

OF MEN AND MONSTERS

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"It doth not appear from all you have said, how any one virtue is required towards the procurement of any one station among you; much less that men are ennobled on account of their virtue, that priests are advanced for their piety or learning, soldiers for their conduct or valour, judges for their integrity, senators for the love of their country, or counsellors for their wisdom.... I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth."

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, "A Voyage to Brobdingnab"

To Sheila Solomon Klass This, in place of Salvation

PART I

PRIESTS FOR THEIR LEARNING

1

MANKIND consisted of 128 people. The sheer population pressure of so vast a horde had long ago filled over a dozen burrows. Bands of the Male Society patrolled the outermost corridors with their full strength, twenty-three young adult males in the prime of courage and alertness. They were stationed there to take the first shock of any danger to Mankind, they and their band captains and the youthful initiates who served them.

Eric the Only was an initiate in this powerful force. Today, he was a student warrior, a fetcher and a carrier for proven, seasoned men. But tomorrow, tomorrow

...

This was his birthday. Tomorrow, he would be sent forth to Steal for Mankind.

When he returned—and have no fear: Eric was swift, Eric was clever, he would return—off might go the loose loincloths of boyhood to be re-placed by the tight loin straps of a proud Male Society warrior.

He would be free to raise his voice and express his opinions in the Councils of Mankind. He could stare at the women whenever he liked, for as long as he liked, to approach them even, to

He found himself wandering to the end of his band's

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burrow, still carrying the spear he was sharpening for his uncle. There, where a women's burrow began, several members of the Female Society were preparing food stolen from the Monster larder that very day. Each spell had to be performed properly, each incantation said just right, or it would not be fit to eat—it might even be dangerous. Mankind was indeed fortunate: plenty of food, readily available, and women who well understood the magical work of preparing it for human consumption.

And such women—such splendid creatures!

Sarah the Sickness-Healer, for example, with her in-credible knowledge of what food was fit and what was unfit, her only garment a cloud of hair that alternately screened and revealed her hips and breasts, the largest in all Mankind. There was a woman for you! Over five litters she had had, two of them of maximum size.

Eric watched as she turned a yellow chunk of food around and around under a glow lamp hanging from the ceiling of the burrow, looking for she only knew what and recognizing it when she found it she only knew how. A man could really strut with such a mate.

But she was the wife of a band leader and far, far beyond him. Her daughter, though, Selma the Soft-Skinned, would probably be flattered by his attentions. She still wore her hair in a heavy bun: it would be at least a year before the Female Society would consider her an initiate and allow her to drape it about her nakedness. No, far too young and unimportant for a man on the very verge of warrior status.

Another girl caught his eye. She had been observing him for some time and smiling behind her lashes, behind her demurely set mouth. Harriet the History-Teller, the oldest daughter of Rita the Record-Keeper, who would one day succeed to her mother's office. Now there was a lovely, slender girl, her hair completely unwound in testa-ment to full womanhood and recognized professional status.

Eric had caught these covert, barely stated smiles from her before; especially in the last few weeks as the time for his Theft approached. He knew that if he were successful—and he *had* to be successful: don't dare think of anything but success—she would look with favor on advances from him. Of course, Harriet was a redhead, and there-fore, according to Mankind's traditions, unlucky: she was probably having a hard time finding a mate. But his own mother had been a redhead.

Yes, and his mother had been very unlucky indeed. Even his father had been infected with her terrible bad luck. Still, Harriet the History-Teller was an important person in the tribe for one her age. Good-looking too. And, above all, she didn't turn away from him. She smiled at him, openly now. He smiled back.

"Look at Eric!" he heard someone call out behind him. "He's already searching for a mate. Hey, Eric! You're not even wearing straps yet. First comes the stealing. *Then*

comes the mating."

Eric spun around, bits of fantasy still stuck to his lips.

The group of young men lounging against the wall of his band's burrow were tossing laughter back and forth between them. They were all adults: they had all made their Theft. Socially, they were still his superiors. His only recourse was cold dignity.

"I know that," he began. "There is no mating until—"

"Until never for some people," one of the young men broke in. He rattled his spear in his hand, carelessly, proudly. "After you steal, you still have to convince a woman that you're a man. And some men have to do an awful lot of convincing, an *awful* lot, Eric-O."

The ball of laughter bounced back and forth again, heavier than before. Eric the Only felt his face turn bright red. How dare they remind him of his birth? On this day of all days? Here he was about to prepare himself to go forth and Steal for Mankind... .

He dropped the sharpening stone into *his pouch* and slid his right hand back along his uncle's spear. "At least," he said, slowly and definitely, "at least, my woman will stay convinced, Roy the Runner. She won't be open to offers from every other man in the tribe."

"You lousy little throwback!" Roy the Runner yelled. He leaped away from the rest of the band and into a crouch facing Eric, his spear tense in one hand. "You're asking for a hole in the belly! My woman's had two litters off me, two big litters. What would you have given her, you dirty singleton?"

"She's had two litters, but not off you," Eric the Only spat, holding his spear out in the guard position. "If you're the father, then the chief's blonde hair is contagious—like measles."

Roy bellowed and jabbed his spear forward. Eric par-ried it and lunged in his turn. He missed as his opponent leaped to one side. They circled each other, cursing and insulting, eyes only for the point of each other's spears. The other young men had scrambled a distance down the burrow to get out of their way.

A powerful arm suddenly clamped Eric's waist from behind and lifted him off his feet. He was kicked hard, so that he stumbled a half-dozen steps and fell. On his feet in a moment, the spear still in his hand, he whirled, ready to deal with this new opponent. He was mad enough to fight all Mankind.

But not *Thomas* the Trap-Smasher. No, not that. mad.

All the tension drained out of him as he recognized the captain of his band. He couldn't fight Thomas. His uncle. And the greatest of all men. Guiltily, he walked to the niche in the wall where the band's *weapons* were stacked and slid his uncle's spear into its appointed place.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Roy?" Thomas was asking behind him. "Fighting a duel with an initiate? Where's your band spirit: that's all we need these days, to be cut down from six effectives to five. Save your spear for Strangers, or—if you feel very brave—for Monsters. But don't show a point in our band's burrow if you know what's good for you."

"I wasn't fighting a duel," the Runner mumbled, sheathing his own spear. "The kid got above himself. I was punishing him."

"You punish with the haft of the spear. And anyway, this is my band and I do the punishing around here. Now move on out, all of you, and get ready for the council. I'll attend to the boy myself."

They went off obediently without looking back. The Trap-Smasher's band was famous for its discipline throughout the length and breadth of Mankind. A proud thing to be a member of it. But to be called a boy in front of the others! A boy, when he was full-grown and ready to begin stealing!

Although, come to think of it, he'd rather be called a boy than a singleton. A boy eventually became a man, but a singleton stayed a singleton forever. It was almost as bad as being a bastard—the child of a woman not fully accepted by the Female Society. He put the problem to his uncle who was at the niche inspecting the band's reserve pile of spears.

"Isn't it possible--I mean, it is possible, isn't it—that my father had some children by another woman? You told me he was one of the best thieves we ever had."

The captain of the band turned to study him, folding his arms across his chest so that biceps swelled into greatness and power. They glinted in the light of the tiny glow lantern bound to his forehead, the tiny glow lantern that only fully accredited warriors might wear. After a while, the older man shook his head and said, very gently:

"Eric, Eric, forget about it, boy. He was all of those things and more. Your father was famous. Eric the Storeroom-Stormer, we called him, Eric the Laugher at Locks, Eric the Roistering Robber of all Mankind. He

taught me everything I know. But he only married once; and if any other woman ever played around with him, she's been careful to keep it a secret. Now dress up those spears: you've let them get all sloppy. Butts together, that's the way, points up and even with each other."

Dutifully, Eric rearranged the bundle of armament that was his responsibility. He turned to his uncle again, now examining the knapsacks and canteens that would be carried on expedition. "Suppose there had been another woman. My father could have had two, three, even four litters by different women. Extra-large litters too. If we could prove something like that, I wouldn't be a singleton any more. I wouldn't be Eric the Only."

The Trap-Smasher sighed and thought for a moment. Then he pulled the spear from his back sling and took Eric's arm. He drew the youth along the burrow until they stood in the very center of it. He looked carefully at the exits at either end, making certain that they were completely alone before giving his reply in an unusually low, guarded voice.

"We'd never be able to prove anything like that. If you don't want to be Eric the Only, if you want to be Eric the something else, well then, it's up to you. You have to make a good Theft. That's what you should be thinking about all the time now—your Theft. Eric, which category are you going to announce?"

He hadn't thought about it very much. "The usual one I guess. The one that's picked for most initiations. First category."

The older man brought his lips together, looking dissatisfied. "First category. *Food*. Well . . ."

Eric felt he understood. "You mean, for someone like me an Only, who's really

got to make a name for him-self—I ought to announce like a real warrior? I should say I'm going to steal in the second category—Articles Useful to Mankind. Is that what my father would have done?"

"Do you know what your father would have done?" "No. What?" Eric demanded eagerly.

"He'd have elected the third category. That's what I'd be announcing these days, if I were going through an initiation ceremony. That's what I want you to announce."

"Third category? Monster souvenirs. But no one's elected the third category in I don't know how many auld Lang synes. Why should I do it?"

"Because this is more than just an initiation ceremony: it could be the beginning of a new life for all of us."

Eric frowned. What could be more than an initiation ceremony and his attainment of full thieving manhood?

"There are things going on in Mankind, these days," Thomas the Trap-Smasher continued in a strange, urgent voice. "Big things. And you're going to be a part of them. This Theft of yours—if you handle it right, if you do what I tell you, it's likely to blow the lid off everything the chief has been sitting on."

"The *chief*?" Eric felt confused: he was walking up a strange burrow now without a glow lamp. "What's the chief got to do with my Theft?"

His uncle examined both ends of the corridor again. "Eric, what's the most important thing we, or you, or anyone, can do? What is our life all about? What are we here for?"

"That's easy," Eric chuckled. "That's the easiest question there is. A child could answer it:

"Hit back at the Monsters," he quoted. "Drive them from the planet, if we can. Regain Earth for Mankind, if we can. But above all, hit back at the Monsters. Make them suffer as they've made us suffer. Make them know we're still here, we're still fighting. Hit back at the Mon-sters."

"Hit back at the Monsters. Right. Now how have we been doing that?"

Eric the Only stared at his uncle. That wasn't the next question in the catechism. He must have heard incorrect

ly. His uncle couldn't have made a mistake in such a basic ritual.

"We will do that," he went on in the second reply, his voice sliding into the singsong of childhood lessons, "by regaining the science and knowhow of our forefathers. Man was once Lord of all Creation: his science and knowhow made him supreme. Science and knowhow is what we need to hit back at the Monsters."

"Now, Eric," his uncle asked gently. "Please tell me this. What in hell is knowhow?"

That was way off. They were a full corridor's length from the normal progression of the catechism now.

"Knowhow is—knowhow is—" he stumbled over the unfamiliar verbal terrain. "Well, it's what our ancestors knew. And what they did with it, I guess. Knowhow is what you need before you can make hydrogen bombs or economic warfare or guided missiles, any of those really big weapons like our ancestors had."

"Did those weapons do them any good? Against the Monsters, I mean. Did they stop the Monsters?"

Eric looked completely blank for a moment, then brightened. Oh! He knew the way now. He knew how to get back to the catechism:

"*The suddenness of the attack—*"

"Stop it!" his uncle ordered. "Don't give me any of that garbage! *The suddenness of the attack, the treachery of the Monsters—does* it sound like an explanation to you? Honestly? If our ancestors were really Lords of Creation and had such great weapons, would the Monsters have been able to conquer them? I've led my band on dozens of raids, and I know the value of a surprise attack; but believe me, boy, it's only good for a flash charge and a quick getaway if you're facing a superior force. You can knock somebody down when he doesn't expect it, but if he really has more than you, he won't *stay* down. Right?"

"I—I guess so. I wouldn't know."

"Well, I know. I know from plenty of battle experi-ence. The thing to remember is that once our ancestors were knocked down, they stayed down. That means their science and knowhow weren't so much in the first place. And *that* means"—here he turned his head and looked directly into Eric's eyes—"that means the science of our ancestors wasn't worth one good damn against the Mon-sters and it wouldn't be worth one good damn to us."

Eric the Only turned pale. He knew heresy when he heard it.

His uncle patted him on the shoulder, drawing a deep breath as if he'd finally spat out something extremely unpleasant. He leaned closer, eyes glittering beneath the forehead glow lamp and his voice dropped to a fierce whisper.

"Eric. When I asked you how we've been hitting back at the Monsters, you told me what we *ought* to do. We haven't been *doing* a single thing to bother them. We don't know how to reconstruct the Ancestor-Science, we don't have the tools or weapons or knowhow—whatever *that* is—but they wouldn't do us *a* bit of good even if we had them. Because they failed once, they failed complete-ly and at their best. There's just no point in trying to put them together again."

And now Eric understood. He understood why his uncle had whispered, why there had been so much strain in this conversation. Bloodshed was involved here, blood-shed and death.

"Uncle Thomas," he whispered, in a voice that kept cracking despite his efforts to keep it whole and steady, "how long have you been an Alien-Science man? When did you leave Ancestor-Science?"

Thomas the Trap-Smasher caressed his spear before he answered. He felt for it with a gentle, wandering arm, almost unconsciously, but both of them registered the fact that it was loose and ready. His tremendous body, nude except for the straps about his loins and the light spear

sling on his back, looked as if it were preparing to move instantaneously in any direction.

He stared again from one end of the burrow to the other, his forehead lamp reaching out to the branching darkness of the exits. Eric stared with him: no one was leaning tightly against a wall and listening.

"How long? Since I got to know your father. He was in another band; naturally we hadn't seen much of each other before he married my sister. I'd heard about him, though: everyone in the Male Society had—he was a great thief. But once he became

my brother-in-law, I learned a lot from him. I learned about locks, about the latest traps—and I learned about Alien-Science. He'd been an Alien-Science man for years. He converted your mother, and he converted me."

Eric the Only backed away. "No!" he called out wildly. "Not my father and mother! They were decent people—when they were killed a service was held in their name—they went to add to the science of our ancestors—"

His uncle jammed a powerful hand over his mouth.

"Shut up, you damn fool, or you'll finish us both! Of course, your parents were decent people—how do you think they were killed? Your mother was with your father out in Monster territory. Have you ever heard of a woman going along with her husband on a Theft? And taking her baby with her? Do you think it was an ordinary robbery of the Monsters? They were Alien-Science people, serving their faith as best they could. They died for it."

Eric looked into his uncle's eyes over the hand that covered the lower half of his face. *Alien-Science people ... serving their faith ... do you think it was an ordinary robbery ..*

He had never realized before how odd it was that his parents had gone to Monster territory together, a man taking his wife and the woman taking her baby!

As he relaxed, his uncle removed the gagging hand. "What kind of Theft was it that my parents died in?"

Thomas examined his face and seemed satisfied. "The kind you're going after," he said. "If you are your father's son. If you're man enough to continue the work he start-ed. Are you?"

Eric started to nod, then found himself shrugging weak-ly, and finally just hung his head. He didn't know what to say. His uncle—well, his uncle was his model and his leader, and he was strong and wise and crafty. His father—naturally, he wanted to emulate his father and continue whatever work he had started. But this was his initiation ceremony, after all, and there would be enough danger merely in proving his manhood. For his initiation ceremony to take on a task that had destroyed his father, the greatest thief the tribe had ever known, and a heretical, blasphemous task at that ..

"I'll try. I don't know if I can."

"You can," his uncle told him heartily. "It's been set up for you: it will be like walking through a dug burrow, Eric. All you have to face through is the council. You'll have to be steady there, no matter what. You tell the chief that you're undertaking the third category."

"But why the third?" Eric asked. "Why does it have to be Monster souvenirs?"

"Because that's what we need. And you stick to it, no matter what pressure they put on you. Remember, an initiate has the right to decide what he's going to steal. A man's first Theft is his own affair."

"But, listen, Uncle—"

There was a whistle from the end of the burrow. Thomas the Trap-Smasher nodded in the direction of the signal.

"The council's beginning, boy. We'll talk later, on expedition. Now remember this: stealing from the third category is your own idea, and all your own idea. Forget every-thing else we've talked about. If you hit any trouble with the chief, I'll be there."

I'm your sponsor, after all."

He threw an arm about his confused nephew and walked to the end of the burrow where the other members of the band waited.

2

The tribe had gathered in its central and largest burrow under the great, hanging glow lamps that might be used in this place alone. Except for the few sentinels on duty in the outlying corridors, all of Mankind was here, over a hundred people. It was an awesome sight.

On the little hillock known as the Royal Mound, lolled Franklin the Father of Many Thieves, Chieftain of all Mankind. He alone of the cluster of warriors displayed heaviness of belly and flabbiness of arm—for he alone had the privilege of a sedentary life. Beside the sternly muscled band leaders who formed his immediate background, he looked almost womanly; and yet one of his many titles was simply The Man.

Yes, unquestionably The Man of Mankind was Franklin the Father of Many Thieves. You could tell it from the hushed, respectful attitudes of the subordinate warriors who stood at a distance from the mound. You could tell it from the rippling interest of the women as they stood on the other side of the great burrow, drawn up in the ranks of the Female Society. You could tell it from the nervousness and scorn with which the women were watched by their leader, Otilie, the Chieftain's First Wife. And finally, you could tell it from the faces of the children, standing in a distant, disorganized bunch: a clear majority of their faces bore an unmistakable resemblance to Franklin's.

Franklin clapped his hands, three evenly spaced, flesh-heavy wallops.

"In the name of our ancestors," he said, "and the science with which they ruled the Earth, I declare this council opened. May it end as one more step in the regaining of their science. Who asked for a council?"

"I did." Thomas the Trap-Smasher moved out of his band and stood before the chief.

Franklin nodded, and went on with the next, formal question:

"And your reason?"

"As a band leader, I call attention to a candidate for manhood. A member of my band, a spear-carrier for the required time, and an accepted apprentice in the Male Society. My nephew, Eric the Only."

