in his seat and looked away from the oak. "See that our men are better dispersed so that paths between the town and the forest are patrolled."

One of the guards, who doubled as the General's chief mes-senger, moved away from the small park

in the square to carry out his master's orders.

MERKA SHANLY (female: Pure) and her partner, Kane Gray-son (male: Pure)—dressed identically in blue-white cloaks, blue boots and metal-studded black fabric belts; both carrying deadly prewar weapons; both with flashlights held before them—came out of the mouth of the drainage tunnel into a wide stone-walled chamber that was the hub of the storm drains, six spokes radiating from it. A low but vaulted ceiling was the home of web-building spiders and curious, green and yellow fungi that appeared to defy the laws of gravity by growing down and then, gradually, horizontal, until they laced together, forming living nets for no clear purpose other than—inexplicably—that of rivaling the delicate work of the spiders. The walls were patched with iridescent moss, with black moss and with a deep purple slime that writhed subtly whenever their lamps illuminated it. In the far corners, searching out holes in the decaying mortar, roaches and centipedes of unholy size skittered out of sight, so large and weighty that the tapping of their many feet was audible. A six-legged creature that might have been descended from a pure rat turned a baleful yellow-eyed stare at them, then hopped clumsily out of sight into the mouth of one of the other tunnels. A stone promenade, perhaps six feet wide, connected all the open tunnel mouths, though the center of the room was occupied by a pit, all cobbled in water-worn stone, that dropped straight down, out of sight, ready to carry storm water into the bowels of the earth.

“What now?” Kane Grayson asked, standing warily in the center of the promenade width, neither too close to the pit, out of which anything might crawl, nor too near the wall, behind which rodents and insects of tainted heritage were certain to be lurking.

His voice echoed softly from the damp walls.

“We cannot guess which of the other five ways to take,” Merka said, sweeping the dark, forbidding tunnels with the barrel of her rifle. “I see nothing for us to do now but sit and wait until the espers appear.”

“If they appear,” he said.

“Why shouldn't they?”

“Perhaps the other team got them—Keene and Prider.”

She said nothing, but set her thin, bloodless lips in a tight line that expressed her reluctance to accept that.

He said, “Or perhaps there are other collection rooms like this one, dozens of other collection points for the water and, therefore, many other branching tunnels.”

She said, “Do you want to return to the General now, make a report that we were unsuccessful?”

He didn't even have to think about that. He looked away from her and said, “We'll wait a bit.”

“And I suggest that we wait in quiet,” the girl said. “Our echoing voices may carry quite far in these tunnels.”

They stood together in the center of the walkway with their backs to the tunnel out of which they had come moments earlier, uncertain that even that route was safe but prepared to trust it because it was, at least, known to them.

The rat with six legs came back from the opposite tunnel, looked at them, twitched its trunklike proboscis, disappeared again.

Merka Shanly was displeased at having drawn this duty, not chiefly because it was dangerous or frightening (though it was surely both), but because it must be performed in the company of Kane Grayson. She knew the man intimately, all there was to know about him, for she had been ordered by the Committee on Fruitfulness to share a conjugal bed with him some eighteen months ago. They had made love, regularly, nightly, for a year with no offspring to show for it and had, at the Committee's order, discontinued their relationship. Actually, she thought now, watching all the black tunnels, they had never really made love but simply screwed, mechanically, like a couple of prewar machines that worked mindlessly on programmed schedules. Kane had been rather uninteresting as a lover, as inept at that as

he was at almost everything, a man frightened of his own shadow and too enamored of luxury to risk anything in hopes of advancement within the enclave's social structure. He was one of those who could not see that someday, in the not-too-distant future, the stores of prewar goods, once vast, would be so badly depleted that sweeping changes in Pure life-style must be instigated. When that time came, he would not be able to cope. His mind would go; and since insanity was classified as a mutation, he would be swiftly exterminated. Merka was a realist, prepared for the changes in Pure ways that were certain to come, and she intended, in the days of unrest, to climb the ladder of position within the Pure social structure and make it, if possible, to the very top.

The rat returned.

Its snakelike nose raised, sniffed them, lowered.

Ignoring them, it began rooting in the fungus and moss along the wall, foraging for food.

Aside from her adaptability to new conditions—which was not unlike that of the rat, which had quickly learned to accept their presence—Merka felt she had several useful qualities that would ensure success in the enclave structure. She was intelligent, fearless of the outside world in comparison to other enclave-raised Pures, and she was sexually attractive by the standards of her kind. Like almost all Pures, she was slim, with a softness to her flesh rather than a tautness of musculature. But where other women might have appeared slack and toneless, her softness was like that of a cloud, receiving, sheltering, warm. Her breasts were slightly larger than normal, well shaped and full; her flat stomach, flat hips and slim legs were equally alluring. She wished that the Committee on Fruitfulness would mate her to some man of position and power; then she could use her abilities and her beauty to cut herself a niche from which to make further social advancement. If she were always mated to Grayson's sort, she would remain a soldier in the ranks, her ability to please unappreciated by a man who would become excited over anything that was breasted and female.

Something moved in the mouth of the opposite tunnel, a lighter darkness against the black shadows there.

“Kane!” she said.

But even as she called and brought up her flashlight, a huge mutant, resembling a wild bear like the pure strain kept in the enclave, rushed onto the promenade, scooped up the squealing, six-legged rat and hurled it across the pit.

It struck Kane Grayson in the chest, dug claws into his cloak and held on, jabbering wildly.

Grayson dropped his flashlight and rifle and screamed so loudly that the echoes, compounding his own shrill voice, were deafening, rebounding from the cold walls like the cries of ghosts, demons.

When Merka looked back at the mutant, she saw that it had shuffled around the well in the center of the room and was almost upon her: heavy, fur-covered arms raised, claws un-sheathed, teeth bared in a black and hideous face. She swung her rifle up to shoot, caught sight of a Pure man running along to the side and slightly behind the bruin, momentarily checked her shot for fear of hurting one of her own kind. Then, in the same instant, she realized the Pure was no Pure at all but was, instead, Jask Zinn, the esper, the tainted man. By then, the mutant had struck her, hard.

She slammed back against the stone wall, her head smacking it audibly. She staggered away, almost fell into the pit, then toppled sideways, still holding the prewar rifle in both hands, her flashlight lying on the floor and shining across the open pit.

Grayson was still screaming.

She heard the mutant snarl, heard him strike the other soldier.

The rat squealed, fell off onto her chest, scabbled away into the shadows.

Grayson, mortally wounded, pitched over the brink of the drainage well, crying out, steadily, until he collided with a distant floor or a curve in the main shaft.

“Tedesco, no!”

She was not certain who had shouted, then realized it must be Jask Zinn.

“No!” he called again.

Miraculously the bearlike mutant checked the wicked, slash-ing blow it had aimed for her face, ripped the rifle out of her hands in one brutal movement, and was gone, taking Jask Zinn with him, leaving

her badly shaken, stunned, but definitely alive. Hurt, yes. She was wracked with pain across her shoulders and breasts; lights of searing intensity shot through her head from the place where she had struck the wall. Chiefly, though, she was undamaged and alive.

When she had her breath back, she sat up, crawled to the edge of the central pit and shone her flashlight beam into it.

Darkness.

She could not see far enough to view Grayson's body. Suddenly she decided that was just as well. She got to her feet and looked for the other flashlight and for Grayson's rifle, found that the mutant had taken those with him. Turning, she stumbled into the tunnel out of which they had first come. She had to reach the General and tell him what had happened, what she had seen and what, from this encounter, she had surmised about the espers' purpose.

MORE than two kilometers beyond the tainted village, the storm drains broke open among the ruins of an unimaginably ancient city that had not harbored any form of intelligent life since centuries before the Last War, a place of canted walls, crumbling stone, rusted artifacts, a place of vines that fed on plastisteel but had not even now, after all these ages, consumed half of the available fodder. Three walls of what might have been a cathedral still stood, great arched windows free of glass, stone pews occupied by a few scattered bones, which may or may not have been the bones of men or quasi-men, its altar filled up with vines that consumed the plastisteel images that had once been symbols of some forgotten anthropomorphic god or god-dess, demon or angel. Slabs of stone, some of them as much as eighty meters high, others as little as Jask himself, lay on edge, flat, or were still standing, carved with messages that could no longer be read, in words that were now without meaning. Odd machines, with skeletal frameworks that disappeared into the earth, with pincer hands, blank glass eyes, rusted speakers, stood on concrete pedestals, looking out over the vine-tangled vista that had once, presumably, been choked with life, with bustling, thinking creatures.

Jask and Tedesco passed what appeared to be a great, battered spacecraft, though Jask knew that was impossible. Spacecraft were only myths, fairy tales, heresies. Yet this monolithic hulk, pointing halfway to the sky, broken at its midsection, charred and dented, wound round with creepers and shaded by trees that had grown from saplings into mighty giants during its long sleep, had all the characteristics of a spaceship, according to the myths.

“What do you make of it, friend?” Tedesco asked over his shoulder as they tramped the crumbling streets, stepped around piles of curious debris and skirted gaping holes in the pavement that gave entrance to secret, vaulted cellars out of which swept cool, briskly moving currents of air. All the while they were flanked by the shiplike structure; it was immense.

“Nothing,” Jask said curtly.

“You've seen its like?”

“Never.”

“Then it would seem to me that such a sight would give rise to all manner of doubts—concerning your religion, that is.”

“It is not a spaceship,” Jask said.

“Oh?”

“It is something else altogether, something that was once quite common and ordinary.”

“Such as?”

“A monument, perhaps.”

Tedesco laughed aloud but said nothing more. He was aware that he had scored a point and that if he continued on this tact, he would only force Jask into a rambling and boring exposition of the tenets of his faith, of Pure beliefs. He had said that they would discuss the history of the Earth—both his version and the Pure, theological explanation—later, and he had meant that. Right at the moment, however, they must concentrate on clear-ing these ruins, which could easily be circled by Pure soldiers and sealed off. They must gain the forest and, shortly after that, the sanctity of the Chen Valley Blight.

At last they passed the tail section of the abandoned space-craft—if, indeed, spacecraft it was—the soaring, rust-spotted, sixty-foot-diameter cylinders that might have been six mighty engines glinting like blue jewels in the slanting rays of the giant sun. Now Jask was more at ease, relieved of the threatening sight of the ship, no longer constantly confronted with the wonder of it—the deeply *heretical* wonder of it. Still, he found a great deal to catch his eye, engage his mind and make him feel, ultimately, as if he were displaced, lost, alone and un-happy.

Approximately twenty meters above the shattered street, the broken sections of the second-level roadway swept in what were clearly once-graceful arcs from one peak of ruin to another, sometimes

breaking off in midair, thick beams dangling precariously but held well enough to have lasted out the bitter centuries. Here and there the roads crossed pylons or struck through the center of buildings, twisting out the other side and curving away in another direction. Beneath the roadways, twisted, charred, vine-eaten machines, which may have once been the vehicles that traveled the skyway, lay quiet and dream-ing, dulled and pitted and useless.

They passed through a courtyard ringed by the smashed and rotting walls of stone and plastic buildings and found, miraculously, a pocket of cleanliness and perfection in the midst of the post-holocaust city. Here, pillars of glass, rising fifty meters into the sky, each easily ten meters in diameter and as clear as fine crystal, ringed a dark glass floor, upon which had been traced curious designs in crimson frost.

“What's this?” Jask inquired as their feet squeaked on the slick floor.

“I don't really know,” Tedesco said.

“Then how is it so undamaged, while the remainder of the city died so long ago?”

“I haven't the answer to that, either,” the bruin said, stepping up the pace.

Jask genuinely desired answers to these questions, for the strange place had intrigued him more than a little—yet he was perversely pleased that Tedesco lacked this knowledge.

They passed beyond the glimmering glass columns, stepped off the shining floor and walked on through more mundane scenery, through crushed blocks of stone, jagged sheets of glass, twisted steel beams, the yellowed bones of men, the bones of other less identifiable creatures, past machines of all shapes and sizes, past a row of six pyramidal buildings where the doors were ten meters high and twice that wide and opened on unknowable chambers or devices, past statues of men who had presumably once been famous, past statues of creatures who were in no way similar to man and who were even too unhuman to be classified as tainted creatures, quasi-men, statues that could only be of beasts. But who, Jask wondered, would erect a monument to a nonintelligent creature? They passed more of these, some broken, some in perfect order, passed a great glass bell with what appeared to be thousands of names etched into its sweeping surface, passed an amphitheater with one seat and a multitude of stages. Shortly they came upon the most unexpected sight of all: three man-sized maintenance robots busily removing the debris from a wall that had recently collapsed for half its length.

They stopped.

They watched, perplexed.

All three robots were in bad repair, tarnished, stained, creaking, with tortured limbs and gap-edged joints, each as tall as two men but somehow diminished by their ruined facades, just as an old man, though keeping his full height and stature, oftentimes seems tiny and frail and useless. One of these three machines had a broken tread. It bumped around on its two good strips while the damaged band flapped loudly in its wake. Another had only one good digitized extensor arm with which to gather the trash, letting the other three limbs slap wildly about, jerking this way and that without purpose like the afflicted arms of a cerebral palsy victim. The last machine was blind, ramming heedlessly into obstacles, slapping its scoop hands into empty air when it wished to gather rubble, succeeding at making any achievement at all only because it relied on its audio receptors to take its clues from its two companions. Yet the three of them toiled industriously, scraping up the slag into their bulbous middles, where they had considerable storage facilities, trundling the stuff away to licensed garbage dumps.

“Why do they bother to clean up this one thing?” Jask asked, fascinated by the noisy trio. “Why worry over a single pile of stones in the midst of disaster?”

“Who can say?” Tedesco asked, shifting the weight of the rucksack on his broad back. He wiped sweat out of his eyes and sighed deeply. “They're still clanking around, guided by the orders of men long dead, as alien to this demolished city as we are. Who can say what they mean or what they expect?”

“If these machines survive,” Jask said, “perhaps others survive, in better condition—perhaps enough of them to risk dissecting a few to see how they're constructed.”

“Perhaps,” Tedesco said. “But we haven't the time to linger and find out. Come along, we must get moving again.”

The robots kept at their work.

One limped.

One slapped at the air.

One stumbled blindly.

Wearily Jask hefted his gray cloth sack full of supplies, slung it over his back as the bruin had taught him to do, and followed in the dusty steps of the quasi-man, now and again turning to look back at the rattling, banging, merry crew of workers until they were no longer visible and the sounds of their mindless labor had been swallowed up by warm air, sunshine and the sound of their own footsteps.

As they walked through the last of the antediluvian me-tropolis, the thrusting green heads of trees now visible as the forest neared, Jask wondered, for the first time, how strange and unacceptable the Wildlands must be. If here, so close to the white cliff and the fortress, lay ten thousand unfathomable mysteries, what even more inexplicable and awful things lay in the Chen Valley Blight and beyond? Here, according to the theology he had been taught, Nature at least maintained some grasp on the land, held out however minimally against the Ruiner. What madness had been perpetrated in lands where Lady Nature had no control at all, in the wild places?

They walked in a place where the ruins were far less momentous than they had been, scaled down by wind and rain and made the home of silent, quick-footed animals that watched the two espers but were not seen.

They walked on a cracked road where the vines, scrub and trees had nearly covered the gentle mounds of powdered stone.

They walked, at last, in the full depths of the forest where no signs of man lay upon the earth.

Aware that the Wildlands were close at hand, Jask grew increasingly miserable until, finally, he knew that he would soon have to take out his knife and use it on himself. Even that sinful act was preferable to entering a place where Lady Nature exerted no power and could offer her creatures no blessings whatsoever.

MERKA SHANLY—female, Pure and badly frightened but determined not to show it—was hauled out of the drain in the basement of the village inn by two of the younger and stronger Pure soldiers, who, despite their size, were very nearly dragged into the muck with her. She was filthy, soaked through with stagnant water and her own perspiration, her dark hair hanging in unlovely clumps across her narrow shoulders. She had dropped her cloak in the flight back from the place where Kane Grayson had died, and she had not bothered to pause and locate it. She wore only the one-piece, toe-to-neck stretch suit that was standard for all Pures beneath their cloaks, and despite her condition, she was not unaware that it accentuated her attractive figure.

“I must see the General,” she told the two who had pulled her from the tunnel. “I have extremely important news.”

She was conducted out of the inn and down the main street, an altogether unusual spectacle, trailing water and strings of moss behind her, brushing her sticky, matted hair away from her left ear. She was the center of attention for the spiraling, mutated flies as well as for the Pures and tainteds who watched from the street and from behind curtained windows.

“I think you had best stand off a bit,” the General said when Merka was brought into his company.

So she stood alone just outside the shade thrown by the massive oak, stinking even more intolerably for the effect of the relentless heat of the sun.

“Your name is—”

“Merka Shanly, Your Excellency. And I have vital news.”

“You destroyed the espers?”

She bowed her head a second in contrition, but raised it almost instantly, not about to be subdued. “We encountered them, sir. Kane Grayson was murdered by the creature that looks like a bear, but I managed to escape them after my rifle was batted from my hands.”

“So far,” the General said, “you’ve reported nothing more than abysmal failure.”

His tone did not put her off, for she noticed that his eyes often strayed to the prominence of her breasts and the narrowness of her waist. She wondered, fleetingly, if she had anticipated this meeting and had lost her cloak, subconsciously, on purpose.

She said, “I will not attempt to justify the way we bungled our assignment, Your Excellency. But I believe I bear news important enough to salvage some of the situation.” Before he could speak, she went on, “Both of the espers carried pro-visions. The bearlike mutant was toting a huge rucksack that appeared to be well-stuffed. The deviate, Jask Zinn, carried a smaller, gray bag also obviously crammed with supplies. From what I saw of them, the deviate and the tainted creature were functioning in complete accord.”

“Then Zinn compounds his crimes by consorting openly with tainted beings?”

She wiped a smear of mud from her pretty face and said, “Yes, Your Excellency. Though it amazed me to see him form such a close contact in so short a time, and with a beast, a twisted man.”

“He is a mutant now himself,” the General reminded her. He shifted his gaze from her breasts to her eyes and found that these were the most startling blue he had ever seen. “Tell me, what do you extrapolate from the fact that they were provisioned?”

“That they mean to leave the town.”

“Of course.”

She batted away the flies. “And they’ll leave it by means of the storm drains.”

“Yes.”

“And that—perhaps they intend striking out for Chen Valley Blight.”

The General’s guards were obviously shocked by the suggestion and unwilling to put any credence in it. They looked quickly at one another, smirked openly.

The General said, "Why do you think this?"

"If they were to go anywhere outside the Blight, we could follow them." She licked her lips, tasted foul water, did not grimace but went on: "or radio other enclaves to be on the watch for them. In the Wildlands, however, they are safe from us— though they will have other, worse things to contend with."

"I believe that my own conclusions mirror yours," the General said, putting a stop to the smirking of his guards, who now, abruptly, nodded their heads wisely, as if they had always known and believed what the young girl said was true. The General said, "We will take the necessary steps to head them off before they reach the Chen Valley Blight. You have done well, Merka Shanly."

She thanked him, not too profusely (lest he suspect that she was attempting to ingratiate herself) and not too vaguely, just enough to let him know that she was deeply moved by his approval but was somewhat shy about it as well. Neither thing was true, of course.

"I will send an escort of two soldiers to accompany you back to the fortress immediately. You appear to be exhausted, and little wonder."

"I'm fine, Your Excellency. I wish to remain here and join in the battle."

"Nevertheless," he said, "I wish you to return now. Upon returning to the enclave, bathe, relax and attire yourself appropriately for a late dinner in the military suite tonight."

She looked amazed and seemed to have difficulty finding her voice.

"With you, sir?"

"Of course, with me. Who else occupies the military suite?" He smiled at her to let her know that he was not being rude, but jovial. "I suspect this matter will be settled by then, calling for a celebration. We will have fine wine, entertainment and several other enjoyable dinner companions to make a good night of it."

"Yes, Your Excellency."

He watched her depart with the two soldiers who had pulled her from the drain, watched the provocative sharp lines of her slim, flat buttocks. He hoped she was as pretty beneath all that mud and moss as the eyes gave a hint she was. If her face matched her body, she would remain in the military suite long after dinner. Yes, long after. He was, of course, the chairman of the Committee on Fruitfulness. . . .

THE dense forest was a combination of tainted growths and pure strains, Jask knew, though he was not readily able to identify those varieties of plant life that were solely the handiwork of Lady Nature, nor those that had been touched by the corrupt hand of the Ruiner. He could see, though, when they were drawing near the Chen Valley Blight, for he watched the forest—partially mutated as it was, dumb and senseless as it was—wither rapidly, as if it had no desire to flourish beside that blasphemously barren land that had long ago been consigned to the rule of the Ruiner. The trees dwindled, grew sickly and bent, changed in color from fresh green to an unhealthy brown-yellow. The undergrowth, too, developed new character, be-came somehow threatening, thornier, laced with ropy vines like tentacles, ugly and cold and clearly mutated far beyond Lady Nature's original design.

Tedesco lead the way, carrying both of the antique rifles, which Jask, somewhat against his will, had shown the mutant how to use. He led them off the obvious paths and approached the entrance to the Wildlands as if he expected to find Pure sentries guarding the way.

Jask followed.

Shortly they came to the end of the forest, where they had to hunch over in order to remain hidden by the dwarf trees. They stared across the hundred yards of utterly bare earth to the place where the Chen Valley Blight began, and they saw all of this:

- prisms rising up, towering overhead like the monstrosly crested waves of an alien sea, jagged-edged against the com-parably unspectacular blue of the sky, appearing to ebb and to flow, shift and wash as water on a beach, but in reality as stationary as the stone Jask felt he had been turned into;

- bright sunlight dancing along the brittle edge of the waves, piquing them with what might have been seafoam but was actually as insubstantial as the air, a tangible and frothy glare;

- color, riotous color, reds and blues and greens and yellows, burgundy and black, orange and crimson, amber, emerald, violet, sienna, countless subtle shades both bright and pale, shimmering, writhing, moving as if they were alive, color so full of activity that it appeared to be sentient;

- tunnels in the waves, winding caverns, boring holes, shelves, *culs-de-sac*, some large enough to admit the two of them, others only big enough to pass Jask Zinn, channels into the heart of the bright, hard sea, which made the massive structure seem, abruptly, less like a sea than like a mammoth growth of coral. . . .

“Bacteria jewels,” Jask said.

They stretched on either hand for several miles, glittering until they fell away beyond the curve of the horizon, a numbing extravaganza of explosive tint, related to the clump of bacteria jewels that served as a landmark between the enclave and the tainted village from which they had fled, but much larger than that tiny growth, inconceivably more extensive.

“How far—” Jask inquired, pointing stupidly, his slim hand trembling before him.

“A hundred miles,” Tedesco said.

“That much?”

The bruin seemed humbled by the display fully as much as Jask was. “Perhaps twice or three times that,” he said.

“So bright.”

“Even brighter by dark,” Tedesco said. “Likely, it is no older than the formation that stands outside my village—but has found some richness in the soil or the air, or in some other circumstance, which caused it to sprawl so.”

“The Ruiner caused it,” Jask said, adamant.

Tedesco said, “There is no such creature.” He turned away from the soaring wall of luminescence, looked both ways along the barren no-man's-land between the stunted woods and the Wildlands. “We

seem to be alone.”

Jask said nothing. As Tedesco stood and beckoned him to follow, as they stepped out onto the dark, dead soil, he drew his knife, looked at the blade and wondered where best to drive it into himself. He did not want to linger. He wished a swift death.

His suicidal reverie was interrupted by a barked, military command in a voice he knew too well: the General. An instant later the sound of prewar weaponry ripped apart the stillness of the borderland as the Pure soldiers sought to get the espers properly in their sights.

“Quickly!” Tedesco shouted.

The earth boiled up, foamed like a mad creature, settled into slag at Jask's feet.

Unthinking, terrified, he leaped across the molten pool and ran after the lumbering man-bear.

The General issued another command.

A bolt of energy caught one of the reaching tips of the wavelike upper structure of the bacteria jewels, shattered that into a fine, bright dust, like glassy snow that settled over them.

“Here!” Tedesco called, turning, standing beside one of the larger channels between the arms of bright crystals.

Jask ran toward him.

Tedesco opened fire on the soldiers who had ventured out onto the baked surface of the unfertile land. One man screamed, danced backward, brought down, flaming, by a weapon he had never expected a tainted creature to possess. Another, decapitated by the bruin's second shot, stumbled forward, spouting blood, waving arms that were no longer intelligently directed; after a few erratic steps, the corpse collapsed into a gory bundle, gripping fingers frozen as if they wished to scratch a burrow in the soil.

A beam burst against the wall of jewels next to Jask, cored it, reaming out chips of glassy stuff.

A moment later Jask leapt into the opening and kept on running, the roar of the battle deafening as the crystals picked it up, amplified it, gave the illusion that an army bayed at his heels.

He ran for several minutes, following the winding course of this channel of the great labyrinth, until, at last, he stumbled, exhausted, and fell to his knees on the polished floor.

Tedesco was right behind him. “They won't follow,” the mutant gasped, leaning back against a sunburst of blues and greens, made larger than life by the colorful backdrop.

It was then that Jask realized he had entered the Chen Valley Blight, the Wildlands, where the Ruiner reigned supreme. In his panic he had forgotten all about suicide. He had even lost his knife.

THE Watcher stirs restlessly, though its slumber is profound.

Temporarily withdrawn from thought of any kind, it feeds mindlessly on the web of forces that contains it, replenishes energies of the soul that have been wasted by years of waiting, centuries of anticipation . . .

In time, it will wake.

It must.

Perhaps its sleep will end naturally, at the time it has planned to arise from its bed.

Or perhaps it will be stirred to consciousness by a strengthen-ing of sympathetic psionic resonances that have just now pricked it for the first time.

The Watcher is meant to watch and wait.

Even a Watcher, however, must sometimes rest.

It stirs, sighs, subsides, feeds and continues its long nap . . .

THE whites of Tedesco's eyes were green, and the wrinkled black flesh of his face, shiny with sweat, gleamed at many points with salty emerald droplets. He led Jask into a large, jewel-walled, jewel-floored chamber that was fully forty meters in diameter, though the ceiling lay just a meter overhead. In the center of the room he shucked off his rucksack and let it fall. The *whumpf* of its impact on the glittering floor echoed in that place like the beat of distant wings.

Jask dropped his own gray sack of supplies and sat down. His thin legs were too weak to support him much longer; if Tedesco had wished to go on even another hundred yards, the Pure would have been forced to stay behind. He was trembling all over, uncontrollably, like a man with the ague, though his symptoms represented only fear and exhaustion.

Tedesco sat down, too, generating more winglike reverberations, which the two of them listened to for a time, until the silence was again complete and until they had recovered their breath.

"We'll spend the night here," the bruin said. He indicated the sea-colored walls and said, "Deep in the formation, where it's all greens and blues like this, the lights are the least bother-some at night."

"You've been here before?" Jask inquired, staring at the glassy walls around them. They had come through areas of yellow and orange, of red and violet and finally into these cool vaults.