As his name was sung out, Eric shook himself. Half on his own volition and half in response to the pushes he received from the other warriors, he stumbled up to his uncle and faced the Chief. This, the most important moment of his life, was proving almost too much for him. So many people in one place, accredited and famous warriors, knowledgeable and attractive women, the Chief himself, all this after the shattering revelations from his uncle—he was finding it hard to think clearly. And it was vital to think clearly. His responses to the next few questions had to be exactly right.

The Chief was asking the first: "Eric the Only, do you apply for full manhood?"

Eric breathed hard and nodded. "I do."

"As a full man, what will be your value to Mankind?"

"I will steal for Mankind whatever it needs. I will defend Mankind against all

outsiders. I will increase the possessions and knowledge of the Female Society so that the Female Society can increase the power and well-being of Mankind."

"And all this you swear to do?"

"And all this I swear to do."

The Chief turned to Eric's uncle. "As his sponsor, do you support his oath and swear that he is to be trusted?"

With just the faintest hint of sarcasm in his voice, Thomas the Trap-Smasher replied: "Yes. I support his oath and swear that he is to be trusted."

There was a rattling moment, the barest second, when the Chief's eyes locked with those of the band leader. With all that was on Eric's mind at the moment, he noticed it. Then the Chief looked away and pointed to the women on the other side of the burrow.

"He is accepted as a candidate by the men. Now the women must ask for proof, for only a woman's proof bestows full manhood."

The first part was over. And it hadn't been too bad. Eric turned to face the advancing leaders of the Female Society, Otilie, the Chieftain's First Wife, in the center. Now came the part that scared him. The women's part.

As was customary at such a moment, his uncle and sponsor left him when the women came forward. Thomas the Trap-Smasher led his band to the warriors grouped about the Throne Mound. There, with their colleagues, they folded their arms across their chests and turned to watch. A man can only give proof of his manhood while he is alone; his friends cannot support him once the women approach.

It was not going to be easy, Eric realized. He had hoped that at least one of his uncle's wives would be among the examiners: they were both kindly people who liked him and had talked to him much about the myster-ies of women's work. But he had drawn a trio of hard faced females who apparently intended to take him over the full course before they passed him.

Sarah the Sickness-Healer opened the proceedings. She circled him belligerently, hands on hips, her great breasts rolling to and fro like a pair of swollen pendulums, her eyes glittering with scorn.

"Eric the Only," she intoned, and then paused to grin, as if it were a name impossible to believe, "Eric the Singleton, Eric the one and only child of either his mother or his father. Your parents almost didn't have enough between them to make a solitary child: is there enough in you to make a man?"

There was a snigger of appreciation from the children in the distance, and it was echoed by a few growling laughs from the vicinity of the Throne Mound. Eric felt his face and neck go red. He would have fought any man to the death for remarks like these—any man at all—but who could lift his hand to a woman and be allowed to live? Besides, one of the main purposes of this exhibition was to investigate his powers of self-control.

"I think so," he managed to say after a long pause. "And I'm willing to prove it."

"Prove it, then!" the woman snarled. Her right hand, holding a long, sharp-pointed pin, shot to his chest like a flung spear. Eric made his muscles rigid and tried to send his mind away. That, the men had told him, was what you had to do at this moment: it was not you they were hurting, not you at all. You, your mind, your knowledge of

self, were in another part of the burrow entirely, watching these painful things being done to someone else.

The pin sank into his chest for a little distance, paused, came out. It probed here, probed there; finally it found a nerve in his upper arm. There, guided by the knowledge of the Sickness-Healer, it bit and clawed at the delicate area until Eric felt he would grind his teeth to powder in the effort not to cry out. His clenched fists twisted agonizingly at the ends of his arms in a paroxysm of protest, but he kept his body still. He didn't cry out; he didn't move away; he didn't raise a hand to protect himself.

Sarah the Sickness-Healer stepped back and considered him. "There is no man here yet," she said grudgingly. "But perhaps there are the beginnings of one."

He could relax. The physical test was over. There would be another one, much later, after he had completed his Theft successfully; but that would be exclusively by men as part of his proud initiation-ceremony. Under the circumstances, he knew he would be able to go through it almost gaily.

Meanwhile, the women's physical test was over. That was the important thing for now. In sheer reaction, his body gushed forth sweat which slid over the bloody cracks in his skin and stung viciously. He felt the water pouring *down his* back and forced himself not to go limp, prodded his mind into alertness.

"Did that hurt?" he was being asked by Rita, the old crone of a Record-Keeper. There was a solicitous smile on her forty-year-old face, but he knew it was a fake. A woman as old as that no longer felt sorry for anybody: she had too many aches and pains and things generally wrong with her to worry about other people's troubles.

"A little," he said. "Not much."

"The Monsters will hurt you much more if they catch you stealing from them, do you know that? They will hurt you much more than we ever could."

"I know. But the stealing is more important than the risk I'm taking. The stealing is the most important thing a man can do."

Rita the Record-Keeper nodded. "Because you steal things Mankind needs in order to live. You steal things that the Female Society can make into food, clothing and weapons for Mankind, so that Mankind can live and flourish."

He saw the way, saw what was expected of him. "No," he contradicted her. "That's not why we steal. We live on what we steal, but we do not steal just to go on living."

"Why?" she asked blandly, as if she didn't know the answer better than any other member of the tribe. "Why do we steal? What is more important than survival?"

Here it was now. The catechism.

"To hit back at the Monsters," he began. *"To drive them from the planet, if we can. Regain Earth for Man-kind, if we can. But, above all, hit back at the Monsters."*

He ploughed through the long verbal ritual, pausing at the end of each part, so that the Record-Keeper could ask the proper question and initiate the next sequence.

She tried to trip him once. She reversed the order of the fifth and sixth questions. Instead of *"What will we do with the Monsters when we have regained the Earth from them?"* she asked, *"Why can't we use the Monsters' own Alien-Science to fight*

the Monsters?"

Carried along by mental habit, Eric was well into the passage beginning *"We will keep them as our ancestors kept all strange animals, in a place called a zoo, or we will drive them into our burrows and force them to live as we have lived,"* before he realized the switch and stopped in confusion. Then he got a grip on himself, sought the right answer in his memory with calmness, as his uncle's wives had schooled him to do, and began again.

"There are three reasons why we cannot ever use Alien-Science," he recited, holding up his hand with the thumb and little finger closed. *"Alien-Science is nonhuman, Alien-Science is inhuman, Alien-Science is antihuman. First, since it is nonhuman,"* he closed his forefinger, *"we cannot use it because we can never understand it. And because it is inhuman, we would never want to use it even if we could understand it. And because it is antihuman and can only be used to hurt and damage Mankind, we would not be able to use it so long as we remain human ourselves. Alien-Science is the opposite of Ancestor-Science in every way, ugly instead of beautiful, hurtful instead of helpful. When we die, Alien-Science would not bring us to the world of our ancestors, but to another world full of Monsters."*

All in all, it went very well, despite the trap into which he had almost fallen. But he couldn't help remembering the conversation with his uncle in the other burrow. As his mouth reeled off the familiar words and concepts, his

mind kept wondering how the two fitted together. His uncle was Alien-Science, and, according to his uncle, so had been his parents. Did that make them nonhuman, inhuman, antihuman?

And what did it make him? He knew his religious duty well: he should at this moment be telling all Mankind about his uncle's horrible secret.

The whole subject was far too complicated for someone with his limited experience.

When he had completed the lengthy catechism, Rita the Record-Keeper said: "And this is what you say about the science of our ancestors. Now we will find out what the science of our ancestors says about you."

She signaled over her shoulder, without turning her head, and two young girls—female apprentices—pulled forward the large record machine which was the very center of the tribe's religious life. They stepped back, both smiling shyly and encouragingly at Eric the Only.

He knew the smiles meant little more than simple best wishes from apprentices of the one sex to apprentices of the other, but even that was quite a bit at the moment. It meant that he was much closer to full status than they. It meant that, in the opinion of unprejudiced, disinterested observers, his examination was proceeding very well in-deed.

Singleton, he thought fiercely to himself. *I'll show them what a singleton can do!*

Rita the Record-Keeper turned a knob at the top of the squat machine and it began to hum. She flung her arms up, quiveringly apart, and all, warriors, women, children, apprentices, even the chief himself, all bowed their heads.

"Harken to the words of our ancestors," she chanted. "Watch closely the spectacle of their great achievements. When their end was upon them, and they knew

that only we, their descendants, might regain the Earth they had lost, they made this machine for the future generations of

Mankind as a guide to the science that once had been and must be again."

The old woman lowered her arms. Simultaneously, heads went up all over the burrow and stared expectantly at the wall opposite the record machine.

"Eric the Only," Rita called, spinning the dial on the left of the machine with one hand and stabbing at it randomly with the forefinger of the other. "This is the sequence in the science of our ancestors that speaks for you alone. This is the appointed vision under which you will live and die."

3

He stared at the wall, breathing hard. Now he would find out what his life was to be about—Now! His uncle's vision at this moment, many years ago, had suggested the nickname he came to bear: the Trap-Smasher. At the last initiation ceremony, a youth had called forth a sequence in which two enormous airborne vehicles of the ancestors had collided.

They'd tried to cheer the boy up, but he'd known his fate was upon him. Sure enough, he had been caught by a monster in the middle of his Theft and dashed to pieces against a wall.

Even then, Eric decided, he'd rather have that kind of a sequence than the awful emptiness of a *blank* vision. When, every once in a while, the machine went on and showed nothing but a blinding white rectangle, the whole tribe knew that the youth being examined had no possibility of manhood in him at all. And the machine was never wrong. A boy who'd drawn a blank vision inevitably became more and more effeminate as he grew older without ever going out on his Theft. He tended to shun the company of warriors and to ask the women for minor tasks to perform. The machine of the ancestors looked at a

boy and told exactly what he was and what he would become.

It had been great, that science which had produced this machine, no doubt about it. There was a power source in it which was self-contained, and which was supposed to be like the power behind all things. It would run almost forever, if the machine were not tampered with—although who could dream of tampering with it? In its visions were locked not only the secrets of every individual human being, but enormous mysteries which the whole of Man-kind had to solve before it could work out its salvation through the rituals and powers of the ancestral science.

Now, however, there was only one small part of Man-kind that concerned Eric. Himself. His future. He waited, growing more and more tense as the power hum from the machine increased in pitch. And suddenly there was a grunt of awe from the entire burrow of people as a vision was thrown upon the wall.

He hadn't drawn a blank. That was the most important thing. He had been given an authentic ancestral vision.

"Scattergood's does it again!" a voice blared, as the picture projected on the wall showed people coming from all directions, wearing the strange body wrappings of the ancestors. They rushed, men, women, children, from the four corners of the glittering screen to some strange structure in the center and disappeared into its entrance. More and more poured in, more and more kept materializing at the edges and scrambling toward the structure in the center.

"Scattergood's does it again!" the vision yelled out at them. "The sale of sales! The value of values! Only at Scattergood's three stores tomorrow. Binoculars, tape re-records, cameras, all at tremendous reductions, many be-low cost. Value, value, value!"

Now the vision showed only objects. Strange, unfamiliar objects such as the ancestors used. And as each object appeared, the voice recited a charm over it. Powerful and ancient magic this, the forgotten lore of Ancestor-Science.

"Krafft-Yahrman Exposure Meters, the best there is, you've heard about them and now you can buy them, the light meter that's an eye-opener, a price to fit every pocketbook, eight dollars and ninety-five cents, tomorrow at Scattergood's, absolutely only one to a customer.

"Kyoto Automatic Eight-Millimeter Movie Cameras with an f 1.4 lens and an electric eye that does all the focusing and gives you a perfect exposure every single time. As low as three dollars a week. The supply is limited, so hurry, hurry, hurry!"

Eric watched the sequence unfold, his hands squeezing each other, his eyes almost distended in reverence and concentration. This was the clue to his life, to what he might become. This was the sequence that the record machine of the ancestors, turned on at random, had vouchsafed as a prophecy of his future.

All knowledge was in that machine—and no possibility of error.

But Eric was getting worried. The vision was too strange. Sometimes there would be a vision that baffled even the wisest women. And that meant the youth who had called it forth would always be a puzzle, to himself and all of Mankind.

Let it not happen to him! O ancestors, O science, O record machine, let it not happen to him!

Let him only have a clear and definite vision so that his personality could be clear and definite for the rest of his life!

"Our special imported high-power precision binoculars," the voice roared on as a man appeared in the vision and brought one of the strange objects up to his eyes. "If we told you the manufacturer's name, you'd recognize it immediately. 7 x 50, only fourteen dollars and ninety-five cents, *with case*. 10 x 50, only fifteen dollars and ninety-five cents, *with case*. You see further, you see clearer, you

pay less. You always pay less at Scattergood's. Rock-bottom prices! Skyscraper values! Tomorrow, tomorrow,, tomorrow, at Scattergood's annual Week-After-Halloween Sale!"

There was a click as the vision went off abruptly to be replaced by a white rectangle on the wall of the burrow. Eric realized that this was all the clue there was to be to his life. What did it mean? Could it be interpreted?

Anxiously, now, he turned to Otilie, the Chieftain's First Wife. He turned to her as everyone else in Mankind was now turning, Sarah the Sickness-Healer and Rita the Record-Keeper amongst them.

Only Otilie could read a vision, only short, squat, imperious Otilie. The Chieftain's First Wife was her title of honor and her latest title, but long before she had acquired that, long before even she had become Head of the Female Society, she had been Otilie the Augur, Otilie the Omen-Teller, Otilie who could walk in her mind from the familiar, homey burrow of the present into the dark, labyrinthine corridors of the future, Otilie who could read signs, Otilie who could announce

portents.

It was as Otilie the Augur that she could pick out the one new-born babe in a litter of three that had to be destroyed because, in some way or other, it would one day bring death to its people. It was as Otilie the Augur that, upon the death of the old chief, she had chosen Franklin the Father of Many Thieves to take over the leadership of Mankind since he stimulated the most propitious omens.. In everything she had been right. And now, once again it was as Otilie the Augur that she threw her arms over her head and twisted and swayed and moaned as she sought deep inside herself for the meaning of Eric's vision, it was as Otilie the Augur and not as Otilie the Chieftain's First Wife, for that she had been only since Franklin had ascended the Throne Mound.

The scratches and holes gouged in his body by Sarah the Sickness-Healer had begun to ache badly, but Eric shrugged off their annoyance. Could his vision be interpreted? And *how* would it be interpreted?

Whatever Otilie saw in the vision would stick to him for the rest of his life, much closer than the dried blood upon his arms and legs and chest. How could you possibly interpret such a vision? Eric the Scattergood? That was meaningless. Eric the Value? No, that was a little better, but it was dreadfully vague, almost as bad as a blank vision.

He stared past Otilie's writhing figure to where his uncle stood, surrounded by his band, a little to the left of the Throne Mound. Thomas the Trap-Smasher was watching Otilie and grinning with all his teeth.

What did he find so funny, Eric wondered desperately? Was there nothing holy to him? Didn't he realize how important it was to Eric's future that his vision be read-able, that he get a name to be proud of? What was funny in Otilie's agony as she gave birth to Eric's future?

He realized that Otilie was beginning to make coherent sounds. He strained his ears to listen. This, this was it. Who he really was. Who he would be.

"Three times," Otilie mumbled in a voice that steadily grew clearer and louder, "three times our ancestors gave Eric his name. Three repetitions they made. Three different ways they called on him to become what their science needed him to be. And all of you heard it, and I heard it, and Eric heard it too."

Which, Eric puzzled, which among the many strange magical statements had contained his name and his life's work? He waited for the Augur to come out with it. He had almost given up breathing.

Her body relaxed now, her hands hanging at her sides, Otilie was speaking to them in a sharp, authoritative voice as she stared at the wall of the burrow where the vision had appeared.

"`A light meter that's an eye-opener,' the Ancestor-Science said," she reminded them. "And `an electric eye

that does all the focusing.' And `you see further, you see clearer, you pay less,' the Record Machine told us of Eric. What the ancestors want of Eric is unmistakable, what he must be if we are to hit back at the Monsters and regain the Earth which is rightfully ours."

Thank the Record Machine, thank each and every ancestor! At least the message had been unmistakable. But what precisely had it been?

Ottilie the Augur, the Omen-Teller, turned to face him now where he stood apart from the rest of eagerly watching Mankind. He straightened up and stood stiffly to learn his fate.

"Eric," she said. "Eric the Only, Eric the Singleton, you go out now to make your Theft. If you are successful and return alive, you will become a man. And as a man you will no longer be Eric the Only, you will be Eric the Eye. Eric the Eye, Eric the Espier, Eric who seeks out the path for Mankind. Eric who hits back at the Monsters with his eye, his open eye, his electric eye, his further-seeing, clearer-seeing, less-paying eye. For this is the word of the ancestors, and all of you have heard it."

At last Eric could take a deep breath, and he did so now, noisily, in common with the whole of Mankind who had been hanging on Ottilie's words. Eric the Eye—that was what he was to be. If he was successful. And if he lived.

Eric the Eye. Eric the Espier. Now he knew about himself. It was fixed, and for all time. It was a good name to bear, a fine personality to have. He had been very fortunate.

Rita the Record-Keeper and her daughter, Harriet the History-Teller, rolled the Record Machine back into its accustomed holy place, the niche in the wall behind the Throne Mound. Despite the sacred quality of the act in which she was engaged, the younger woman could not take her eyes off Eric. He was a person of consequence now, or at least would be when he returned. Other young and mating-aged women, he noticed, were looking at him the same way.

He began to walk around in a little circle before Man-kind, and, as he walked, he strutted. He waited until Ottilie, no longer the Augur now, no longer the Omen-Teller, but once more the Chieftain's First Wife—he waited until she had returned to her place at the head of the Female Society before he began to sing.

He threw back his head and spread out his arms and danced proudly, stampingly, before Mankind. He spun around in great dizzying circles and leaped in the air and came down with wrenching spasmodic twists of his legs and arms. And as he danced, he sang.