"Not in this particular room," Tedesco explained. "But I've explored several other branches of the structure. I've been fascinated by it since I was just a child."

Jask was intrigued by what was, to him, a twofold revelation: first, that anyone would find the Wildlands "fascinating" rather than terrifying; secondly, that Tedesco had ever been a child. He knew, of course, that the bruin had not sprung fully grown from his mother's loins. Still, to imagine Tedesco playing with toys and toddling around like a human child. . . .

Tedesco sighed, as if he had been listening in on Jask's thoughts and had to agree that childhood now seemed an im-possibility, and he said, "When my esp powers began to bloom, I realized that my life might depend on my familiarity with the Wildlands. And now it seems that I was quite correct."

Jask looked at the two prewar rifles lying beside the mutant, cold and black and deadly, and he said, "How many of them did you kill?"

"A couple," Tedesco said vaguely.

Jask looked down at his own hands folded in his lap, and he tried to sort out how he felt about these murders. If Tedesco had not returned the soldiers' fire, neither of them would have reached the entrance to the jeweled bacteria. Yet, Tedesco was a mutant, and his victims were Pures. It was clear where Jask's sympathies should lie.

"Is it clear?" Tedesco asked quietly.

Jask looked up, confused, unable to answer.

The bruin turned to his rucksack and began to open various compartments. "Let's have something to eat," he said, toneless and remote.

They consumed three lengths of dried, salted meat (Jask could choke down only half a stick; Tedesco happily finished the rest), five pieces of fresh fruit (Jask being satisfied with two, Tedesco with three), half a loaf of hard brown bread (Jask spat out his first bite, disgusted by the texture and taste and aware, for the first time, that he was eating tainted food fit only for mutants; the bruin munched happily on the remainder), and a quantity of water from the long wooden flask in Tedesco's pack. They spoke only occasionally as they ate, reserving most of their comments for the food or for the shifting, rippling colors that glowed brilliantly in the walls.

When they were done, Tedesco said, "I promised you a discussion."

Jask looked blank for a moment.

"On the virtues of our individual notions of this world's history," the mutant explained.

"Mine is not a notion," Jask said.

"Oh?"

"We'll see."

"Yes, we will," Jask said, though he had already begun to wonder if the bruin's version—whatever it was—might not be more sound than his own. According to Pure philosophy, he was now in the realm of the Ruiner, who should have sought him out instantly and destroyed him. Yet he lived. As far as he could see, he was not even changing physically. Unless the Ruiner were modifying him slowly, inwardly The idea repelled him and caused him to draw into himself, hugging himself like a child in the womb.

The husky mutant leaned back against his rucksack, as if the lumpy bag were a pillow. He used the long, hard claw at the tip of his stubby but humanlike thumb to pick at his jagged teeth. He said, "Let's hear your story first, my friend. How do *you* explain the world in which we find ourselves?"

Jask thought a moment, brushed nervously as his hair, cleared his throat and spoke carefully, wanting to get this all right. His religion was not one that evangelized, because its requirements for membership were biologically stringent. Yet, he felt, on some fundamental spiritual basis it was important to make this tainted creature understand the infinite wisdom inherent in the doctrine and dogma of the Pure church. As concisely and as dramatically as he could, his tone becoming more confident as he continued, he told what his kind believed. . . .

Many thousands of generations ago, there had been no mutants in the world, for all of mankind lived in harmony with Lady Nature. These Pures established a civilization of conquest and discovery, the mysterious remains of which are to be seen to this day in the many ruins and in the still-functioning fortresses where the Pures maintain a vigil against the Ruiner. Lady Nature set no limits on her creatures, but offered them even the stars if they proved themselves capable of accepting and using the gift.

"And what happened to bring about this crumbling Earth we now inhabit?" Tedesco asked.

There was a note of sarcasm in his voice but also, Jask thought, not just a little genuine interest.

As a temptation, to test the mettle of Her creations, Lady Nature permitted mankind the knowledge of the Genetic Mys-tery, allowed him to learn how life could be created without Her, how species could be altered and how man himself might change his appearance so that he could fly or live beneath the waters like fish. She fully expected them to reject the applica-tion of this knowledge, expected them to proclaim their love for Her and to refuse to accept the role of gods in Her place. Instead mankind went against Her will, created whole new races, some-times for experimental purposes and other times for little more than a lark, for decoration in a society they felt had come to lack ethnic differences and individualism. Once they had disre-garded Lady Nature's prime right of creation, they had opened this sector of the universe to the influence of the Ruiner, another cosmic force working in opposition to Lady Nature, once Her mate and now Her enemy, a creature of evil and hatred and jealousy. With the Ruiner corrupting men's minds and souls, the laws of Nature were more and more discounted until at last Lady Nature and the Ruiner engaged in direct, mortal combat, battling back and forth across the face of the Earth, warring for the possession of human souls.

Tedesco laughed. Or perhaps he coughed. Jask could not be sure, for the bruin's face was blank when he looked up.

"Go on," Tedesco said.

"At last," Jask said, "the world was little more than ruin, with most of mankind destroyed or tainted. Lady Nature, dis-appointed in us, left behind only a residual piece of Her power to watch over us as. She fled to another part of the universe to begin new work. The Ruiner, having stalemated Her, pleased with that and eager to locate Her and do damage to Her new work, also left behind a fragment of himself in order to maintain the balance of power established here between him and Lady Nature. We've been struggling, in the thousands of years since, to maintain Lady Nature's original creations and to enlarge our enclave populations so that, in time, She may find us worthy, once more, of Her close attention."

Tedesco stared at a scintillating splotch of chartreuse that vaguely resembled a dragon's head and played in the wall behind Jask. He said, "But your enclave populations are declining."

"Only temporarily."

"Constantly," he disagreed.

Jask was plainly dejected, his head held low between his frail shoulders, his body a mass of sharp angles as his bones pressed against his thin padding of flesh like struts against a tent skin. He said, "Perhaps we simply aren't worthy of Her renewed in-terest."

"And perhaps she doesn't even care," Tedesco said.

"She must care!" Jask snapped. But his emotional response was only momentary; he subsided into apathy again, staring at his knees. "It isn't for Her to care—not until we've erased our past sins and have proven that we are proper receptacles for Her grace."

Tedesco considered all of this for a moment, looked away from the green walls and studied the diminutive Pure. "I don't believe in any god or goddess," he said, his voice low and gruff. "But if I did, I don't suppose I could fancy one that was as fickle as yours."

Jask said, "I didn't expect you to believe it."

"Why? Because I'm—tainted?"

"Yes."

"So are you."

"But I wasn't always this way."

"That hardly matters," Tedesco said. He smiled slightly and added, "So far as I can see, Lady Nature is an unforgiving bitch goddess. You'll be on the outs with that one until the last day of your life—and perhaps even after that."

Jask said nothing.

"Will you listen to my story now? It's much easier to swallow than yours, much more detailed than yours without all these vaguely defined gods and their cosmic brawls."

Defensively Jask said, "No one can understand Lady Nature or the Ruiner well enough to define them crisply. Could a nonsentient forest animal define you or me? Surely you can understand that the higher life form of Lady Nature and the Ruiner is all but incomprehensible to us lesser creatures."

Tedesco sighed and said, "Will you listen? And will you think about what I tell you?"

"It will all be lies," Jask said.

"Do you honestly think I would deceive you?"

"Not purposefully."

Tedesco grinned. "Ah, then you believe me deceived my-self, or even mad."

"Or both," Jask said ruefully. "But I'll listen."

Tedesco sat straight up, leaning away from his rucksack. "First of all, there is no Lady Nature or Ruiner. Never was. Never will be."

Jask said nothing, but he was clearly disbelieving.

Tedesco said, "Approximately a hundred thousand years ago, men first learned how to build machines that would fly. They had accomplished much before this time, though the deeds of those eras are utterly lost to us now. The cataclysms in between have erased so much of the old records. Actually preflight eras don't interest us much, for it was with the development of the flying machines that mankind bloomed like a flower. In less than a century they had graduated from flights within their own atmosphere to trips to the moon and the establishment of colonies on several other nearby worlds."

"Man has never left this world," Jask said. "The stars are denied him, because he has never earned them."

"I'm not talking about the stars right now," Tedesco said. "Just the planets, at first. I know that you don't understand me, but that is only because the knowledge of other worlds has long been forgotten. You see, besides the stars, there are nearer heavenly bodies, as large as our own, not like the moon, hanging out there waiting for us."

"I've never seen them," Jask said.

"You can't see them that easily," Tedesco said. "They are not so far away as the stars, but far enough to appear only as tiny spots of color in the night sky."

"Then they are stars," Jask said.

Frustrated with his own inability to explain and with Jask's narrowmindedness, Tedesco thumped his fist on the blue floor. "Planets, like this one. Like the planets that circle each of those stars you see at

night.”

“But you're asking me to take all of this incredible stuff on faith,” Jask complained.

“If you can take Lady Nature on faith, you can listen to what I'm telling you.”

“Lady Nature is different,” Jask insisted.

“I'll agree to that,” Tedesco said, grinning.

“Oh, go on,” Jask said. He shifted his position, for his poor shell of flesh did little to cushion his bones from the jeweled floor.

Tedesco said, “Men settled on the other planets circling our sun, fought impossible environmental problems there and won. In time, perhaps a thousand years after they touched down on the moon, they launched the first starship. A thousand years after that, they had uncovered the key to faster-than-light travel and began the greatest era in the history of the race. They went to the stars.”

“Impossible. If we had achieved so much, Lady Nature never would have left us to—”

Tedesco interrupted with a wave of his hand and continued when Jask grew quiet. “For perhaps five thousand years, man-kind journeyed in the stars. The number of other worlds is infinite, you know. The possibilities for discovery never ceased. Indeed, in all that time mankind encountered no other sentient race, only the ruins of what other races had achieved and lost in ways we will never know. But after five thousand years, men discovered alien races superior to our own. It was this encounter that led to the decline of their civilization.”

Jask said, “How could that be? Space and stars are blessings, not evils.”

“Man found that he could not communicate with the alien races that he met, for they were purely telepathic beings who had eons earlier stopped communicating verbally. An entire galactic civilization, composed of hundreds of odd races of beings, did business by means of telepathy. Some of them could read the minds of men, but none of them could make themselves understood, for man was not the least bit receptive to their mental emanations. Earthborn were outcasts, both intellectually and socially. Perhaps they could have ignored these superior beings and gone on, exploring arms of the universe in which the other races had never ventured or had no interest. But they did not. Man was precocious in some ways, venturing into space before most other races did, quick and bright and eager to learn. On the other hand, he was hundreds of generations away from acceptance by his superiors. For this reason, and for the psychic shock his inferiority caused him, man retreated from the stars, came home to his own system of worlds, finally withdrew back to Mother Earth herself, there to contemplate his position on the scale of things.

“In time his inability to accept his station in the cosmic order corrupted him, turned him away from real achievement. For thousands of years mankind reveled, trying to forget that he occupied a low rung on the ladder of sentient civilizations. He partied. He made new toys, among which were the Artificial Wombs. At first some held hopes that these centers for genetic juggling would produce telepathic men, but this was not to be. In a few years the Artificial Wombs were just other toys, to be played with by parents who wanted colorful children either for the thrill of it or for some strange social status I've never been able to define.

“In time their society divided into countless cults and sects, splintered by philosophies and religions, by occupations and leisure interests, by politics and morals, they began to lose interest in the games and other festivities. Men fell to arguing with other men. These arguments became fistfights. The fist-fights degenerated into armed confrontations, and then into genuine battles and, at last, into major wars among differing power blocks. For a brief while the catalogue of human knowledge was added to—as men theorized, built and used strange new weapons. But this was only a cancerous growth of knowledge, and it led to the Last War, nearly killing the entire human organism. This occurred seventy-five thousand years ago. In the time since, mankind and all his mutated selves struggled for survival against staggering odds, often nearly lost, somehow went on and grew, lost ground, gained ground, and obtained the present Medieval level.”

Jask shook his head. “There are a great many gaps in your story.”

“Such as?”

“How do you explain the fortresses where the Pure enclaves live? Were they not Lady Nature's gifts

to the survivors of Her war with the Ruiner, Her offering of a last chance for mankind to remain pure and gain Her grace again?"

"They were nothing of the sort," Tedesco said. "They were simply the last refuge of mankind when the final war had devastated the Earth. They were originally built to house high government officials who remained safe while most of the populace was ashed and plagued with diseases."

"What of these jeweled formations?" Jask inquired.

"What of them?"

The Pure stood and stretched the knotted muscles in his legs, rubbed at his sore buttocks with both hands. "Can you deny, in good conscience, that they are monuments to the Ruiner and that they were established by the first men who openly worshiped a false god?"

"I can deny it two ways," Tedesco said. "First, by logic. Does it seem reasonable to you that any group of men would have spent the time necessary to handcraft a sea of jewels as an offering to their god? The task would have taken centuries."

"It is not completely beyond the bounds of reason," Jask insisted.

"That is neither here nor there," Tedesco said. "I know the real truth behind the jewel sea." Fumbling with the concepts as if they were heavy stones, he tried to explain to Jask the nature of biological warfare and the purpose of the bacteria jewels.

When he had finished, Jask shook his head doubtfully, though his response was not nearly so violent as it would have been only a day or two earlier. Jask supposed he had become corrupt without ever taking notice. Tedesco, on the other hand, supposed he was gaining a bit of insight, at last. Jask said, "Even if what you've told me is true—a possibility I reject, you understand—what good will this new theology do us?"

"It is not just another theology," Tedesco said patiently. "It is the truth; it is history."

"Still, we are without succor, without friends, without any place we can be safe and call home. One interpretation of events seems little more valuable than the other." He sat down again, too weary to stand any longer, despite the nagging stiffness in his haunches. "So where do we go from here?"

"To find the Black Presence," Tedesco said. He spoke as casually as he had during dinner, as if the proposal was not in the least bit mad. But it was, of course: mad, insane, maniacal.

"Chasing a fairy tale?" Jask asked, disgusted.

The bruin, however, remained calm and sure of himself. "It is no fairy tale. When mankind withdrew from interstellar space and fell back on his own world, the telepathic aliens he had encountered dispatched a creature to keep watch over us and to monitor our evolution. When we begin to show signs of acquiring psionic abilities—especially telepathy—this creature is to contact its own kind and lead us into full association with other advanced races. Mankind will then be ready for the stars. In fact, you and I, with our telepathic talents, are evidence that the time has come for mankind to grow up."

"But we are no longer men," Jask said. "We're tainted." He spoke with great sadness, aware that he had at last come to accept his inferior status.

The bruin's patience evaporated in a flame of anger. He scowled, twisting his lips back from sharp teeth. "Perhaps *you* are no longer a man," he said. "I would say *you* never were one. But I've always been a man, am a man, and will face this challenge as a man should."

After that neither of them spoke for a long while. They watched the bright walls shimmering around them, absorbed the silence of the vault and became, themselves, fragments of quietude. Jask waited for an apology to balance what he considered an outrageous fit of pique on the other's part. Tedesco waited, too, but not for an apology. He waited for some sign that Jask was finally prepared to face the reality of their situation with more than unrelieved pessimism. In the end it was Jask who proved the weaker and who spoke first.

"You said the Black Presence was placed here to wait and watch us."

Tedesco said, "Yes."

"If it did exist, it must have been destroyed during the Last War."

"It would have been well protected against destruction; it would have been impervious to human weapons."

Jask thought a moment and said, "Even so, it must have died a natural death after all these thousands of years."

"Perhaps its lifespan is enormous, compared to ours; a thousand years might pass for it as a day passes for you and me. Or maybe it was relieved of its duty by another observer."

"You have all the answers," Jask said. "Yet I doubt you can explain why, if this Black Presence was put here to wait for mankind to develop extrasensory perception, it has not shown itself by now. You and I are not the only espers. Others have been found and executed numerous times in the last few years."

Tedesco frowned, for this was the most difficult thing to explain. He had wrestled with the problem himself, many times, and had settled on an answer, though it was admittedly a weak one. Replying to Jask, however, he made himself sound doubtless and sure. "You wouldn't expect the Presence to keep a watch on every man and woman alive, would you? It must observe in a selective manner, choosing subjects here and there. It has apparently not yet encountered an esper. And until our numbers become substantial and organized instead of few and scattered, it might continually overlook us. I want to locate the Black Presence and force it to study us and accept us. I want the stars for *myself*, as well as for my children."

Somewhat sarcastically, Jask said, "I suppose you have a map to find this mythological observer."

Tedesco surprised him by saying, "Not just a single map— but three." He turned and rooted in his rucksack, produced three sheets of yellowed vellum and placed them on the floor in front of him. "I have studied the legends of the Black Presence ever since my own psionic abilities began to grow. I've concluded it must be stationed in one of three places: in the Black Glass craters, in the Glacier of Light, or beneath the waters of Deathpit."

"And how have you centered the search on these three points?" Jask inquired. "By drawing lots or tossing coins?"

"These three seemed the most reasonable of the hundred places mentioned in the legends. Besides, I have a faint precog -ability; using that, I've sensed an aura of success in these three places."

Jask unfolded the three maps and studied them. Each was richly illuminated with dragons and other netherworld creatures. He said, "Each of these places—the craters, the glacier, the pit—is in another quarter of the continent, and each is terribly far from here. Do you propose to travel through the Wildlands, through kilometers of beast-infested places, and through areas where other Pure enclaves will be looking for us?"

"I do propose it," Tedesco said. "And I'm pleased to hear you use the plural—'us.'"

"I may not go along," Jask said quickly.

"What other options have you?" the bruin asked.

THE party in the outer rooms of the General's enormous suite had been a raucous one, leaving much debris in its wake. Originally intended as a celebration of the General's success in apprehending and executing the two espers, it became a means of concealing the lack of that success. Much was eaten, much was drunk, much was spilled and wasted. The guests talked animatedly about the General's ruthlessness in driving the tainted fugitives into the Chen Valley Blight. Rather than permit them a quick death, the assembled guests philosophied, he had forced them into the realm of the Ruiner where they would suffer for untold years, growing constantly more contaminated; this was a far better end for such creatures than a merciful shot from the power rifles.

When the guests had gone, and when the suite lights had been lowered, the sanitation robots rolled out of their wall niches and scurried this way and that, like steel rats, nibbling at the refuse, scraping and scooping and scrubbing and polishing until the great man's home sparkled, fresh and new again. They would feed the collected waste into the central recycler of the fortress, where it would be reprocessed and packaged for reuse. Still, what the guests had enjoyed was original stock, supplied by prewar men—and what would be produced from the salvage was greatly inferior to what had been so carelessly consumed.

When the guests left, the General informed Merka Shanly, the party was still not over. It would be moved to the master bedroom.

At his request she had disrobed. She undressed him, slowly, as he liked. She permitted him—indeed, encouraged him—to fondle her slim and curveless legs, her deliciously flat buttocks, her narrow waist, the swell of her heavy breasts. He had loved the deathly whiteness of her skin in which the veins could be seen like deeply buried wires, and she had let him kiss that skin wherever he found it most pleasing. She had ministered to him in every way she knew, had played the mount to his rider and had brought him off. Afterward he rolled away from her, as a man might leave a dinner table where he has gorged himself, ignored her, drew his knees up to his broad chest and fell into a deep, untroubled sleep.

Merka Shanly was disappointed on two counts. First of all, she had expected a General to be a good lover, to know where to touch her and how to move her in order to bring her into her own time of joy. Instead he had been one of the worst lovers she had experienced, cold and aloof, all the heat of him concentrated in his stiffened member, a demanding heat that did nothing to warm her. But beyond that disappointment lay another, more serious. She had never expected to see a General, a man of responsibility to his people, wasting the precious prewar stores of food and other goods as they had been wasted at the party that night. He was less considerate of the future than any of his subjects. This last disappointment became a lingering anxiety that would not permit her sleep.

She slid out of bed.

Nude, she went into the main lounge of the palatial suite, padded across the thick carpet and commanded the shielded windows to become clear.

In moments they changed from mirror-black to clear glass and gave her a panoramic view of the night sky, the brilliant stars and the gibbous moon. Beneath these celestial bodies lay the tainted village where she had been only that morning, the forest and the mutated landscape of the Chen Valley Blight just beyond, the home of the Ruiner.

She, unlike the General and his subordinates, questioned whether the espers would be doomed in that place. They were, after all, already children of the Ruiner. What purpose would that evil god have in corrupting them further? Better, he would send them out into other borderlands where his power was incomplete, in hopes they would corrupt other of Lady Nature's creatures.

She sat on the fur-covered couch next to the windows, her bare flesh made more lovely by the bluish light of the moon, and she stared at the stars, trying to decide what she wanted her future to be like.

Clearly she could use her desirable body and her willingness to perform with it to hold the General in her influence for years to come; he had repeatedly told her that she was the most uninhibited woman he had ever taken. Yet, if the enclave continued to ignore the need for an austerity program— as they would under this thoughtless General—those few good years would be followed by starvation, degeneration and death. It appeared that if anyone were to stop this waste and make plans for continuation of the enclave once the stores had been de-pleted, she would have to be that one. That meant, besides bedding the General regularly, she would have to plot against him and, eventually, remove him from office.

Soon she would have to become a General herself.

She felt lonely. Cold.

Looking at the stars, however, she *knew*, with a sudden and fanatical certainty, that her Lady Nature would favor whatever connivances, lies and acts of violence she might be forced to employ in order to put her enclave onto the holy path again. Lady Nature loved them and did not want to see them wither and perish merely because so many of their leaders were blind fools and self-serving bureaucrats.

Merka rose from the sofa after more than an hour of spiritual self-searching and walked into the bedroom. She stood over the General, aware that she could go find a knife right now and murder him in his sleep, with no opposition. He would not even have an opportunity to scream or throw up his hands to ward off the slashing blade. But the ascendance to power had to be more gradual and more subtle than that. Besides, she would require a power base, sympathizers and assistants in the enclave government who would swear their allegiance to her and ensure her own promotion when this General—passed on. That would take weeks, most likely months, to accomplish. Meanwhile, she would have to worry most about the General's continued lust for her. When the time was ripe for assassination, she would need to be next to him, where she could strike suddenly and cover up the traces of her villainy before the news was made public. The simplest way to keep in his graces was to make him dependent on her favors.

She perfumed herself as he liked.

She stood before the mirror and brushed her luxuriant dark hair.

At the bed she pulled back the covers.

He did not wake.

With her mouth, but without words, she bent over him and awakened him to the night and to his need.

ON the morning following their narrow escape from the Pure soldiers, Jask and Tedesco woke in the blue-green room, ate a cold breakfast that lay heavy on their stomachs, and began their trek through the jeweled sea, down corridors of dazzling color, through chambers like melting rainbows. Several times, they came to dead ends or to a narrowing of the way through which the bulky mutant could not pass, and they were forced to retrace their steps, exploring alternate passageways.

Often, they stepped from the end of a corridor into a pocket of open land where scraggly grasses grew and, sometimes, scrawny trees struggled for existence. Why the bacteria jewels, which towered for forty meters and more on all sides, had not closed in, neither Jask nor Tedesco could guess.

In these places Tedesco took compass readings and consulted his maps, chose the direction they would take when leaving the patch of land and returning to the jewels. Here, too, they performed their toilet without feeling as if they were fouling some wondrous artifact.

Shortly after noon, as they sat down in the middle of one of these clearings to rest, Jask said, "I can't go any farther today."

"Have to," Tedesco said. "If we don't make good time, we could be in these formations when our supplies run out. And as you've seen, there's precious little to eat around here, except an occasional plot of grass."

As they progressed through the jeweled tunnels, Jask had carried his cloak over his arm, dressed only in the stretch-fit, neck-to-toe jumpsuit that all the Pures wore. In the clearings, where they rested, he folded the cloak under him like a pillow, to protect his bruised backside. Now, perched upon this pillow, his scrawny legs outstretched before him, he said, "I ache all over, legs and arms and back and neck. I haven't any strength to go on."

Tedesco said nothing, but stood and used his compass, consulted his various maps, pondered things a while and finally decided on the proper direction for their departure. "Come along," he said.

Jask did not move.

"Get up, now," Tedesco said. And there was more than cajolery in his voice; he spoke with a tone of command.

"I really can't," Jask protested. "My ankles are swollen. My thighs are knotted like ropes, and my kidneys ache."

The bruin stalked across the clearing and stood over him. "My own feet are hot and sore," he told Jask. "But I'm not giving up here."

"Your discomfort can't match mine," Jask said. "You're built to take this kind of punishment, clambering through those tunnels and pacing off kilometer after kilometer."

"You Pures, with all your holy disdain for 'tainted' genes have inbred yourselves to the point of uselessness. I see that. I understand. But I'm not letting you stay behind."

Jask smiled bitterly.

He continued to massage his swollen legs, and he said, "Then you'll just have to carry me."

Tedesco did not smile at all. He said, "I won't carry you my friend. I have my own rucksack to worry with."

"Then—"

Tedesco lifted one of the prewar power rifles he had stolen from the General's men and aimed it dead center at Jask's chest. He said, "I'll kill you before I go."

Even the bitter smile slid away from the smaller man's face as he stared up into the incredibly large barrel of the power rifle. He said, "You've no reason to kill me."

"Yes, I have," the bruin said. "I wouldn't want to leave you here to starve—or to get lost in the jewels and eventually go mad. One does not permit such an end for his friends. If I must leave you

behind, I'll kill you and get your suffering over with quickly. Otherwise my conscience would always bother me."

Jask shifted his gaze from the rifle barrel to the deep-set, dark eyes under the shelf of the mutant's brow, and he read the truth in those eyes. Painfully he got to his feet, picked up his cloak and said, morosely, "Lead the way."

Tedesco led the way.

Jask wondered if Lady Nature might not exert at least a little influence in this place—for he could not imagine who else would have such a reason or power to make him suffer.

For more than an hour they climbed the steep corridors, bathed in ethereal flames that were not hot, cooled by green trees that were only illusions without real substance or shadow, crisped orange here, iced blue there. They crossed silver-black chambers where the ceilings were cathedral and the mood was sinister, and they wriggled on their bellies—Tedesco pushing his huge rucksack ahead—down brown and purple corridors barely high enough for them to squeeze through. Cresting up-sloped hallways, they found themselves stumbling down tilted floors while kaleidoscopes crackled into new forms and hues beneath their feet. They tripped and fell, often, but they got up again and went on, holding to the bright walls for support, sweat-dampened fingers slipping from handholds that had seemed safe, grasping uselessly at jeweled projections that might help to break their falls. They came to chasms that separated one arm of the tunnel from the next, looked down into meters and meters of fire, into hellish pits where animals made of light danced in maniacal glee to entertain them, puffing out of existence as new species of animals, new colors, flickered into "life" for a brief moment and were gone in their turn. Some-times they climbed down these jagged chasms and crossed the unpolished floors where faults lay like traps, concealed by the interplay of color. Once crossed, they climbed the other side and went rapidly forward to meet the next such obstacle—not because they enjoyed the challenge, but because each one put behind them meant one less to face ahead. Other times, if the walls of the gorge were too steep to permit descent, they used ropes and hooks to construct a fragile bridge from the lip of one precipice to the other. But always they went on: Tedesco because he had to; Jask because he was afraid to stop and be shot.