He sang out of the pride that racked his chest like a soul coughing, out of the majesty of the warrior-that-was-to-be, out of his sure knowledge of self. And he sang his promise to his fellows:

I am Eric the Eye,
Eric the Open Eye,
Eric the Electric Eye,
Eric the Further-Seeing, Clearer-Seeing, Less-Paying Eye.
Eric the Espier
Eric who finds and points out the way.
Are you lost in a strange place?
I will show you the path to your home.
Does the burrow break off in too many branches?
I will pick out the best one and Mankind shall walk through in safety.
Are there enemies about, hidden traps, unthought of dangers?
I will see them and give warning of them in time.
I will walk at the head of the line of warriors and see for them,
And they shall be confident and they shall conquer

For they have Eric the Espier to lead the way and point the path!

So he sang as he danced before Mankind, under the enormous glow lamps of its great central burrow. He sang of his mission in life as just a few short auld lang synes ago he had heard Roy the Runner, at his initiation, sing of the fleetness and swiftness that he would soon be the master of; as his Uncle Thomas had sung long before that of his coming ability to detect and dismantle traps; as once his own father had sung of the robberies he was to commit, of the storerooms he would empty for the benefit of Man-kind. He sang and he leaped and he whirled, and all the while the watching host of Mankind beat time with its feet and hands and played chorus in the litany of his triumph.

Then came a loud grunt from Franklin the Father of Many Thieves. The noise stopped. Eric danced to a quiver-ing halt, his body wet all over, his limbs still trembling.

"That is what is to be," Franklin pointed out, "once the Theft has been made. But first, first comes the Theft. Always before manhood comes the Theft. Now let us speak of your Theft."

"I will go into the very home of the Monsters," Eric announced proudly, his head thrown back before the chief. "I will go into their home alone, with no companion but my own weapons, as a warrior should. I will steal from them, no matter what the danger, no matter what the threat. And what I steal, I will bring back for the use and enjoyment of Mankind."

Franklin nodded and made the formal reply. "That is good, and it is spoken like a warrior. What do you prom-ise to steal from the Monsters? For your first Theft must be a promise made in advance and kept, kept exactly."

Now they were at it. Eric glanced at his uncle for support. Thomas the Trap-Smasher was staring off in a different d'irection. Eric licked his lips. Well, maybe itwouldn't be too bad. After all, a youth going off on his first Theft had complete freedom of choice.

"I promise to make my theft in the third category," he said, his voice trembling just a little.

The results were much more than he had anticipated. Franklin the Father of Many Thieves yelped sharply. He leaped off the Royal Mound and stood gaping at Eric for a while. His great belly and fat arms quivered with disbe-lief.

"The third category, did you say? The *third*?"

Eric, thoroughly frightened now, nodded.

Franklin turned to Chief Wife Otilie. They both peer"d through the ranks of Mankind to where Thomas the Trap-Smasher stood in the midst of his band, seemingly uncon-cerned by the sensation that had just been created.

"What is this, Thomas?" the chief demanded, all cere-mony and formality gone from his speech. "What are you trying to pull? What's this third category stuff you're up to?"

Thomas the Trap-Smasher turned a bland eye upon him. "What am I up to? I'm not up to a damn thing. The boy's got a right to pick his category. If he wants to steal in the third category, well, that's his business. What have I got to do with it?"

The chief stared at him for a fe 7 moments longer. Then he swung back to Eric and said shortly: "All right. You've chosen. The third category it is. Now let's get on

with the feast."

Somehow it was all spoiled for Eric. The initiation feast that preceded a first Theft—how he had looked forward to it! But he was apparently involved in something going on in Mankind, something dangerous and unsavory.

The chief obviously considered him an important factor in whatever difficulty had arisen. Usually, an initiate about to depart on a Theft was the focus of all conversation as Mankind ate in its central burrow, the women squatting on one side, the men on the other, the children

at the far ends where light was dim. But at this meal, the chief made only the most necessary ritual remarks to Eric: his eyes kept wandering from him to Thomas the Trap-Smasher.

Once in a while, Franklin's eyes met those of Otilie, his favored and first wife, across the feast that had been spread the length of the burrow. He seemed to be saying something to her, although neither of them moved their lips. Then they would nod at each other and look back to Eric's uncle.

The rest of Mankind became aware of the strained atmosphere: there was little of the usual laughter and gaiety of an initiation feast. The Trap-Smasher's band had pulled in tightly all around him; most of them were not even bothering to eat but sat watchful and alert. Other band captains—men like Stephen the Strong-Armed and Harold the Hurler—had worried looks on their faces as if they were calculating highly complex problems.

Even the children were remarkably quiet. They served the food over which the women had said charms much earlier, then scurried to their places and ate with wide eyes aimed at their elders.

All in all, Eric was distinctly relieved when Franklin the Father of Many Thieves belched commandingly, stretched, and lay back on the floor of the burrow. In a few minutes, he was asleep, snoring loudly.

Night had officially begun.

4

At the end of the sleep period, as soon as the chief had awakened and yawned, thus proclaiming the dawn, Thomas the Trap-Smasher's band started on its trip.

Eric, still officially surnamed the Only, carried the precious loin straps of manhood in the food knapsack the women had provided for a possible journey of several days. They should return before the next sleep period, but when one went on an expedition into Monster territory anything might happen.

They stepped out in full military formation, a long, straggling single file, each man barely in sight of the warrior immediately ahead. For the first time in his military career, Eric was wearing only one set of spears—those for himself. Extra weapons for the band—as well as extra supplies—were on the back of a new apprentice, a stripling who marched a distance behind Eric watching him with the same mixture of fright and exhilaration Eric himself had once accorded all other warriors.

Ahead of Eric, momentarily disappearing as the dim corridor curved and branched, was Roy the Runner, his long, loose-jointed legs purposefully treading down the mileage. And all the way in the lead of the column, Eric knew, was his uncle. Thomas the Trap-Smasher would be striding cautiously yet without any

unnecessary waste of time, the large glow lamp on his forehead constantly shifting from wall to wall of the uninhabited burrow and then straight ahead, the heavy spear in each brawny hand ready for instant action, his mouth set to call the warning behind him if danger materialized.

To be a man—this was what it was like! To go on expeditions like this for the rest of one's life, glorious, adventure-charged expeditions so that Mankind might eat well and have weapons and live as Mankind should. And when you returned, triumphant, victorious, the welcoming dance of the women as they threaded their way through the tired ranks, giving you refreshment and taking from you the supplies that only they could turn into usable articles. Then, after you had eaten and drunk and rested, your own dance, the dance of the men, where you sang and acted out for the tribe all the events of this particular expedition, the dangers you had overcome, the splendid courage you had shown, the strange and mysterious sights you had seen.

The sights you had seen! As Eric the Eye, he would probably be entitled to a solo dance any time his band came across anything particularly curious. Oh, how high Eric the Eye would leap, how loudly, how proudly, how melodiously he would sing of the wonders the expedition had encountered!

"Eric the Eye," the women would murmur. "What a fine, fine figure of a man! What a mate for some lucky woman!"

Harriet the History-Teller this morning, for example, before they started out. She had filled his canteen for him with fresh water as if he were already an accredited man instead of an initiate going out to face his ultimate trial. Before the eyes of all Mankind she had filled it and brought it to him, her eyes downcast and light purple blushes on the rosy skin of her face and body. She had treated him the way a wife treats a husband, and many warriors—Eric thought gleefully—many full warriors with their Thefts long behind them had observed that Eric was likely to join the ranks of the Male Society and the married men almost simultaneously.

Of course, with her unlucky red hair, her bustling, domineering mother, Harriet was not exactly the most marriageable girl in Mankind. Still, there were many full warriors who had not yet been able to persuade a woman to mate with them, who watched Franklin and his three wives with unconcealed hunger and envy. How they would envy Eric, the newest warrior of all, when he mated the same night he returned from his Theft! Call him Only, then! Call him Singleton, then!

They would have litter after litter, he and Harriet, large litters, ample litters, four, five, even six at a time. People would forget he'd ever been the product of a singleton birth; other women, mates of other warriors, would wriggle to attract his attention as they now wriggled when they caught the eye of Franklin the Father of Many Thieves. He would make the litters fathered by Franklin look puny in comparison, he would prove that the best hope for Mankind's increase lay in his loins and his loins alone. And when the time came to select another chief . . .

"Hey, you damned daydreaming singleton!" Roy the Runner was calling from the burrow ahead. "Will you wipe that haze out of your face and pay attention to signals? This is an expedition to Monster territory, not a stroll in the women's quarters. Stay alert, will you? The band captain's sent down a call for you."

Amid the chuckles ahead and behind him—damn it, even the new apprentice was laughing!—Eric took a firmer grip on his glow torch and sprinted for the head of the

column. As he passed each man, he was asked the name of the girl he'd been thinking about and pressed for interesting details. Since he kept his mouth tightly shut, some of the warriors hypothesized out loud. They were painfully close to the truth.

His uncle wasn't much gentler with him. "Eric the *Eye*," the Trap-Smasher growled. "Eric the Eyebrow, Eric the Closed Eyelash, you'll be known as, if you don't wake up! Now stay abreast of me and try to *act* like Eric the Eye. These are dangerous burrows and my vision isn't as sharp as yours. Besides, I have to fill you in on a couple of things." He turned. "Spread out a little farther back there," he called out to the men behind him. "Spread out! You should be a full spear-cast from the backside of the man in front of you. Let me see a real strung-out column with plenty of distance between each warrior."

To Eric, he muttered, once the maneuver had been completed: "Good. Gives us a chance to talk without ev-eryone in the band hearing us. You can trust my bunch, but still, why take chances?"

Eric nodded, with no idea what he was talking about. His uncle had become slightly odd recently. Well, he was still the best band captain in all Mankind.

They marched along together, the light from the strange glowing substance on Eric's torch and his uncle's forehead

spreading a yellowish illumination some hundred feet ahead of them. On either side, underfoot, overhead, wore the curved, featureless walls of the burrow. From the center of the corridor, where they marched, the walls looked soft and spongy, but Eric knew what tremendous labor was involved in digging a niche or recess in them. It took several strong men at least two sleep periods to make a niche large enough to hold more than a handful of Mankind's store of artifacts.

Where had the burrows come from? Some said they had been dug by the ancestors when they had first begun to hit back at the Monsters. Others claimed the burrows had always been there, waiting for Mankind to find them and be comfortable in them.

In all directions the burrows stretched. On and on they went, interminably curving and branching and forking, dark and silent, until human beings stamped into them with glow lamp and glow torch. These particular corridors, Eric knew, led to Monster territory: he had been along them many times as a humble spear-carrier when his uncle's band had been dispatched to bring back the necessities of life for Mankind. Other corridors went off to more exotic and even more dangerous places. But were there any places which had no burrows?

What a thought! Even the Monsters lived in burrows, big as they were reputed to be. But there was a legend that Mankind had once lived outside burrows, outside the branching corridors. Then what had they lived in? Jyst trying to work it out made you dizzy.

They came to a place where the burrow became two burrows, each curving away from the other in opposite directions.

"Which one?" his uncle demanded.

Eric unhesitatingly pointed to the right.

Thomas the Trap-Smasher nodded. "You have a good memory," he said as he bore in the direction that Eric had indicated. "That's half of being an Eye. The other

half ishaving a feeling, a knack, for the right way to go. You have that too. I've noticed it on every expedition where you've been along. That's what T told those women—Rita, Otilie—I told them what your name had to be. Eric the Eye, I told them: `find a vision for the kid that corresponds to it."

He was so shocked that he almost came to a halt. "You picked my name? You told them what kind of vision? That's—that's—I never heard of such a thing!"

His uncle laughed. "It's no different from Otilie the Omen-Teller making a deal with Franklin to have a vision showing him as the new chief. He gets to be chief, she becomes the Chieftain's First Wife and automatically takes over the Female Society. Religion and politics, they're always mixed up together these days, Eric. We're not living in the old times any more when Ancestor-Science was real and holy and it worked."

"It still works, Ancestor-Science, doesn't it?" he plead-ed. "Some of the time?"

"Don't be a fool. Of course it works. Without the correct ritual behind us, we wouldn't dare go out on expedition. But it doesn't work far enough, strong enough—like Alien-Science. Alien-Science is working for the Mon-sters. It's got to begin working for us. That's where you come in."

He had to remember that his uncle was an experienced captain, a knowledgeable warrior. Thomas the Trap-Smasher's protection and advice had brought him, a despised singleton, an orphaned child of parents that no one dared even talk about, to his present estate of almost full thieving status. It was very fortunate for him that neither of his uncle's wives had yet produced a son who survived into the initiate years. He still had a lot to learn from this man.

"Now," the Trap-Smasher was saying, his eyes still on the dimly illuminated corridors ahead. "When we get to the Monster burrows, you go in. You go in alone, of course."

Well, of course, Eric thought. What other way was there to make your Theft? The first time you stole for Mankind, you did it all alone, to prove your manhood, your courage, also the amount of personal luck you en-joyed. It was not like a regular band theft—an organized stealing of a large amount of goods that would last Man-kind many sleep periods, almost a tenth of an auld lang syne. In a regular band theft, assigned to each band in rotation, a warrior had to be assured of the luck and skill of the warriors at his side. He had to know that each one of them had made his Theft and proved himself when completely alone.

Stealing from the Monsters was dangerous enough un-der the best of conditions. You wanted only the cleverest, bravest, most fortunate warriors along with you.

"Once you're inside, stay close to the wall. Don't look up at first or you're likely to freeze right where you are. Keep your eyes on the wall and move close to it. Move fast."

Nothing new here. Every initiate learned over and over again, before he made his Theft, that it was terribly dangerous to look up when you first entered Monster territory. You had to keep your eyes on the wall and move in the protection of it, the wall touching your shoul-der as you ran alongside it. Why this was so, Eric had no idea, but that it was so he had long ago learned to repeat as a fact.

"All right," Thomas the Trap-Smasher went on. "You turn right as you go *in—right*, do you hear me, Eric?—you turn right, without looking up, and run along

the wall, letting it brush your shoulder every couple of steps. You run forty, fifty paces, and you come to a great big thing, a structure, that's almost touching the wall. You turn left along that, moving away from the wall, but still not looking up, until you pass an entrance in the structure. You don't go in that first entrance, Eric; you pass it by. About twenty, twenty-five paces further on, there'll be a second entrance, a bigger one. You go in that one."

"I go in that one," Eric repeated carefully, memorizing his uncle's words. He was receiving directions for his Theft, the most important act of his life! Every single thing his uncle told him must be listened to carefully, must not be forgotten.

"You'll be in something that looks like a burrow again, but it'll be darker, at first. The walls will soak up light from your glow lamp. After a while, the burrow will open out into a great big space, a real big and real dark space. You go on in a straight line, looking over your shoulder at the light from the entrance and making sure it's always directly behind you. You'll hit another burrow, a low one this time. Turn right at the first fork as soon as you go in, and there you are."

"Where? Where will I be? What happens then?" Eric demanded eagerly. "How do I make my Theft? Where do I find the third category?"

Thomas the Trap-Smasher seemed to have trouble continuing. Incredible—he was actually nervous! "There'll be a Stranger there. You tell him who you are, your name. He'll do the rest."

This time Eric came to a full stop. "A Stranger?" he asked in complete amazement. "Someone who's not of Mankind?"

His uncle grabbed at his arm and pulled him along. "Well, you've seen Strangers before," he said with a loud laugh. "You know there are others in the burrows besides Mankind. You know that, don't you, boy?"

Eric certainly did.

From an early age he had accompanied his uncle and his uncle's band on warfare and trading expeditions to the burrows a bit further back. He knew that the people in **these burrows looked down on the people in** his, that they

were more plentiful than his people, and led richer, safer lives—but he still couldn't help feeling sorry for them. ,

They were nothing but Strangers, after all. He was a member of Mankind.

It wasn't just that Mankind lived in the front burrows, those closest to the Monster larder. This enormous convenience might be counterbalanced, he would readily admit, by the dangers associated with it although the constant exposure to dangers and death in every form were part of Mankind's greatness. They were great despite their inferior technology. So what if they were primarily a source of raw materials to the more populous but less hardy burrows in the rear? How long would the weaponsmiths, the potters and tanners and artificers of these burrows be able to go on with their buzzing, noisy industries once Mankind ceased to bring them the basic substances—food, cloth, metal—it had so gloriously stolen from fear-filled Monster territory? No, Mankind was the bravest, greatest, most important people in all the burrows, but that still wasn't the point.

The point was that you had nothing more to do with Strangers than was absolutely necessary. They were Strangers: you were Mankind. You stayed proudly aloof from them at all times.

Trading with them—well, you traded with them. Man-kind needed spear points and sturdy spear shafts, knap-sacks and loin straps, canteens and cooking vessels: **you** needed these articles and got them in exchange for heavy backloads of shapeless, unprocessed stuff freshly stolen. Mating with them—well, of course you mated with them: one was always on the lookout for extra women who could add to the knowledge and technical abilities of Mankind. But these women became a well-adjusted part of Mankind once they were stolen, just as Mankind's women were complete outsiders and Strangers the moment they had been carried off by a foreign raiding party. And fighting with them, warring with them—next to stealing from the Monsters, that was the sweetest, most exciting part of a warrior's existence.

You traded with Strangers, coldly, suspiciously, always alert for a better bargain; you stole Stranger women when-ever you could, gleefully, proudly, because that dimin-ished them and increased the numbers and well-being of Mankind; and you fought Stranger men whenever there was more to be gained that way than by simple trading—and periodically they came upon you as you lay in your burrow unawares and fought you.

But otherwise, for all normal social purposes, they were taboo, almost as taboo and not-to-be-related-to as the Monsters on the other side of Mankind's burrows. When you came upon an individual Stranger wandering apart from his people, you killed him quickly and casually.

You ce inly didn't ask him for advice on your Theft.

Eric was still brooding on the unprecedented nature of his uncle's instructions when they came to the end of their journey, a large, blind-alley burrow. There was a line cut deep into the blank wall here, a line that started at the floor, went up almost to the height of a man's head, and then curved down to the floor again.

The door to Monster territory.