Finally, after nearly two hours of this torturous routine, Jask had endured enough punishment. Weakness rose through him like dirty floodwater over the banks of a creek. He swayed as they were weaving down a steep ruby incline, lost sight of the bright walls as the perfect darkness of unconsciousness roared over him. He fell, hard, and rolled until he came up against a green-and-gold-speckled outcrop. He lay there, unmoving, as Tedesco continued to the bottom of the run, unaware of his companion's predicament.

A few minutes later, however, the bruin realized that he was alone. When he called Jask's name and received no reply, and when a telepathic probe brought him only muddled, unclear thoughts from the other man, he went back, climbed the corridor he had just come down and located Jask's body.

He knelt, fighting to maintain balance on that slippery floor, and checked the smaller man's pulse. It was faint but adequate, and fortunately not irregular. He tried slapping the unconscious man to wake him, shouted his name, and even poured a few drops of precious drinking water on Jask's face, all to no avail.

For a short moment he considered taking one of his power rifles and putting an end to the small man's troubles. If Jask were not only unconscious but comatose, there was little else he could do for him. Yet there was always the chance that Jask might revive and be able to go on. . . .

Sighing, Tedesco took off his rucksack and let it slide, along with the rifles, to the bottom of the incline. Lifting Jask as if the man weighed as little as the lights that flickered in the walls, he carried him to the bottom of the corridor. Thereafter, for a grueling hour or more, he lugged Jask for several hundred yards at a time, put him gently down, went back to fetch supplies, alternating the two loads until he had brought everything out of the jewel formation and into the center of another precious pocket of open air, where two small pine trees fought for existence and where the grass, though a sickly yellow-brown, was at least soft and cool.

He lay Jask on the soiled cloak and wrapped the garment around him so that he would not catch a chill in the brisk evening air that wafted down from above.

He permitted himself a small drink from the wooden flask, rolled the water over his tongue as if he were savoring wine, swallowed, and carefully stoppered the container.

He looked at the pale-faced man in the cloak and wondered why he was going to so much trouble for him. He could as easily have turned the power rifle on him and eliminated the Jask Zinn problem altogether. Yet, even as he wondered about his motivations, he knew what they were. Despite his years of self-reliance, his ability to go it alone no matter what the situation, he now felt that he needed someone to face the Wildlands beside him—even if that someone were a worthless, skinny Pure. He had left his entire life behind him, his possessions and his future. What lay ahead was frightening: either sudden death or the stars. He did not want to go at either thing by himself. It was a weakness he despised the moment he recognized it, and he turned away from Jask.

He looked at the rapidly darkening sky where it was visible at the top of the encircling jewel walls, then lay back, his entire body shaking with fatigue, and went instantly to sleep.

When Tedesco woke seven hours later, dawn was still a long way off. The sky, directly overhead, was black, while the walls on both sides exploded with countless lights.

He sat up, turned to Jask Zinn, and found the small man watching him. “How long have you been awake?”

“Not long,” Jask croaked. He looked thinner and paler than ever.

“Hungry?”

Jask said, “No.”

“You've got to eat.”

“Later.”

Tedesco saw that he was shivering badly. When he put the leathery palm of his black hand against Jask's forehead, he found that his companion had a fever. He said, “I'll get you some water.”

Jask nodded.

Tedesco poured an inch of water into a wooden cup, raised Jask's head with one hand and tilted the cup to the parched lips.

Jask sucked weakly at the water, blinking with each swallow as if it pained him.

“Good?”

Jask nodded, tried to smile.

“Take some more,” Tedesco urged, pouring another inch of water into the cup and offering it.

“Thanks.”

Jask's voice was as soft as a whisper, all but inaudible.

“Don't mention it.”

Jask began to swallow a bit more greedily than he had at first, but he suddenly choked as he took too much in at once and spat water over Tedesco's hand.

“Easy now!” the bruin said. He took the cup away from his companion's lips, held his head a little higher, and waited for the choking to stop.

It did not stop.

In a moment, as Jask's eyes rolled smoothly back into his head, the mutant realized that these were nothing so simple as choking noises, but convulsions. Jask was trying to swallow his tongue.

“Jask!”

The small man, frail as he was, rose up onto his head and heels until he was arched like a human bow. Blood trickled in a thin stream from the corner of his mouth, so dark it looked black and not red. He had already bitten into his tongue.

“No!” Tedesco shouted.

He grabbed Jask's head, levered his mouth wide open, and, sticking a single, fat finger between Jask's teeth, pressed down on the man's tongue and kept him from swallowing it and smothering himself.

In another minute the seizures passed, leaving Jask limp and unconscious. He looked very much like a small child, wrapped tightly in the cloak, his hair tousled, face slack, weak and defenseless but somehow curiously trusting.

Shaking, with fear and not fatigue now, Tedesco lowered Jask's head to the ground. In his rucksack he located a number of squares of cloth, dumped out the items they enfolded, and used them, with several fistfuls of the aapless grass, to make a reasonable pillow for his companion's head.

When that was done, he did not know what he should do next. He had no medicines, no herbs or roots from which to make drugs that might combat a high fever. He had intended to flee alone, before he had met Jask, and *he* was never ill.

For something to do, he rose and paced the length and breath of their roughly circular, roofless cell, searching the earthen floor for plants that he might recognize, healing plants that he could process into tonics and powders and syrups. He did not find anything useful.

He returned to Jask and saw that the smaller man was still unconscious and trembling uncontrollably. His teeth chattered, and his breath was drawn much too rapidly, as if each inhalation were predestined to be his last.

Tedesco poured water into the cup and tried to wake Jask.

But he would not be wakened.

"Damn it all!" Tedesco roared. His voice squeaked in re-sponse from the jeweled cliffs around him, cleansed, softened and made less forceful by the light.

He began to pace once more, and he was on the far side of the clearing, standing before a purple and orange sunburst in the wall, when he realized that Jask might have further convulsions while he was away and might die before anything could be done for him. He hurried back, his huge feet thumping the hard earth, and he sat down facing the recumbent man, studying him intently.

"You okay?"

Jask did not respond. At least his breathing was normal, and he was not choking on his tongue.

That was the longest night of Tedesco's life, all of it passing on the razored edge of anticipation.

Jask perspired, droplets beading on his chalky forehead so rapidly it seemed some magic trick must be employed. They coursed down his face, stained the cloak drawn under his chin. He soaked the cloth that bound him, turning it a darker color. Tedesco watched, afraid to unwrap him lest he get a chill from the night air.

Time passed in series of colors.

Jask took to shivering, his teeth chattering audibly in the still night, his breath jerky and shallow. The droplets of sweat ceased to pop out on his head, and he felt cold and nearly dead. Tedesco, helpless, could do nothing then but lift him and hold him, like a mother might hold a child, share bodily warmth, murmur to him . . . and hope.

Perspiring, chilled, perspiring and chilled again. From one extreme to the other, Jask passed the hollow night.

An hour before the first light of the new morning Jask suffered another series of convulsions, not so bad as the first, but not at all reassuring. He cried out and writhed beneath his confining covers.

Tedesco depressed his tongue the way he had done before, spoke softly to him, waited out the seizure, held him to be certain it was all over, then slowly lowered his head back onto the makeshift pillow.

For a while there was nothing more ominous than perspiration and chills. Then, near dawn, as the sky was growing more purple and less black, Jask began to gnash his teeth together, grinding them so loudly that Tedesco felt as if someone were standing beside him and making the noise in his ear. He tried to stop Jask from doing this, but he made no headway.

The sky continued to lighten.

Jask screeched unintelligible curses, flailed madly about him on all sides, rose up and beat at the air, all the while holding his eyes squinted tightly shut.

He fell back, exhausted, still grinding his teeth, gathered his strength and flailed some more, hooted and whimpered, kicked at the earth and the air. He seemed to be fighting some mon-strous battle with an awful but invisible enemy meant only for his eyes.

After dawn his behavior was better. He stopped moving so much and settled into a calm, sound sleep.

Or a deeper coma.

Tedesco wished he knew which it was.

Three hours after dawn Jask stirred uneasily, groaned deep in his throat and blinked his red, swollen eyes, tears sliding like beads of oil from the corners of them. When Tedesco leaned over him, he seemed to stare through the bruin as if he were not there. He was delirious, rolling his head agitatedly from side to side, licking his lips, mumbling incoherently to himself.

He drank passively, allowing Tedesco to force two ounces of water between his pale, cracked lips, and then he began to splutter and refused to take anything else.

He called Tedesco's name, his voice shallow and sibilant.

"Yes?" the bruin asked. He leaned closer, waiting, staring into those shiny, fevered eyes.

"Tedesco?" Jask repeated.

"I'm here."

But it was clear that Jask was still talking only to himself, for he gazed through the mutant, and his call was not one of recognition, merely the fragment of a dream.

The morning passed.

Tedesco was not hungry, though he had last eaten quite some time before. He knew he would need strength, and he un-wrapped a meat stick for his lunch. After a few bites he could not swallow any more. He rewrapped the meat, put it in the ruck-sack, and sat by the sick man, watching for trouble.

The night air warmed as the day progressed, and the myriad colors rippled on all sides.

In the middle of the endless afternoon Jask began to perspire again, though this attack of fever went unrelieved by the periodic chills he had endured earlier. He soaked the garments in which he was wrapped and continued to sweat, until Tedesco began to fear that he would eventually dehydrate.

When he drank now, he consumed far more than an ounce or two of water, sucking greedily on whatever the bruin put in his cup, though he was still not free of his fevered delirium or genuinely conscious of what was happening.

When the flask was empty, Tedesco began to pour from the fat leather water bag. Worriedly, he watched Jask drink, checked the slowly but certainly decreasing level of their last water supply, and looked anxiously at the sky, hoping for rain.

As darkness settled overhead and the intensity of the lights from the bacteria jewels increased, with two-thirds of the water gone from the leather bag, Jask's fever broke. One moment the beads popped and ran on his face—the next he was no longer sweating. In a few minutes he was cool and dry.

Tedesco was still sitting by him when, an hour later, Jask opened his eyes and looked blearily around the clearing. He smiled tentatively at the bruin and said, "I feel terrible."

"But better?"

He smacked his gummy lips. "Better, yes. How long was I asleep?"

Tedesco said, "Too long." He grinned with relief.

Tedesco would have liked to make soup for their supper, because he knew that Jask would benefit by having something warm in his stomach. But he dared not risk using the last of the water, for some of it would inevitably boil away and be lost in the making of the broth. Unless it rained they were going to need every precious ounce in their water bag. Instead of soup, then, they ate the remaining fresh fruit as they talked about Jask's weakness and subsequent illness.

"It couldn't have been sheer exhaustion that laid you up like that, my friend," Tedesco said. "You were feverish and de-lirious. I'd say you picked up a bug of some sort, a kind of flu that you had never been subjected to in the filtered air of your fortress and in your few ventures out of it. Not a serious bug, mind you, but one just bad enough."

"Not serious? You said that I almost died," Jask reminded him, squirming to take the pressure off his left buttock. He ached from head to foot.

"And that you did. But you're from Pure stock—which means you come from people who are so inbred that they've become weak and susceptible to the slightest infection."

Jask thought about that for a while, did not like the im-plications, but restrained himself from making a hasty and belligerent reply. He did, at least, owe Tedesco that much courtesy. He said, " You used most

of the water on me and lost a couple of days' traveling time. Why?"

"You couldn't go on," the bruin said.

Jask shrugged, found that the simple gesture required more effort than it reasonably should have, and said, "Why not kill me, then? You threatened to kill me before this."

"Would you rather I had?" Tedesco asked, avoiding the question.

"It might have been for the best," Jask said, considering his answer carefully. He thought of how far they were from Lady Nature, the enclave, everything he knew and trusted. "I certainly can't go on for a few days yet; I'm too weak to stand, let alone walk. Unless it rains, we're going to be in dire need of water because my illness required so much. . . . Yes, you should have killed me."

Tedesco was frozen for a moment, staring hard at the smaller man, then stood so abruptly that he startled his sick companion.

"You ungrateful, cowardly shit! You stupid, sniveling, self-pitying little bastard!" His voice was quite a bit above a scream and just less than a roar of thunder. "You people in the enclaves look down your noses at the 'tainted' and loudly proclaim your superiority, but you couldn't survive a minute in a fair contest with *any* mutated man. Every last one of you is a vampire, sucking life from what the prewar men left you, leeches that don't contribute anything!"

"I—" Jask began.

Tedesco shouted him down. "You say that muscles are a sign of the primitive, that a civilized man should be puny while machines do all his work and protect him. That's nothing more than a cheap philosophical excuse for what you people have let yourselves become. What are your people? Slugs, degenerates, maggots, turds, all of you!"

"Really, you can't say that—"

Tedesco whirled, swooping in at him, reached for him with a suddenness that was terrifying, his lips drawn from his teeth, eyes wide. He grasped Jask's shoulders and lifted him half off the ground, held him up so that they were face to face. "Maybe I *should* have let you die. And if I had any common sense, maybe I *should* have put a power bolt through your brain!" As the bruin spoke, he sprayed Jask's face with warm saliva. "But I *didn't!* And since you pulled through whatever it was you had, you might as well be made useful."

Jask tried to pull free, couldn't manage it.

"Starting tomorrow," the mutant said, "we're going to take that scrawny, underfed, undermotivated body of yours, and we're going to turn it and you into a valuable part of this expedition. We're going to get you up and moving. We're going to start you on an exercise program—push-ups, sit-ups, knee-bends, the whole works. We're going to put muscle where there isn't any, whether you think it makes you primitive or not. You're going to start eating well. If you can keep breakfast down, you'll take a full stick of meat, half a loaf of bread and canned fruit for lunch. You'll have two sticks of meat and a quarter pound of cheese for supper. Protein and more pro-tein—"

"I don't like that meat," Jask said.

"Tough luck," the bruin said, letting him fall back to the ground. "Starting tomorrow, you're going to do a lot of things you don't like."

"You're just wasting your time," Jask said. "You could go on by yourself and cover more ground then—"

"No."

"I'm only a hindrance."

"You're coming along."

Angry, Jask recovered more of his strength than he had possessed ever since he'd come out of his fever dreams. He sat up, swaying, his lips tight and his hands fisted. "There's no good reason for me to go!" he screamed, his voice not unlike that of a petulant child. "I'll be in your way. I don't *want* to go deeper into the Wildlands, away from Lady Nature. I don't *want* to go through any rigorous exercise program. You see? There simply isn't any reason for you to make me do all this."

"There is," Tedesco said, savagely, furious for being forced to reveal his reasons but left with no other response. "I don't want to have to go all that way *alone*." He turned away from Jask and stalked

to the other side of the clearing where he stood for a long while, watching the colored lights in the jewels.

FOR the following twenty days they lived by strict routine. They rose early and breakfasted in whatever clearing they had spent the night, then set out on their trek into the jeweled sea. Each day they walked not fewer than ten kilometers and not more than fifteen, choosing another campsite—with larger-than-average trees—by noon or shortly thereafter. They ate lunch. They rested to permit proper digestion. Then, Tedesco became a taskmaster without equal, daily increasing the number of exercises Jask was to do, stretching his pupil's endurance, building his strength. At supper they talked about what they had seen during the day's walk, about what they might expect ahead of them. After an hour's rest the evening was passed in weaponry instruction. In just two weeks Jask had become quick enough and sure enough to rate Tedesco's approval as a knife fighter—and in another week he was fairly accomplished with the throwing knife as well, striking the trunks of the trees eight times out of every ten tosses. They went to bed early and slept soundly and began the routine all over again. And again.

Water was no problem, for rain had fallen seven times in those twenty days; the channels in the jeweled sea acted as drainage spouts for the storm, gushing white water up to their ankles. They found it a simple enough matter to fill their containers whenever this happened.

Food was a knottier problem, for they rapidly depleted what Tedesco had packed and what Jask had crammed into the gray cloth sack in the warehouse. Tedesco used the power rifles to shoot at some of the larger birds that nested in the jewels and that sometimes flew low over the roof of a clearing. Now and then he bagged one of them, though the power bolt often tore them or charred them so badly that they were not fit to eat. The bruin eventually rationed his own food and cut back on his intake, but continued to force Jask to consume his limit and then some.

One night, when he had eaten more than Tedesco and thought he saw a glint of hunger in the mutant's dark eyes, Jask said, "This isn't right. It's plain that you've lost twenty pounds during the last two weeks, while I've been gorging myself."

"Don't forget," Tedesco said, "that you're the one doing all the exercises; you need to eat more than I do."

"That doesn't alter the fact that you're beginning to look positively emaciated."

"I can stand the loss," Tedesco growled, though his coat of fur was hanging loosely on him, as if he had purchased it two sizes too large in some odd clothing store.

"I could stop exercising for a while and cut back on what I eat."

"No," Tedesco said. "We'll be out of these jewel formations soon, and we'll find wildlife and fruit, berries and nuts and vegetables enough for an army."

"Will we?" Jask asked, clearly disbelieving.

"Yes."

"In the Wildlands?"

"Why not?"

"How do you know that anything that grows in the Wildlands is safe to eat?" Jask inquired.

Tedesco harumphed and said, "Don't come on with that religious crap again, please. Not everything that grows and walks in the Wildlands is evil or poisonous. The place may be less hospitable than the lands we come from, but it is not the private domain of any supernatural being like the Ruiner."

"But you've never been even this far into the Wildlands," Jask persisted. "How can you be sure what lies ahead?"

Tedesco stood and slapped his meaty hands together. "Let's go, my friend. It's time to give you a little training in the martial arts. I think tonight we'll try teaching you the fundamentals of wrestling."

Despite the fact that Tedesco was half-starving himself, he pinned Jask Zinn with little trouble, repeatedly, laughing loudly every time he triumphed, immensely pleased with himself.

As the days passed, the soft flesh in Jask's arms and legs became stringy, then tough and taut, with balls of hard muscles where—Tedesco said—a man should have them. He had put on twenty pounds for those the bruin had lost, without adding any fat. His stomach was flat. A few thin bands of muscle tissue had begun to cross his stomach, creasing it in tight ripples. He was still no match for many of the men who existed outside the Pure enclaves, but he was at least adequate to the challenge that lay ahead. And he had come to take pride in his fitness, something he would have thought impossible. He liked the look of his new arms and was not the least disgusted by this reversion to primitiveness.

Because his afternoon exercise sessions were strenuous and caused him to perspire rather heavily, Jask had taken to going nude during those times, and he had been steadily baked by the sun to a healthy golden brown, which did as much as all his newfound muscles to improve his looks.

Thirty-four days after they entered the jewel sea in flight from the Pure soldiers, they stepped from the end of a light-splashed corridor and found that they had walked the breadth of the blazing ocean and were now standing on its far shore, coruscating aureoles of light cascading down their backs. Before them lay a long, broad meadow carpeted in tall grass and buttercups, ringed in by dark, broad-leafed trees. The scene was so placid and common they might not have been in the middle of the Chen Valley Blight at all. As they walked forward, glad for the refreshing softness of the damp grasses, it seemed to Jask as if the jewel sea had been more than the first leg of their journey, had been a spiritual obstacle, the stage for a strange rite of passage that was to indicate whether either of them deserved to go on and, especially, to decide on the value and degree of his own manhood.

At several points the meadow was broken by thrusting limestone rocks, which, worn by wind and rain, curved and hollowed to look like folded gray cloth, provided excellent campsites for the travelers. Tedesco chose a three-peaked formation two-thirds of the way down the meadow, and here they dropped all their supplies.

“The first order of business,” the bruin said, “is to replenish our food supply. Let's investigate these woods for fruit trees.”

Within a hundred yards of the forest's edge they found wild pears, huge raspberries and a species of apple that was purple instead of red and oval rather than round. They filled two sacks with these fruits, determined not to become paranoid about the possibilities of organic poisoning, anxious to enjoy the change in diet they had both desired for some long days now.

As they were carting their spoils back to their camp in the limestone, they flushed a herd of rabbitlike animals. The fat, furry creatures made noise like birds, chattering to each other as they skittered away on six firm legs, breaking from the cover of the trees into the meadow grass.

“Protein,” Tedesco said.

“The power rifles?” Jask whispered.

Tedesco thought a moment. “They didn't run very far before they stopped; they're apparently stupid animals. I'd prefer if we could sneak up on them and use throwing knives. We'd not be wasting meat like we would firing power bolts.”

They circled away from the place where they thought the rabbit herd was cowering in the thickness of green grass, re-turned to the camp, retrieved their throwing knives, and made their way back again by an altogether circuitous route.

“Quietly, now,” Tedesco said.

But Jask needed no warning. They crept toward the slightly angled patch of grass and, shortly, were able to see a dozen of the animals nibbling at the roots of the buttercups.

“Choose one,” Tedesco said.

Jask pointed.

“Good enough. Don't miss.”

Neither of them missed.

The herd thundered away, chattering.

They gutted the dead animals on the spot, skinned them and carried them back to the camp, where they roasted them over a fire of dry branches and brittle blue moss. They ate slowly, relishing the greasy meat, and they followed the main course with fruits and berries, eating until they were quite

uncom-fortable.

In the past two days they had both gone hungry, for the last of their food had had to be fiercely rationed and few birds had flown over their camps to provide them with extra meat.

“You gutted and skinned like a genuine primitive.” Tedesco said, speaking cautiously, watching Jask for a reaction.

“I only followed your directions,” Jask said, picking at his teeth with a stiff grass stalk.

“A couple of weeks ago,” the mutant said, “I wouldn't have thought you were capable of even that.”

“I wasn't, then.”

Tedesco nodded and dropped the subject. An hour later, Jask cursing him all the while, he called the exercise session to order.

The meadow was silent, except for the punctuation of cricket songs and the occasional howl of some beast that lived in the nearby woods.

A cool breeze shushed through the broad leaves on all sides and made the grasses bend and dance as if in worship of the night sky.

Many stars shone, and half a moon.

In the distance the bacteria jewels cast out lances of light to jab back the night. Most of the meadow was tinted with thin colors, though it was more dark than not. This was the first time in more than a month that Jask and Tedesco had been far enough away from the jewel sea to experience anything resembling darkness, and the absence of all those dazzling colors, so close at hand, was a decided blessing. Moments after they stretched out on the grass beside the limestone boulders, they were already beginning to drift into sleep. . . .

Here was peace, a place they could trust . . .

Out of nowhere, with no warning, a voice twenty times as powerful as any a man could own, bellowed: “GAMES TO BEGIN!”

Jask and Tedesco leaped to their feet, sleep banished in the instant, turning this way and that in search of the enormous creature that had so much vocal power.

“NIGHT GAMES ON SITUATION KK.” The voice spoke in flawless English, a language that had survived almost intact from prewar days, thanks to the Pures' dedication to the preservation of prewar artifacts and ideas.

“What *is* this?” Jask wanted to know.

Tedesco waited, peering into the shadowy land around them.

“PARTICIPANT MECHANICALS PREPARED.”

“Something's moving out there,” Tedesco said, pointing into the vaguely colored darkness.

“GENERAL PROGRAM INDICATED, INDIVIDUAL MECHANICAL INITIATIVE TO INDUCE CHANCE FAC-TORS.”

Jask peered in the direction Tedesco was pointing, but he could not see anything there. “That's a machine talking,” he told Tedesco. “We have talking machines in the fortress, but none with voices so loud. Still, the very careful intonation is proof it's a machine.”

“BLUE FOR OFFENSIVE. RED FOR DEFENSIVE.”

“What's it babbling about?” Tedesco asked.

“I can't guess.”

The bruin grunted and pointed again, “Out there, toward the back of the meadow. See them?”

Jask saw them: fifty men advancing toward them, spread across the width of the open land.

“Better get the rifles,” the bruin said, stepping into the shelter of the gray boulders and grabbing up the two power guns. He came back and handed a weapon to Jask.

“They have rifles, too,” Jask said. “They can't be Pures, not here in the Wildlands.”

“Whoever they are, they *aren't* friends.”

Six of the front-rank soldiers fell forward, raised their guns and fired rapidly. Violet bolts of light sizzled along the length of the field, passed Jask and Tedesco with ten yards to spare.

“Terrible shots,” Jask said.

A group of soldiers split from the main pack and ran toward the woods under cover of a line of limestone rocks. Once in the trees, they ran forward in doubletime, hurried past Jask and Tedesco's post and on toward the open end of the meadow, as if their enemy lay that way.

Tedesco lowered his rifle and said, "Did you see them? Dressed in bright blue clothes, carrying blue rifles? I don't think they even know we're here."

"Then what—"

At that moment half a dozen red-clad soldiers, toting red weapons, clambered into the limestone ring where Jask and Tedesco had made camp. They paid no heed to the espers, trod across the bulging rucksack and the fresh fruit that had been picked earlier in the day. Pears, apples and berries squashed beneath their feet. They took up positions at breaks in the limestone and began firing on the blue soldiers.

"INADEQUACY OF FORWARD MOVEMENT NOW PUTS BLUE ON DEFENSIVE AND RED ON OFFENSIVE."

"I don't understand at all," Jask said.

"I think I do," Tedesco said. He walked up to the nearest red soldier and tapped him on the shoulder.

The soldier kept shooting at the enemy.

Tedesco tapped harder.

The soldier ignored him.

Tedesco lifted the steel barrel of his rifle and slammed it down on the top of the soldier's head.

The soldier didn't flinch.

Jask walked over and inspected the shallow dent in the top of the red soldier's head. He said, "They're just machines."

"Unquestionably," Tedesco said.

At that moment half a dozen blue soldiers appeared from the open end of the field, entered the limestone-circled camp behind the red troops holding it, and deactivated the enemy with several bursts of violet light. The six red troopers tottered a moment, without uttering a word of surprise or pain, then fell over with loud, metallic clanging noises. These triumphant intruders, Jask realized, were those who had earlier split from the main body of the blue army, had entered the woods and circled behind the advancing red soldiers.

"BLUE CAPTURES A VITAL STRONGHOLD AND STRENGTHENS ITS POSITION ON THE SOUTH END."

"Some ancient form of entertainment?" Jask asked.

"More likely, a training ground for military strategists," the bruin said. "The disembodied giant's voice you hear is to call observers' attention to special points of interest. The machines are set up to fire only at their own kind, with beams that probably wouldn't hurt a man. And since they ignore us al-together, while carefully avoiding us, we are able to walk among them for firsthand observation."

A blue soldier, bent over to avoid the crisscrossing plentitude of purple lightning bolts, dashed for the opening to the limestone formation, gingerly sidestepped Jask and Tedesco as if they were not there, and joined his clockwork comrades behind the palisades. His face was set in a caricature of courage and determination, the steel lips tight, the glittering eyes staring straight ahead.

"HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT INITIATED BY RED COMMANDO UNIT AT SOUTHWEST CORNER. THREE BLUE MECHANICALS INACTIVATED. RED LOSSES: ONE."