Thomas the Trap-Smasher waited for a moment, listen-ing. When his experienced ears had detected no unusual noises in the neighborhood, no hint of danger on the other side, he cupped his hands around his mouth, faced back the way he had come, and softly gave the ululating recog-nition-call of the band. The four other warriors and the apprentice came up swiftly and grouped themselves about him. Then, at a signal from their leader, all squatted near the door.

They ate first, rapidly and silently, removing from their knapsacks handfuls of food that the women had prepared for them and stuffing their mouths full, the beams from the glow lamps above their eyes darting incessantly back

and forth along the arched, empty corridor. This was the place of ultimate, awful danger. This was the place where anything might happen.

Eric ate most sparingly of all, as was correct for an initiate about to emerge upon his Theft. He knew he had to keep his springiness of body and watchfulness of mind at their highest possible pitch. He saw his uncle nodding approvingly as he returned the bulk of his food to the knapsack.

The floor vibrated slightly underfoot; there was a regu-lar, rhythmic gurgling. Eric knew that meant they were in a holy place, directly over a length of Monster plumbing. Two immense pipes ran here side by side. One was the sewer pipe to which Mankind dragged their accumulations of garbage and in which they ceremoniously buried their dead. The other was a prime source of the fresh water

without which life came to an end. Upon his return, before the band started homeward, Thomas the Trap-Smasher would make an opening in the plumbing and they would refill their canteens. The water here, close to Monster territory, was always the sweetest and best.

Now his uncle got to his feet and called Roy the Runner to him. While the other warriors watched, tense and still, the two men walked to the curved line and laid their ears against it. Satisfied, finally, they inserted spear points into the door's outline on either side and carefully pried the slab back toward them. They laid it on the floor of the corridor, very gently.

A shimmering blur of pure whiteness appeared where the door had been.

Monster territory. The strange, alien light of Monster territory. Eric had seen many warriors disappear into it to fulfill their manhood tasks. Now it was his turn.

Holding his heavy spear at the ready, Eric's uncle leaned forward into the whiteness. His body twisted as he looked up, down, around, on both sides. He withdrew and came back into the burrow.

"No new traps," he said in a soft voice. "The one I dismantled last expedition is still up there on the wall. It hasn't been repaired. Now Eric. Here you go, boy."

Eric rose and walked with him to the doorway, remembering to keep his eyes on the floor. You can't look up, he had been told again and again, not right away, not the first time you're in Monster territory. If you do, you freeze, you're lost, you're done for completely.

His uncle checked him carefully and fondly, making certain that his new loin straps were tight, that his knap-sack and back-sling were both in the right position on his shoulders. He took a heavy spear from Eric's right hand and replaced it with a light one from the back-sling. "If you're seen by a Monster," he whispered, "the heavy spear's not worth a damn. You scuttle into the closest hiding place and throw the light spear as far as you can. There's a chance that Monster can't distinguish between you and the spear. It might follow the spear."

Eric nodded mechanically, although this too had been told many times, this too was a lesson he knew by heart. His mouth was so dry! He wished it weren't unmanly to beg for water at such a moment.

Thomas the Trap-Smasher took his torch from him and slipped a glow lamp about his forehead. Then he pushed him through the doorway. "Go make your Theft, Eric," he whispered. "Come back a man."

5

He was on the other side. He was in Monster territory. He was surrounded by the strange Monster light, the incredible Monster world. The burrows, Mankind, every-thing familiar, lay behind him.

Panic rose from his stomach and into his throat like **vomit**.

Don't look up. Eyes down, eyes down or you're likely to freeze right where you are. Stay close to the wall, keep your eyes on the wall and move along it. Turn right and move along the wall. Move fast.

Eric turned. He felt the wall brush his right shoulder. He began to run, keeping his eyes down, touching the wall with his shoulder at regular intervals. He ran as fast as he possibly could, urging his muscles fiercely on. As he ran, he counted the steps to

himself.

Twenty paces. Where did the light come from? It was everywhere; it glowed so; it was white, white. *Twenty-five paces. Touch the wall with your shoulder. Don't—above everything—don't wander away from the wall. Thirty paces.* In light like this **you** had no need of the glow lamp. It was almost too bright to see in. *Thirty-five paces.* The floor was, not like a burrow floor. It was flat and very hard. So was the wall. Flat and hard and straight. *Forty paces. **Run and keep your eyes down. Run. Keep touching the wall with your shoulder. Move fast. But keep your eyes down. Don't look up. Forty-five paces.***

He almost smashed into the structure he had been told **about**, but his reflexes and the warnings he had received swung him to the left **and** along it just in time. It was a different color than the wall, he noted, and a different textured material. ***Keep your eyes down. Don't look up.*** He came to an entrance, the beginning of a small burrow.

Don't go in that first entrance, Eric; you pass it by. He began to count again as he ran. Twenty-three paces more; and there was another entrance, a much higher, wider one. He darted inside. ***It'll be darker, at first. The walls will soak up light from your glow lamp.***

Eric paused, gasping. He was grateful for the sucking darkness. After that terrible, alien white light, the gloom was friendly, reminiscent of the familiar burrows now so horribly far away.

He could afford to take a breath at this point, he knew. The first, the worst part was over. He wasn't out in the open any more.

He had emerged into Monster territory. He had run fast, following instructions until he was safely under cover again. He was still alive.

The worst was over. Nothing else would ever be as bad as this.

Monster territory. It lay behind him, bathed in its own peculiar light. Now. Why not? Now, when he was in a place of comparative safety. He could take a chance. He *wanted* to take a chance.

He turned, gingerly, fearfully. He raised his eyes. He looked.

The cry that tore from his lips was completely involuntary and frightened him almost as much as what he saw. He shut his eyes and threw himself down and sideways. He lay where he had fallen for a long while, almost paralyzed.

It couldn't be. He hadn't seen it. Nothing was that high, nothing ran on and on for such incredible distances!

After a time, he opened his eyes again, keeping them carefully focused on the dark near him. The gloom in this covered place had diminished somewhat as his eyes had grown more accustomed to it. Yellowish light from his glow lamp was providing illumination now: he could make out the walls, about as far apart from each other as those in a burrow, but—unlike a burrow's walls—oddly straight and at right angles to the floor and ceiling. Far off there was an immense patch of darkness. *The burrow will open out into a great big space, a real big and real dark space.*

What was this place, he wondered? What was it to the Monsters?

He had to take another look behind, into the open. One more quick look. He was going to be Eric the Eye. An

Eye should be able to look at anything. He had to take another look.

But guardedly, guardedly.

Eric turned again, opening his eyes a little at a time. He clamped his teeth together so as not to cry out. Even so, he almost did. He shut his eyes quickly, waited, then opened them again. Bit by bit, effort by effort, he found he was able to look into the great open whiteness without losing control of himself. It was upsetting, overpowering, but if he didn't look too long at any one time, he could stand it.

Distance. Enormous, elongated, unbelievable distance. Space upon space upon space—that white light bathing it all. Space far ahead, space on all sides, space going on and on until it seemed to have no end to it at all. But there, fantastically far off, there was an end. There was a wall, a wall made by giants that finally sealed off the tremendous space. It rose hugely from the flat, huge floor and disappeared somewhere far overhead.

And in between—once you could stand to look at it this much—in between, there were objects. Enormous objects, dwarfed only by the greatness of the space which surrounded them, enormous, terribly alien objects. Objects like nothing you had ever imagined.

No, that wasn't quite true. That thing over there. Eric recognized it.

A great, squat thing like a full knapsack without the straps. Since early boyhood, many was the time he had heard it described by warriors back from an expedition into Monster territory.

There was food in that sack and the others like it. Enough food in that one sack to feed the entire population of Mankind for unnumbered auld long synes. A different kind of food in each sack.

No spear point possessed by Mankind would cut through the fabric of its container, not near the bottom where it was thickest. Warriors had to climb about halfway up the sack, Eric knew, before they could find a place thin enough to carve themselves an entrance. Then the lumps of food would be lowered from man to man all the way down the sack, warriors clinging to precarious handholds every few paces.

Once the pile on the floor was great enough, they would clamber down and fill their specially large, food-expedition knapsacks. Then back to the burrows and to the women who alone possessed the lore of determining whether the food was fit for consumption and of preparing it if it were.

That's where he would be at this moment, on that sack, cutting a hole in it, if he'd chosen a first category Theft like most other youths. He'd be cutting a hole, scooping out a handful of food—any quantity, no matter how small, was acceptable on an initiatory Theft and be preparing to go home to plaudits from the women and acceptance from the men. He'd be engaged in a normal, socially acceptable endeavor.

Instead of which . . .

He found that he was able to stare at the Monster room now from under the cover of his hiding place with only a slight feeling of nausea. Well, that in itself was an achievement. After such a relatively short time, here he was, able to look around and estimate the nature of Monster goods like the most experienced warrior. He couldn't look up too high as yet, but what warrior could?

Well and good, but this wasn't getting him anywhere. He didn't have a normal Theft to make. His was third category. Monster souvenirs.

Eric turned and faced the darkness again. He walked rapidly forward into the straight-walled burrow, the glow lamp on his forehead lighting a yellow path. Ahead of him, the great black space grew steadily larger as he pushed toward it.

Everything about his Theft, his initiation into man-hood, was extraordinary. Thomas the Trap-Smasher telling the women about his special talents, so that he would be accorded a vision and a name which would fit with them. Visions were supposed to come from the ancestors, through the Ancestor-Science of the Record Machine. Nobody was supposed to have the slightest idea in advance of what the vision would be. That was all up to the ancestors and their mysterious plans for the descendants.

Was it possible, was it conceivable, that all visions and names were prearranged, that the Record Machine was set in advance for every initiation? Where did that leave religion? If that were so, how could you continue to believe in logic, in cause and effect?

And having someone—a Stranger, at that!—help you make your Theft. A Theft was supposed to be purely and simply a test of your male potential; by definition, it was something you did alone.

But if you could accept the concept of prearranged visions, why not prearranged Thefts?

Eric shook his head. He was getting into very dark corridors mentally: his world was **turning** into sheer confusion. -

But one thing he knew. Making an arrangement with a Stranger, as his uncle had done, was definitely an act contrary to all the laws and practices of Mankind. Thomas' uncertain speech had underlined that fact. It was *wrong*.

Yet his uncle was the greatest man in all Mankind, so far as Eric was concerned. Thomas the Trap-Smasher could do no wrong. But Thomas the Trap-Smasher was evidently leaning toward Alien-Science. Alien-Science was wrong. But again, on the other hand, his own parents, according to the Trap-Smasher, his father and his mother had been Alien-Scientists.

Too much. There was just too much to work out. There was too much he didn't know. He'd better concentrate on his Theft.

The strange burrow had come to an end. The hairs rose on the back of his neck as he walked into the great dark area and sensed enormous black heights above him. He began to hurry, turning every once in a while to make certain that he was staying in a straight line with the light from the entrance. Here, his forehead glow lamp was almost no use at all. He didn't like this place. It felt almost like being out in the open.

What, he wondered again feverishly, was this structure in the world of the Monsters? What function did it have? He was not sure he wanted to know.

Eric was running by the time he came to the end of the open space. He hit the wall so hard that he was knocked over backward.

For a moment, he was badly frightened, then he realized what had happened. He hadn't taken his bearings for a while: he must have moved off at an angle.

Groping along the wall with extended arms, he found the entrance to the low

burrow at last. It was quite low—he had to bend his knees and duck his head as he went up it. And it was an unpleasantly narrow little corridor. But then there was an opening on his right—the fork his uncle had told him about—and he turned into it with relief.

He had arrived.

There was a burst of light from a group of glow lamps. And there were Strangers, there were *several* Strangers here. Three of them—no, four—no, five! They squatted in a corner of this large, square burrow, three of them talk-ing earnestly, the other two engaged in some incomprehen-sible task with materials that were mostly unfamiliar.

All of them leaped to their feet as he trotted in and deployed instantly in a wide semicircle facing him. Eric wished desperately he had been holding two heavy spears instead of the single light one. With two heavy spears you had both a shield and a dangerous offensive weapon. A light spear was good for a single cast, and that was that.

He held it nevertheless in the throwing position above his shoulder and glared fiercely, as a warrior of Mankind should. If he had to throw, he decided, he would spring to

one side immediately afterward and try to pluck the two heavy spears from his back-sling. But if they rushed him right now

The tension was broken by a strong-faced, middle-aged man who stepped forward, spear throbbing in an upraised arm, and said cautiously, almost inquiringly: "Safety first?"

Eric began to relax. This was the ancient greeting of peace when warrior met warrior in the dangerous pre-cincts of Monster territory. You said "Safety first!" as recognition of the fact that there were much more fearful creatures than humans about—and as a mutual reminder of what should be uppermost in everyone's mind while they were in this terrible place.

He gave the traditional reply. "Safety above all!" he intoned, announcing his own willingness to observe the truce of Monster territory, to sink any individual belliger-ence into common alertness and back-to-back protection against the perils that surrounded them.

There was a nod of acceptance from the middle-aged man. "Who are you?" the man said. "What's your name—what's your people?"

"Eric the Only." Then he remembered to add: "I'm destined to be Eric the Eye. My people are Mankind."

"He's expected, one of us," the man told the others who immediately relaxed, slung their spears and went back to what they had been doing. "Welcome, Eric the Only of Mankind. Put up your spear and sit with us. I am Arthur the Organizer."

Eric gingerly dropped his spear into the back-sling. He studied the Stranger.

A man about as old as his uncle and not nearly as hefty, although well-muscled enough for normal warlike pur-poses. He wore the loin-straps of a full warrior, but—as if these were not enough honor for a man—he also wore straps laced about his chest and across his shoulders, though he was carrying no knapsack. This was the fashion of many Strangers, Eric knew, as was the strap at the back of the head that held the hair in a tight tail away from the eyes instead of letting it hang wild and

free as the hair of a warrior should. And the straps were decorated with odd, incised designs—another weak and unmanlike Stranger fashion.

Who but Strangers, Eric thought contemptuously, would group up so in an alien place without setting sentries at either end of their burrow? Truly Mankind had good reason to despise them!

But this man was a leader, he realized, a born leader, with an even more self-assured air than Thomas the Trap-Smasher, captain of the best band in all Mankind. He was studying Eric in turn, with eyes that weighed carefully and then, having decided on the measure, made a definite placement, fitting Eric permanently into this plan or that plan. He looked like a man whose head was full of many plans, each one evolving inexorably through action to a predetermined end.

He took Eric's arm companionably and led him to where the others squatted and talked and worked. This was no tribal burrow of any sort: it was quite apparently a temple-in-exile, the field headquarters of a new faith. The men who sat working on the floor would one day be priests of that faith among their various peoples. And Arthur the Organizer would be Supreme Pontiff.

"I met your uncle," he told Eric, "about a dozen auld fang synes ago, when he came to us on a trading expedition—back in our burrows, I mean. A fine man, your uncle, very progressive. He's attending our secret meetings regularly, and there's going to be an important place for him in the great burrows we will dig, in the new world we are making. He reminds me a lot of your father. But so do you, my boy, so do you."

"Did you know my father?"

Arthur the Organizer smiled and nodded. "Very well. He could have been a great man. He gave his life for the

Cause. Who among us will ever forget Eric the—the—Eric the Storekeeper or something, wasn't it?"

"-The Storeroom-Stormer. His name was Eric the Storeroom-Stormer."

"Yes, of course. Eric the Storeroom-Stormer. An unforgettable name with us, and an unforgettable man. But that's another story; we'll talk about it some other time. You'll have to be getting back to your uncle very soon." He picked up a flat board covered with odd markings and studied it with his glow lamp.

"How do you like that?" one of the men working with the unfamiliar materials muttered to his neighbor. "You **ask** him his people, and he says, 'Mankind.' *Mankind!*"

The other man chuckled. "A front-burrow tribe. What the hell do you expect—sophistication? Each and every front-burrow tribe calls itself Mankind. As far as these primitives are concerned, the human race stops at their outermost burrow. Your tribe, my tribe—you know what they call us? Strangers. In their eyes, there's not too much difference between us and the Monsters."

"That's what I mean. They're narrow-minded savages—practically Wild Men. Who needs them?"

Arthur the Organizer glanced at Eric's face. He turned sharply to the man who had spoken last.

"I'll tell you who needs them, Walter," he said. "The Cause needs them. If the front-burrow tribes are with us, it means our main lines of supply to Monster

territory are kept open. But we need every fighter we can get, do matter how primitive. Every single tribe has to be with us if Men-Science is to be the dominant religion of the burrows, if we're to avoid the fiasco of the last rising. We need front-burrow men for their hunting, foraging skills and back-burrow men for their civilized skills. We need everybody in this thing, especially now."

The man called Walter put down his work and leaned against the wall. "And I'll tell you who we need most," he said. "Who we need a hell of a lot more than these front-burrow characters. I said they're one step away from being Wild Men, and I'll stick by what I said. But the Aaron People, if the Aaron People were with us ... "

The Organizer's face darkened. He seemed to be remembering one major plan that had gone awry. "Those snobs," he muttered. "Those selfish, stuck-up bastards. Damn them. But listen, Walter. If you think there's no difference between a front-burrow tribe and a bunch of Wild Men from the Outside, you go up to the Wild Men next time a mob of them comes through the burrows and try to start a conversation. You know what will hap-pen?"

"He'll be eaten raw," one of the other men called out. "Torn to pieces and eaten raw. A handful of Walter the Weapon-Seeker for anyone who can grab."

There was a grim laugh in which Eric joined after some uncertainty. He'd heard about the Wild Men, hordes who supposedly poured into the burrows at irregular intervals from some strange place called "the Outside," undisciplined, slaving cannibals who used grunts in place of speech—but he'd always understood them to be merely the stuff of legend. If you were an Alien-Scencer did you have to make believe that Wild Men really existed?

Real or legendary, though, to be compared with Wild Men was an ugly insult.

These arrogant back-burrowers with their ornamented straps and unmilitary manners! Men from different tribes sitting around and talking, when—if they had any sense of propriety at all—they should be killing each other!