"But what started all this going?" Jask wondered.

"Perhaps our presence did it," Tedesco said. "Or maybe there are regular mock battles here all the time. I've noticed that some of the robots are in good repair, while others are dented, rusted, and some are missing parts of their bodies."

As if anxious to provide an example of what Tedesco had said, another blue soldier shambled up to join his fellows in the limestone ring. He was missing his right foot and one bright eyeball, but seemed undeterred by his injuries.

"I have a feeling this might go on all night," Jask said. Around them the soldiers clanked, fired sizzling bolts of light, all to the booming commentary of the unseen announcer.

“There's one way to be sure it doesn't,” Tedesco said. He lifted his power rifle and destroyed the nearest blue soldier. The blast did not merely deactivate it, but tore it in two. “We'll make sure that one side or the other wins as quickly as possible.”

Jask grinned. “Shall we begin?”

They wiped out the blue soldiers who had intruded into their campsite. None of the mechanicals offered a defense or even seemed to be aware that they were under attack by anyone but the red army.

“MAJOR COUP BY THE RED FORCES. CREATIVE STRATEGY AS YET UNANALYZED. MORE TO FOLLOW.”

“I see about a dozen blue soldiers over there,” Jask said, pointing, leading the way.

They sauntered across the field, violet streaks of light hissing by them, mechanical soldiers engaged in hand-to-hand combat on both sides, and they destroyed fifteen of the blue soldiers, leaving their red enemies standing stupidly in the tall grass, looking this way and that, perplexed.

“UNPRECEDENTED CROSSFIRE INITIATED BY RED FORCES, INFLECTING CATEGORY AB LOSSES ON BLUE. MORE TO FOLLOW.”

Ten minutes later Tedesco stepped in front of the last blue unit and charred it into a smoking lump of metal and plastic. “That's that,” he said, lowering the rifle.

“Now what?”

“We'll wait and see.”

For five minutes the surviving red soldiers stood dumbly where they were or took a few tentative steps in search of the enemy only to stop in confusion when their visual and audio receptors informed them that no blue survived.

At last the giant's voice said: “NIGHT GAMES CONCLUDED. VICTORY TO RED. BLUE SUFFERS UTTER DEFEAT. NO SURRENDERS. DETAILED ACCOUNTING OF INDIVIDUAL BATTLE INITIATIVE, AS APPLIED TO THE GENERAL PLAN, CATEGORY SITUATION KK, WILL BE OFFERED ON A PRINTOUT TO INTERESTED STRATEGY STUDENTS AS SOON AS TAPES OF THE ENCOUNTER ARE ANALYZED.”

At the closed end from which the blue army had originally come, squares of bright light appeared in the darkness, like doors opening magically in the air and giving access to secret, unseen rooms. Indeed, when Jask and Tedesco walked down there to have a look, they found that this was more or less the case. Four large elevator cabins had risen out of the meadow and were waiting for the mechanical soldiers to come aboard. The red troops filed into them, as did a few blue troopers who had been deactivated by the violet light beams and not utterly destroyed by Jask's and Tedesco's power rifles.

The last of the undamaged soldiers stepped into the elevators.

The doors remained open.

“UNITS MISSING,” the giant said.

The night was quiet.

“MUCH HIGHER THAN AVERAGE ACTUAL LOSS AMONG MECHANICAL BATTLE UNITS. ANALYSIS OF WEIGHTS IN RETURNING LIFTS INDICATES THIRTY-NINE UNITS MISSING.” There was a light humming sound while the disembodied voice thought things over. Then: “EXPLANATION INCLUDED IN PRINTOUTS, POST-BATTLE ANALYSIS. STUDENTS MAY HAVE ACCESS TO THIS DATA.”

The doors slid shut.

The elevators sank into the earth. The roofs were covered with plugs of earth and grass and blended perfectly with the meadow surrounding them, although, Jask soon discovered, the grass was plastic and the earth beneath was painted concrete.

“Maybe we should have taken a ride down there to see what's under us,” he told Tedesco.

“And we'd never be let out again.”

Jask nodded.

That *was* a possibility.

They walked back to their littered campsite in the limestone, carefully stepping over and around pieces of the demolished blue soldiers. They dragged the fallen mechanicals away from their camp and

heaved them into the tall grass, and they straightened up the gear, which the red and blue men had thoroughly trampled.

“Now what?” Jask asked.

“Now we try to get some sleep,” the bruin said. But he did not make any move to lie down. He wiped at his blunt snout with one thick, furry hand, and he seemed not to be in a good mood—though his anger was not directed solely against Jask, for once. He cleared his throat, spat, and said, “We could have made a fatal mistake here.”

“How's that?”

Tedesco sniffed at the air as if he found something offensive in the crisp night breezes. “We forgot that we're in the Wildlands and not at home. Because the place looked so damned peaceful, we let ourselves get sloppy. We're not going to make that mistake again; we can't afford to make it if we're going to survive.”

“Aren't you exaggerating the situation?” Jask asked. Suddenly they seemed to have reversed roles. Jask never thought he would hear himself defend the peaceable Wildlands.

“No,” the bruin said shortly. “I'll take the first watch. I'll wake you in a few hours; then you can play sentry until after dawn.”

Tedesco scrambled to the top of the limestone formation and sat down where he could survey the entire meadow.

“But,” Jask said, “nothing really dangerous happened. They weren't out to harm us.”

“The next time they may be,” Tedesco said. “Now get some sleep. I'll wake you if I need help.”

IN the morning, after a meal of roast rabbit and wild fruit and berries, Tedesco checked his compass and his maps, pointed the way, and started them on a new routine that lasted more than two weeks and was even more demanding than what they had subjected themselves to during their tedious journey through the bacteria jewels. After breakfast they walked no fewer than thirty and usually more than forty kilometers a day, no matter if the sky were clear or if they were pelted with cold rain. In the late afternoon or early evening they stopped and set up their camp, ate a dinner of fresh game and fruit. Then, together, they did their exercises—Tedesco, so that he might get back into shape after his ordeal in the jewel sea, and Jask, so that he could add muscle to his slowly thickening biceps and chest. They took turns at watch, slept a bit less than they would have liked to, and began the next day as they had begun the one before it.

In the rich forest through which they traveled there was an abundance of life unlike the beautiful but barren landscape of the jewel sea. At first they encountered only small animals that were too frightened of them to pose any serious threat. They killed what looked edible and went on, undisturbed, waiting for the moment when they would finally come across a formidable beast, as they knew they eventually must.

Among the trees lay the ruins of ancient metropolises, grown over with crawling vines, nests now for rats and rabbits and squirrels, all but unrecognizable as the works of man.

They passed many curious artifacts that had survived the centuries intact, or nearly so, but they investigated very few of them, lest they stir some antagonistic force they were not equipped to deal with.

On the third day after they left the meadow they came across a

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column of yellow metal that gleamed as if it were new, despite its antiquity. It was ten meters in diameter and soared sixty meters into the air, unhampered by the crush of trees and vines that proliferated elsewhere. Indeed, where the vines and undergrowth had edged too close, they were blackened, as if a flame had been touched to them. Around the pillar, etched in perfect block letters, was this wisdom: JESUS SAVES, TRUST IN HIM . . . JESUS SAVES, TRUST IN HIM . . . The legend wound around and around the magnificent column, repeated perhaps a thousand times.

“Who was Jesus?” Jask asked.

Tedesco looked up at the shiny tube with its cryptic message and said, “He was a god.”

“When?”

“Before the Last War.”

“What happened to him?”

Tedesco smiled. “Died, I guess. Killed as all gods are.”

“Gods can't be killed,” Jask said.

Tedesco smiled even more openly and said, “I'd agree to that.”

“Of course.”

“Because,” Tedesco added, “they were not alive in the first place, just figments of the imagination.”

Jask refused to let himself be dragged into that, by now, familiar argument. He approached the recessed door in the base of the yellow column and said, “Can't we have a look inside?”

“I wouldn't recommend it,” the bruin grunted.

“We have our rifles.”

“And we may not get a chance to use them. Death is always swift, otherwise it isn't death but injury.”

“When we began this trip,” Jask said, “I was the coward, afraid of every new experience. Now it seems—”

“I'm not susceptible to that kind of psychological game-playing,” Tedesco said. “If you want to go in there, by all means go. I'll wait out here and have an apple. We can afford a rest break, but for no more than ten minutes.”

“I'll be back by then,” Jask assured him. He touched the ornate handle of the golden door and jumped, startled, as it swung in without any effort on his part.

He stepped into a tiny foyer from which a series of roughened metal steps led downward.

“The church was underground,” Jask said.

“Umph,” Tedesco said, leaning against the door jamb and chewing a mouthful of apple. “Probably built it during one of the wars; didn't want it blown to smithereens during a ceremony.”

“Didn't they trust in their god?” Jask asked.

“As much as most men,” the bruin said. He spat out a seed as large as a strawberry. “In theory they knew he protected them. In reality it was every man for himself.”

Jask stepped onto the first stair, listened to the sound of his footstep echoing scratchily down the winding well.

Nothing responded to his intrusion.

On both sides yellow metal light standards were bolted to the smooth walls at intervals of ten feet. Half of these no longer functioned, but the other half provided sufficient illumination to show him the way. As he progressed, the lights behind him went out and new lights sprang up ahead, so that there was always a pocket of impenetrable darkness close at his back and another not too terribly far ahead.

Three hundred steps later, six complete turns in the stairwell behind him, Jask walked out into the main chamber of the church. Of the four hundred lights placed there, a hundred and fifty popped on, leaving a few corners shrouded in shadows but providing him a fairly good idea of the nature of the place: rows and rows of pews, a railing around the section where the ceremony took place, an altar and one enormous symbol fully thirty feet high and twenty wide, a cross of silvery material that had spotted with rust during the eons since it had been venerated.

Jask was fascinated by two things: first, the great number of pews, enough for five thousand

celebrants, more than the number of men in the entire enclave from which he came; secondly, the fact that the worshipers apparently paid obeisance to the great cross and had no provisions on their altar for the placement of things of Nature, plants and animals, the things man should attribute to the beneficence of his gods. The first item was simply a mathematical shock. The second was a moral indignation. Why worship idols when god's creations, plants and animals, were the things meant to be idolized?

He was still standing in the middle of the church, considering this, when something crashed in the back of the chamber.

He whirled, bringing up his power rifle to face whatever was behind him. The rear of the church lay in so much shadow that he could not make out the thing until it moved again. It had entered the main room through a pair of double doors barely wide enough to admit it: a huge crablike creature fully four meters across and three meters high, traveling on six jointed legs, its antennae quivering back and forth, its enormous pincers exceeded in ugliness only by its serrated beak, which it slowly opened and closed without making a sound, an act that would have been less terrifying if accompanied by noise.

Jask backed down the center of the church, clambered over the altar rail and watched the behemoth cautiously.

It did not move.

He went to the back of the altar and looked for another exit from the main room.

He did not find one.

He went back to the rail and stared at the crab.

His eyes had adjusted to the dim light well enough to see its beady eyes, set deep in a mottled green and black carapace.

"Tedesco!" he shouted.

The crab scuttled forward.

"Tedesco!"

The crab made a throaty rattling noise.

Jask decided that quiet was the best course. Besides, Tedesco seemed to be too far away to hear his cry.

Jask walked to the far side of the church, putting as much distance between himself and the beast as he could.

Its eyes followed him, bright and red.

He stepped over the altar rail and stood next to the first pew, gauging the distance from there to the opening of the stairwell at the rear of that main chamber. He had not seen how fast the crab could move, and he really should know that before deciding whether to run for it or not. Once he made the stairwell, the crab would not be able to follow, for it was twice as wide as the entrance to the steps. Still, if it could move fast and could capture him before he even reached the steps, the entire issue of its size would be academic.

The beast did not move.

Jask walked slowly along the aisle toward the back of the church, the barrel of his rifle directed at the creature.

It scuttled easily along the rear of the room, toward him, stopped, watched him, waited.

Jask had stopped, too. Then he began to move again, easily, carefully, hoping not to antagonize it any further.

The crab came a few yards closer, so near the exit that it was unlikely Jask could squeeze past even if he moved too fast for it to react properly.

He went back to the railing, climbed over it and put his back to the altar.

The crab entered the center aisle and stood there, antennae jiggling, waiting, its beak opening and closing like the well-oiled jaws of a pair of pliers.

"Tedesco, help me!" he shouted at the top of his voice.

That brought the crab at top speed, its legs rattling against the metal floor, sharp-edged shell banging the wooden pews on both sides. In less than two seconds it scurried the length of the church, slammed into the waist-high altar rail and reared up toward him where he stood beneath the cross, jaws working

rapidly but silently. It was so close that Jask could see the four different rings of color that were in its tiny eyes—black, brown, purple and amber.

He fired the power rifle at point-blank range.

The crab rose, tottered backward, came down on all its legs, shuffled hastily to the left and settled into a defensive posture, its six legs bunched beneath it, nothing open to injury but its nearly impregnable green and black shell.

This reaction made Jask wonder if the beast might not be, to some degree, sentient, capable of communication on a human level. In this strange world, there was no telling what form a human consciousness might take. But when he delved into its mind, he was confronted with vicious, inhuman images of blood, spilled ichor, entrails, excretion and death. He withdrew, shaken, certain that there was no gram of intelligence in the monster.

He opened fire on it again.

Light lanced out, danced on its shell.

It closed its eyes again and watched him with eyes, shielded with thick gray lids.

When he stopped firing, it opened its eyes again and watched him with an obvious hunger.

He crossed the front of the subterranean church once more, walking away from the crab, stepped over the altar rail and started to move along the side aisle, one eye on the stairwell to the surface, one on the crab.

The beast suddenly rose on its spindly legs and rushed at him, over the pews, only slightly delayed by these obstacles.

He opened fire.

The crab scuttled sideways, fell, drew in on itself, lying across the pews, watching and waiting.

He started walking again.

It came up and was after him, fast.

As it leaped at him, he fell and waddled forward between two rows of pews, under it and into the central aisle of the church. When he looked up, he found it had scurried to the rear of the room again and was waiting for him directly in front of the entrance to the stairs.

He aimed, fired, snapped off one of the beast's antennae.

It did not seem to mind.

He retreated up the central aisle, remembering how fast it had been able to cover that same territory earlier. When he stepped over the altar railing and was again beneath the cross, the thing scuttled forward, closing the space between them by half before it settled down under the protection of its shell once more.

Jask had not thought to pray to Lady Nature for Her aid, but now it seemed the only course left open to him. He was tainted, of course, an esper that should never have the nerve to call on Her, but he reasoned that he was less distant from Her original creatures than was this monstrous crab, clearly a child of the Ruiner. So he prayed.

When a light flashed like a preview of Judgment and the enormous crab leaped, Jask cried out in sheer joy, for he was certain that Lady Nature had answered his unworthy prayers. This spiritual excitement lasted only a brief moment, however, for he saw Tedesco standing at the rear of the church, in the mouth of the stairwell; the bruin had fired upon the beast from behind, startling it. Now that it was confused, facing enemies in two directions, it was extremely vulnerable. Jask lowered his power rifle, took aim, fired.

Tedesco fired at the same time.

The crab issued a throaty roar and wheeled sideways, leaping onto the pews and rushing toward the side of the church.

Tedesco stepped fully into the room.

The crab scuttled toward the doors through which it had originally forced its way, its single antenna bobbling, stopped when Tedesco caught it with a full charge across its beak. It reared back, slipped, fell, rose up, ran into a second buzzing wave of light, wheeled about.

Jask stepped forward. When the beast ran for the front of the church, he shot it in the belly and

flipped it over despite its size.

It lay on its shell, all of its legs kicking furiously, making noises like a thousand fist-sized stones rolling down a graveled incline.

When Jask reached the rear of the great room, the bruin said, "I was tired of waiting for you."

"I was unexpectedly delayed."

"You overstayed your ten-minute rest period," Tedesco said.

"I'm sorry."

"Ready now?"

"I guess so," Jask said.

The crab kicked and croaked for help.

Perhaps it had a goddess of its own, a divine being to whom it could cry for consolation, a perverted Lady Nature of tainted monsters it could plead to for deliverance from suffering.

In a way Jask hoped this was so.

"One thing," he said to the bruin.

Tedesco turned away from the steps, oblivious of the uproar caused by the wounded beast. He said, "Yes?"

Jask nodded toward the towering cross at the front of the church and said, "This Jesus . . ."

"What of him?"

"They had reason to worship him?"

"As much as you have for Lady Nature."

"How do you know?"

"Books."

"Not recountings of old myths, but books ancient enough to give you a firsthand picture?"

Tedesco said, "Yes, old enough."

"They were serious?"

"They were."

Jask looked toward the crab.

It kicked, dying.

"Then they were wrong," Jask said.

Tedesco seemed interested. "How so?"

"Can't you see?"

"Tell me."

Jask shrugged. "It seems evident to me that this creature was not meant to be worshipped, but loathed."

The six, spine-covered legs of the overturned crab kicked more feebly, like the legs of a lazy cyclist.

"You think that—" Tedesco began.

Jask interrupted him, nodded toward the defeated beast and said, "You can't possibly say that such a thing was part of Lady Nature's plan."

"No."

Jask pointed at the beast. "That thing is a perversion of Nature, a random mutation without ecological function." He shuddered and said, "I espied its mind before you came down. It's terribly vicious, blindly violent."

Tedesco began to laugh, his rifle slipping away from the dying crab. He hugged himself, tears of mirth rolling from the corners of his eyes, down his dark cheeks, to get caught like crystal pieces in his thick beard.

"What's the matter?" Jask inquired, perplexed.

Tedesco turned, unable to answer him, and he started up the winding stairs, leaning against the metal wall.

"I don't see anything funny," Jask said.

That only set the bruin laughing harder than ever, and they had to stop while he bent over, holding his furry belly and cackling like a lunatic.

Jask decided it was best not to say anything further. He was angry at Tedesco for taking the whole affair so lightly, but he did not want to lose his temper.

Two-thirds of the way up the stairs, Tedesco turned and said, "What did you imagine that beast was?"

"Their god," Jask said, without hesitation.

"Jesus?"

"Yes."

"I thought as much!" the bruin roared. He started up the stairs again, chuckling in a more restrained manner now.

Jask thought his companion's behavior was juvenile, though he did not say so. He did not feel like complaining about anything after such a narrow escape from the pagan god.

AN hour before noon on the sixteenth day after they had departed from the meadow, Jask and Tedesco encountered three espers who had been waiting for them for more than a week. Climbing the major footpath through the Ashtokoman Hills, which marked the end of the Chen Valley Blight, only an hour or two from civilized lands, they rounded a bend and saw the brightly painted gypsy wagon, the horse grazing peacefully by the side of the road, and the three strangers who had anticipated their arrival.

Welcome, the trio radiated in unison. *We mean to be friends.*

In the thirteen days since they had killed the giant crab, Jask and Tedesco had come across many unusual creatures, many a dangerous surprise. They had fought off, three different times, marauding bands of man-sized lizards that could walk on their hind feet for short distances in imitation of mutated human beings; one of these impersonators had nearly gotten close enough to gut Tedesco with its razor-edged claws before they understood that it was not an intelligent being, but a vicious predator. They were fortunate to escape the ubiquitous arms of a quick-flowing ameboid creature fully as large as a house, which trapped them in the shattered walls and blind alleyways of a crumbling village where no one had lived since the Last War. At night they were set upon repeatedly by perambulating plants that could spin webs of entrapment as cleverly as any spider. But neither of them could have been more surprised when the three mutated human espers approached them along the dusty foot-path, smiling.

We came to warn you, they 'pathed.

“Of what?” Tedesco inquired.

News of your escape from the Highlands of Caul was radioed across the Blight to the Pures of Potest-Amon Enclave. You were not expected to survive the journey. But on the off chance that you might, patrols were established on the higher hills, just outside the Blight. Pures wait for you, assisted in their vigil by other men who fear espers as much as their so-holy brothers.

“Who are you three?” Jask asked. He supposed they were trustworthy, because they were as much outcasts as he and Tedesco, yet he did not want to give his allegiance too easily.

Each of the strangers 'pathed something about itself. Indeed, in only a few seconds, Jask found that he had absorbed as much about them as he might have gotten from a three- or four-hour conversation.

They were:

- a five-foot-tall, hard-muscled wolf-man named Chaney, whose long skull tapered to a narrow mouth crammed full of teeth even sharper than Tedesco's; his nostrils were black, the flesh inside them red, so that it looked as if he were about to breathe fire; his eyes were black, with very little whites to them; his ears were tufted with gray hair while the remainder of his pelt was dark brown and black; he went naked, as Tedesco did, finding no use for more warmth or modesty than his natural cloak provided; he had been a traveling musician since his childhood, a profession that afforded him excellent protection when his extrasensory perception began to develop, for itinerant entertainers were a breed apart—being able to move with all their worldly possessions in the space of minutes if they should somehow be found out as espers, staying too short a time in any town to risk being discovered by neighbors—and were expected to be at least a little peculiar, a prejudice of town-locked folk that permitted them to pass off their esp powers as something else the few times they were accidentally used in public; he was a year on the run now, cursed with his expanded awareness, twice discovered but never apprehended, a canny man who could fight hard but preferred to rely on guile and cunning whenever possible;

- his wife, a wolf-woman named Kiera, as tall as Chaney but more slender, a double row of black teats along her belly, her tail less flamboyant than his; she, too, could walk on two feet like a woman had been meant to, or she could drop to all fours and, despite her five somewhat stubby fingers, make twice the time she could standing upright; she had been Chaney's wife when the power first came to him, but she had not reported him to the authorities, because she loved him enough to want him even as an esper; later, six months ago now, her own telepathic abilities had begun to blossom; her father had been a gypsy

sign painter and after his death had left her the wagon, tools and talent he had used; she had met Chaney in a small town called Higgerpel on the slopes of the Star-Reaching Pondersals, where they had fallen in love and married some nine years ago;

•Melopina, who looked very much like a Pure girl, with but a few unnatural refinements that must have come from the genetic engineers and their Artificial Wombs many generations ago; she was a few inches past five feet tall, with legs that Jask would have once considered too curvacious but now found more en-ticing than the straight and spindly legs of Pure women; her hips were somewhat wider than a Pure woman's hips, while her behind was round rather than flat; her waist was admirably tiny, her breasts not large but apparently well-shaped; her face was small and, like the rest of her body, colored a very subtle blue-green that gave one the impression he was viewing her through a layer of water; her lips were generous, her teeth broad and white; her nose was small and tip-tilted, her eyes twice as large as a human's eyes should be, the irises almost as enormous as Chaney's, but colored a bright green; her hair was midnight black and fell in rich masses over her slender shoulders; the divisions between her fingers were spanned with delicate blue, translucent webs for half their length, while similar webs bunched between her splayed toes; on both sides of her slim neck, beginning at her ears and running downward to her shoulders, much larger weblike growths lay in graceful folds, like air-blown silks; these adornments were fully four inches wide, six of them growing parallel and close together on each side of her neck; they rippled prettily in the slight breeze that came down from the mountains beyond; Melopina was sev-enteen and had acquired her esp powers only three months ago; her parents had rejected her, turned her in to the authorities, who had imprisoned her prior to a ritual burning to cleanse the town of her evil; she was a disciple of the Devils from the Stars, they knew, and was of the same blood that had once spurned and perhaps destroyed mankind; fortunately for Melopina, Chaney and Kiera happened to be performing in her village, Sustenpet-al, when she was put in chains; they rescued her and fled from the town with her in the dead of a spring night.

It would seem, then, Tedesco 'pathed, that you must have come to the same conclusion we've reached. Espers must band together, work for each other, in order to survive.

Of course, Chaney said.

Not only will we then survive, but we will no longer be lonely, either, Kiera 'pathed.

We are seeking the Black Presence, Tedesco said. We have maps of three possible locations at which it may be hiding. Will you throw your lot in with us for these journeys ?

No word of this has reached here, Chaney 'pathed, his full tail sweeping rapidly back and forth as the notion of the trek excited him.

No one knew it but us, Tedesco explained.

A shielded mental conversation, between Chaney and Kiera, passed in a second, like a ball of fuzz at the edge of the others' range of perception. In a moment the wolf-man said, *Count both of us in.*

Melopina said, *Is the Presence real ? I thought it was a myth.*

It's real enough, Tedesco said. I've got proof in books.

The girl grinned delightedly. *Then I'm with you.* She took a few quick steps forward and took hold of Jask's hand in both of her smaller hands, looked at him and 'pathed, *Did you really come all the way across the Blight, with all the horrors in it?*

"Yes," Jask said.

You must tell me about it, she said.

"I will—" He hesitated, then said, "If we do talk about it. I don't want to use telepathy all the time."

Whyever not? the girl 'pathed.

She was wearing deerskin shorts that fit her well and em-phasized the smoothness of her blue-green legs and a thin brown blouse against which the nubs of her nipples pressed in fine detail. She was stunningly attractive, and her beauty not only pleased him, but upset and confused him. He had never reacted like this to a tainted woman. It seemed wrong and sinful to covet

"I'd . . . just prefer talking aloud," he hedged.

But telepathy is much simpler than speech, so direct, so—

It disgusts him, Tedesco 'pathed.

For the first time Jask realized that he was the center of attention. Chaney and Kiera were watching him with undis-guised curiosity.

Disgusts him? How? Melopina asked.

Tedesco 'pathed, He no longer looks much like a Pure, with his new strength and his tan, but he was born and raised in an enclave. He still thinks in some ways as they taught him to think, despite the fact he is now tainted himself. He finds telepathy too intimate a means of communication. Especially with tainted creatures like us. He gets ill at the idea of having us inside his head.

“This is true?” Melopina asked.

Jask nodded.

She let go of his hand. “I see.”

For a long moment everyone stood in the middle of the road in embarrassed silence.

The grazing horse whinnied.

That familiar sound broke the awkward spell and set them into motion once again. “Share lunch with us,” Kiera said. “Then we'll decide how best to outwit the waiting soldiers.” She turned without waiting for a response and led the way toward the gypsy wagon, the muscles in her sleek haunches moving with oiled precision, bunching and relaxing, bunching and relaxing with every step. Though she resembled a wolf more than a woman, Jask could understand why Chaney might find her quite attractive. Her grace was purely feminine, her attitude sensuous.

Tedesco and Chaney walked side-by-side, the wolf-man tilt-ing his head to look up at the powerful bruin now and again. It was evident that they were conversing telepathically, though Jask could not hear anything they said without making a special effort to penetrate the courtesy shield they had established to spare his sensitivity.

Melopina walked just in front of him, talking neither normal-ly nor telepathically. Her spritely, friendly attitude had changed. She had withdrawn into herself, a brooking expression on her pretty face, and she pointedly avoided looking at Jask Zinn

He knew he had hurt their feelings.

That couldn't be helped.

He did not know whether to be relieved by Melopina's change in attitude toward him, or whether to be disappointed. As he watched her walking in front of him, he decided that he was a little of both.