And the Aaron People, who or what was this Aaron People, he wondered? A people referred to by these strut-ting, conceited, dressed-up pseudo-warriors as snobs and stuck-up bastards! He'd never heard of the Aaron people before. He wondered what *they* would be like.

Suddenly, the floor shook under him. He almost fell. He staggered back and forth, trying to grab at the spears in his back-sling. He finally got used to it, managed to find a solid footing in the upheaval. The spear he held vibrated in his hand.

From far away came a series of ear-splitting thumps. The floor swung to their rhythm. "What is it?" he cried, turning to Arthur. "What's going on?"

"You've never heard a Monster walking before?" the Organizer asked him unbelievably. "That's right—this is your Theft, your first time out. It's a Monster, boy: a Monster's moving around in the Monster larder, doing whatever it is that Monsters do. They have a right, you know," he added with a smile. "It's their larder. We're just visitors."

Eric noticed that none of the others seemed particularly concerned. He drew a deep breath and reslung his spear. How the floor and the walls shook! What a fantastic, enormous creature that must be!

As an apprentice warrior, he had often stood with the rear-guard on the other side

of the doorway to Monster territory while the band went in to steal for Mankind. A few times there had been heavy, thumping noises off in the distance, and the walls of the burrow had quivered slightly. But not like this. **It had never been** remotely as awesome as this.

He raised his eyes to the straight, flat ceiling of the burrow above them. He remembered the dark space further back stretching up limitlessly. "And this," he said aloud. "This structure we're in. What is *this* to them?"

Arthur the Organizer shrugged. "A piece of Monster furniture. Something they use for something or other. We're in one of the open spaces they always leave in the bases of their furniture. Makes the furniture lighter, easier to move around, I guess." He listened for a moment as the thumps drifted farther away and then died out. "Let's get down to business. Eric, this is Walter the Weapon-Seeker. Walter the Weapon-Seeker of the Maximilian people. Walter, what do you have for Eric's tribe—for, uh, for Mankind?"

"I hate to give anything even halfway good to a front-burrow tribe," the squatting man muttered. "No matter how much you explain it to them, they always use it wrong, they botch it up every single time. Let's see. This should be simple enough."

He rummaged in the pile of strange stuff in front of him and picked up a small, red, jellylike blob. "All you do," he explained, "is tear off a pinch with your fingers. Just a pinch at a time, no more. Then spit on it and throw it. After you spit on it, get it out of your hands fast. Throw it as fast and as far as you can. Do you think you can remember that?"

"Yes." Eric took the red blob from him and stared at it in puzzlement. There was a strange, irritating odor: it made his nose itch slightly. "But what happens? What does it do?"

"That's not your worry, boy," Arthur the Organizer told him. "Your uncle will know when to use it. You have your third category Theft—a Monster souvenir that no one in your tribe has ever seen before. It should make them sit up and take notice. And tell your uncle to bring his band to my burrow three days—three sleep periods—from now. That will be the last time we meet before the rising. Tell him to bring them armed with every last spear they can carry."

Eric nodded weakly. There were so many complex, incomprehensible things going on! The world was a bigger, more active place than he had ever imagined.

He watched Arthur the Organizer add a mark to the flat board on which many symbols were scratched. This was another Stranger practice—made necessary, he knew, **by the weak Stranger memory**, so inferior to that of **Mankind**.

The Weapon-Seeker leaped up and stopped him as he was about to put the red blob into his knapsack. "Nothing wet in there?" Walter demanded, opening the bag and

rummaging about in Eric's belongings. "No water? Remember, get this stuff wet and you're done for."

"Mankind keeps its water in canteens," Eric explained irritably. "We keep it here," he pointed to the sloshing pouch on his hip, "not splashing around loosely with our provisions." He swung the full knapsack on his back and stepped away with stiff-dignity.

Arthur the Organizer accompanied him to the end of the burrow. "Don't mind

Walter," he whispered. "He's always afraid that nobody but himself will be able to use the Monster weapons he digs up. He talks that way to everyone. Now, suppose I refresh your memory about the way back. We don't want you to get lost."

"I won't get lost," Eric said coldly. "I have a good memory, and I know enough to perform a simple reversal of the directions on the way here. Besides, I am Eric the Espier, Eric the Eye of Mankind. I won't get lost."

He was rather proud of himself as he trotted away, without turning his head. Let the Strangers know what you think of them. The snobs. The stuck-up bastards.

But still, he felt damaged somehow, made less—as when Roy the Runner had called him a singleton before the entire band. And the last comment he had heard behind him—"These primitives: so damned touchy!"—made it no better.

He crossed the dark open space, still brooding, his eyes fixed on the patch of white light ahead, his mind engaged in a completely unaccustomed examination of values. Mankind's free simplicity against the Stranger multiplicity and intricacy. Mankind's knowledge of basics, the important foraging basics of day-to-day life, against the Stranger knowledge of so many things and techniques he had never even heard about. Surely Mankind's way was infinitely preferable, far superior?

Then why did his uncle want to get mixed up with Stranger politics, he wondered, as he emerged from the structure? He turned left and, passing the small entrance he had ignored before, sped for the wall which separated him from the burrows. And why did all these Strangers, evidently each from a different tribe, agree in the contempt with which they held Mankind?

He had just turned right along the wall, on the last stretch before the doorway, when the floor shook again, jarring him out of his thoughts. He bounced up and down, frozen with fear where he stood.

He was out in the open while a Monster was abroad. A Monster had come into the larder again.

6

Far off in the dazzling distance, he caught sight of the tremendously long gray body he had heard about since childhood, higher than a hundred men standing on each other's shoulders, the thick gray legs each wider than two hefty men standing chest to chest. He caught just one wide-eyed, fear-soluble glimpse of the thing before he went into complete panic.

His panic was redeemed by a single inhibition: he didn't spring forward and run away from the wall. But that was only because it would have meant running directly toward the Monster. For one thoroughly insane moment, however, he thought of trying to claw his way through the wall against which his shoulders were pressed.

Then—because it was the direction he had been running in—he remembered the doorway. He must be about thirty, thirty-five paces from it. There lay safety: his uncle, the band. Mankind and the burrows—the blessed, closed-in, narrow burrows!

Eric leaped along the wall for the doorway. He ran as he'd never in his life run before, as he'd never imagined he could run.

But even as he fled madly, almost weeping at the effort he was making, a few sane thoughts—the result of long,

tiresome drills as an initiate—organized themselves in his screaming mind. He had been closer to the structure in which the Strangers were hiding, the structure which

Ar-thur the Organizer had explained was a piece of Monster furniture. He should have turned the other way, toward the structure, gotten between it and the wall. There, unless he'd been seen as the Monster entered the larder, he could have rested safely until it was possible to make his es-cape.

He had gone too far to turn back now. But run silently, he reminded himself: run swiftly but make no noise, make no noise at all. According to the lessons that the warriors taught, at this distance Monster hearing was more to be feared than Monster vision. Run silently. Run for your life.

He reached the door. It had been set back in place!

In disbelief and utter horror he stared at the curved line in the wall that showed where the door had been replaced in its socket. But this was never done! This had never been heard of!

Eric beat frantically on the door with his fists. Would his knuckles make enough noise to penetrate the heavy slab? Or just enough to attract the Monster's attention?

He twisted his head quickly—a look, a deliberately wasted moment, to estimate the closeness of his danger. The Monster's legs moved so slowly: its speed would have been laughable if the very size of those legs didn't serve to push it forward an incredible distance with each step. And there was nothing laughable in that long, narrow neck, almost as long as the rest of the body, and the malevolent, relatively tiny head on the end of the neck. And those horrible pink things, all around the neck, just behind the head

It was much nearer than it had been just seconds ago, but whether it had noticed him and was coming at him he had no idea. Beat at the door with the shaft of a spear?

That should attract attention, that might be heard. Yes, by the Monster too.

There was only one thing to do. He stepped a few paces back from the wall. Then he leaped forward, smashing his shoulder into the door. He felt it give a little. Another try.

The floor-shaking thumps of the Monster's steps were now so close as to be almost deafening. At any moment, a great gray foot might come down and grind out his life. Eric stepped back again, forcing himself not to look up.

Another leap, another bruising collision with the door. It had definitely moved. An indentation showed all around it.

Was he about to be stepped on—to be squashed?

Eric put his hands on the door. He pushed. Slowly, suckingly, it began to leave the place out of which it had been carved long ago.

Where was the Monster? How close? How close?

Suddenly the door fell over into the burrow, and Eric spilled painfully on top of it. He scrambled to his feet and darted down the corridor.

He had no time to feel relief. His mind was repeating its lessons, reminding him what he had to do next in such a situation.

Run a short distance down the burrow. Then stop and wait on the balls of your feet, ready to bolt. Get as much air into your lungs as possible. You may need it. If you hear a hissing, whistling sound, stop breathing and start running. Hold your breath for as long as you can—as long as you possibly can—then suck another chestful of air and keep running. Keep this up until you are far away. Far, far

away.

Eric waited, poised to run, his back to the doorway.

Don't look around—just face the direction you'll have to run. There's only one thing you have to worry about, only one thing you have to listen for. A hissing, whistling sound. When you hear it, hold your breath and run.

He waited, his muscles contracted for instant action.

Time went by. He remembered to count. If you counted up to five hundred, slowly, and nothing happened, you were likely to be all right. You could assume the Monster hadn't noticed you.

So the experienced warriors said, the men who had lived through such an experience.

Five hundred. He reached five hundred and, just to be on the safe side, still tense, still ready to run, counted another five hundred, up to the ultimate number conceived by man, a full thousand.

No hissing, no whistling sounds. No suggestion of danger.

He relaxed, and his muscles—suddenly set free—gave way. He fell to the floor of the burrow, whimpering with the release of tension.

It was over. His Theft was over. He was a man.

He had been in the same place as a Monster, and lived through it. He had met Strangers and dealt with them as a representative of Mankind. Such things as he would have to tell his uncle!

His uncle. Where was his uncle? Where was the band?

Suddenly fully aware of how much was wrong, Eric scrambled to his feet and walked cautiously back to the open doorway. The burrow was empty. They hadn't waited for him.

But that was another incredible thing! A band never gave an initiate up for lost until at least two full days had gone by. In the chief's absence, of course, this was measured by the sleep periods of the band captain. Any band would wait two days before giving up and turning home-ward. And, Eric was positive, his uncle would have waited a bit longer than that for *him*. He'd been away for such a short time! Then what had happened?

He crept to the doorway and peeped outside. There was almost no dizziness this time: his eyes adjusted quickly to the different scale of distance. The Monster was busy on the other side of the larder. It had merely been crossing the room, then, not pursuing and attacking. **Apparently**, it hadn't noticed him at all.

Fantastic. And with all the noise he had made! All that rushing back and forth, that battering down of the door!

The Monster turned abruptly, walked a few gigantic steps and hurled itself at the structure in which Eric had met the Strangers. The walls, the floor, everything, shook mightily in sympathy to the impact of the great organism as it wriggled a bit and became still.

Eric was startled until he realized that the creature had done no more than lie down in the structure. It was a piece of Monster furniture, after all.

How had that felt to Arthur the Organizer and Walter the Weapon-Seeker and the others hidden in the base? Eric grinned. Those Strangers must be a little less haughty, a little less sober at this moment.

Meanwhile, he had work to do, things to find out.

He got his fingers under the slab of door and tugged it upright. It was heavy! He pushed against it, slowly, care-fully, first one side and then the other, walking it back to the hole in the wall. A final push, and it slid into place tightly, only the thin, curved line suggesting its existence.

Now he could look around.

There had been a fight here—that much was certain. A brief, bitter battle. Examining the area closely, Eric saw no mistakable signs of conflict.

A broken spear shaft. Some blood on the wall. Part of a torn knapsack. No bodies, of course. You were not likely to find bodies after a battle. Any people of the burrows knew that the one unavoidable imperative of victory was to drag the bodies away and dispose of them. No one might ever leave dead enemies to rot where they would foul the corridors.

So there had been a battle. He had been **tight—his**

uncle and his uncle's band had not just gone off and left him. There must have been an attack by a superior force: the hand had stood its ground for a while, sustained some losses, and then been forced to retreat.

But there were a few things which didn't make sense. First, it was very unusual for a war party of Strangers to come this close to Monster territory. The burrows which were inhabited by Mankind, the natural goal of a war party, were much further back. At this point, you would not expect to find any group larger than a foraging expedition—a Stranger band at most.

His uncle's men, fully armed, operating under battle alert, could easily cope with a single band of weavers, weaponsmiths or traders from the decadent back burrows. They would have driven them off, possibly taking a few prisoners, and continued to wait for him.

That left only two possibilities. The unlikely war party—a two- or three-band attack—and, even more unlikely, a band from another fierce, front-burrow people. But front-burrowers rarely went prowling at random near Monster territory; they would have their own door cut into it and would tend to feel hugely uncertain about one belonging to another people. They too would head for the inhabited burrows if they were on any business other than the important one of stealing for their tribe's needs.

And another thing. Unless his uncle's band had been wiped out to the very last man—a thought Eric rejected as highly improbable—the survivors were honor-bound, by their oath of manhood, after doing whatever the immediate military situation required, from pursuit to retreat, to return as soon as possible to the spot where an initiate was expected back from his Theft. No warrior would dare face the women if he failed to do this.

Possibly the attack had just come. Possibly his uncle's band was a short distance away, still fighting their way from burrow's end to burrow's end; and, once they had gotten clear of the enemy, would make their way back to him.

In that case, he should be able to hear the battle still going on. And the burrows were dreadfully still.

Eric shivered. A warrior was not meant to be abroad without companions. He'd heard of tribeless Strangers—once, as a child, he remembered enjoying the intricate

execution of a man who'd been expelled from his own people for some major crime and who had wandered pathetically into the neighborhood of Mankind—but these people were hardly to be considered human: tribes, bands, societies, were the surroundings of human creatures.

It was awful to be alone. It was unthinkable.

Without bothering to eat, though he was quite hungry after his Theft, he began walking rapidly down the cor-ridor. After a while, he broke into a trot. He wanted to get home as soon as possible—to be among his own kind again.

He reached into his back-sling and got a spear for each hand.

A nervous business going through the corridors all by yourself. They were so empty and so quiet. They hadn't seemed this quiet when he'd been on expedition with the band. And so fearfully, frighteningly dim. Eric had never before realized how much difference there was between the light you got from one forehead_ glow lamp and the usual band complement of a half-dozen. He found himself getting more and more wary of the unexpected shadows where the wall curved sharply: he picked up speed as he ran past the black hole of a branching burrow.

At any one of those places, an enemy could be waiting for him, warned by the sound of his approaching footsteps. It could be the same enemy which had attacked his uncle's band, a handful of cruel and murderous Strangers, or a horde of them. It could be something worse: abruptly he remembered legends of unmentionable creatures who lurked in the empty burrows, creatures who fled before

the approach of a band of warriors, but who would come noiselessly upon a single man. Big creatures who engulfed you, Tiny creatures who came in their hundreds and nibbled you to pieces. Eric kept jerking his head around to look behind him: at least he could keep his doom from taking him by surprise.

It was *awful* to be alone.

And yet, in the midst of his fears, his mind returned again and again to the problem of his uncle's disappearance. Eric could not believe anything serious had happened to him: Thomas the Trap-Smasher was a veteran of too many bloody adventures, too many battles against unequal odds. Then where had he gone? And where had he taken the band?

And why was there no sound of him anywhere, no sign in all this infinity of gloomy, stretching, menace-filled tunnels?

Fortunately, he was an Eye. He knew the way back and sped desperately along it without the slightest feeling of doubt. The Record Machine was right: he would never be lost. Let him just get safely back to the companionship of Mankind and he would be Eric the Eye.

And there it was again: who had been right, the Record Machine or his uncle? The vision that named him had come from the Record Machine, but his uncle claimed that this was pure political manipulation. The vision had been selected and his name proposed to the women well in advance of the ceremony. And his uncle was an Alien; Sciencer, plotting with Strangers to erect an altar to the new religion in Mankind's burrows, plotting to overthrow the holy prerogatives of Otilie the Omen-Teller... .

So many things *had* happened in the last two days, Eric felt. So much of his world had shifted. It was as if the walls of the burrows had moved outward and

upward until they resembled Monster territory more than human areas.

He was getting close now. These condors looked friend-her, more familiar. He made himself run faster, although he was almost at the point of exhaustion. He wanted to be home, to be officially Eric the Eye, to inform Mankind of what had happened so that a rescue and searching party could be sent out for his uncle.

That doorway to Monster territory: who had replaced it? If a battle had been fought, and his uncle's band had retreated, still fighting, would the attacker have stopped to put the door neatly back in its socket? No.

Could it be explained by a sudden onslaught and the complete extermination of his uncle's band? Then, before dragging the bodies away, the enemy would have had time to put the door back. A doorway into Monster territory was a valuable human resource, after all, valuable to Mankind and Strangers alike—why jeopardize it by leaving it visible and open?

But who—or what—could have been capable of such a sudden onslaught, such a complete extermination of the best-led band in all Mankind? He'd have to get the answer from one of the other band captains or possibly a wise old crone in the Female Society.

Definitely within the boundaries of Mankind now, Eric forced himself to slow to a walk. He would be coming upon a sentry at any moment, and he had no desire at all to have a spear flung through him. A sentry would react violently to a man dashing out of the darkness.

"Eric the Only," he called out, identifying himself with each step. "This is Eric the Only." Then he remembered his Theft proudly and changed the identification. "Eric the Eye. This is Eric the Eye, the Espier, the further-seeing, less-paying Eye. Eric the Eye coming."

Oddly, there was no returning call of recognition. Eric didn't understand that. Had Mankind itself been attacked and driven away from its burrow? A sentry should respond to a familiar name. Something was very, inexplicably wrong.

Then he came around the last curve and saw the sentry

at the other end. Rather, he saw what at first looked like three sentries. They were staring at him, and he recognized them. Stephen the Strong-Armed and two members of Stephen's band. Evidently he had arrived just at the moment when the sentry on duty was about to be relieved. That would account for Stephen and the other man. But why hadn't they replied to his shouts of identification?

They stood there silently as he came up, their spears still at the ready, not going down in welcome. "Eric the Eye," he repeated, puzzled. "I've made my Theft, but something happened to the—"

His voice trailed off, as Stephen came up to him, his face grim, his powerful muscles taut. The band captain shoved a spear point hard against Eric's chest. "Don't move," he warned. "Barney. John. Tie him up."

7

His spears taken from him, his arms bound securely behind his back by the thongs of his own knapsack, Eric was pushed and prodded into the great central burrow of Mankind.

The place was almost unrecognizable.

Under the direction of Otilie, the Chieftain's First Wife, a horde of women—what

seemed at first like the entire membership of the Female Society—was setting up a platform in front of the Royal Mound. With the great scarcity of any building materials that Mankind suffered from, a construction of this sort was startling and unusual, yet there was something about it that awoke highly unpleasant memories in Eric's mind. But he was pulled from place to place too fast and there were too many other un-precedented things going on for him to be able to identify the memory properly.

Two women who were accredited members of the Female Society were not working under Otilie's direction, he noticed. Bound hand and foot, they were lying against the far wall of the great central burrow. They were both covered with blood and showed every sign of having undergone prolonged and most vicious torture. He judged them to be barely this side of death.

As he was jerked past, he recognized them. They were the two wives of Thomas the Trap-Smasher.

Just wait until his uncle got back: someone would really pay for this, he thought, more in absolute amazement than horror. He had the feeling that he must keep the horror away at all costs---once let it in and it would soak through his thoughts right into the memory he was trying to avoid.

The place was full of armed men, running back and forth from their band captains to unknown destinations in the outlying corridors. Between them and around them, scuttled the children, fetching and carrying raw materials for the hard-working women. There was a steady buzz of commands in the air—"Go to—," "Bring some more—," "Hurry with the—," —that mingled with the smell of many people whose pores were sweating urgency. And it wasn't just sweat that he smelled, Eric realized as he was dragged before the Royal Mound: it was anger, the anger and fear of all Mankind.

Franklin the Father of Many Thieves stood on the mound, carrying unaccustomed spears in his fat hands, talking rapidly to a group of warriors, band captains and—yes, *actually!*—*Strangers*. Even now, Eric found he could still be astonished.

Strangers in the very midst of Mankind! Walking around freely and bearing arms!

As the chief caught sight of Eric, his face broke into a loose-skinned smile. He nudged a Stranger beside him and pointed at the prisoner.

"That's him," he said. "That's the nephew. The one that asked for the thus category Theft. Now we've got them all."

The Stranger didn't smile. He looked briefly at Eric and turned away. "I'm glad you think so. From our point of view, you've just got one more."

Franklin's smile faded to an uncertain grin. "Well, you know what I mean. And the damned fool came back by himself. It saved us a lot of trouble, I mean, didn't it?" Receiving no answer, he shrugged. He gestured with flabby imperiousness at Eric's guards. "You know where to put him. We'll be ready for them pretty soon."

Again the point of a spear stabbed into Eric's back, and he was forced forward across the central space to a small burrow entrance. Before he could reach it, however, he heard Franklin the Father of Many Thieves call out to Mankind: "There goes Eric, my people. Eric the Only. Now we've got them all."

For a moment, the activity stopped and seemed to focus on him. Eric shivered as a low, drawn-out grunt of viciousness and hatred arose everywhere, but most of all

from the women.

Someone ran up to him. Harriet the History-Teller. The girl's face was absolutely contorted. She reached up to the crown of her head and pulled out the long pin held in place by a few knotted scarlet hairs. About her face and neck the hair danced like flames.

"You Alien-Sciencer!" she shrieked, driving the pin straight at his eyes. "You filthy, filthy Alien-Sciencer!" . Eric whipped his head to one side; she was back at him

in a moment. His guards leaped at the girl and grappled with her, but she was able to get in one ripping slash that opened up almost all of his right cheek before they drove her away.

"Leave something for the rest of us," one of Eric's guards pleaded the cause of reason as he strolled back to Eric. "After all, he belongs to the whole of Mankind."

"He does not!" she yelled. "He belongs to me most of all. I was going to mate with him when he returned from his Theft, wasn't I, Mother?"

"There wasn't anything official," Eric heard Rita the Record-Keeper admonishing as he tried to stanch the flow of blood by bringing his shoulder up and pressing it against the wound. "There couldn't be anything official about it until he'd achieved manhood. So you'll just have to wait your turn, Harriet darling—you'll have to wait until your elders are finished with him. There'll be plenty left for you."

"There won't be," the girl pouted. "I know what you're like. There won't be hardly anything left."

Eric was shoved at the small burrow entrance again. The moment he was inside it, one of his guards planted a foot in his back, knocking the breath out of him. The kick propelled him forward, staggering wildly for balance, until he smashed into the opposite wall. As he fell, unable to use his arms to cushion himself, he heard laughter behind him in the great central burrow. He rolled on his side dizzily. There was a fresh flow of blood coming down from his cheek.

This wasn't the homecoming he'd imagined after his Theft—not in the slightest! What was going on?

He knew where he was. A tiny, blind-alley burrow off Mankind's major meeting place, a sort of little vault used mostly for storage. Excess food and goods stolen from Monster territory were kept here until there was enough accumulated for a trading expedition to the back burrows. Occasionally, also, a male Stranger, taken prisoner in battle, might be held in this place until Mankind found out if his tribe valued him enough to pay anything substantial for his recovery.

And if they didn't . . .

Eric remembered the unusual structure that the women had been building near the Royal Mound—and shivered. The memory that he'd suppressed had now come alive in his mind. And it fitted with the way Harriet had acted

and with what her mother, Rita the Record-Keeper, had said.

They couldn't be planning that for him! He was a member of Mankind, almost a full warrior. They didn't even do that to Strangers captured in battle—not normal Strangers. A warrior was always respected as a warrior: at the worst, he deserved a

decent execution, quietly done. Except for— Except for

"No!" he screamed. "No!"

The single guard who'd been left on duty at the entrance turned around and regarded him humorously.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Oh, definitely yes! We're going to have a lot of fun with both of you as soon as the women say they're ready." He nodded with ominous, emphatic slowness and turned back to miss none of the preparations.

Both of you? For the first time, Eric looked around the little storage burrow. The place was almost empty of goods, but off to one side, in the light of his forehead glow lamp (how proud he had been when it had been bestowed on him at the doorway to Monster territory!) he now saw another man lying against the wall.

His uncle.

Eric brought his knees up and wriggled rapidly over to him. It was a painful business: his belly and sides were not calloused and inured to the rough burrow floor like his feet. But what did a few scratches, more or less, matter any more?

The Trap-Smasher was barely conscious. He had been severely handled, and he looked almost as bad as his wives. There was a thick crust of dried blood on his hair: the haft of a spear, Eric guessed, had all but cracked his head open. And in several places on his body, his right shoulder, just above his left hip, deep in his thigh, were the oozing craters of serious spear wounds.

"Uncle Thomas," Eric urged. "What happened? Who did this to you?"

The wounded man opened his eyes and shuddered. He looked around stupidly as if he had expected to find the walls talking to him. And his powerful arms struggled with the knots that held them firmly behind his back. When he finally located Eric, he smiled.

It was a bad thing to do. Someone had also smashed in most of his front teeth.

"Hello, Eric," he mumbled. "What a fight, eh? How did the rest of the band do—anybody get away?"

"I don't know. That's what I'm asking *you!* I came back from my Theft—you were gone—the band was gone. I got here, and everyone's crazy! There are Strangers out there, walking around with weapons in our burrows. Who are they?"

Thomas the Trap-Smasher's eyes had slowly darkened. They were fully in focus now, and long threads of agony swam in them. "Strangers?" he asked in a low voice. "Yes, there were Strangers fighting in Stephen the Strong-Armed's band. Fighting against us. That chief of ours—Franklin—he got in touch with Strangers after we left. They compared notes: they must have been working together, been in touch with each other, for a long time. Mankind, Strangers, what difference does it make when their lousy Ancestor-Science is threatened? I should have remembered."

"What?" Eric **begged**. "**What should you have remembered?**"

"**That's the way they put** down Alien-Science in the other rising, long ago. A chief's a chief; he's got more in common with another chief—even a chief of Strangers—than with his own people. You attack Ancestor-Science, and you're attacking their power as chiefs. They'll work together then. They'll give each other men, weapons, information—they'll do everything they can against the common enemy. Against the only people who really want to hit back at the Monsters. I should have remembered! Damn it all," the Trap-Smasher groaned through his ru

fined mouth, "I saw that the chief and Otilie were suspicious. I should have realized how they were going, to handle it. They were going to call in Strangers, exchange information—and unite against us!"

Eric stared at his uncle, dimly understanding. Just as there was a secret organization of Alien-Scientists that cut across tribal boundaries, so there was a tacit, rarely used understanding among the chiefs, based on the Ancestor-Science religion that was the main prep of their power. *And* the power of the leaders of the Female Society, come to think of it. All special privileges were derived from their knowledge of Ancestor-Science: take that away from them, and they'd be ordinary women with no more magi-cal abilities than was necessary to tell edible food from Monster poison.

Grunting with pain, Thomas the Trap-Smasher wormed his way up to a sitting position against the wall. He kept shaking his head as if to jar recollection loose.

"They came up to us," he said heavily, "Stephen the Strong-Armed and his band came up to us just after you'd gone into Monster territory. A band from Mankind with a message from the chief—who suspected anything? They might be coming to tell us that the home burrows were under attack by Strangers. Strangers!" he gave a barking laugh, and some blood splashed out of his mouth. "They had Strangers with them, hidden all the way behind in the corridors. Mobs and mobs of Strangers."

Eric began to visualize what had happened.

"Then, when they were among us, when most of us had reslung our spears, they hit us. Eric, they hit us real good. They had us so much by surprise that they didn't even need outside help. I don't think there was much left of us by the time the Strangers came running up. I was down, fighting with my bare hands—and so was the rest of the band. The Strangers did the mopping up. I didn't see "most of it—somebody handed me one hell of a wallop—I never expected to wake up alive." His voice got even lower and huskier. "I'd have been lucky not to."

The Trap-Smasher's chest heaved: a strange, long noise came out of it. "They brought me back here. My wives—they were working on my wives. Those bitches from the Female Society—Otilie, Rita—this part of it is their business—they had my wives pegged out and they worked on them in front of me. I was blanking out and coming to, blanking out and coming to: I was conscious while they—"

He dropped to a bloody mumble again, his head falling forward loosely. His voice became clear- for a moment, but not entirely rational. "They were good women," he muttered. "Both of them. Good, good girls. And they loved me. They had their chance to become more important—a dozen times Franklin must have offered to impregnate them, and they turned him down every time. They loved me, they really loved me."

Eric almost sobbed himself. He'd had little to do with them once he'd reached the age of the warrior initiate, but in his childhood, they'd given him all the mother love he ever remembered. They'd cuffed him and caressed him and wiped his nose. They'd told him stories and taught him the catechism of the Ancestor Science. Neither had sons of his age who had survived the various plagues and the Monster-inflicted calamities that periodically swept through Mankind's burrows. He'd been lucky: he'd received much of the care and affection that their own sons might have enjoyed.

Their fidelity to the Trap-Smasher had been a constant source of astonishment in Mankind. It had cost them more than the large, healthy litters for which the chief had a well-proven capacity: such eccentric, almost nonwomanly behavior had inevitably denied them the high positions in the Female Society they would otherwise have enjoyed.

And now they were dead or dying, and their surviving babies had been apportioned to other women whose importance would thereby be substantially increased.

"Tell me," he asked his uncle. "Why did the Female Society kill them? What did they do that was so awful?!"

He saw that Thomas had lifted his head again and was staring at him. With pity. He felt his own body turn completely cold even before the Trap-Smasher spoke.

"You still won't let yourself think about it? I don't blame you, Eric. But it's there. It's being prepared for us outside."

"What?" Eric demanded, although a distant part of him had already worked out the terrible answer and knew what it was.

"We've been declared outlaws, Eric. They say we're guilty of ultimate sacrilege against Ancestor-Science. We don't belong to Mankind anymore—you, me, my family, my band. We're outside Mankind, outside the law, outside religion. And you know what happens to outlaws, Eric, don't you? Anything goes. *Anything.*"

8

Ever since early childhood, Eric remembered looking forward to ceremonies of this sort. A Stranger would have been caught by one of the warrior bands, and it would be determined that he was an outlaw. Nine times out of ten, such a man was easy enough to identify—no one but an outlaw, for example, would be wandering the burrows by himself, without a band or at least a single companion, to guard his back. The tenth time, when there was the slightest doubt, a request for ransom to his people would make the prisoner's position clear. There would be a story of some unforgivable sacrilege, some particularly monstrous crime that could be punished by nothing but complete anathema and the revocation of all privileges as a human being. The man had escaped the punishment being prepared for him. Do with him as you will, his people would say: he is no longer one of us; he is the same as a

Monster; he is something nonhuman so far as we are concerned.

Then a sort of holiday would be declared. Out of the bits and pieces of lumber stolen from Monster territory and set aside by the women for this purpose, the members of the Female Society would erect a structure whose specifications had been handed down from mother to daughter for countless generations—all the way back to the ancestors who had built the Record Machines. It was called a Stage or a Theater, although Eric had also heard it referred to as The Scaffold. In any case, whatever its true name, most of the details concerning it were part of the secret lore of the Female Society and, as such, were **no** proper concern of males.

One thing about it, however, everyone knew. On it would be enacted a moving religious drama: the ultimate triumph of humanity over the Monsters. For this, the central character had to fulfill two requirements: he had to be an intelligent creature as the Monsters were, so that he could be made to suffer as some day Mankind meant

the Monsters to suffer; and he had to be nonhuman as the Monsters were, so that every drop of fear, resentment and hatred distilled by the enormous swaggering aliens could be poured out upon his flesh without any inhibition of compunction or fellow-feeling.

For this purpose, outlaws were absolutely ideal since all agreed that such disgusting creatures had resigned their membership in the human race.

When an outlaw was caught, work stopped in the burrows, and Mankind's warrior bands were called home. It was a great time, a joyous time, a time of festival. Even the children—doing whatever they could to prepare for the glorious event, running errands for the laboring wom-en, fetching refreshment for the stalwart, guarding men—even the children boasted to each other of how they would express their hatred upon this trapped representative of

the nonhuman, this bound and shrieking protagonist of the utterly alien.

Everyone had their chance. All, from the chief himself to the youngest child capable of reciting the catechism of Ancestor Science, all climbed in their turn upon the Stage—or Theater—or Scaffold—that the women had erected. All were thrilled to vent a portion of Mankind's vengeance upon the creature who had been declared alien, as an earnest of what they would some day do collectively to the Monsters who had stolen their world.

Sarah the Sickness-Healer had her turn early in the proceedings; thenceforth, she stood on the structure and carefully supervised the ceremony. It was her job to see that nobody went too far, that everyone had a fair and adequate turn, and that even at the end there was some life left in the victim. Because then, at the end, the structure had to be completely burned—along with its bloody occupant—as a symbol of how the Monsters must eventually be turned into ash and be blown away and vanish.

"And Mankind will come into its own," she would

chant, while the charred fragments were kicked out the burrow contemptuously.

"And the Monsters will be gone.

They will be gone forever, and there will be nothing upon all the wide Earth but Mankind."

Afterward, there was feasting, there was dancing, there was singing. Men and women chased each other into the dimmer side corridors; children whooped and yelled around the great central burrow; the few old folks went to sleep with broad, reminiscent smiles upon their faces. Everyone felt they had somehow struck back at the Monsters. Everyone felt a little like the lords of creation their ancestors had been.

Eric remembered the things he himself had done—the things he had seen others do—on these occasions. A tremendous tic of fear rippled through his body. He had to draw his shoulders up to his neck in a tight hunch and tense the muscles of his arms and legs. Finally, his nerves subsided.

He could think again. Only he didn't want to think.

Those others, those outlaws in previous ceremonies of this sort in auld lang syne long past—was it possible that they had experienced the same sick, bewildered dread while waiting for the structure to be completed? Had they trembled like this, had they also felt wetness running down their backs, had they felt the same pleading squirm in their intestines, the same anticipatory twinges of soft, vulnerable flesh?

The thought had never crossed his mind before. He'd seen them as things completely outside humanity, the compressed symbol of all that was alien. One worried about their feelings no more than about those of the roaches scurrying madly about here in the storage burrow. One squashed them slowly or rapidly—at one's pleasure. What difference did it make: you didn't sympathize with roaches—you didn't identify with them.

But now that he was about to be squashed himself, he realized that it did make a difference. He was human—no matter what Mankind and its leaders now declared him to be—he was human. He felt human fears; he experienced a desperate human desire to live.

Then so had the others been. The outlaws whom he'd helped tear to pieces. Human. Completely human.

They'd sat here, just as he did now, they'd sat and waited... .

Only twice in his memory had members of Mankind ever been declared outlaw. Both cases had occurred a long time ago, before he'd even been a warrior-initiate. Eric tried now to remember what they had been like as living people: he wanted to reach out and feel companionship, some sort of companionship, even that of the dead. The dead were better than this beaten, bloody man next to him who had subsided into half-insane mumbles, his battered head on his torn and wound-scribbled chest.

What had they been like? It was no use. In the first case, memory brought back only a picture of a screaming hulk just before the fire was lit. No recollection of a man. No fellow-human in Mankind. And in the second case

Eric sat bolt upright, straining against his bonds. The second man to be declared an outlaw had escaped! How he had done it Eric had never found out: he remembered only that a guard was severely punished, and that bands of warriors had sniffed for him along far-distant corridors for a long time afterward.

Escape. That was it. He had to escape. Once declared an outlaw, he could have no hope of mercy, no remission of sentence. The religious overtones of the ceremony being prepared were too highly charged to be halted for any-thing short of the disappearance of its chief protagonist.

Yes, escape. But how? Even if he could get free of the knots which so expertly and so strongly tied his hands behind his back, he had no weapon to hand. The guard at the entrance would transfix him with a spear in a moment. And if he failed, there were others outside, almost the entire warrior strength of the people.