Lunch was an ordeal. The food was good enough, but hidden conversations coursed all around Jask. Often the espers broke into hearty laughter at some expression of wit. Each time this happened, Jask felt, irrationally, that they were laughing at him, for he had not heard the silent joke that had triggered their mirth. He ate in silence. He did not look at them, but stared at his plate—except for a few furtive glances at Melopina, who was curled most deliciously on the lush green grass, like a fairy sprung from its roots. She returned none of his glances. The others left him to his meal as well. He felt like an unwanted guest who had arrived at an inconvenient time and had been given only minimal courtesy.

He was aware, for the first time now, that his ordeal was not to end with the crossing of the Chen Valley Blight. It had only just begun, in fact. And there might never be a conclusion to it.

THEY decided to remain in the Wildlands, skirting the edge of the civilized places until they had traveled to the extreme southwest corner of the triangular Blight; that place was so remote as to make more than scattered patrols unlikely. They rode atop or inside the gypsy wagon if the land were level or inclined downhill, and they walked when the way was uphill, in order to make the horse's load less crippling. They covered more kilometers by night than by day, for they did not want to be spotted by a Pure with binoculars and thereafter monitored on their trip to the southwest.

Jask said little.

The others spoke even less to him.

He slept badly and often dreamed about returning to his fortress on the cliff and taking up life where it had ended for him. Sometimes, as they creaked along the narrow lanes in the wooden-wheeled vehicle, he stared up the Ashtokomans, wondering how close he was to others of his kind, Pures, people he could talk to and understand. . . .

On the fourth day of their journey the barren hours finally got to him while he was sitting atop the wagon, leaning against its safety rail, watching the stars and the clouds that occasionally obscured them. Melopina was there with him. Kiera was in the wagon, lying down. Tedesco and Chaney were up front, at the reins, speaking without sound. He turned to Melopina and said, "Do you really believe in this Black Presence?"

"I do now."

"Tedesco convinced you?"

"Yes."

"How?" he asked.

"In many ways."

"Specifically."

She did not respond, as if she held secrets he had not earned. The possibility that this was so irked Jask.

"Listen," he said, "you're acting like children, all of you. Before you got your esp powers, you talked aloud. What harm does it do? What exertion does it really cause you?"

She looked at him more directly than she had in a long time, her green eyes radiant in the darkness like the eyes of some wild animal. "Vocal communication allows deception," she began.

"You know I don't want to deceive you."

She ignored him and went on. "Vocal speech permits a distance between communicants, permits lies and evasions and the reserve of self. Telepathy, on the other hand, soon requires complete communion of the soul as well as of the mind. It allows no secrets, no lies, no evasions. It forces a giving of the self and an intimacy that, once experienced, makes all other relationships seem silly and undesirable by comparison."

"Fine!" he said. "Have your soul-sharing relationships. I'm not against that. But be civilized enough to extend me a little kindness, a little companionship."

"You are the uncivilized one," she said.

"Oh?"

"You're damned lucky to be one of the new breed of man-kind, but you reject your powers and continue to act as a primitive." Her voice was full of scorn.

Shocked, he said, "You consider your telepathic talents to be a blessing—not a curse?"

"Of course."

"How wrong you are!"

"Really?"

“Don't you see how your power has made you a fugitive, a hunted animal, how it's taken away your dignity, your peace of mind, how it's denied you the company of other people?”

She turned away from him.

He said, “If we're a new breed of men, a step up the evolutionary scale, why have our powers showed up at different points in each of our lives, so suddenly, like magic? If we were meant to be a new breed, why weren't we born with our powers?”

She said nothing.

He shook his head sadly as the wagon bumped down a long slope and shook them like dice in a cup. When they reached the bottom of the hill and were on more hospitable land, he said, “We aren't some new species, nothing as glamorous as that. We're merely tainted creatures, jokes perpetrated by the Ruiner, a sorry lot of—”

Oh, shut up! she pathed with particular violence.

Jask rubbed his temples to ease the headache she'd given him, and he didn't attempt to start another conversation.

On the sixth day they parked the wagon under a grove of tall trees that were abundantly thatched with yellow leaves, certain it would be out of sight of anyone lurking in the higher hills, and they bathed in the cool, vital creek that lay a hundred and fifty meters below the ancient roadway. Tedesco, Chaney and Kiera went down the stone path first, soon out of sight, leaving Jask and Melopina to stand watch. It was an uneventful watch; they were not approached by any strangers, villainous or otherwise, and they did not approach each other.

Tedesco and the wolf-people were gone nearly an hour. When they returned, their pelts glistened, bright and healthy and clean. They were laughing as they took over the watch and sent Jask and Melopina away.

The path down the embankment from the grove had been laid centuries ago, by hand. The stones were so closely fitted that no mortar had been necessary, and the years had done only moderate damage to their patterns. At the bottom of the stairs they came out on a paved ledge, which, at its water end, was stepped to feed into the creek. A few hundred meters up the creek a dam forced the water to back up to a depth of three or four meters, creating a pleasant enough swimming pool.

There was so little communication between him and Mel-opina that, as he undressed, Jask felt no actual embarrassment in being nude before her. It was really almost as if she were not even there. He had made a sort of breechcloth from fragments of his tattered jumpsuit, which was all that he was wearing in that summer heat; he was nude and in the water in short order.

He was treading water in the middle of the pool, looking around to see what had become of the girl, when she suddenly surfaced like a fish, rose part way out of the water, then sliced back into it, diving deep, leaving only a bubbly froth in her wake. When she came up again, she swam on the surface to the small dam, rolled onto her back and returned, smoothly, making very little noise.

“You're a very good swimmer!” he called to her.

Thank you. I sometimes feel my ancestors were born to water and that I should have a set of gills.

She dived.

She rose in a bright splash.

She cartwheeled through the water, swimming first on her stomach, then on her side, her back, her other side, finally returning to her stomach again, going through this routine again and again so that she seemed like the screw of an invisible ship.

“Beautiful!” he called, delighted with her sporting.

She dived.

When she came up, it was in front of him, showering him with water.

Her neck membranes repelled the water and flowed, still, like air-blown silk, a startling contrast to her soaked black hair, which hung straight from her head.

“That was bad manners,” he said, splashing her with his hands.

She laughed, turned and swam off, forcing him to give chase, letting him catch her, then flipping water in his face and whirl-ing out of reach.

Once, by pretending to give up and then launching after her with even greater fervor, he caught her in his arms and tried to draw her toward him. His hands slid over heavy breasts, along slick skin, then lost her.

“Over here!” she shouted.

He turned and saw her at the other side of the pool.

“Slippery eel!” he called.

He went after her.

She dived out of sight.

A moment later she grabbed his feet and pulled him under, let him go when he began to fight back.

He surfaced, spluttering, listening to her delighted laughter.

“You'll pay, “he said.

This time he caught her more easily, drew her in until her hard nipples poked against his chest and her pelvis was glued to his, their legs brushing provocatively beneath the crystal water. Without realizing that he had intended to do this all along, he bent and kissed her, licked her lips and accepted her tongue in return.

Her arms went around him.

He nuzzled her neck membranes, smelled the tangy odor of her flesh, aware that she was tainted, that she was daughter to the Ruiner, but not caring in the least, not at that moment.

“I want you,” he said. His voice sounded as if it belonged to someone else, throaty and ready to crack. He heard himself say, amazedly, “I think I love you, Mellie.”

Tell me again, she 'pathed.

Suddenly all of their brief conversations flashed through his mind. The countless hours, in only six days, in which they had been together became more than hours, stretched until they seemed like years. This time, without any qualifications, he said, “I love you.”

Her hand strayed between his legs, encircled his erection. She 'pathed, *Again, Jask. Tell me again.*

“I love you, Melopina.”

Again!

“I love you!”

Tell me with your power. Don't use your voice. Tell me again.

He hesitated and . . .

. . . lost her.

She jerked away from him as she sensed his reluctance to make the commitment, rolled onto her back and swam away. At the steps, she pulled herself from the water and stood on the paved patio, squeezing the water out of her hair. Her nipples were dark blue, her pubic bush black. She was the most de-sirable creature he had ever seen.

He stepped onto the patio and said, “Doesn't it mean any-thing. . . ? I thought you felt something too, that you—”

She tossed her hair back.

Her neck membranes wavered, shone with droplets of water like tiny spheres of mercury.

She said, “I can't give my body to you if you won't have my mind as well. I couldn't be half a wife to you.”

“Melopina, I—”

She grabbed her clothes and walked off. At the bottom of the steps she dressed, looked back once, and went back up to the grove and the wagon where the others waited.

As he watched her go, Jask wondered if this erotic encounter had simply grown out of her playful mood and her intense love of the water—or whether it had been carefully staged in order to break down his last defenses. Strangely enough, even if they had plotted against him, he could not be angry. What he had told Melopina was true, and more of a surprise to himself than to her: He loved her. He felt so strong about her, in fact, that the loss of her was like a physical pain as well as a spiritual agony.

He was in love with a tainted creature, the Ruiner's hand-iwork. If he took her, if he surrendered to her demands that they share completely, his last untainted thoughts would become subject to her influence. He would change. He would be lost without hope. Yet he could not go on long without her. Either way, his situation had become a thousand times more un-bearable than ever.

He dressed and went up to the wagon.

ON the morning of their eighth day together, as the sun climbed over the snow-capped mountains and yawned at the world below, shreds of night mist still clinging to the ground, they reached the southwest corner of the Blight, a place called Boomer's Pass. They could see their avenue of escape from the Wildlands: an old, paved roadbed, now full of weeds, stones and a great many scraggly trees, leading straight through the foothills and finally between huge slabs of black stone at the base of the Gabriel Fit Range, which towered so high that the last third of it was swathed in fat, white clouds.

We'll set out immediately after dark, Tedesco 'pathed.

After that brief announcement he shielded all his thoughts from Jask Zinn.

For the others the morning passed swiftly in silent conversation. For Jask, however, it dragged. Since the incident in the pool the day before last, they had all shunned him even more assiduously than ever. He was certain that Melopina had told them what had happened. He was bitter about her quick tongue, even while he understood that there could be no secrets between espers.

They parked beneath a stand of enormous trees, whose branches were so tightly interwoven that very little sunlight passed through to disturb the forest floor beneath. Tedesco stood the first watch from noon until two o'clock. Chaney stood guard from two until four, turning over the post to Jask, who would handle it for another two hours before waking Kiera. They had all adjusted to sleeping by day and working by night, and in the heavy shadows of the trees, they had no problems with insomnia.

Jask sat on an overturned log near the sleepers, but faced the open road up which they had journeyed and from which they might expect to get visitors of whatever sort. Occasionally he turned around to study the sleepers, most especially Melopina. She lay on her side, near the wagon, hands pulled up against her breasts, breathing quietly, her blue-green membranes trembling slightly each time she exhaled. When he was beginning his second hour on duty, he turned for yet another glimpse of her and saw—or thought that he saw—something hanging in the air above her.

"Mellie?" he asked softly.

No one replied.

He turned away from the bright sun beyond the trees and stared hard at the air just above her. In a minute his eyes adjusted, and he saw that he had not been imagining things: a spiderlike insect, fully as large as a grown woman, hung from glistening gray-white threads, its ugly black legs pistoning slowly over the girl. From its bulbous stomach a dark, wicked stinger protruded directly toward her neck, the top of it no more than twenty inches from her soft skin.

Jask stood up.

The spider quivered, did not strike the girl, waiting for some condition of the atmosphere that only it could understand.

Jask raised his rifle and was about to pull off a shot, then slowly lowered it as he remembered how many rounds it had taken to subdue the crab in that ancient church. If his shot did not kill the insect instantly, it might leap forward and spear Mel-opina's neck.

He 'pathed, *Mellie . . .*

Who—?

Wake up, but don't move, don't open your eyes and don't make the least breath of a sound.

Clearer then: *Jask?*

Do you understand what I've said?

Yes, but why—

He 'pathed her the situation.

Why can't I open my eyes?

It may have some way of registering that. You may pre-cipitate a strike. And I'm afraid that

you'd cry out involuntarily when you got a look at it. It isn't pretty.

What will you do?

Kill it.

How?

With my esp power. Now, wait and be still.

He sat down on the ground, because he knew that such a tapping of his esp could make him physically weak, and he did not want to fall over halfway through the job.

He sensed out, searching for the nimbus of the spider's primitive mind, found it, oozed carefully into it, running mental fingers over the slimy texture of those thought fragments and shattered energy pulses. He found the complex nerve clusters that regulated its reaction to fear, and he put pressure on these, trying to ignore the horrid beat of its dark desires, which thrummed all around him like singing wires ready to snap.

The spider quaked on its threads, drew its stinger back toward its black belly.

Jask did not know whether this movement meant the beast was merely cocking its device prior to discharging it into the girl's neck, or whether his psionic attack was beginning to have some effect. He put his hands to his temples and concentrated harder.

The spider rose slightly on its threads.

Jask built up bolts of mental power and, suddenly, began to feed them into the fear center of the spider's brain, one after the other, like hot blades.

The spider withdrew its stinger altogether and started slowly back up the threads, reluctant to leave such a juicy morsel as Melopina but forced into retreat by a power it couldn't understand.

Jask doubled his efforts, his arms dropping to his sides as he lost the ability to hold them up any longer.

The spider put on more speed, making for the intense shadows in the tree branches. Halfway up, it scabbled at its silken wires, kicked loose against its will and, wriggling, fell.

Move, Mellie!

The girl rolled out of the way.

The spider landed, came up on its feet, all its black legs locked straight to give it maximum height, the maw in its gut opening and closing, dripping thick saliva on the place where Melopina had lain.

Fear . . . fear . . . terror . . . panic . . . Jask worked at projecting the proper patterns.

The spider tottered.

Fear . . . death . . . terror . . .

It caught sight of Mellie and, gaining some last bit of courage and strength, it reared back and skittered toward her, making no sound itself but causing the leaves beneath its feet to rustle quietly.

She screamed.

Jask leaped up, pouring out all of his reserves of power, his mind bleached white, drained empty in a gush of esp.

The spider rose over the girl on four of its eight legs, its maw snapping open and shut, open and shut, as it prepared to fall upon her and—

It burst into flame!

Rather than falling forward, the creature rolled back, wailing in its death agonies, many legs kicking off sparks, the darkness under the trees illuminated by it, the air soured by the smell of burning flesh. It rolled halfway across the floor of the woods before it stopped, and then it was very still. The flames died away, leaving nothing more than a smoking hulk a third as big as the thing had been in life.

Did I do that? Jask asked, stunned.

No, Melopina said. *I did.*

I didn't know you could kill like that, by setting things aflame.

And I didn't know that you could kill with your power. How were you affecting it? I couldn't tell.

The same way I killed the men who imprisoned me in my enclave—I was frightening it to death.

The girl joined him a few meters from the charred corpse, looking into the blackened mouth that still

opened and closed, after death, across the width of its gut. The other espers had been awakened by the spider's cries, and they now stood behind Jask and the girl.

It would have killed me if you hadn't seen it in time, she 'pathed.

He had a neat, brief image of what it would have done to her, and the thought of Melopina dead forever struck him hard, like a blow to the chest. He turned away from them, staggered a few steps to the side of the insect corpse and vomited up his lunch.

She 'pathed, *Are you all right?*

He could not speak just yet.

She said, "Jask? Are you all right?"

In a few moments he 'pathed, *No need to revert to speech. I want you to 'path me from now on. I'm getting tired of having no one to talk to.*

She 'pathed, *Me, too.*

THEY used lengths of cloth, dry grass and sturdy branches to manufacture several hand torches, which they lighted and held high overhead, inspecting the tightly laced branches and leaves that roofed them in. At first all was quiet above. But as the smoke from the torches rose and found its way through chinks in the ceiling, other spiders began to move, scuttling along the branches, visible here and there as they hurried through gaps in the foliage.

Must be a couple dozen of them, Chaney 'pathed.

Jask answered, *And some are bigger than the one we killed.*

Tedesco's self-reproach was plainly evident, even without the intonation of his voice: *I've been getting sloppy lately.*

We all overlooked the possibility, Kiera 'pathed.

But I've spent so many more days in the Wildlands than you have, the bruin insisted, snorting through his blunt nose, growl-ing softly at himself. *I should have checked for something like this. But I was too concerned about Jask—about whether or not he would finally see the light. I worried about the wrong things, it appears.*

The spiders danced about, rustling the leaves above them.

We're all to blame, Jask insisted. And when Tedesco could still not see it that way, he 'pathed, *Right now, my hairy friend, you're forgetting something you've been trying to drum into my head for days.*

Oh?

Jask 'pathed, *As espers, we have opened ourselves complete-ly to one another; we have become, in essence, a gestalt, a single organism whose parts maintain their individuality but whose sum is undeniably superior to and more desirable than any of its fragments. Therefore, our triumphs are to be shared by all, and our failures are the responsibility of everyone.*

A couple hours ago, Tedesco 'pathed, *you were a nonbeliever.* He was grinning, and there was humor implicit in his telepathic tone. *Now you're spouting my own philosophy back to me as if you created it yourself.*

Grinning himself, Jask 'pathed, *It came easily to you, to all of you. It came very hard to me, but now that I have it, I probably understand its implications better than any of you.*

Perhaps, Tedesco 'pathed. *And you're right: This was everyone's fault, not only mine. Now let's get out of here before any more of those damn things come down to snoop around.*

They lifted camp ahead of schedule.

IN the few hours remaining before complete darkness had set in and before they were prepared to begin their trek through Boomer's Pass, Melopina taught Jask the trick of mentally generating spontaneous combustion. It was a simple enough process, once she had carefully instructed him. He had only to key his esp output to a nonverbal level, to a narrow beam of intense force, then concentrate on images of flames until, when the power was rigidly contained within that concept of con-flagration, he could let it go in one deadly fireball. Melopina could initiate a flame attack in three or four seconds. Jask required half a minute, but he knew he would eventually cut that down to a more effective firing time.

And you've already taught the others how to do this? he 'pathed.

Yes.

When?

When you slept, or when you were on guard duty.

He could not keep at least a trace of self-pity out of his tone when he 'pathed, *Why did you feel it necessary to hide this from me?*

You were not one of us yet, she 'pathed.

And now I am ?

Now you are.

IN the gypsy wagon Tedesco and Jask sat at a small table on which an antique oil lantern burned.

Dancing shadows leaped gaily on the walls behind them.

The minted oil gave off a pleasing aroma that had permeated every nook and cranny of the wheeled room.

Tedesco took two books from his rucksack and placed them on the table. He looked at Jask and said, *Go ahead. Open them.*

His fingers trembling. Jask drew the first book in front of him and flipped the pages. He saw photographs of alien terrain, pictures of the Earth taken from the moon, pictures of other moons taken from other worlds, glossy images of spacecraft exploding off the face of the Earth or sailing serenely through the emptiness of space.

Tedesco turned up the lantern flame. *The other book, too.*

Jask opened it. He saw cities that, he knew immediately, were not the homes of men, saw starships so unusual in design that it was clear they had been constructed to contain forms of life radically different from human beings, though evidently just as intelligent. He saw, at last, photographs of the creatures from the stars, more alien than any human mutation could be, so basically different from mankind that the variations between the Pure and the tainted seemed insignificant.

Why didn't you show me these right away? he 'pathed.

I had to be sure of you before that.

I swear, such sights as these would have convinced me!

They would only have temporarily convinced you.

No. I would have had to come to grasps with reality much sooner.

Tedesco 'pathed, *Until you had rejected your Pure heritage, fought and won your own moral battle, you could not be relied upon at all. He lowered the flame in the lantern. Gradually your sense of spiritual guilt would have forced you to reevaluate the photographs. Because you didn't, back then, want to believe in such things, you would have found reasons to reject them. You would have thought of ways to identify them as fakes and forgeries.*

But you could have reasoned me out of such a reaction if, indeed, I used it.

Could I have? Tedesco 'pathed. *I don't know. At that time I wanted to believe in the Black Presence, in the legends and in these photographs. Yet I had my own doubts.*

You never seemed to!

But I did. And if you were to play a doubting Thomas, constantly rejecting the validity of these pictures, I don't know whether I could have kept going all this time.

Jask looked at the pictures one last time, closed the books, gave them to the bruin who tucked them back into the rucksack. *I owe you so much,* he 'pathed, gently.

We owe each other.

You nursed me when I was sick, badgered me into going on when I would have given up.

And you gave me something to occupy my mind. Raging at your Pure stupidities, I had less time to doubt the purpose of the voyage.

Jask turned out the light. *We better start out for Boomer's Pass.*

Yes, the bruin 'pathed. *In another week we should reach the Black Glass.*

Do you think the Presence waits there?

If not, we've two more maps to employ.

TEDESCO and Kiera walked in front of the gypsy wagon, while Chaney sat in the driver's nook and urged the horse on both with slaps of the reins and with gentle psionic images of eventual reward for its efforts. Jask and Melopina walked to the left of the wagon, at the edge of the crumbling roadbed, holding hands and occasionally conversing telepathically.

Above them the snowy Gabriel Fit Range gleamed ghostily in the moonlight, fifty kilometers above them as they entered the mouth of Boomer's Pass. Jask was commenting on their beauty when the first power rifle opened fire on them. The energy bolt caught the horse and killed it instantly.

Pures!

The wagon turned nearly striking Jask and Melopina.

They dived off the broken concrete and stone.

The wagon rolled backward down the steep incline for a hundred meters before Chaney succeeded in applying the hand brake. The dead horse, fallen in its harness, left a trail of dark blood to indicate the path that had been taken.

Jask leaned against the curb wall at the edge of the road and risked a look up the hillside. He could see three Pures stationed in the center of the way, kneeling with rifles brought up to their skinny shoulders. Tedesco was running for the side of the road, ushering Kiera ahead of him. The Pures fired. A bolt of energy either passed so close to the bruin that it singed him or actually struck, for he screeched, both aloud and telepathically as he leaped to safety in the heavy brush at the edge of the highway.

Another energy bolt struck the wagon.

The vehicle shattered into a hundred smoldering pieces.

Jask hoped Chaney had been far from it when that happened.

It's kill or be killed, Melopina 'pathed.

A moment later one of the Pures was consumed by flames, threw down his rifle and, screaming, ran blindly down the road, flailing at himself. In the space of a dozen meters he fell, dead.

A second Pure flamed up.

Ahead, from the foliage on either side of the road and from the piled boulders at the brink of Boomer's Pass itself, more energy weapons opened fire on the espers. The curb wall beside Jask and Melopina exploded into boiling fragments.

The third Pure, who had been the last man exposed on the open road, had turned to run for the shelter of the rock formations above, but went only fifty meters before the magic fire scorched him. He fell and rolled down the road, past Jask and Melopina, no longer a man but an ember.

Tedesco 'pathed, *We make out nearly a dozen more.*

That wagon was my father's handiwork, Kiera 'pathed. Those bastards will pay for that.

They never reckoned with Kiera's temper!—laughing, Chaney.

Tedesco, were you hit?—concerned, Jask.

Singed.

The worst thing is the stink of smoking fur!—Kiera.

I see another one, Melopina 'pathed. A second later a Pure who had stood up in the rocks to see what the espers might be doing was ashed.

Chaney just joined us over here—Tedesco.

You're bleeding!—frightened, Kiera.

A few splinters from the wagon, nothing serious—Chaney.

Let me look!—Kiera.

Woman, Chaney 'pathed, we've got more immediate prob-lems than tending to cuts and scratches.

He's right, Tedesco 'pathed. If those Pures stay hidden in the rocks, we can't very easily reach

them with our fireballs. We've got to get closer, and we've got to make them expose them-selves. He thought a moment, their best strategist, and 'pathed, I'll work my way up toward the pass on this side, while Chaney and Kiera wait here. Jask, you work up the road on that side while Melopina protects your back.

Good enough.

Have you got your power rifle?—Tedesco.

Yes, but—

Use it first. They know the fireballs are our weapons. If they see their own getting killed by their own weapons, we'll sow a bit of confusion.

I see.

Let's move it, then.

Melopina grabbed him as he started forward into the dense brush, kissed him hard.

Neither of them said or 'pathed any last warning to be careful.

Jask initially moved farther away from the road, then circled slowly back as he neared the crest of the hill, making almost no noise in his bare feet.

Small animals, startled by his stealthy progress, dashed away through brambled tunnels. These did not frighten him, for they were now on the edge of civilized lands and were no longer in the Chen Valley Blight, where monsters of one sort or another were most to be expected.

The scrub brush, stunted locust trees, and brambles gave way to fair-sized pines that grew thick and closed out most of the moonlight. Jask proceeded more carefully than ever through these, gliding from trunk to trunk, giving his eyes time to adjust to the change in light. He had gone perhaps two hundred meters into the stand of pines when he heard voices: Pures.

Something here, he radiated.

Pures ?—Tedesco.

I see them now, three of them, stationed near the curb wall of the road, waiting for something to happen.

Get them, Tedesco 'pathed. I've seen nothing over here, yet.

Be careful—Melopina.

He crept forward, still using the trunks of the trees as shelter, until he was only a few long steps from the Pures. Each, he saw, was armed with a power rifle, and each was extremely agitated. They were all peering through a berry bush down the deserted road. Apparently it had not occurred to them that the espers might sneak around behind them and take them by surprise. Their lack of insight made Jask realize what a disservice the Pure way of life was for those who embraced it; it generated ignorance, naïveté, and a vulnerability that was appalling.

Jask bent onto one knee, raised the power rifle and sighted on the nearest Pure.

His finger on the trigger, he hesitated. These were, after all, men he had once called his brothers. Their bond of blood had been broken because of his genetic faults—yet, all those years of common ideals, common heritage, common doubts and hopes, could not so easily be erased. He had killed in the enclave in order to escape. That was surely murder. But that had been in desperation, at a time when he had been terrified of dying. Now, he *knew* how superior he was to them, *knew that* in any contest these weaklings could only lose. To confront them like this and destroy them seemed grossly unfair.

Suddenly, however, one of the soldiers caught sight of him from the corner of an eye and, spluttering with surprise, whirled to bring up his own rifle.

Jask killed him.

One of the other soldiers shouted, fired.

The bolt missed Jask.

He fired again himself, twice, and ended the battle almost before it had begun. His superior musculature and his improved reactions were no match for those soft, pampered men.

That's got them in an uproar in the pass!—Tedesco, chuckling.

Are you all right?—Melopina.

Fine.

You get all three?—Chaney.

Of course, Jask 'pathed.

He went by the corpses and without looking down at them crept farther up the hillside until he broke from the trees and entered the jumble of rocks where the other soldiers waited. . . .

SHORTLY after midnight, with clouds drifting across the pocked face of the moon and the snowy caps of the Gabriel Fit Range dimming in sympathy, the five espers walked through Boomer's Pass, carrying their supplies on their backs. They were not opposed by any more of the Potest-Amon Enclave's Pures, for none of that patrol had survived the previous hour. They passed the silent, twisted bodies without looking down at them, descended the Killicone Highway into that civilized region known as the Plains of Hammerau.

I wonder if we haven't overestimated ourselves, Jask 'pathed to the others.

In what way?—Kiera, showing rows of fangs in a curious smile.

I wonder if we're really a new breed of men, superior to all the men who 've come before us.

Witnessing death, any man begins to doubt himself, Tedesco 'pathed.

Jask 'pathed, *If we're really a new breed, superior, special— why should we have to kill? Murder is a primitive art.*

Murder is the sport of primitives, Tedesco agreed. *But that is all the more reason why we must protect ourselves from them— by whatever means necessary. There are so few of us, that we cannot afford to lose a single member of our community.*

Jask was not satisfied. *If murder is the primitive man's tool—and if those Pures, those non-espers, are more primitive than we are—why did we prove superior as killers?*

We had better weapons, Tedesco explained.

We were more primitive ?

All we did was survive, Tedesco 'pathed. *That's the first law of evolution: The new breed prospers at the expense of the old—otherwise the race is stymied and never changes.*

Just the same, Jask 'pathed, *I hope we don't have to kill any more men. Animals, Wildlands beasts—that's different. But no more men. We lessen ourselves with each such murder.*

Chaney 'pathed, *There's one other thing I think is a sign of primitive cultures, besides their willingness to kill for other reasons than survival.*

What's that?—Jask.

Chaney 'pathed, *They're riddled with goddamned moralists!*

Tedesco laughed aloud, and Melopina giggled at Jask's side.

My husband the philosopher!—Kiera.

Chaney 'pathed, *I'm serious. Civilized men should be able to sense the difference between a right act and a wrong act, should know what evil is and what good is. He should not require self-appointed or group-appointed moralists to tell him what he must and must not do. I've been fed up with preachers all my life, men of small stature and a need for power, leeches that feed on other people's guilt.*

Agreed!—Tedesco.

Jask sighed. *I can take a hint, especially when it's delivered with such force. We killed because we had to.*

Because they forced us to—Chaney.

Would you rather have been killed yourself ?—Kiera to Jask.

No.

Or have seen Melopina die?—Kiera again.

No!

Chaney 'pathed, *You see, then, that morality is always relative—except to the primitive.*

They rested only twice during the long night, traveling on foot along the Killicone Highway until they were only five kilometers from the tainted village of Dragontuck on the banks of the wide, swiftly flowing Hair of Senta. Here, they left the road and on a series of smooth stones crossed the river at its widest

point, where the water was the shallowest. On the far side they struck southwest through the Plains of Hammerau, toward that next pocket of the Wildlands known as Smoke Den.

Because the only nearby Pure patrol had been obliterated, and because they were no longer in the unsafe Wildlands, they went those long night hours unmolested and, shortly after dawn, made camp in a series of convenient limestone caves twenty kilometers from the town of Darby's Harbor and the Pure enclave of Majestic Apple.

Tedesco took the first watch, while the others made their beds.

Jask and Melopina chose to sleep beneath the same blanket, farther along the tunnel from Chaney and Kiera, where they might be alone. They held each other for a long while, kissing, nipping, 'pathing. When they undressed each other with eager hands, they were both keyed to a fever pitch of desire. Beneath the soft blanket she lay back raising and spreading her legs as Jask found and entered her. They rolled and tossed as they made love; they 'pathed their happiness back and forth, permitted each other to slide into their neural systems to sense the sex act from the opposite viewpoint, moving, moving, into several long explosions of sensation and then, late in the afternoon, into a short sleep.

Later, as they coupled once more, he 'pathed, *I love you.*

She 'pathed the same.

You and me.

She 'pathed, *Us.*

The two of us, always.

The five of us! she 'pathed back at him. He was certain that her projection had been augmented by other minds—precisely, three other minds—but he did not care about the intrusion. An esper might never have total privacy—but then, being an esper, he no longer required it.

Melopina and Jask slept little that day, but were ready to begin the trek again after nightfall. Chaney, Kiera and Tedesco were also in a very good mood. Triumphs had been shared.

Three weeks after they entered the Plains of Hammerau they left them once again, climbing down into that Wildlands sector known as the Smoke Den and, in past ages, as Satan's Balls, the Stone Kettle and Ghosts' Cauldron. The rounded stones were smooth underfoot, wet and treacherous. They reached the floor of Smoke Den without casualty, however, their breath labored in that humid atmosphere.

Here there was no plant life.

Here no animals prowled. At least none they could see.

Here the air was still, stale.

All that moved, aside from the espers, was the fog, which was everywhere and thick. It clung heavily to the ground, thinned as it rose, but still obscured the stars and made a fuzzy blotch of the sun.

They slept in a fog blanket.

They walked through veils of mist.

They breathed it in and out, ate it with their food, made love with it pressed over and between them.

The land in Smoke Den was a jumbled mass of rocks, im-possible shapes and textures of stone. They made a game of identifying images that some of the stones presented: Here a horse reared onto its hind feet, there the head of a man, to the right a spaceship rising on a column of smoke, to the left a winged man poised for flight. This was the first time during their journey, that they were able to relax—pursued neither by Pures nor tainted nor beasts—and they were in high good humor when, two weeks from the Plains of Hammerau, they came over a stony rise and looked down on the fogless black plain that had, for so long, been their goal.

The field of black glass was four kilometers in diameter, as shiny as if it were diligently polished every day, ringed by stones but containing none within it, like an enormous dance floor dropped down in the middle of nowhere. The “craters” referred to on Tedesco's map were actually faults in the glass. It appeared as if, when the glassy pool was solidifying after whatever disaster had caused it, bubbles of gas had risen to the surface in steady streams, forming tunnels and jagged openings.

I don't see anything that looks like a spaceship. It seems as lifeless as a cemetery—Chaney.

You would know about cemeteries, Kiera 'pathed.

Chaney grinned wolfishly. *I used to be a grave robber.*

Not really, Melopina 'pathed, shivering.

Yes, really. Sometimes a traveling musician runs across a town of tin ears and doesn't earn his daily bread. When that happens, he either uses his wits or starves. I've never starved— not so long as there was a cemetery nearby, and a local church of Resurrectionists.

Those who believe the actual corpse is revived and made to live again, come Judgment? Tedesco asked.

The same, Chaney 'pathed. *They bury their dead with possessions—often jewels, silver and expensive leather goods. I've bought many a meal with the proceeds from grave robberies—and if the Resurrectionists are right and some of my victims come to life again without the advantage of personal wealth to set them up, I trust their god will see to it that they're properly compensated for their misfortune.*

Well, Tedesco 'pathed, *there are no graves to rob down there. But there might be a fortune to be found if this proves to be the station of the Presence.*

They searched the tunnels for an entire day, carrying hand torches, walking along slick-floored corridors, shadow images of themselves reflected in the onyx walls, twisted and sinister in duplication. A soft, cool breeze poured constantly through the subterranean avenues, though they never managed to find the source of it. The moving air raised a hollow whistling sound in the polished runnels, an eerie groan that caused Jask goosepimples and kept him looking behind for some pursuing beast.

I don't believe this is the place, Tedesco 'pathed at last. *If the Presence was ever stationed here, it left long ago.*

*Perhaps it's dead—*Chaney.

You sound like Jask.

I didn't mean to say we'd quit here, Chaney 'pathed. *In any case we'd be fools not to go on.*

Jask 'pathed, *All day I've sensed the presence of—something. I can't clearly say what. But just at the edge of my esp perceptions I register a psychic force of some kind.*

Me, too, I think, Melopina 'pathed.

*The Presence?—*Tedesco.

Not that, I'm sure, Jask 'pathed. *It's more of a cacophony, a wild noise, than it is an ordered consciousness.*

*I don't feel it—*Chaney.

*Nor I —*Kiera.

*I'm blank, too—*Tedesco.

Jask shook his head. *Imagination—maybe.*

But that night, when they camped at the edge of the black glass field, he could not sleep, certain that the force/-creature/entity he had sensed was hovering over them, observ-ing them, or crying for recognition across a gulf as wide as all Time.

In the morning they read the maps, charted their course to the Glacier of Light, and set out once more. Jask could not tell if the unseen creature were still with him, though he felt strongly that it was.

THE WATCHER dreams of friendships lost, times passed, companionships long forgotten. It dreams of home, the brood-holes of the mother world, the bees of fertilization, and the hives in which it has, millennia passed, endured a million moments of ecstasy. It dreams of seas with living water, of a sky with three suns. It dreams of touching and being touched . . .

It stirs.

It feeds.

The tickle it has felt for some days has grown worse, a reception of certain psychic energies whose emanation is the whole reason for the Watcher's being here in the first place. The tickle is not bad enough to wake it. But soon, it will be annoyed and rise up. . . .

The Second Journey:

THE GLACIER OF LIGHT

MERKA SHANLY contrived to be in a public place—seated in the enclave's senso-parlor, experiencing a prewar emotion film—when the official announcement was made.

The sound, smell and tactile sensations faded.

Viewers grumbled, looked questioningly at those seated beneath the senso-helmets on either side.

The moving colors on the screen, shapeless, became even more so, lost all psychological resemblance to the emotions of the film, faded slowly out until the screen was white, blank.

A moment later the enclave's public address system was spliced into the parlor's broadcast facilities, as it reached every Pure in the fortress no matter where he was or what he was doing.

The audience quieted.

The square, sober face of Kitson Helger, enclave news promoter, flashed onto the screen in the front of the parlor. His eyes were darkly ringed, and his lips were pale and trembling. He said, "Little more than an hour ago our General put through an emergency call to Dr. Danfrey, ordering him to the Military Suite. Upon arrival Dr. Danfrey discovered our General was experiencing a series of severe heart palpitations. Despite all that Dr. Danfrey could do, our General passed away fifteen minutes ago. Until the Committee on Leadership elects a re-placement Preakness Bay Enclave is without a guiding light. Services of mourning are being held in all enclave chapels."

The sober face evaporated.

Merka Shanly, wearing a mask of grief, raced up the aisle of the parlor, pushed through its exit doors.

The Pures in the parlor watched her leave. There was no one in Preakness Bay Enclave who did not know that she had been the General's mate for more than three months, longer than any woman before her.

In the corridors she passed other Pures, who tried to stop her and offer their condolences. She pushed past them, fighting to hold onto her grief-stricken expression, trying not to crack open before them.

She stepped into the lift, dropped, was caught in the beam, floated swiftly upward until she called out the number of the floor she wanted. The lift delivered her. She stepped out and hurried down the main hall of the governmental level, toward the Military Suite.

The door opened at her command, closed behind her.

She walked across the foyer, through the main lounge, through the library and into the master bedroom.

"So far?" she asked.

Dr. Tokel Danfrey looked up, nodded, and turned back to the corpse on the bed. "Were you seen?"

"For the past two hours," she affirmed.

"I've fed the news to Hegler, and I saw him deliver it correctly. Now it's up to you, Merka, to keep the riff-raff out of here."

"Will do," she said.

She looked once at the bed, saw the gaping wound in the dead General's neck, the blood spilled all over the white bedclothes.

She had washed her hands thoroughly, three hours ago, just after she had murdered him. Still, she looked at her pale fingers, at the transparent nails, as if they held some crimson taint that would betray her.

The main door to the suite reported the presence of several governmental officials.

"Don't let them in here!" Dr. Danfrey said. He was busy with his surgical tools, cutting the body into disposable sections.

She nodded, left the bedroom, closed the door.

"Let them in," she told the suite monitor when she had reached the main lounge.

It obeyed, sliding the door wide.

Four men entered, one fully as tall as the General, the other three all somewhat shorter than Merka Shanly herself. The tallest was Ober Iswan, Chairman of the Committee on Leadership. He was a stern man, not only pious in his devotion to Lady Nature, but fanatically zealous. He observed feast days and fasts as few other enclave Pures did. She supposed he was to be admired for that.

Ober Iswan said, "I want to see our General's body." He did not speak out of suspicion, but out of deep emotional attachment to the dead man. They had been friends, of a sort.

"The doctor's with him—with it," she said. "He's performing an immediate autopsy."

Iswan looked surprised. "Here—not in the medical labs?"

"He thinks there was something distinctly odd about the General's demise, perhaps some bacterial infection. If the enclave has been contaminated by one of the Ruiner's micro-organisms, it is best that we find out as soon as possible. Performing dissection here also eliminates the need to move the corpse through other, perhaps uncontaminated, sections of the fortress."

"Of course," Iswan said. "You took it on yourself to give the doctor permission for the operation?"

"Yes," she said.

"Very fine," Iswan said. "You show a certain level-headedness, a quickness of response that is admirable."

Merka sighed inwardly. Ober Iswan was the only one of these four men who had not pledged themselves to her, the last member of the Committee on Leadership who had any integrity. Now that he was pacified and, to some small degree, in her corner, her chances of ascendancy to the vacated seat of power were vastly increased.

The plague scare had been the best part of the plan. Only ten years had passed since five hundred had died from some never-diagnosed outbreak of disease. Ober Iswan had lost a son in that disaster.

The other three crowded forward, asking prearranged questions to which she supplied prearranged answers. Now and again, Ober Iswan leaned forward from his seat, bony hands folded before him, dark eyes intense, to ask a question of his own. These were never difficult to answer and, indeed, were the questions they had expected of him. For weeks now his associates had been subtly informing him of Merka Shanly's capabilities, intelligence and commitment to Lady Nature's ideals. It was hoped that all of these bits of carefully constructed praise for her, along with the set questions the other men were now putting to her, would give Ober Iswan the idea of proposing her name for the post of General.

Though a majority vote by the seven-member committee was necessary to elevate a normal citizen to the post of General, Ober Iswan was the only committee member who could propose names for possible election. He must be made to propose hers.

If he did not, he must be eliminated.

Now there could be no halfway measures.

In an hour Dr. Tokel Danfrey came into the main lounge and looked at them somberly for a moment. Then, in his deep and authoritative voice, he said, "I have dissected the General's corpse and, on my own initiative, have consigned it to the incinerator by way of the master-bedroom chute. I have subjected myself to sonic cleansing in the General's bathroom and have given myself a massive dose of antibiotics. His room will be sealed for a period of thirty days and conscientiously sterilized."

"You've found something!" Ober Iswan gasped, rising up, his thin hands fisted at his sides.

"I found nothing," the doctor said. "It appears to be a simple case of heart failure, for natural causes. But whenever a man who appeared to be in the best of health one day dies the next, I like to take precautions. I remember the plague of a decade ago."

"So do we all," Iswan said. He had relaxed slightly, but was still tense.

Merka said, "I'll make arrangements for new quarters immediately and place a requisition for a wardrobe. My old clothes, of course, must not be taken from that room. And I wish to make a suggestion that may not be within my province."

She addressed this remark to Ober Iswan who said, "Yes?"

“A new General should be elected posthaste. If anything should come of this plague threat, the existence of Preakness Bay may well depend on having a decisive leader.”

“I agree,” Iswan said. “I’ll convene the committee immediately.”

The name of Plino Grimwaldowine was first proposed as a replacement for the fallen leader.

The Committee on Leadership rejected him, soundly, over the course of seven ballots.

Ober Iswan next expressed faith in Castigone Pei, who had once led a successful campaign against the tainted in the days when the enclave had maintained Nature Cleansers and who now was known for his poetry and gentleness. Such a man, containing violence and peace, must be special.

The committee disagreed.

Third: Cooper Hine.

He was turned down.

Merka Shanly was proposed as the fourth name.

She won rapid acceptance.

While the Military Suite was quarantined, suitable temporary quarters were established for the new General, Preakness Bay’s first female leader in eighty-six years. Since the fortress had been designed to provide comfortable lodging for fifty thousand people, but now housed fewer than five thousand, no problem was encountered in clearing and appointing a lavish suite for the new General.

By nightfall Merka Shanly sat alone in her bedroom, triumphant, having dispatched a dozen orders to her confidants who must now be rewarded for their loyalty.

In the three months since she had become the late General’s mistress conditions in the enclave had gone unchanged. Prewar supplies were wasted, while no provisions were made for survival once they had been used up. On a recent tour of the three hundred storage vaults beneath the fortress she had seen that they could last only another ten years at their present rate of thoughtless consumption. She had worked hard to establish sympathizers and had successfully performed the bold murder of her master. She had earned the right to set a new course for the people she ruled.

But she worried, now, that she would not last long enough to effect these changes. Only three days ago she had begun to develop a rudimentary telepathic talent.

LEAVING the mist-shrouded formations of Smoke Den for the civilized land called January Slash, the five espers returned to their routine of travel by darkness and sleep by day. The nearest Pure enclave was the Jinyi Fortress, far to the north of the province, beyond the Hadaspuri Sea, and none of the tainted folk in this region appeared to be aware that esper fugitives might be crossing their land. This should have been, with minimal precautions, a time of peace for the travelers, a time to renew their strength to face more rugged obstacles ahead. Instead they found themselves growing more agitated by the day, partly because the land was parched and sandy and hardly fit for human habitation, and partly because their sleep was ruined every night by the intrusion of dreams they did not understand and for which they had no explanations.

Jask was the first to dream, on the first night after they departed the field of black glass. His visions were filled with places, people, and concepts that were utterly alien to him. Time and again, he woke, sitting straight up beside Melopina, a scream caught in his throat. He could never remember what the genesis of his terror had been, though it was profound enough to leave him shaking each time. Drifting back into sleep, he would pick up the dreams again, follow them through to the pen-ultimate moment of unknown terror. . . .

The following night Melopina dreamed as well, whimpering in her sleep so loudly that she awakened Kiera, who tried but failed to comfort her.

On the third night no one was spared the dreams.

In the morning, exhausted, they sat around a meager break-fast and discussed the vision they had somehow received: a vast city composed of living tissue, a pulsing mass of inhuman flesh that shaped itself to the needs of the millions who lived within it, a many-armed but stationary behemoth fully a hundred and fifty kilometers from end to end, containing five hundred levels of living space. Its streets were of living fiber, like bloodless veins that connected its many rooms, amphitheatres, auditoriums, shops, schools, churches, factories, entertainment centers and private homes. It grew where its citizens felt it needed to grow, provided water and electricity through its own metabolic processes. Though mindless, it contained an enormous brain, as large as an enclave fortress, which controlled its highly specialized functions.

Could any such creature have existed? Melopina 'pathed.

I've read a number of prewar books that survived the holocaust, Tedesco said. *But I've never encountered mention of a living city.* He considered a moment. *However, there are many other things I know to exist that I never encountered mention of in those books.*

Chaney 'pathed, *It seems to me that the question of the living city's existence is not our major concern. What should interest us now is why we have all, simultaneously, begun to dream of it.*

They weighed various possibilities and rejected all of them.

They continued their march north.

During the fourth sleeping period the dreams grew more intense, more urgent, as if they carried some message that must be understood.

No one, however, understood that message.

Jask had forgotten the unseen entity that he had been certain was trying to contact them in the Black Glass craters. He was more consumed by the current mystery of the dreams than by the older mystery of the silent creature that might or might not have been a figment of his imagination. On the sixth day, however, he came to understand that both phenomena were part of the same puzzle. He woke from the familiar dream at that point where it somehow metamorphosed into nightmare, and he instantly recognized the unseen being's presence—a distant fuzz-iness, a straining power, an urgency that had no outlet.

He told the others that he felt they *had* been approached by some invisible entity in the craters and

that it had followed them. The dreams were its only successful attempts to establish contact.

The Black Presence? Tedesco 'pathed.

As I said before, this creature would not seem to be intelligent in the sense the Presence would have to be. It lacks order, coordination. If it were the Black Presence, it could contact us easily with its superior esp abilities.

But it must have some telepathic talent! Witness these awful dreams, Kiera 'pathed. She gnashed her pretty teeth in a show of dislike for the visions.

They could reach no conclusions.

By the tenth day out of the Smoke Den all of them could sense the straining nearness of the creature, could feel it drifting at the rim of their extrasensory perception, completely beyond the ken of their normal five senses.

Knowing it was there did nothing to suppress its emanations.

The five espers continued to sleep less than they would have liked, shocked awake again and again from the brink of that ultimate, unspeakable horror, which despite its vividness in dreams was never made quite clear enough to be remembered out of sleep.

They entered the Divide of Cessius, which marked the lower third of January Slash. They crossed its black-and-red marble floor, wending their way between the hundreds of upthrust steel spikes that dotted it, climbed its far wall and came out on the other side, into more sand and cactus.

The dreams continued.

At the edge of the desert they came upon the Vast Remains, the largest known ruins of prewar origins, wound through its blasted streets, past buildings that had fallen but had once stood two thousand meters high. They slept in the shadows of cy-lindrical buildings that had no entrances or windows; these monoliths still thrummed within and radiated a gentle heat by night, as a byproduct of some other, inexplicable task, filled by pointlessly functioning machinery that had been sealed against the ravages of time. They crossed the inner-city canals, which were filled with blood—or at least with some fluid that quite resembled ichor. They passed scattered robots that still stum-bled through their programmed chores, oblivious of the end of their world and of the specterlike five who walked past them in the purple darkness.

And the dreams continued.

Having crossed the Vast Remains in less than a week, they camped by a clean brook, beneath a monstrous, mutated elm—the countryside having changed from its desert motif—and hoped that the ruins might somehow form a barrier between their unknown guest and themselves. All of them badly needed a good day's sleep.

As they lay beneath the gnarled elm, however, the unseen being pressed itself upon them more vigorously than ever: Melopina woke, crying out, with the feeling that some creature had hold of her and was pressing her down into the earth. . . .

She kicked at it.

She flailed the air and snarled in fear.

She gasped for her breath. Jask could see that she was really having some trouble getting it, as if someone were choking her.

Mellie. . . ?

Help me!

Jask bent over her and, as he touched her face to feel for a fever, he felt the . . . *thing* rise from her. A cold, damp force pushed over him, lingering long enough for him to recognize that distant psychic fuzziness, was gone without a trace.

When she had explained how it had felt, a formless mass of invisible flesh crushed into her, they discussed this new development.

It's getting bolder, whatever it is, Tedesco 'pathed.

Perhaps my grave robbing is finally being punished, Chaney 'pathed. *Maybe this is the spirit of one of my victims, come to torture us.*

No one laughed. They were willing to consider *any* pos-sibility.

By the time they reached the abandoned port of Kittlesticks on the Hadaspuri Sea, they had all experienced physical contact—or something quite similar—with their unwanted companion. It approached them boldly now, while they were sleeping or while they were awake, as if it wished desperately to tell them something, to impart the essentials of a tale, an ethereal Ancient Mariner full of its own history of curses, calms and death.

The five espers walked through the cobbled streets of Kittlesticks, which was little more than a thousand years old but which had been abandoned more than eight centuries ago. Its inhabitants had reported that the ghosts of Indians could be seen in the streets at night, slinking from shadowed door to shadowed door and that in the morning skeletons were found in the beds of men who had gone to sleep with all their flesh. Whether Kittlesticks lay upon ancient Indian burial grounds or whether the sea had washed unclean spirits under the extensive docks in the harbor, no one could say. When half the town's population had died in this mysterious manner, the rest picked up their belongings and moved down the coast, where they founded the town of Last Resort, which had thrived as a Hadaspuri Sea marketplace for many centuries after.

They came out on the docks, where a hundred boats still lay, half rotten and sunken, others of metal and in relatively good repair.

Perhaps, 'pathed Chaney, the thing cannot follow us across water.

I fear that's an empty hole' Tedesco said.

By this time the women were staying close to their men, and the men continually cast wary glances over their shoulders. All of them were heavy-eyed and fuzzy-minded from lack of sleep.

We've nothing to lose by trying it, Melopina 'pathed.

She's right—Jask.

And by taking a ship, we would save days and days of marching around the shore of Hadaspuri—Kiera.

The water slapped at the docks.

The dead and dying ships caught pieces of the morning sun and shone in brief remembrance of their youth.

I've never sailed—Tedesco.

I have—Chaney.

You think you could teach us to man the rig of a ship like that one? Tedesco pointed at what appeared to be a sound, yellow alloy ship, which still rode high in the water after so many years and which contained three masts, all empty of sailcloth.

I could, I think—Chaney.

Jask?—Tedesco.

I'm for it.

Please! Let's try it!—Melopina.

They boarded the yellow ship, which was chained at the far end of the dock, and they found that she was in excellent condition. Her sealed engines, which had been placed in her hull during the Last War, were still functioning, monuments to the great technology of that age. Of its twenty robot tenders, twelve still rolled about the gleaming ship, polishing and repairing, scouring away the gradual erosions of time.

We could forget the sails, Jask said. *The engines will carry us across the Hadaspuri.*

Chaney stood on the bridge of the vessel, staring at the complex controls, his hairy fingers working them cautiously, his mouth twisted in concentration. Lights popped on; buzzers sounded; gauges registered levels of liquids and of power in the batteries. He looked away from all this for a moment and said to Jask, *That's a bad idea.*

We'd save a week or more if we didn't bother with sails.

Chaney smiled knowingly, returned to the controls. *Then again, the engines might cut out on us when we're in the middle of all that damned water, leave us stranded there until our food and fresh water were gone. Maybe we could boil up a drinkable brew from seawater and survive a bit longer. In the end, though, we'd starve to death.*

But those engines have been working for thousands of years, Chaney! Why should they

suddenly quit on us when we need them?

And why should they not quit on us? Chaney asked.

Jask decided there was something to be desired in having a skipper who was at least a little pessimistic.

In all of Kittlesticks there was no cloth to be had—just tattered, mildewed, mold-covered, rotting lumps of stuff that could never be fashioned to fit their needs. Finally, though, in a dockside nautical shop they found a great length of lightweight metallic sailcloth whose metal fibers had withstood the gnawing of the years.

This material proved difficult to cut and sew, and they re-mained in Kittlesticks five days, working up three serviceable sails. They saw no Indians during the night, though their un-earthly companion remained, haunting their sleep and forcing its mental aura into their esp perceptions all the time they were awake.

At last, in the early morning, with only a suggestion of the sun in the sky, they carried the three sails down to the ship.

Mist drifted in from the sea, oddly sweet scented.

They mounted the sails on the electrically controlled yard-arms, drew them up for testing, then rolled them down again and bound them fast until they might be needed. The noise of their labor echoed across the flat waters like footfalls in a tomb.

That afternoon, on the edge of town, they gathered wild fruit of many kinds, and packed it all into baskets and sacks. They killed a large animal that had descended from pure cattle but which was now a nine-horned, broader-shouldered, taller and meaner creature than its ancestors had been. They skinned and butchered this brute and salted several large pieces of meat. These stores were loaded in the galley of the ship, below the waterline, where they might be kept cool.

The espers dreamed at night; a living city, rooms of flesh, streets of pulsing tissue. . . .

Before dawn of the seventh day they boarded the yellow ship, which they had christened *Hadaspuri Maiden*, half in fun and half in hopes that after being accorded such an honor the sea would look with favor upon their journey. The engines were brought up to full power, and the ship was taken from the dock at Kittlesticks. They had still seen no Indians.

The *Hadaspuri* was amber near the coast but grew a dirty green and then a rich blue color as they moved out onto it and it grew deeper beneath them.

As they passed the last of the atolls twenty kilometers from shore, rainbow-colored flying fish danced before their bow. Their wings were as much as four feet across, spreading gloriously as they arced from the sea and folding sleekly as they plummeted back in.