How? How? He forced himself to be calm, to go over every possible alternative in his mind. He knew there was not much time. In a little while, the structure would be finished and the leaders of the Female Society would come for him.

Eric began working on the knots behind him. He worked without much hope. If he could get his hands loose, perhaps he might squirm his way carefully to the entrance, leap up suddenly and break into a run. So what if they plunged a spear through him—wouldn't that be better and quicker than the other thing?

But they wouldn't, he realized. Not unless he were very lucky and some, warrior forgot to think straight. In cases like this, when it was a matter of keeping, not killing a prisoner, you aimed for the legs. There were at least a dozen men in Mankind with skill great enough to bring him down even at twenty or twenty-five paces. And

an-other dozen who might be able to catch him. He was no Roy the Runner, after all.

Roy! He was dead and sewered by now. He found himself regretting the fight he'd had with Roy.

A Stranger passed by the storage burrow entrance, glancing in with only a slight curiosity. He was followed in a moment by two more Strangers, going the same way. They were leaving, Eric guessed, before the ceremony began. They probably had ceremonies of their own to attend—with their own people.

Walter the Weapon-Seeker, Arthur the Organizer—were they at this moment sitting in similar storage burrows awaiting the same slow death? Eric doubted it. Somehow he couldn't see these men caught as easily as he and his uncle had been. Arthur was too clever, he was certain of that, and Walter, well, Walter would come up with some fantastic weapon that no one had ever seen or heard of....

Like the one he had in his knapsack right now—that red blob the Weapon-Seeker had given him!

Was it a weapon? He didn't know. But even if it wasn't, he had the impression it could create some kind of surprise. "It should make them sit up and take notice," Walter had said back in Monster territory.

Any kind of surprise, any kind of upset and he might have a diversion under cover of which he and his uncle could escape.

But that was the trouble. His uncle. With his hands bound as thoroughly as he could now ascertain they were, he needed his uncle's help to do anything at all. And the Trap-Smasher was obviously too far gone to be at all useful.

He was talking to himself in a steady, monotonous, argumentative mutter, his upper body slumping further and further across his own lap. Every once in a while, the mutters would be broken by a sharp, almost surprised

moan as his wounds woke into a clearer consciousness of themselves.

Most other men in his condition, Eric judged, would have been dead by now: only a body as powerful as the Trap-Smasher's could have lasted this long. And—who knew?—if they could escape, it was possible that his uncle's wounds, given care and rest, might heal.

If they could escape.

"Uncle Thomas," he said, leaning toward him and whispering urgently. "I think I know a way out. I think I've figured out a way to escape."

No response. The bloody head continued to talk in a low, toneless voice to the lap. Mutter, mutter, mutter. Moan. Mutter, mutter.

"Your wives," Eric said desperately. "Your wives. Don't you want to get revenge for your wives?"

That seemed to be worth a flicker. "My wives," said the thick voice. "They were good women. Real good women. They never let Franklin near them. They were real good women." Then the flicker was over and the mutters re-turned.

"Escape!" Eric whispered. "Don't you want to escape?"

A thin, coagulating line of blood dripped out of his uncle's slowly working jaws. There was no other an-swer.

Eric looked toward the entrance of the storage burrow. The guard posted there was no longer turning from time to time to glance at the prisoners. The structure outside was evidently nearing completion, and his interest in the final preparations

had caused him to take a step or two away from the entrance. He was staring off to the left down the great central burrow in absolute fascination.

Well, that was something. It gave them a chance. On the other hand, it also meant that they had scant moments left to their lives. Any time now, the leaders of the Female Society would be coming to drag them to the torture ceremony.

With his eyes on the guard, Eric leaned against the rough burrow wall and began scraping the imprisoning knapsack thongs against the sharpest edges he could find. It wouldn't be fast enough, he realized. If there were only a spear point in this place, something sharp. He looked around feverishly. No, nothing. A few tumbled bags of food over which lazy roaches wandered. Nothing he could use.

His uncle was his only hope. Somehow he had to rouse the man, get through to him. He squirmed up close, his mouth against the Trap-Smasher's ear.

"This is Eric, Eric the Only. Do you remember me, Uncle? I went on the Theft, Uncle Thomas, I went on the Theft with you. Third category. Remember, I asked for a third category Theft, just like you told me to? I did my Theft, I was successful, I made it. I did just what you told me to do. I'm Eric the Eye now, right? Tell me, am I Eric the Eye?"

Mutters, mumbles and moans. The man seemed beyond intelligibility.

"What about Franklin? He can't do this to us, can he, Uncle Thomas? Don't you want to escape? Don't you want revenge on Franklin, on Otilie, for what they did to your wives? Don't you? *Don't you?*"

He had to cut through his uncle's gathering delirium. In complete desperation, he lowered his head and sank his teeth into a wounded shoulder.

Nothing. Just the steady flow of argumentative gibber-ish. And the thin blood dripping from the mouth.

"I saw Arthur the Organizer. He said he'd known you for a long time. When did you meet him, Uncle Thomas? When did you first meet Arthur the Organizer?"

The head drooped lower, the shoulders slumped further forward.

"Tell me about Alien-Science. What is Alien-Science?" Eric was almost gibbering himself now in his frantic efforts to find a key that would unlock his uncle's mind.

"Are Arthur the Organizer and Walter the Weapon-Seeker very important among the Alien-Sciencers? Are they the chiefs? What was the name of the structure they were hiding in? What is it to the Monsters? They talked about the Aaron People. Who are the Aaron People? Do you—"

That was it. He had found the key. He had gotten through.

Thomas the Trap-Smasher's head came up waveringly, dimness swirling in his eyes. "The Aaron People. Funny that you should ask about the Aaron People. That *you* should ask."

"Why? What about them?" Eric fought to hold the key in place, to keep it turning. "Why shouldn't I ask?"

"Your grandmother was from the Aaron People. I remember hearing about it when I was a little boy." Thomas the Trap-Smasher nodded to himself. "Your grandfather's band went on a long journey, the longest they'd ever taken. And they caught your grandmother and brought her back."

"My grandmother?" For the moment, Eric forgot what was being prepared for him outside. He'd known there was some peculiar secret about his grandmother. She had

rarely been mentioned in Mankind. Up to now, he'd taken it for granted that this was because she'd had a son who was terribly unlucky—almost the worst thing a person in the burrows could be. The father of a one-child litter, after all, and being killed together with his wife in Mon: ster territory. Very unlucky.

"My grandmother was from the Aaron People? Not from Mankind?" He knew, of course, that several of the women had been captured from other peoples in neigh-boring burrows and had the *good* fortune now to be considered full-fledged members of Mankind. Sometimes one of their own women would be lost this way, when she strayed too far down an outlying burrow and stumbled into a band of Stranger warriors. If you stole a woman from another people, after all, you stole a substantial portion of their knowledge. But he'd never imagined

"Deborah the Dream-Singer." Thomas's head waggled loosely: he dribbled words mixed with red saliva. "Did you know why your grandmother was called the Dream-Singer, Eric? The women used to say that the things she talked about happened only in dreams, and that she couldn't talk straight like other people—she could only sing about her dreams. But she taught your father a lot, and he was like her. Women were a little afraid to mate with him. My sister was the first to take a chance—and everyone said she deserved what she got."

Abruptly, Eric became conscious of a change in the sounds outside the burrow. More quiet. Were they coming for him now?

"Uncle Thomas, listen! I have an idea. Those Strangers —Walter, Arthur the Organizer—they gave me a Monster souvenir. I don't know what it does, but I can't get at it. I'll turn around. You try to reach down into my knapsack with the tips of your fingers and—"

The Trap-Smasher paid no attention to him. "She was an Alien-Scencer," he rambled on, mostly to himself. "Your grandfather was the first Alien-Scencer we ever had in Mankind. I guess the Aaron People were all Alien-Scencers. Imagine—a whole tribe of Alien-Scencers!"

Eric groaned. This half-alive, delirious man was his only hope of escaping. This bloody wreck who had once been the proudest, most alert band captain of them all.

He turned for another look at the guard. The man was still staring down the length of the great central burrow. There was nothing to be heard now but a terrifying silence, as if dozens of pairs of eyes were glowing in anticipation. And footsteps—weren't those footsteps? He had to find a way to make his uncle cooperate.

"Thomas the Trap-Smasher!" he said sharply, barely managing to keep his voice low. "Listen to me. This is an order! There's something in my knapsack, a blob of sticky

stuff. We're going to turn our backs to each other, and you're going to reach in with your hands and tear some off. Do you hear me? That's an order—a warrior's order!"

His uncle nodded, completely docile. "I've been a war-rior for over twenty auld fang synes," he mumbled, twist-ing around. "Six of them a band captain. I've given orders and taken them, given them and taken them. I've never disobeyed an order. What I always say is how can you expect to give orders if you don't—"

"Now," Eric told him, bringing their backs together and hunching down so that his

knapsack would be just under his uncle's bound arms. "Reach in. Work that mass of sticky stuff out. It's right on top. And hurry!"

Yes. Those were footsteps coming up outside. Several of them. The leaders of the Female Society, the chief, an escort of warriors. And the guard, watching that deadly procession, was liable to remember his duties and turn back to the prisoners.

"Hurry," he demanded. "I told you to hurry, dammit! That's an order, too. Get it out fast. Fast!"

And, all this time, as the Trap-Smasher's fumbling fingers wandered about in his knapsack, as he listened with fright and impatience to the sounds of the ap-proaching execution party—all this time, somewhere in his mind, there was astonishment at the orders he was rapping out to an experienced band captain and the incredible authority he had managed to get into his voice.

"Now you're wondering where the Aaron People have their burrow," Thomas began suddenly, reverting to an earlier topic as if they were having a pleasant conversation after a fine, full meal. "Well, I'll tell you."

"Forget it! Get that stuff out. Just get it out!"

"It's hard to describe," the other man's voice wandered on. "A long way off, their burrow is, a long way off. You know the Strangers call us front-burrow people. You know that, don't you? The Strangers are back-burrowers.

Well, the Aaron People are the bottommost burrowers of all."

Eric sensed his fingers closing in the knapsack.

The three women who ruled the Female Society came into the storage burrow. Otilie the Omen-Teller, Sarah the Sickness-Healer and Rita the Record-Keeper. With them was the chief and two band captains, heavily armed.

9

Otilie, the Chieftain's First Wife, was in the lead. She stopped, just inside the entrance to the burrow and the others came to a halt around her.

"Look at them," she jeered. "They're trying to free each other! And what do they plan to do if they get themselves untied?"

Franklin moved to her side and took a long, judicious look at the two men squatting back to back. "They'll try to escape," he explained, continuing his wife's joke. "They'll have their hands free, they figure, and surely Thomas the Trap-Smasher and his nephew are a match, even bare-handed, for the best spearmen in Mankind!"

And then Eric felt the searching hands come up out of the knapsack to which his own arms were tied. Something fell to the floor of the burrow. It made an odd noise, halfway between a splash and a thud. He twisted around for it immediately with his mouth open, flexing his knees in a tight crouch underneath his body.

"You've never seen anything like the burrows of the Aaron People," his uncle was mumbling, as if what his hands had just done was no concern of the rest of him. "And neither have I, though I've listened to the tales. Some of the tales—some of the tales—"

"He won't last long now," Sarah the Sickness-Healer commented. "We'll have to have our fun with the boy."

All you do, Walter the Weapon-Seeker had said, *is tear*

on^e a pinch with your fingers. Then spit on it and throw it. Throw it as fast and

as far as you can.

He couldn't use his fingers. But he leaned down to the red fragment and picked it up with his teeth. He brought his tongue against the strange soft substance, lashing saliva into it. And simultaneously he kicked at the bur-row floor with curved toes, straightening his legs, jerking his thighs and body upward. Unable to use his arms for balance, he tottered erect and turned, swaying, to face the leaders of his people.

After you spit on it, throw it fast. As fast and as far as' you can.

"I don't know what he's doing," someone said, "but I don't like it. Let me through."

Stephen the Strong-Armed stepped ahead of the group and lifted a heavy spear, ready for throwing.

Eric shut his eyes, bent his head far back on his neck and took a deep, deep breath. Then he snapped his head forward, flipping his tongue hard against the object in his mouth. He forced out his breath so abruptly that the exhalation became a wild, barking cough.

The soft little mass flew out of his mouth, and he opened his eyes to watch its course. For a moment, he was unable to find it anywhere; then he located it by the odd expression on Stephen's face and the fearful upward roll of his eyes.

There was a little red splotch in the middle of the band captain's forehead.

What was supposed to happen, he wondered? He had followed directions as well as he could under the circum-stances, but he had no idea what the scarlet stain, made loose and moist by his saliva, was supposed to accomplish. He watched it, hoping and waiting.

Then Stephen the Strong-Armed brought his free hand up slowly to wipe the stuff off. Eric stopped hoping. Nothing was going to happen.

Strangers, he had begun to think despairingly, *that's what comes of trusting Strangers*

The blast of sound was so tremendous that for a moment he thought the roof of the burrow had fallen in. He was slammed backward against the wall and fell as if he'd been walloped with a spear haft. He remembered the cough with which he'd expelled the bit of red blob from his mouth. Had there been a delayed echo to his cough, a gigantic, ear-splitting echo?

He lifted his head from the floor finally, when the reverberations in the little storage burrow had rumbled into a comparative silence. Someone was screaming. Someone was screaming over and over again.

It was Sarah. She was looking at Stephen the Strong-Armed from the rear. She had been standing directly behind him. Now she was staring at him and screaming in sharp steady bursts.

Her mouth was open so wide that it seemed she was about to tear her jaws apart. And with each scream she lifted her arm rigidly and pointed to the back of Stephen's neck. She kept lifting her arm and pointing as if she wanted everyone present to know beyond the least doubt why and how she came to be screaming.

Stephen the Strong-Armed had no head. His body ended at the neck, and flaps of skin fell down to his chest in an irregular wavy pattern. A fountain of blood bubbled and spurted where his head had been. His body still stood upright, feet planted wide apart in a good warrior's stance, one arm holding the spear ready for

action and the other congealed in its upward motion to wipe the red blob away. It stood, incredibly straight and tall and alive.

Suddenly, it fell apart.

First the spear slid slowly forward out of the right hand and clattered to the floor. Then the arms began to fall loosely to the sagging knees and the entire great, brawny body slumped as if its bones had left it. It dropped aimlessly to the floor, an arm poking out here, a leg

twisting out there, in a pattern as meaningless as if an oddly shaped bag of skin had been flung to one side of the burrow.

It continued to twitch for a moment or two, as the bubbling fountain of blood turned into a sluggishly flowing river. At last it lay still, a motionless heap of limbs and torso. Of the missing head there was no trace any-where.

Sarah the Sickness-Healer stopped screaming and turned, shaking, to her companions. Their protruding eyes left the body on the floor.

Then they all reacted at once.

They yelled madly, wildly, fearfully, as if they were a chorus and she the conductor. Still bellowing, they made for the narrow entrance behind them. They got through in a pushing, punching scramble that at one point looked like a composite monster with dozens of arms, legs and swing-ing, naked breasts. They carried the guard outside with them, and with them, too, they carried their panic, screaming it into existence all along the great central burrow.

For a little while, Eric could hear feet pounding into the distant corridors. Then there was quiet. There was quiet everywhere, except for Thomas the Trap-Smasher's interminable mumbling.

Eric forced himself upright again. He was unable to imagine what had happened. That red blob—the Stranger, Walter, had said it was a weapon, but it didn't operate like any weapon he had ever in his life heard of. Except possibly in the times of the ancestors: the ancestors were supposed to have had things which could blow an object apart and leave no trace. But this was an alien artifact, a possession of the Monsters which Walter the Weapon-Seeker had somehow found and appropriated. What was it? How had it exploded the head of Stephen the Strong-Armed?

A lot of it still lay in his knapsack. Meanwhile, he had his chance; It might not last long; he had no idea when the panic might subside and a patrol of warriors be sent back to investigate. He stepped carefully across the red stream flowing from the fallen man's neck. Squatting down in front of the dropped spear, he managed to get a grip on it with his bound hands and rose, holding it awkwardly behind him.

No time to cut his bonds. Not here.

"Uncle Thomas," he called. "We can get away. We have a chance now. Come on, get up!"

The wounded band captain stared up at him without comprehension. "—corridors like you've never seen or imagined," he continued in a low monotone. "Glow lamps that aren't on foreheads. Corridors filled with glow lamps. Corridors and corridors and corridors—"

For a moment, Eric considered. The man would be a heavy liability in fast travel. But he couldn't desert him. This was his last surviving relative, the only person who didn't consider him an outlaw and a thing. And, shattered as he was, also still his

captain.

"Get up!" he said again. "Thomas the Trap-Smasher, get up! That's an order, a warrior's order. Get up!"

As he'd hoped, his uncle responded to the old command. He managed to get his legs under his body, and strained against them, but it was no use. He didn't have the energy to rise.

Casting apprehensive looks over his shoulder at the entrance to the storage burrow, Eric ran to the struggling man. Working backward, he managed to get one end of the spear under the crook of his uncle's arm. Then, using his own hip as a fulcrum, he levered hard at the other end.

It was painful, slippery work, since he couldn't bring all of his muscles into play and it was difficult to see what he was doing. In between efforts, he gasped out orders to "Get up, get up, get up, damn you!" At last the end of the

spear went all the way down. His uncle was on his feet, staggering, but at least on his feet.

Dragging the spear awkwardly, Eric urged and butted him out of the place. The great central burrow was empty of people. Weapons, pots and miscellaneous possessions lay strewn about where they had been dropped. The finished structure of the Stage stood deserted in front of the Royal Mound. And some time before, the bodies of his uncle's wives had evidently been removed.

The chief and the other leaders had bolted to the left once they had clawed their way out of the storage burrow. They had apparently run past the scaffold structure and picked up the rest of Mankind in their panic.

Eric turned right.