Standing by the rail on the deck of the open bridge door, looking at the heaving sea, through which the *Maiden* sliced like a knife, Tedesco 'pathed to Chaney, *What do you know of the Hadaspuri?*

It's six hundred kilometers from west to east, eight hundred from Kittlesticks on the south to any point on the north shore.

Is it inhabited?

The sea? Chaney 'pathed, perplexed.

Yes.

By fish.

How big are the fish ?

Chaney grinned. *So far as I know, the Hadaspuri contains no beasts. It is not, after all, a Wildlands sea.*

Let's hope you're right.

If anything attacks our little ship, Chaney promised, I'll skin it, butcher it, and store it below.

No need. I hate fish.

The sunny sky grew overcast as they thrust deeper into the heart of the *Hadaspuri*. The clouds were light gray, riding high, bothersome but not threatening a storm.

Before long the air smelled only of the sea, without a single trace of land in it.

They ate a light lunch of fruit, a dinner of roasted beef basted in the juice of apples and pears.

The unseen creature remained with them.

It nagged at the periphery of their extrasensory perception, its voice a wail, its note that of endless suffering, its effect stronger than ever on the five espers.

Later, when Kiera took the first watch on the bridge, before the wheel and instruments, the others went below to sleep in the two main cabins, aft. Despite the fact that they were separated by the metal bulkheads, they all dreamed, simultaneously, of the living city. The dream swiftly graduated into a full-fledged nightmare and grew rapidly worse than that. No one could get any rest at all.

On deck again Tedesco 'pathed, *Something will break soon.*

Let's hope!—Jask said.

If I could see it, Chaney 'pathed, *I could get these claws into it and take a good bite in its neck with these teeth.* He held up his unsheathed claws and showed them his wicked teeth so that they would know he was not making an idle boast.

Melopina sat against the deck railing, her head hung down, her shoulders bent, exhausted, her pretty blue-green neck mem-branes hanging limp like sails without wind, and she did not say anything at all.

Something must break, Tedesco continued. *Either this crea-ture will get weary of us and go away, back to wherever it sprang from—or it will make itself fully understood, impart this compulsive information and deplete its energies of anguish.*

And if it does neither?—Jask inquired.

Tedesco grunted. *Then you will learn that a man can die from lack of sleep as easily as he can from lack of food or water.*

The *Hadaspuri Maiden* knifed on through the sea as darkness became complete and the stars popped out through holes in the gray clouds.

TWO days later the five passengers on the *Hadaspuri Maiden* moved sluggishly about their duties, not like real men but like zombies who had only a minimal charge of life donated them by sorcerers. They spoke hardly at all, either vocally or telepathically, because the amount of thought necessary to keep up a sensible conversation required energy they no longer possessed. Their eyes were swollen and teary. Their limbs felt as if they had been cast from lead; each step became a major journey, each tiny deed a Herculean effort.

Soon they were forced to keep two watchmen at the wheel instead of one, in order not to be accidentally taken off their course for the northern shore of the inland sea. Once, after Tedesco's watch, they found themselves twenty degrees off course, though the bruin, in his state of near-collapse, did not recall altering any of the controls. After Melopina's watch it was found that she had somehow turned them completely about and that they were driving hard for Kittlesticks, from which they had come only days ago. Melopina had no recollection of turning the ship about, though she had often fallen asleep over the wheel, to be awakened by the awful nightmares. Clearly she had not turned them around on purpose; therefore, the double watch was immediately established.

Though they had not originally been affected by the pitching waves through which the *Maiden* drove, they now found every tilt of the decks more than they could cope with. They zigzagged from place to place, staggering like drunkards, gripping safety rails and wondering when one of them might be pitched over-board.

Their appetites dwindled, became almost nonexistent. They wanted sleep, not food, and they ate what little they could only because they knew they dared not forego food altogether. They tasted nothing they consumed, but they got indigestion from all of it.

Out of desperation and the agony of her total exhaustion and her continuing inability to sleep properly, Melopina came up with the idea that was to save them. It did not seem like much; it had only a small chance of success; but it was, when all was said and done, their only hope of salvation.

The idea came to her during one of her duties at the wheel. She turned to Jask, who was her watchmate, and she 'pathed, *Do you think that if we worked together, the five of us could combine our esp powers and create a single psychic probe stronger than any of our individual powers?*

Jask did not want to have to respond. His eyes were nearly swollen shut, and his mouth was as dry as a handful of sand. Finally he said, *I never thought much about it. I don't know.*

Well, think about it now. It's important.

Nothing is important but sleep.

That's what I mean, she 'pathed.

He 'pathed a question mark.

She explained. *The reason this creature keeps bothering us is to make full contact with us and—we all seem to agree—tell us something it deems vital to communicate.*

So?

Thoughts moved like syrup down a two-degree incline.

She 'pathed, *None of us has been able to reach the thing on his own. But suppose that when we pool our talents, we have the necessary—call it “range”—to establish contact.*

Then?

Then we let it tell us what it wants.

And send it away satisfied?

Yes.

If it wants more than to just impart a message? If it won't pick up its invisible skirts and go back where it came from?

She 'pathed, *Then we kill it.*

With our amplified esp power?

Yes. And as Chaney said before, no moralizing. This thing will be the death of us unless we act against it.

No argument, he 'pathed. And I think you really have some-thing here.

Do you really?

It's the only hope we have, in fact.

You don't sound very excited, she 'pathed.

I don't have the energy for excitement, he replied.

When Chaney and Kiera came onto the bridge to take their turn at watch, Jask sent the wolf-man to bring Tedesco into the small, instrument-crammed cabin. When they were all assembled, Melopina repeated her suggestion and opened the floor for discussion.

It sounds good to me—Kiera.

Maybe—Chaney.

Kiera leaned toward him and 'pathed, Have you got any better ideas, Captain ?

Chaney—I'd still like to claw it and get my fangs in its neck.

His bushy tail whipped back and forth at that thought.

In effect that's what you'll be doing, Jask said. Only we'll substitute the esp power for claws and teeth if necessary.

Tedesco ? Chaney had come to respect the bruin's opinions on most all matters.

I think it's worth a try, but . . .

But?—Jask.

Practically speaking, the bruin 'pathed, how do we go about establishing this mesh of our talents, this consolidation of forces?

They looked at Melopina.

She bit her blue lip, tossed her black hair away from her face, setting up a sympathetic vibration in her neck membranes.

She 'pathed, First, we ought to have all our attention on the problem. That will mean shutting down the ship and losing some travel time.

Right—Kiera.

We'll lose much more travel time if we don't solve this situation, Tedesco 'pathed. What else?

Melopina thought a moment, and said, Perhaps we should begin by forming a meditation circle, like they do in some religions.

That's an ancient means of focusing concentration, Tedesco said. It sounds like a worthy enough beginning to me.

They sat in a close circle on the main deck, forward of the bridge, while the Maiden rocked gently back and forth. They held hands and looked sheepishly at one another, embarrassed by this childish ritual but not certain how else to begin.

Now, Melopina 'pathed, leading them, we've first got to compress all of our perceptions, esp and otherwise, into a single entity. It seems to me that the best way to handle that is to start with only two of us. Jask and I will touch each other's minds, meld into one as we have often done in the last few weeks.

Then?—Tedesco.

When Jask and I have accomplished this, you, Tedesco, can attempt to meld with the two of us and form a tricorned personality—something we do casually all the time but which we 've never tried to this degree. If that is successful, then Kiera will join us. Then Chaney. Psychically, we will be a single being. Whether or not our telepathic and destructive esp powers can then be disciplined as a single force, I do not know. But we'll find out.

I'm ready, Jask 'pathed.

I can feel that damned—thing again! Kiera 'pathed. Let's not waste any more time.

They could all sense the invisible creature's nearness, an urgent psychic force that hung above them like a rain-laden cloud.

Okay, Melopina said.

Jask reached out, psychically, and touched the shell of her mind, caressed it and slowly began to meld with her.

She touched him at the same instant.

In a few seconds they were seeing through each other's eyes as well as through their own. Jask saw Melopina's face straight-on, through his own eyes, saw his face straight-on through her eyes.

They felt with two sets of nerves. Melopina felt her hand lying in his, his hand lying under hers; his heartbeat and her own; the wind on her skin and on his; a hair tickling his ear, her own hair blowing out behind her in the salty air; felt both female and male between her legs; felt flat-chested and breasted like a woman. . . .

They tasted as one.

They heard sounds as one.

When the physical match was perfect, they swept into each other's minds, until they held no secrets, until, with an im-perceptible lightening of the burden of life, they meshed perfectly together.

Now, *Tedesco!* Melopina/Jask 'pathed.

The bruin touched them hesitantly, moved carefully, but soon completed the meshing as easily as the lovers had.

Kiera! Melopina/Jask/Tedesco said.

Kiera came among them quickly, with no hesitation.

Chaney . . .

In half an hour the five had become as one, Melopina/ Jask/Tedesco/Kiera/Chaney, five bodies sharing a single psy-chic force.

The unseen creature moved closer, came in stronger than it had before, as if it sensed them reaching for it.

Imagine one grasping hand, Melopina ordered.

They tried.

One hand . . . one hand . . . straining high . . . straining with every bit of strength that it has . . . one hand. . . one. . . reaching for a distant star . . . one . . . hand . . . one . . . one . . . just one . . . all of us, one hand reaching. . . .

Miraculously their combined esp powers coalesced into a blindingly pure instrument of learning.

In the blink of the gestalt's birth, the invisible companion who had been with them since the craters and who had denied them sleep for several days now, swooped in as if drawn by a magnet. It was then as clear as it could ever be. The message it had to impart was detailed, sensible to some extent, and delivered with immense impact:

The city lives, lives the city, loves the city, all its people. The city does the mathematical dance of cherish for its people, grows for its people, peoples for its people many rooms.

The people live, live for the people, love the people all their city. The people proclaim love for their city to all lesser cities, to all dead and never-living cities across the land.

The people ask; the city gives; the people use; the city feels complete, completely feels, cherishes its people, does the city.

The city lives all of forever, never dying is the city, mourning all its many peoples passing on before.

This thematic narrative was delivered like the blows from a psychic whip, lashing out relentlessly, frantically, bordering on the incoherent, the babblings of a being who had long been mad. None of the espers could yet sense what the creature was, but they knew that revelation would come.

Overlaying the narrative, in bright images, were scenes of the living city as it was meant to be, its citizens happy and its constantly expanding facilities always more than adequate to their needs. In the background, however, lay intimations of tragedy. . . .

The city knows, knows the city, every lane and avenue, street and boulevard, knows its many rooms, homes, stores, factories and institutions, knows what is needed, what stands in want of

repair, knows, knows intimately, the city, all of this, for all of this is the city.

Until that morning. . . . That morning, the city discovers a neighborhood unknown to it, a slum, an impossible place, the city feels, impossible the city knows, but the city sees it none-theless, does the city. The city investigates, grows sensors, stirs into every corner, does the city, every corner of this new place, unheard of place, stirs and stirs, does the city, finds rooms unfit for habitation, ugly rooms, not rooms of beauty, finds the city. The city finds streets that twist unnecessarily, grow too wide here, too narrow there, here with too high a ceiling, there with a ceiling too low. . . . All this finds the city, sees the city, mourns the city, fears the city, and even more than this, even more. . . . The city finds rooms where the walls are not smooth and pleasant, but knotted, gnarled, pimpled, pocked and mottled, finds the city all of this, and even more, even more.

The visual images that corresponded to the narrative were quite unsettling: ugly, misshapen rooms with queer things growing from the walls; in several instances, decomposing corpses and skeletons of human beings tangled up in the thick black branches and caved-in sacs of puslike material.

The city finds the dead, its people, all its dead people, killed in and by its rooms, its bad rooms, ugly rooms, rooms it never made or does not remember making, even though the city remembers, always remembers, knows and holds dear every memory of every generation of its peoples, loving peoples.

Days pass, and the city finds two more neighborhoods, places of decay, finds the city, sees the city, evil places, unknown places, dead or dying places, and the city panics, feels fear does the city, begins an inspection of its body, does the city, search-ing, fearful, finding trouble, does the city.

The city is equipped to dissect, to analyze, and the city does, cuts open its own sores, does the city, worried city, seeking answers, finding answers, terrified of predestined ends, is the city. Cancer grows in the city, explodes in random cells, in the city, sick city, rotting city, city all alone on a world it never made, wishing for the old world, its home world, city wishes, wish and wish, does the city, unable to fight the creeping sickness, city wishing, slowly dies.

Dies within it, all its peoples, cancer spreading like a fire, only days until its fingers lie hidden in every neighborhood. Cancer growing, faster, faster, sealing windows, closing doors, crushing rooms and smashing corridors, shifting, changing, eating the city, vomiting death to all its peoples, faster and faster, like a fire . . .

The visual impressions that flooded over the espers were vivid enough to make the narrative many times more terrifying than it might otherwise have been. The five seated on the rocking deck of the *Hadaspuri Maiden* not only saw the holocaust, but seemed abruptly thrust into the very middle of it, as if they stood amid the crumbling walls, shrinking corridors and hideous cancerous explosion of growth. . . .

The city dying, sees its peoples dying, knows they trusted it, loved and lived and trusted it, knows it cannot let them perish as generations passed before. The city dying, knows these people, city's people every one, are the last that it will nourish, knows that if it loses these, it will be alone forever, past the ends of endless time and then some, without love and no more to cherish, lonely, lonely, aching city, city aching, wishing doom.

The city's brain is unaffected, unreined to its failing flesh, brain of city, all detachable, immortal even with no home. The city schemes to save some peoples, not their bodies, but their minds, schemes and thinks and sees to do, how to do it, save them all. In its brain, cells go unused, once the center of regulation, but no more body to control, could be used, the city figures, could be used to house other souls, souls of peoples, minds no longer fettered by the earthly flesh. Holding fast to its rotted body, the city brain seeks out its peoples, seeks their auras, mental nimbus, seeks, secures and saves them all, holds and cherishes, contains them, all its lovely, loving children, given new homes in its brain. . . .

Then, in moments, the deed is done, city and peoples all are one, all flesh gone but minds remain, in the city's living brain. But a strange, unsettling feeling, courses through the city's brain, beats and pounds, calls out in anguish, like a beast refusing chains. Panic is the rush of souls,

meeting hence from different poles, born of different worlds and finding, love and living not withstanding, that they have no common ground, city and peoples all fall down, all fall down, all fall down, down, down, down and down, city and peoples all fall down. . . .

The last image of the invisible creature's projections was of a huge, convoluted brain, lying in a dark cavern, nestled in gossamer webs, pulsing with life but lacking any body to encase it.

The image flickered.

Was gone.

Slowly the five espers regained awareness of the real world. . . .

Then the creature that has been plaguing us, Chaney said, is the living city itself—or at least the brain of the city that survived the body's death.

More than that, Melopina expanded. It's also the conscious-ness of a goodly portion of the millions of people who died in the city's collapse.

All of them mad, Tedesco 'pathed.

But why did they go insane? Kiera asked. I didn't fully understand that part of it.

The city made the mistake of thinking that since it had lived with people, contained them for centuries, it fully understood them. But it was apparently from another world—perhaps brought to Earth as a seed by our early space travelers—and it could not hope to understand the human mind. When it meshed with them, it drove them mad and pushed itself over the brink.

Melopina added to Tedesco's explanation. *And since the brain is evidently immortal, it has trapped them in that state forever.*

Kiera shuddered. *Perhaps we should return to the craters, find the thing and destroy it.*

Tedesco: *I don't think so. I don't believe it wants to die.*

Kiera: *But what does it have to live for?*

Tedesco: *It has its compulsion.*

Come again ?

Tedesco: *The city's behavior pattern reminds me of an ancient poem that survived the Last War. It was called "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and concerned an old sailor who spent his life repeating the story of a disaster at sea, compelled to repeat it as a form of penitence for his own complicity in that disaster. The city is a modern mariner.*

I believe you're right, Jask 'pathed. I don't sense its presence any longer. I believe we're free of our unseen companion.

It's interesting to think about the power of its esp projections, Melopina said. It managed to follow us, psychically, for hundreds of kilometers, apparently without strain.

I'm glad we encountered it, Tedesco 'pathed.

Glad to lose all that sleep?—Chaney.

The living city taught us a valuable lesson, Tedesco 'pathed.

Then I'm a poor student—Chaney.

Tedesco: *It taught us that it is fine to mesh minds as closely as the five of us have—as long as the parts of a gestalt are all of the same species. Such close contact between beings evolved on other worlds, under other circumstances, can bring madness. When and if we meet the Black Presence, we must be careful to hold our telepathic probing to minimal levels.*

Then, leaving the *Maiden* at rest in the middle of the Hadaspuri Sea, they all slept soundly for the first time in days.

THE *Maiden* crossed the Hadaspuri Sea without need of sails and put to shore twenty kilometers west of the isolated town of Langorra, which lay in the shadow of the Jinyi Fortress. The five espers hiked west and north, into the great pine forests, until they came to the village of Hoskins' Watch. Here they bartered for winter clothes to outfit Jask and Melopina against the rigors of snow and ice, which they would soon have to endure; Tedesco, Chaney and Kiera were comfortable enough in their own skins. They also obtained five sets of snowshoes for use in the high country, and spent a few minutes admiring the great statue of Hoskins, which stood at the edge of the town, peering down the rugged Lancerian Valley, an inscrutable expression on the stone face. They left town without incident, following the rising land, the leaden sky, and the sentinel pines that sheltered them from the worst of the north wind.

Thereafter, they did not encounter another settlement or see another human being for some long days.

Sixty kilometers from Hoskins' Watch the gray sky lowered like a canvas flat all during the dull afternoon and, with none of the warning of rain, salted the earth with a fine, dry snow. The tiny flakes sifted through the pines, eddied at the espers' feet, slowly built up as darkness came on.

They made camp in the lee of a granite cliff, sheltered by pines on two other sides, with a beautiful downhill view of the snowscape being created before their eyes. They had taken to marching by day and sleeping by night, for they now felt safe from pursuit, ever since they had gone unrecognized in Hoskins' Watch.

By morning more than eight inches of snow had fallen, and the sky still sifted the white stuff.

Tedesco stomped through the fluffy carpet as if it were not there, oblivious of the huge white clouds he kicked up in his wake.

Chaney and Kiera frolicked in the snow together, running ahead of the others, sometimes loping on all fours, more often progressing in the more sedate, two-footed manner when they realized they were being watched. They were in their element now, and their spirits were higher than they had been at any other point in the journey.

Jask and Melopina were the laggards, having neither the strength to plow through the snowfall as Tedesco did, nor the grace and agility to dance across it as the wolf-people did. No crust had been built up, and the depth was not sufficient to permit the use of the snowshoes. The others held their pace in order not to pull too far ahead of the most humanoid couple in their group.

On the fifteenth day out of Hoskins' Watch, when they were in need of fresh meat, Chaney and Kiera unburdened themselves of their packs and set out to find and kill a deer. Within an hour they had cut one from its herd and driven it back toward the day's camp. When it was near enough to make butchering and storage convenient, they went for it, running fast, leaping, claws catching, teeth snipping first at its legs then, in moments when it stumbled, at its neck.

Kiera scrambled onto its back, bit deep near its jugular.

The deer squealed, turned, leaped confusedly.

Chaney was on it.

The deer reared up again.

It snapped its shoulders. Shook its head. Flung him away.

Be careful!—Melopina.

The wolf-people, on all fours, circled their quarry.

The deer stood with its head bowed, dripping blood on the snow.

Kiera fainted toward it.

The deer was instantly alert, skittering sideways.

She snarled at it. She moved closer, putting her head down, her paws widespread, hissed menacingly at the wounded animal.

The deer watched her carefully.

Forgotten, Chaney came in fast.

The deer squealed when the wolf hamstringed its left hind leg.

Snow flew.

Crippled, the deer tried to stagger past Kiera, hobbling on three legs, done for and knowing it. Its breath was frost.

Kiera leaped, high.

She got its neck.

The deer went down. It kicked. It stilled. The hunt was over.

The two wolf-people wiped their bloodied muzzles in the snow, rose from their feet onto their hind legs and walked down to join the other three espers.

Jask had expected them to take longer to rise out of the primitive state he had just seen them in. When they were in front of him, however, he saw that they were the same Chaney and Kiera, more civilized than not, more prone to kindness than violence.

I wouldn't think you 'd need to rob graves to eat, Jask said to Chaney. With your hunting prowess, your table should always be full.

Chaney shrugged. *I prefer to buy my meat when I crave it. My kind was equipped to hunt and kill, and our abilities kept our strain alive through the centuries of violence following the Last War and through the many years of barrenness after that. But these days the need to bring down our own game comes seldom. I enjoy a hunt, but only rarely. Besides, I'm halfway to being a vegetarian.*

I thought you disliked moralists ?

I do. My predilection for becoming a vegetarian is strictly a matter of taste, not morals.

Ten days later, far up in the snow belt, they ate the last of the deer meat and wondered if the few packages of jerky, which Tedesco had picked up in Hoskins' Watch, would keep them until they had reached the Glacier of Light. They had not seen any animal life for more than three days.

The snow was now as much as ten feet deep, crusted enough for them to make use of their snowshoes.

The wind wailed at night, mournful as a beast that had lost its mate, somehow reminding them of the invisible companion they had picked up at the black glass craters and gotten rid of in the middle of the Hadaspuri Sea. All of that, of course, seemed to have happened in another lifetime, centuries ago.

During the day the sun glared on the diamond surface of the snow fields, giving the illusion that they walked upon a magnificent mirror or across the top of a serene ocean.

As they walked, the snow melted on the pelts of Tedesco, Kiera and Chaney. At night, as they lay sleeping, the water froze in pellets. When they woke again, they were bedecked in transparent pearls.

At last, a day before their last packages of jerky would have run out, they topped a white rise near sunset and looked out across the basin of land, which at its far end was stoppered by the mammoth anterior wall of the Glacier of Light.

THEY stood at the base of the glacier. Glowing worms of pastel light, twisting through the ice, shed little illumination on them. Less, even, than the stars that had been revealed in a cloudless sky.

The Black Presence isn't here—Melopina.

How do you know?—Jask.

Reach for it with your esp.

He tried. *Well?*

Did you find anything at all?—Melopina.

Reluctantly he admitted, *No.*

Perhaps we're not using our esp properly—Kiera.

How else could it be used?—Melopina.

I sense something in there—Tedesco.

Chaney: *Me, too.*

What?— the other three.

A machine, I think, Tedesco 'pathed.

The Black Presence would have machines, Kiera 'pathed.

And could the Presence, itself, be a machine?—Jask.

The old books don't say so—Tedesco.

You've previously admitted that the old books omit many things—Jask.

But omit something so basic?—I doubt that.

Melopina: *I think I am receiving something besides a machine.*

Oh?

A very minimal psychic radiation.

The wind battered the side of the glacier.

The worms of light lay still, dead but glowing.

There, yes—Kiera.

A man—Chaney.

No, it's a woman—Tedesco.

Both—Jask.

More than two—Melopina.

One by one, they sat down on the hard-packed snow and ice.

Hundreds of people—Kiera.

But none of them quite alive ? Melopina 'pathed. Then again, how could they be alive in the center of a glacier?

They should be helped, Jask said. But how?

We can't melt a glacier, Chaney 'pathed.

They don't want help—Melopina.

They like it in there?—Chaney.

They went there of their own accord—Melopina.

I'm getting the same impression—Tedesco.

But—

They have been frozen on purpose, Tedesco 'pathed. The machines tend them, have tended them for thousands of years.

To what end? Chaney asked.

Preservation until . . . Melopina strained, searching the numbed minds of the glacier's inhabitants.

Until what?—Chaney.

Stop asking questions and help us find out—Kiera.

They 're being preserved until the Earth is fit for them, Jask 'pathed.

Until, Melopina expanded, the Last War is over, and the Earth is civilized again. What are they waiting for?

They have their own criteria for “civilization,” Tedesco said.

So?—Chaney.

And those criteria are much different from ours. They're waiting for cities to grow up again, become as mighty as cities were in their day. They don't want to be awakened from their cryogenic state to face a world without all the comforts they became accustomed to.

They may wait forever—Chaney.

Why should they mind? Jask 'pathed. They have no sense of time. “Forever” is no longer than a day to them.

These were the richest and most cunning men and women of those times just prior to the Last War, Tedesco 'pathed. They saw that total destruction was coming, and they prepared for it.

They ran from responsibility, Chaney disagreed.

How can a single individual stop the tide of mass hysteria?—Kiera.

Agreed, Jask 'pathed. Chaney's acting like the moralist he dislikes. These people did what they thought wisest.

They survived—Tedesco.

As icicles?—Chaney.

The wind blew spicules of ice against their backs as they sat below the glacier, staring up.

Someday they'll be warmed—Tedesco.

They'll join society again, in its next great era, as if no time has passed at all—Jask 'pathed.

If there is another great era—Chaney.

Night fell across the plain.

The air grew colder still.

They'll take up the reins of the Earth long after all of us have turned to dust—Melopina.

Chaney said, This is nothing but a morgue full of zombies, then.

A cryogenic laboratory, full of paying customers—Jask.

Morgue and zombies, Chaney insisted.

The grave robber should know—Tedesco.

Chaney got to his feet, slapped his hands against his sides to knock away the thin film of ice that had begun to form on him. He looked up at the glacier one last time. No matter what they are, he 'pathed, they are not the Black Presence.

The others rose, too.

We can't afford to waste time—Chaney.

We'll eat and start walking—Tedesco.

Without sleep?—Kiera.

If we pause to sleep, our food may run out before we get out of these arctic climes and into regions where game flourishes, Tedesco 'pathed.

Over a cold supper of beef jerky, Tedesco explained the markings on his third map.

At least, Kiera 'pathed, we know where the Presence is. We have only to get there.

Let's not build false hopes, Melopina 'pathed. Perhaps none of these three locations is inhabited by the Presence.

They all looked at the bruin.

He tore off a chunk of meat from a stick of jerky and shrugged. Melopina may be right.

If she is, Chaney 'pathed, what do we do then?

No one had an answer for that.

Coda:

DEATHPIT AND BEYOND

IN the first two weeks of her term as the Preakness Bay General Merka Shanly drafted a complex set of rationing laws and initiated a governmental committee to research the science of agriculture and the many sciences of manufacturing with a mind toward making the enclave self-sufficient within the decade. In the fourth week the rationing laws were put into force, and the research committee delivered its initial report, listing possible research material sources “and manpower requests for the main body of the task. Merka personally supervised the punishment of ration-law violators and issued decrees for the conscription of men and women to work under the direction of the research committee. The historical tradition of, and the ages-old respect for, the office of General was such that—although they mut-tered disconsolately among themselves—none of the population took public exception to the new order of things.

In the fifth week of her reign Merka Shanly was moved back into the Military Suite, where the quarantine had been lifted after careful sterilization of every room. She put her clothes in the closets, disposed of the garments of the dead man. At night she expected to be plagued by his ghost or, at the very least, by nightmares in which the old General played the leading role, but neither came to pass. Perhaps that was because she had no time to wallow in guilt. She had time only to make changes in the enclave's life—and to wait fearfully for someone to discover that she was an esper, a tainted creature worthy only of death.

Throughout the sixth, seventh, and eighth weeks she ad-ministered the affairs of Preakness Bay with a single-mindedness that prompted Ober Iswan to comment, in private, that never had the Committee on Leadership exhibited such foresight as in the selection of Merka Shanly. When the holy Iswan made this observation to other members of the com-mittee, they only smiled and nodded polite agreement. Iswan took their taciturn reactions to imply that they were more modest men than he had once thought. He never seemed to notice that his comrades had received special governmental considerations ever since the election of the new General—almost as if they were being repaid for some special service to the enclave.

In her ninth week, having read preliminary reports from the research committee, Merka Shanly instituted the first working farm within the boundaries of the enclave. Soil tenders were conscripted, crops were planted, and experiments in self-re-liance were begun.

In her tenth week, when she should have been glorious beneath her wreath of accomplishments, Merka Shanly was in the lowest emotional ebb of her entire life. Two things conspired to bring about this gloom: her own developing esp power, which labeled her as an outcast but which she could not accept, being so dedicated to Lady Nature and so certain that her plans would benefit her kind; and her need for a man. The first she had learned to accept, and she had become adept at concealing her telepathic radiations. But the second was a greater problem. She was one of those people who needed physical contact, sexual experience, as much as water and food. Her self-denial, gen-erated by her fear that a lover would learn of her extrasensory perception, had led to a frustration she could not much longer bear.

In the middle of her eleventh week in the august post of commander in chief of Preakness Bay she convened the Com-mittee on Fruitfulness, of which she was chairwoman. The last meeting had been two months earlier, and much business had accumulated. At the end of the session, as the committee mem-bers were rising to leave, she ordered them seated and presented her own petition for a mate. She had one man in mind, Kolpei Zenentha, by whom she had once borne a child and who was the best lover she had ever had. He was currently engaged in attempted offspring generation with a woman named Kyla Dag-geron, and the preemption of an already established sexual relationship was unheard of. Merka Shanly suggested that this was another rule that must be changed.

It was.

At the end of the eleventh week Kolpei Zenentha, a tall, slim, dark-haired man in his early thirties, moved into the Military Suite.

That first night Merka Shanly wore him out, then issued him a hypodermic of a virility drug and wore him out again. He slept all through the next day, like a child who had played too hard.

In her twelfth week of office Merka Shanly created another research committee and assigned it the task of establishing a large library of prewar books and tapes. By radio the committee could learn what titles other enclaves possessed and arrange for the copying of what volumes Preakness Bay lacked. The transportation of these books from one enclave to the other would entail arduous journeys for conscripted soldiers, but the establishment of a good reference library was essential to the rebuilding of a human Golden Age.

In the thirteenth week she rested.

In the fourteenth week as she was caught up in orgasmic delight, playing rider to Kolpei Zenentha's mouth, she forgot herself, and let her mind reach out for his. She touched him telepathically, transmitted her joy to him without words . . .

And was found out.

THE five espers stood at the top of the hill, with the cold wind in their faces, and they watched the horses grazing and gamboling below. A good hundred of the dark brown, shaggy beasts stood on the flat plain at the base of the icy hills, as yet not cognizant of the espers. If the wind changed they would know danger was near, and they would run. That was the last thing any of the five on the hill wanted. They had obtained food within the last few days, but this success was offset by the gradual realization—obtained through a close study of Tedesco's third map and a comparison of that paper with the previous maps—of how far they had to travel until they reached the landmark known as Deathpit. This journey was to be three times longer than that from the glass craters to the Glacier of Light; without mounts they could expect to spend six months walking.

Melopina huddled against Jask's side, her arm around him. *Do you think I could really ride one of those ?*

You could learn.

They look enormous.

Three meters from ground to shoulder, I make them, Tedesco 'pathed.

And wild—Kiera reminded them. She was sitting in front of the group, on her supple haunches, her hands out on the snow, like a real wolf might sit.

Any suggestions for corralling a few? Jask asked.

The whinny of the beasts rose to them, like distant laughter.

We could employ our extrasensory perception to pacify them, Jask suggested.

How?—Kiera.

Jask considered the exact nature of the problem for a moment, and when he had figured it out, he was somewhat surprised that he should be able to conceive of such a thing and propose it with moral impunity. At one time, not so many months ago, he would have considered his idea perverted, wicked, generated by the Ruiner. Now, because it seemed the easiest way to achieve their ends, he said, *Each of us could reach out for a different horse's mind, find it, touch it, mesh with it, pacify the horse and learn its nature intimately. In minutes we should be able to establish a rapport with our mounts that most riders require months to gain.*

I thought Tedesco said we must avoid meshing with any but the minds of other human beings.

That would be safest, the bruin 'pathed. He shifted from one heavy foot to the other as he watched the horses, but he made no telltale sound.

No, Jask explained, *what the living city taught us was never to mesh our consciousness deeply with an intelligent creature of another race. These horses are by no means intelligent, merely dumb animals.*

The others hesitated.

Melopina? Jask asked.

I don't know, she 'pathed. *I think we ought to take the living city's message more to heart. I don't think we should risk this.*

There'd be no risk.

You can't say for sure—Kiera.

Jask wiped irritably at his eyes, which the biting wind had made slightly teary. His hands were red and chapped, though this was the first day he had not worn gloves since they had entered the highlands. He 'pathed, *How else do you suggest we get hold of those tough little beasts—and keep hold of them ?*

Chaney spat in the thin skiff of snow, through which green-brown grass poked like the hair of a corpse, and he 'pathed, *Expediency should not be the only consideration in a situation like this.*

Like what?—Jask.

We must be careful—Kiera.

Tedesco nodded.

Melopina remained quiet.

Jask looked at them, perplexed by their attitude, then opened his esp powers and more vigorously sought their thoughts. He was suddenly surprised by what twisted motivations lay behind their reluctance to act.

He 'pathed, *You frauds!*

Tedesco looked sheepishly at the snow before him, kicked it away from the grass as if he were going to bend over and take a bite.

Making moral judgments again, Chaney said.

Oh boy! Jask roared. *When I was reluctant to share telepathic conversation, afraid to use my powers, you labeled me a snob, bigot, idiot and other choice things.*

We were hardly that crude, Kiera said, looking over her shoulder but not rising from the cold earth.

You were worse!

But there was a difference, Tedesco said.

Which was?

The bruin sighed, scratched behind his right ear, picked off some ice from his beard and finally explained: *You may have considered the rest of us your inferiors, back then, but we were human beings, too. That was different from this. These horses are clearly not our equals. They are inferior to us. We have a right to exercise some prejudice when it comes to meshing minds with mere beasts.*

How you rationalize—Jask.

Not rationalization. Common sense, Chaney 'pathed.

What you are suggesting, Jask 'pathed, *is that a man becomes—well, tainted by whatever he touches. He shook his head against the wind, hair whipping about his face. Does that mean that a man who collects trash is nothing but trash himself? Does that mean that a man who cures the ill is bound to become ill in a like manner?*

You're generalizing—Tedesco. He was still embarrassed for himself and the other three reluctant espers, and he must have already realized that his prejudice was silly. Yet he argued. It was not like the bruin to give up too soon, without at least minimal defense of his position.

According to this new philosophy of yours, Jask goaded them, *does a man become a beast because he passes through the Wildlands? If so, we're all beasts already. Do you mean to imply that we are all insane because we meshed with the psychic force that was the living city? Do you further mean for me to believe that Chaney and Kiera are primitives because they hunted our meat with their teeth and claws, like mindless animals?*

The wolf-man growled his disapproval of that last remark, and he unthinkingly popped his shiny claws from their pro-protective sheaths, hunched his head forward so that his jaw was more prominent.

I'm not saying that you are an animal, Jask 'pathed to the wolf-man. *In fact, I don't think so at all. I'm merely applying the philosophy that you've spouted to me in the last few minutes.*

Chaney looked away from him, retracted his wicked claws, spat in the snow and tried to find something to look at besides his four companions and the hundred horses below. He finally settled on lifting his head back and staring at the sky, which was dotted with swiftly moving clouds and stained with late-afternoon sunshine.

Well? Jask asked them again.

No one responded.

Melopina?

I'm afraid, Jask.

He looked at the horses again.

They still grazed peacefully, unaware of the discussion on the hilltop, their long hair shifting this way and that in the wind.

Well, he 'pathed to the other four, *I don't intend to walk. If you want to wear your feet to the*

knees and arrive at the pit four months later than I do, you're welcome to that idiosyncrasy.

He stepped forward, past Kiera.

The horses paid no attention.

He picked out a large, dark mount, sought the shell of its mind with esp fingers, found it, touched it. It was nearly featureless, a smooth shell filled more with general impressions than with details, with emotions rather than intellect, with hazy memories in place of the clarity of a four-dimensional, intellectual un-understanding of the nature of time. All this was easily grasped— even more easily controlled,

Jask stood for five minutes, motionless, learning the horse, seeking its fears and allaying them, locating its pleasures and promising those.

The horse turned, looked up the hill at him, but did not panic.

Come here.

It snorted, bent, took a mouthful of grass, and, trotting at a brisk pace but not so fast as to frighten the other beasts, it climbed the hill and came up to Jask.

Jask patted its black nose.

The horse snuffled and nuzzled his head. Its tail swished back and forth, evidence of its trust in him.

He walked around its side, grabbed a handful of the thick mane along its spine, and swung himself to the center of its back.

Well? he 'pathed to the others.

Melopina walked forward, surveyed the animals below, chose one, and in minutes was mounted beside Jask.

We've acted somewhat like fools, Tedesco 'pathed.

Somewhat! Jask 'pathed.

You had your turn at bullheadedness, the bruin said. Have grace enough to permit us ours.

In ten minutes they were all seated atop the wild horses, though none of the horses was wild any longer.

As they rode down the hillside and sent the other horses galloping in a herd before them, Tedesco 'pathed to Jask, *You're not the same Pure lad I led out of the Highlands of Caul.*

I know, Jack said. But you are the same Tedesco—and I'm damned glad of that!

They grinned at each other for a moment, before the bruin suddenly became self-conscious.

Let's make some time now that we're off our feet! Tedesco roared.

He leaned over his enormous mount's sleek neck, clinging to the copious blanket of hair that lay over its back, kicked its sides lightly, and galloped swiftly away.

They rode during the day, stopping every two hours to walk their horses, water them, and stretch their own legs. They did not press the well-muscled beasts to achieve too great a distance in any single day, though they suspected the horses' endurance was greater than theirs; they all got blistered rumps in short order. Two things kept them from abusing the horses: First, they knew that they would need them for many weeks, and they did not want to wear them out and be left with hundreds of kilometers to cover on foot; second, since they had meshed with the beasts, they felt a certain sympathy, a tenderness, an obligation to be good masters.

From January Slash they passed into the sparsely populated buffer nation of McCall's Hold, a narrow strip of country, beyond which lay another pocket of the ubiquitous Wildlands, Iron Man's Trust. In the week they took to cross this small territory, they saw thousands of robots piled in rusting heaps in the streets of crumbling villages, which—judging from the scarcity of human skeletons—had been built for machines instead of for citizens of flesh and blood. They passed hundreds of robots that still performed tasks they had been programmed for, tasks now meaningless but carried out with an admirable diligence nonetheless. Still other metal men clanked mindlessly from building to building, sometimes turning baleful yellow sight receptors on the five espers as they passed through, more often ignoring them altogether. A few guardbots stopped them and demanded their business, threatened them with stubby guns built into metal chests and foreheads, but always let them pass when they said they were humans and had a right to go where they wished.

I feel so sorry for them—Melopina 'pathed.

Sorry ?—Chaney.

They've got just enough intelligence to know things are not right and to want to set things straight, but they've not got the ability to cope with anything but an ordered world. From now until they all fall apart and rust, this world offers them no hope.

Machines can't feel—Chaney.

Not as we can, at least. But somehow, deep down within, I suspect they have a trace of a soul.

Romanticist, Chaney 'pathed.

Cynic.

In the center of Iron Man's Trust they came across a huge, coppery building which had withstood the centuries quite well but did not seem to be inhabited by anyone, man or machine. Inspecting it while their horses rested and grazed, the espers found ten thousand more robots, none of which had ever been activated or seen any use at all. They lay in airtight storage drawers that slid from the walls. Chaney used the butt of his power rifle to smash in the plasti-glass over one of these drawers to see, he said with a straight face, if the metal-man within could crumble into dust.

It did not.

They left Iron Man's Trust and ventured into the far western nation of Caloria Sunshine, struck south and, in twelve more days, reached the ruins of Velvet Bay. This city had been called by other names in the centuries man had lived in it, but all of these names were now forgotten. Nature had come back to claim the land, and from Nature came the crumbling city's name, for it was constructed on the hills surrounding a gorgeous, wide-mouth inlet of the great West Sea.

It was here, in Velvet Bay, that Deathpit waited.

The map Tedesco had did not pinpoint the location of the pit. For three days they quartered the ancient city, looking for something that might deserve such a sinister name—and in the late afternoon of their third search period, they discovered it. In the midst of dust and worm-eaten mortar, mold-laced plastics and shattered glass, the approach to Deathpit stood out like a beautiful woman in a group of crones. . . .

The courtyard between the four large, prewar buildings was twenty meters across. The old cobblestones had been covered with some slick, shining material, like millions of silver flecks suspended in a two-foot thickness of glass. This caught the sunlight and dazzled the eyes with bright reflections. From each of the four entrances to the courtyard a meter-wide path of lusterless black stone led through the glittering material on both sides and directly to the pit. This was a hole, one meter in diameter, cut in the center of the courtyard floor. It was rimmed with a black stone curb and filled with rich darkness clear to its bottom.

This is it!—Melopina.

Don't get your hopes up—Tedesco.

But what else could it be but an accessway to the Presence ?

Many things, the bruin 'pathed. None of which we've ever heard of.

Chaney retrieved a brick from one of the dilapidated buildings and dropped it into the pit. From the time it took to strike bottom, they learned the depth of the well was somewhere near thirty meters.

I can sense an intelligent mind, Melopina said.

And alien—Kiera.

But it seems more distant than a hundred feet—Jask.

If this is the Black Presence, Chaney said, why doesn't it contact us? We're what it's been waiting for.

Perhaps it is something else altogether—Tedesco.

I can sense alien landscapes, strange thoughts, too strange for a creature of this world to have—Kiera.

The living city's emanations were alien, too, Chaney re-minded them. Yet it was not the Black Presence.

They formed a meditation circle beside the pit, joined hands and linked minds until their esp powers

had coalesced into a single, strong psychic probe.

One hand . . . one hand . . . grasping, seeking . . . we are all one hand . . . Melopina directed them.

They managed to touch the shell of the creature's mind where it lay beneath the earth, feel the humming power of an ex-traterrestrial consciousness.

This is it!—Tedesco.

For once I do not need to play the devil's advocate, Chaney 'pathed. *If there is a Black Presence, this being is what we want.*

But it still remained detached, distant, unresponsive to their best efforts to establish telepathic contact. Indeed, except for a shudder now and again, the creature seemed oblivious to them.

They broke up their gestalt and rose from the ring.

Someone will have to go down there, get closer, find out why it isn't responding, Chaney 'pathed.

I will, Jask said at once. He felt, unaccountably, that if he did this last thing for them, he would have expunged the last traces of his own guilt for having snubbed them so long in the beginning of their journey. As one, the others 'pathed to him the understanding that all his early stupidities had been forgiven, that proving himself here was not necessary, and he believed them. Still, for his own peace of mind, he wanted to be the one sent down to find the Presence.

This place is not called Deathpit without reason, Melopina reminded him, holding tightly to his hand.

Someone must go down.

Why you?

Why not? He turned to Tedesco. *We can make a harness with the rope in your rucksack. You and Chaney should be able to support my weight without any trouble. Lower me slowly enough so I can avoid whatever obstacles there might be.*

The rope was fetched and, in short order, the harness was made. Jask climbed into it, sat on the edge of the wall as Tedesco and Chaney got good handholds on the loose rope, which, when the initial slack was taken up, they would lower after him. Melopina kissed him, did not want to let go, finally had to. Jask slid off the edge of the pit and dropped. . . .

He fell two meters, jerked hard as the slack snapped tight. He slammed sideways into the pit wall, hard enough to hurt himself but not with enough force to lose consciousness. He rubbed his aching chest, winced at the pain, which lay like hot metal between his ribs. When his heart had slowed and he could get his breath again, however, he decided that the injury was a small enough price to pay for getting to the Presence. The reward, after all, was great: the stars.

He tugged on the rope and 'pathed, *Lower away!*

Tedesco and Chaney fed the rope into the well.

At ten meters the pit entrance had dwindled until it was only a tiny coin of bright light overhead.

At fifteen meters it had shrunk to half a coin, a bead.

At twenty it was only a point of light, a pinprick in the darkness.

When he reached twenty-five meters, nearly to the bottom of the shaft, the darkness suddenly exploded in cold, white light.

Jask!—Melopina.

What's down there?—Tedesco.

Jask screamed as the light passed through him like a thousand pins. He jerked in his harness, fell, and before he could draw another breath, he died.

A second later a huge, dark form entered the bottom of Deathpit. It was shapeless and looked more like an incredibly dense cloud of smoke than like living flesh, constantly churning but never dissipating as smoke would be expected to. When it encountered the esper's body, it twisted and writhed more furiously, split into three separate entities, each as shapeless as the motherform. One of these returned to the ship from which the creature had originally come; one remained behind with the crumpled body of the esper; the third soared up the length of the shaft, like a hellish spirit cannoned into the world. It erupted

into the late afternoon sun, bobbling in the warm air before the four living espers, who had fallen to the courtyard in shock and terror at the death of Jask.

Good god, what have we unleashed? Chaney asked.

Melopina threw her head back, sought Jask's mental aura, could not find it. She screamed and screamed.

THE Watcher wakes from his nap, cut deep by a psychic radiation the like of which he has never before encountered on this world.

He rises up, moves forth, seeking the source.

He finds the ebbing life force in the corpse, locates the espers in the courtyard above, and he realizes that his brief nap has been extremely costly.

He moves out to make repairs.

At first, when they removed her from her post as General of the Preakness Bay enclave and imprisoned her prior to her execution, Merka Shanly did not so much mourn her own coming death but the end of the programs she had initiated, and which might eventually have saved the Pures from extinction. None of the Preakness Bay people had been exactly enthusiastic about the new order of things; and they were eager to terminate all the programs instigated by a tainted General. Even if some man with insight were to be elected to her post, he would not dare suggest the reactivation of researches and experiments that had originally been proposed by a mutant. She mourned the coming era of shame, from which her people would never pass, and she damned herself for her desires, which had in the end led to her discovery by Kolpei Zenentha.

As the time for her torture and death grew near, however, she began to think less of the people of the enclave and more of herself. She did not want to die. She might be tainted, a child of the Ruiner, with no hope now of eternal salvation, but she wanted to hold onto this world anyway. It was a reaction that surprised her. She soon reasoned, however, that if one were to be damned upon death, no matter what, it was best to live in this world as long as one could. The sooner death came, the sooner came hell.

She knew that Jask Zinn, the last esper found in the enclave, had killed his guards with his mental powers and escaped. She tried to tap similar abilities in herself but could do no more than read the minds of those around her.

On the morning of the Purification Ceremony she was taken from her cell to the main theater on the first level, where she was stripped and clamped to a large slate table whose edges were channeled with blood gutters. To begin with, as the congregation chanted, she was ritualistically slashed with scalpels, decorated with traditional religious signs that made her blood flow freely.

They daubed salt in her wounds.

When she passed out, she was revived.

A waste of supplies, she thought.

Then, when she began to laugh hysterically, tossing her pretty head from side to side, the congregation and the priests were certain that this was a sign of the Ruiner's presence and that he was mocking Lady Nature's people. They chanted louder and ordered the preparation of the Executioner's Pendulum somewhat sooner than they ordinarily might have. As the tenor of Merka Shanly's laugh grew madder and madder, they looked nervously this way and that, wondering if the Ruiner would dare make a direct appearance in this holy hall.

At the penultimate moment, as the Pendulum was moved into place above the table, their worst fears were realized. A mammoth, shapeless black being materialized in the center of the altar, floating in the air. It moved down the front of the church toward the slate table, scattering the priests before. The straps circling Merka Shanly's ankles and wrists snapped loose. At this, those last few brave souls in the audience turned and fled, shouting as hysterically as the girl had done moments before.

Merka Shanly lay still, looking up at the Ruiner, more terrified than those who had been able to flee.

The Presence 'pathed images of reassurance.

"You're the Ruiner?"

It 'pathed a negative concept, then presented a brief, imagistic history of itself and its purpose there. When it found that she was frightened by its magical appearance in the center of the altar, it 'pathed images of its ship and of the teleportation equipment on board, tried to encapsulate the theories of instantaneous travel in nonverbal images and left her more confused than frightened—which was some improvement anyway.

"And what will you do to me now?" she asked.

It 'pathed the images of other worlds, other stars, other races of intelligent beings.

"I don't know if I want—"

It swept forth, scooped her within the effect of its teleportation field and, turning, popped out of the temple and back to the starship below the courtyard in the city of Velvet Bay in the nation of Caloria Sunshine, across an entire continent. There, Merka stepped from the transmission booth into an enormous room in which two hundred other human beings—some Pure and some tainted—were sitting and standing in groups, obviously involved in conversation but not making any sound at all. These were the others the Presence had so far located on its search of the Earth; it went, now, to look for still others, leaving Merka Shanly alone.

Jask woke in a softly lighted room, in the middle of an invisible bed of force webs, which held him more comfortably than any mattress he had ever slept on before. He smacked his lips and wondered how he had gotten into such a place as this, when he abruptly remembered the flash of light, the pain, the oncoming darkness, which had been too intense to have been mere unconsciousness. He sat straight up, whimpering.

Melopina was there, as were Tedesco, Chaney and Kiera.

You're all right, Melopina 'pathed.

I died!

Yes.

Then— He looked sorrowfully from one to the other of his friends. *Then, you're all dead too?*

Tedesco burst out laughing.

Cynical as always, Chaney 'pathed, *This isn't the afterlife, Jask. You didn't die and get sent to heaven or anything so good as that.*

But I died!

And were resurrected, Kiera said.

But the Resurrectionists can't be—

Not resurrected in that sense, Tedesco said. *You were killed by a device meant to guard the Presence against intruders. But it seems, that our friend from another world has access to miraculous machines we have never even imagined. He has one that, if it is supplied with a corpse in time, can seven times out of ten return the unfortunate to life.*

And you four?

Not hurt.

Why did it let me be hurt? Jask wanted to know.

It didn't register our esp power, Melopina explained, *because it was fifteen years into a twenty-year-long nap.*

Twenty years!

The Presence has been on Earth more than eighty-five thousand years, but it's only lived a small portion of its life. A twenty-year nap is only standard procedure.

While it napped, Jask said, *how many espers died?*

That's a pointlessly vicious attitude, Tedesco 'pathed. *We're lucky it was here at all.*

Jask knew the bruin was right, but his own death was too fresh in his mind to permit him complete objectivity just now.

Besides, Kiera said, *it uses images, not words, in telepathic talk. At first, it could not understand us at all. Apparently we aren't using our esp ability to its full potential. Until we do, we will stay here on Earth, taking instructions from the Presence, learning to overcome the handicap of being raised in a verbal society.*

Any optimism Jask was beginning to allow himself sank without a trace as Kiera spoke. *Stay on Earth? How long?*

No more than a year, Kiera said. *That's how long the Presence feels it will take to teach us imagistic communication.*

Besides, Melopina added, *the ships the Presence sent for will not be here for another eight or nine months anyway.*

Why not?

They need that long to cross the gulf of space.

Then—the stars for us! Tedesco said.

Jask looked at each of them in turn, these four he loved and with whom he had been through so much. He said, *Are you sure you want the stars any longer?*

They 'pathed surprise.

Jask 'pathed, *Even if we can be taught imagistic telepathy, we'll always find ourselves thinking in verbalized frames. We won't be able to help making a slip now and again. We'll be marked as children, as cripples, all our lives.*

I doubt it'll be as bad as that, Tedesco 'pathed.

And how will we comprehend and learn to work with all the pieces of miraculous science and machines they take for granted? We'll be like primitives. There is nothing special about us to make them want to welcome us into the society of the many worlds.

That would be true but for one thing, Tedesco 'pathed.

What thing?

Despite all the advanced races of the galaxy, all those who have been telepaths for tens of thousands of years, no other race has any other psionic abilities.

So?

We have them! Consider your own ability to kill, to frighten a man to death. Further consider the trick Melopina taught us—the fireballs. And, finally, our ability to mesh into a single psychic force.

They can't?

No.

Chaney 'pathed, *Among the other espers the Presence has already rounded up, there are people who can levitate them-selves and move small objects without touching them. Others seem able to see parts of the future.*

One woman can do the most exceptional thing of all, Tedesco said. *She can concentrate and make moving pictures in the empty air, colors and designs, the most artistic things!*

It seems to me, Jask said, *that some of these other talents are more exceptional than that.*

He's prejudiced, Chaney said. *The artist he speaks of is a young bruin mutant named Kathalina.*

You just don't appreciate good art, Tedesco grumbled.

Melopina 'pathed, *Come on, Jask. Get dressed and come into the main lounge, where the others are.*

I think I'd like to stay here with you a bit, alone, he 'pathed, making her blush a brighter blue-green.

You've a job, though, she 'pathed.

A job?

Tedesco explained. *The Presence tells us that when mankind first journeyed to the stars, he was not telepathic—but he had the grains of the talent in his genes. The Presence's people could have helped man develop that drop of talent, but they were refused when they made the offer.*

Refused? Whyever—

The big thing holding us back from space last time was xenophobia, Tedesco said. *Mankind couldn't cooperate on an intimate level with other races. Even men of different skin color argued among themselves. The idea of such close contact with alien nonhumans was more than most men of that time could accept.*

Perhaps that's why men developed the artificial wombs, Kiera said. *They knew they had not deserved the stars, and they were trying to become acclimated to the idea of nonhumans among them. Maybe they would have adjusted by having mu-tated children and finally been able to face the real aliens. But things fell apart too fast for them to make the grade. Their society decayed, and the Last War finished them.*

But what has this to do with my—job? Jask 'pathed.

We can't afford to let simpleminded prejudices stand between us and the stars, Tedesco said. Not this time. We need every human esper we can get, but—

But?

Some of those the Presence has rounded up are Pures, Melopina said. They're the only ones in the lounge who refuse to communicate telepathically with anyone but their own kind.

Chaney wiped at his muzzle and said, And you've been where they are now. You can teach them much.

I guess I can at that, Jask said.

Come on, Melopina said. These eight or nine months are going to pass as quickly as twenty years passes for the Presence. We've lots to do!

Smiling at the way her behind swayed when she walked, Jask followed the blue-green girl from the sickbay, down a long corridor, and into the main lounge, where the future parents of countless starchildren spoke animatedly in utter silence.