His uncle was a problem. Thomas the Trap-Smasher kept coming to a bewildered halt. Again and again he began to tell a story he had heard about the Aaron People by a man who had claimed to have made a journey to the burrows of the strange, distant tribe. Eric had to push against him to keep him moving.

Once they were in the outlying corridors, he felt better. But not until they had made many turns, passed dozens of branches and were well into completely uninhabited burrows, did he feel he could stop and saw himself free of his bonds on the point of the spear. He did the same for his uncle. Then, throwing the Trap-Smasher's left arm across his own shoulders and clutching him tightly about the waist, he started off again. It was slow going; his uncle was a heavy man, but the more distance they could put between themselves and Mankind, the better.

But distance where? Where should they go? He pondered the problem as they tottered together down the silent, branching corridors. One place was as good as another. There was nowhere that they would be welcome. Just keep going.

He may have muttered his questions aloud. To his surprise, Thomas the Trap-Smasher suddenly said in an entirely coherent but very weak voice: "The doorway to Monster territory, Eric. Make for the doorway to Monster territory where you went to make your Theft."

"Why?" Eric asked. "What can we do there?"

There was no answer. His uncle's head fell forward on his chest. He was evidently sliding into a stupor again. And yet, somehow, as long as Eric's encircling arm pulled at his body, the man's legs kept moving forward. There was some residual stamina

and a warrior's determination in him yet.

Monster territory. Was there more safety for them there now than among human beings?

Very well then. The doorway to Monster territory. They would have to come around in a wide arc through many corridors to get to it, but Eric knew the way. He was Eric the Eye, after all, he told himself: it was his business always to know the way.

But was it? He had not enjoyed the formal initiation into manhood that was the usual aftermath of a successful Theft. Without that, perhaps he was still Eric the Only, still a boy and an initiate. No, he knew what he was. He was Eric the Outlaw, nothing else.

He was an outlaw, without a home and a people. And, except for the dying man he pulled along, everyone's hand was henceforth against him. —

10

Thomas the Trap-Smasher had been badly injured in the surprise attack that had wiped out his band. Ordinarily, he would have had his wounds carefully dressed by the cleverness and accumulated experience of Sarah the Sick-ness-Healer. But Sarah had been anything but a healer to him.

Now, the strain of escape and the forced headlong flight that followed it had emptied his body of its last resources.

His eyes were glazed and his strong shoulders hung slack. He was a somnambulist walking jerkily in the direction of death.

When they stopped to rest, Eric—after listening intently for any sounds of pursuit—had washed his uncle's wounds carefully with water from the canteens and had bound the uglier gashes with strips torn from a knapsack. It was all he knew how to do: warrior's first aid. A woman's advanced therapeutic knowledge was needed for anything more complicated.

Not that it would have made **very much difference** by this time. The Trap-Smasher was too far gone.

Eric felt desperate at the thought of being left alone forever in the dark, uninhabited corridors. He tried to force water and bits of food upon his uncle. The man's head rolled back, nourishment dribbling carelessly down from both sides of his mouth. He was breathing lightly and very rapidly. His body had grown quite warm by the time they stopped.

Eric himself ate ravenously: it was his first meal in a long, long while. He kept staring at his recumbent uncle and trying to work out a line of action that would do some good. In the end, he had thought of nothing better than to hitch the man's arm up over his shoulder again and to keep going in the direction of Monster territory.

Once erect, the Trap-Smasher's feet began walking again, but with a dragging, soggy quality that became more and more pronounced. After a while, Eric had to come to a halt: he had the feeling that he was hauling dead weight.

When he tried to lower his uncle to the floor of the burrow, he found that the body had become almost completely limp. Thomas lay on his back, his eyes staring without curiosity at the rounded ceiling upon which his forehead glow lamp outlined a bright circular patch.

The heartbeat was very, very faint.

"Eric," he heard a weak voice say. He raised his eyes from his uncle's chest and looked at the painfully working mouth.

"Yes, uncle?"

"Listen, Eric. Grow up fast. I mean—I mean, really grow up. It's your only chance. A lad like you—in the burrows, a lad either develops fast, or he's dead. Don't—" the chest arched upward for a sudden coughing spasm, "—don't take anything for granted. Anything—from any-body. Learn, but be—be your own man. And grow up, Eric. Fast."

"I'll try. I'll try as hard as I can."

"I'm sorry—about—what I got you into. I had—no right. Your life—after all—your life. You—my .wives—the band. I led—death—everyone. I'm sorry."

Eric fought hard to hold back his tears. "It was for a cause, Uncle Thomas," he said. "It wasn't just you. The cause failed."

There was a hideous cackle from the prone man. For a moment, Eric thought it was a death rattle. Then he realized that it had been a laugh, but such a laugh as he had never heard before.

"A cause?" the Trap-Smasher gasped. "A cause? Do you know—do you—know what—the cause was? I wanted—wanted to be chief. Chief. The only—only way I could—do it—Alien-Science—the Strangers—a cause. Everyone—the killings—I wanted to—to be chief. *Chief!*"

He went rigid as he coughed out the last word. Then slowly, like flesh turning into liquid, he relaxed. He was dead.

Eric stared at the body a long time. It didn't make any difference, he found: the numbness in his mind remained. There was a great paralyzed spot in the center of his brain that was unable to think or to feel.

In the end, he shook himself, bent down and grabbed the body by the shoulders. Walking backward, he dragged it in the direction of Monster territory.

Something he had to do. The duty of anyone who lived in the burrows when death occurred in his neighborhood. Now it filled time and used up energies that he might otherwise have expended in thoughts which were agoniz-ing.

The energies which it demanded were almost more than he was capable of at this point. His uncle had been a heavy, well-built man. Eric found that he had to stop at the end of almost every curving corridor and get his breath back.

He finally arrived at the doorway, grateful for the fact that his uncle had died so relatively close to it. He also felt he understood why this had been suggested as their desti-nation. Thomas the Trap-Smasher had known he had little time left: his nephew would have the responsibility of sewer-ing him. He had tried to make it as easy for Eric as possible by going the greater part of the distance on his own feet.

There was a fresh-water pipe in the wall near the doorway to Monster territory. And wherever there was a fresh-water pipe, the Monsters were likely to have laid a sewer pipe nearby. It was down this, probably, that the men killed in the battle with Stephen the Strong-Armed's band had been disposed of much earlier. And it was down this that Thomas had known his remains must also go—the closest point at which his nephew could sewer him **in** comparative safety.

This much, at least, he had done for Eric's benefit.

Eric located the fresh-water pipe without much difficulty. There was a constant low rumbling and gurgling underfoot, and—at the spot where it was most pronounced—he found the slab in the floor cut at the cost of infinite labor by some past generation of Mankind. Near it, after the slab was lifted, was another, much wider pipe, large enough to carry several men abreast. As with the other one, the hard stuff of the burrow floor had been scraped away so that a joint lay exposed.

Opening the joint was another matter. Eric had seen it done many times by his elders, but this was his own first attempt. It was a tricky business of tugging a heavy covering plate first right, then left, and getting his fingers under the rim and puffing at just the right moment.

The joint opened at last, and the incredible stink of Monster sewage poured out as the liquid swirled darkly by. Death had always been associated in Eric's mind with this stink, since the pipe carried not only the Monsters' waste matter but also that of Mankind, collected from its burrows every week by the old women who were too feeble for any other work. All that was not alive or useful was carried to the nearest Monster sewer pipe, all that might decay and foul the burrows. And that included, of course, the bodies of the dead.

Eric stripped his uncle's body of all useful gear as he had seen the women do many times. Then he dragged it to the hole in the burrow floor and lowered it carefully, holding on to one arm until the current of the sewage caught it. He repeated as much of the ceremony as he could remember, concluding with the words: "*And there*

fore, O ancestors, I beg you to receive the body of this member of Mankind, Thomas the Trap-Smasher, a war-rior of the first rank, a band captain of renown and the father of nine."

There was usually another line or so—"Take him to you and keep him with you until the time when the Monsters have been destroyed utterly and the Earth is ours again. Then shall you and he and all human beings who have ever lived rise from the sewers and joyously walk the surface of our world forever." But this, after all, was a

pure Ancestor-Science passage; and his uncle had died fighting Ancestor-Science. What was the Alien-Science equivalent? And was it likely to be any more potent, any less full of falsehood? In the end, Eric omitted those last two lines.

He let go of his uncle's arm. The body shot away and down the pipe. Thomas the Trap-Smasher was gone, he was gone for all time, the way Eric reasoned now. He was dead and sewerred, and that was that.

Eric closed the joint, pulled the slab down and stamped it into place.

He was completely alone. An outlaw who could expect nothing from other human beings but death by slow torture. He had no companions, no home, no beliefs of any sort. His uncle's last words still lay, in all their stern ugliness, at the bottom of his mind. "*I wanted to—to be chief."*

It was bad enough to discover that the religion on which he had been raised was a mere prop to the power of the chieftainship, that the mysterious Female Society was completely unable to see into a person's future. But to find out that his uncle's thoughtful antagonism to such non-sense was based on nothing more substantial than simple personal ambition, an ambition murderously unscrupulous and willing to

sacrifice anybody who trusted him—well, what was there left to believe in, to base a life upon?

Had his father and mother been any less gullible than the most naive child in the burrows? They had sacrificed themselves—for what? For one superstition as opposed to another, for the secret political maneuvers of this person as opposed to that person.

Not for him. He would be free. He laughed, bitterly and self-consciously. He had to be free. There was no choice: he was an outlaw.

Eric realized he was terribly tired. He'd done his Theft, made the long trip to and from Mankind's burrows and fought what amounted to a full battle—all without any sleep.

He curled back against the wall and napped. It was a warrior's nap, with senses fully alert for the approach of an enemy. His mind submerged only partially into uncon-sciousness, absorbing rest but preventing full slumber. The part of his mind that remained awake peered restlessly into the future, examining alternatives, making plans.

By the time he arose, stretched, yawned, he had reached a decision.

Eric walked a few steps, putting his hands on the door to Monster territory. To shift it out of its socket was a hard job for one man. He strained and tore his fingers; finally he managed it. The door came away, and he deposited it carefully on the floor of the burrow.

He stared at it for a while, trying to figure out a way of getting it back after he'd passed through the doorway. No, a single man just couldn't do that from the other side. He'd have to leave the doorway open, an incredible social crime.

Well, he couldn't commit a crime any more. He was beyond all rules made by human communities. Ahead lay the glaring white light that he and his kind feared so much. Into this, where there were no illusions to treasure and no help to be expected, into this place he would go.

Behind him lay the dark, safe, intricate burrows. They were tunnels in the walls that surrounded Monster territory. Men lived in these walls, and shivered, and were ignorant, and made fools of each other. He could no longer do these things: he had to face the Monsters.

Could humanity really hit back at the Monsters—in any way at all? Weren't they like a swarm of roaches in the storage burrow *who* felt they should declare war on a cook busy at preparing the evening meal for Mankind? The cook would roar with laughter at such a thought. *Who* knew what went on in the mind of a roach—and who cared?

But suppose a roach stopped crawling greedily and aimlessly with his kind? Suppose he hung in a dim crevice and watched his enemy day after day and learned all there was to know about him? Suppose he wiped out of his mind everything that learned fools and ignorant tradition had ever taught him, concentrating exclusively on a totally

new way to hit back at his enemy, a totally unexpected quarter from which to mount his attack?

Suppose he operated not from any belief, any precon-ception at all, but only from a soldier's bitter necessity?

"I'll grow up fast, Uncle," muttered Eric the Only, Eric the Eye, Eric the Outlaw. "I'll grow up fast—I have to."

Then he stepped through the doorway into Monster territory.

PART II
SOLDIERS FOR THEIR VALOR 11

T

he old trap that Thomas the Trap-Smasher had long ago dismantled still hung uselessly on the other side of the wall. And none of the huge creatures was abroad. That horrifying white, white light again! This insane spaciousness!

Eric turned right and ran along the wall, counting paces. He took the same route as he had on his Theft. Fear made him breathe heavily, but he kept reminding himself that here he ran the same risks, no more and no less, as any other human being. Here, every man was an outlaw, an object of the chase, a thing marked for death. In Monster territory, you enjoyed no special advantages if you still belonged to a people.

Of course, you might have a woman waiting for you back in your burrows, ready to turn into useful articles all the good things with which this place was filled. But she wouldn't be with you at such a moment. Women were the custodians of human life and history and all accumulated knowledge. And the magic rituals they recited were the most precious possession of a people, giving them pride and a fundamental sense of identity. Women were abso-lutely forbidden to engage in any enterprise for which more readily expendable men might be used. They never entered Monster territory.

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And yet, according to his uncle, his mother *had*...

He reached the huge article of Monster furniture and turned left along it. There was just a chance that there would be some Strangers still left where he had met them in the course of his Theft. He could warn them of what was going on in the burrows—they might let him stay with them. Even the companionship of effeminate, talkative, overdressed Strangers would be better than nothing.

As he was about to turn into the dark entrance of the structure, Eric paused. He had been running as he had been taught to run in Monster territory: *don't look up, never look up*. Well, he'd looked up once already, in the course of his Theft—and he'd survived. All that he'd been taught: what was it worth?

Therefore he stopped deliberately well outside the en-trance. Making certain again that no Monsters were about, he shoved his hands on his hips belligerently, turned and surveyed the enormous burrow. Yes, it was still a little upsetting at first glance. But one got used to it, one got used to it. Given enough time, no doubt even those in-credibly oversize bags and containers, those walls stretching up so high that it hurt one's neck to try to see their upper limits—given enough time, you'd come to notice this place as casually as a narrow storage burrow full of Mankind's odds and ends.

There was nothing he couldn't eventually learn to live with, Eric told himself. As long as he could see clearly what it was.

Eyes open. Look at everything. Judge everything for yourself, with your own vision. He would be Eric the Eye.

He traveled cautiously inside the structure. If there were any Strangers about, they might be expecting at-tack. They might throw first and examine the spear-pierced body for explanations afterward. Certainly, now at least, if Arthur the Organizer had been alerted to what was going on in the burrows, he would have posted sentries.

And the sentries would be nervous.

He encountered no sentries. He heard voices, however, from the moment he stooped and entered the low tunnel. They grew louder and louder as he turned into the right fork. When he emerged into the large, square burrow he was fully prepared for what he saw: dozens of Strangers, suffering from various degrees of personal damage, talk-ing, gesticulating, arguing. Multitudes of forehead glow lamps created a tremendous flare of illumination.

The scene was like the aftermath of a large-scale raid on an entire people. There were men with slight wounds, the blood having long hardened upon their scratches; there were men with bad wounds, who limped about on a crushed foot or who desperately tried to get aid for the red rip in their chest or side; there were men as mortally hurt as his uncle had been, who—having managed to crawl to this place of comparative safety by themselves or having been helped here by friends—lay now, unnoticed and forgotten along the walls, sliding downward through coma after coma until they smashed into the unyielding surface of death.

And **everyone—everyone** who was at all conscious—was trying to make himself heard.

Those with relatively minor injuries had clustered about Walter the Weapon-Seeker and Arthur the Organizer at the far corner of the burrow, shrilly trying to tell their own experiences and criticizing the behavior of others. Those whose wounds made it impossible for them to jostle in the main crowd, stood on the outskirts or sat on the floor in groaning groups of two and three, and pointed out to each other the defects in Walter's plans or Arthur's leadership that had brought them to this pass. Even the dying muttered their recent experiences to the friendly floor and suggested, with **their last, gasping breath, alternative**

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courses of action that would have developed far better results.

In a sense, Eric thought, his first impression had been correct. It was an entire people after a battle. He was staring at the people of Alien-Science after the other inhabitants of the burrows had crushed them and spat them out.

But, whatever they were, this was his people now. The only one he had. He shrugged and strode into the sharp-angled, noisy place.

Somewhere in the crowd, a man's head swung around and studied him. The face broke into a smile. "Eric," it called out. "Hey, Eric!"

A head that was higher than the others near it. And hair that was loose, not caught by a back strap in the Stranger fashion. A warrior of Mankind.

They elbowed toward each other frantically through the gesticulating debaters, the two beams from their forehead glow lamps making a single line as they kept their eyes locked together.

Long before they met, Eric recognized the man. Tall, thin, nervous-bodied—it could be only one person. The member of his uncle's band who had made his life as an initiate most difficult, the warrior with whom he'd almost fought a duel before

setting out on his Theft: Roy the Runner.

Roy seemed to remember none of this as they came together. He threw his bony arms around Eric and embraced him. "A familiar face," he sang out in delight. "Eric the Only, am I glad to see you!"

Eric stiffened and stepped back out of the hug. "Eric the Eye," he said sharply. "I've become Eric the Eye."

The other man held up both hands placatingly. "Eric the Eye. Sure. Eric the Eye. I'm sorry. I'll remember it from now on. Eric the *Eye*. Anything you say, boy. Just be friendly, just talk to me a little. I've been going crazy standing here and listening to these fake warriors, these damn half-women gabble at each other. And trying to figure out what's going on back in Mankind." He grabbed Eric's shoulders and begged: "What is going on with our people? How do we stand there?"

"We don't." Eric told him his experiences, beginning with the return from his Theft and the discovery that the door slab had been put back into place. "We're outlaws," he said, when he had finished. "You, I, everyone in the Trap-Smasher's band are outlaws. Who else got away?"

"Nobody, so far as I know. I figured I was the only survivor until I saw you come in. The only reason I got away was because I was on sentry duty all the way at the other end of the corridor when the attack came. I heard the noise and ran back. There was Stephen the Strong-Armed's men slamming it into our band and what looked like a hundred Strangers helping them. They saw me come up and a whole mob of them made for me. I didn't stop to think. I just took off, warrior's oath or no warrior's oath. And believe me, if you ever think you've seen me run, you're mistaken. I picked up each foot and I planted it so far ahead of the other one that I practically split down the middle. And all the time, there were those spears going over my head and past my shoulders and all around me. You never saw so many spears: I bet there was corridor after corridor littered with them."

"And they all missed you? You don't show a scratch."

The Runner shrugged contemptuously. "Strangers. What do you expect? They couldn't hit fat old Franklin himself if he were sitting at their feet. I was lucky none of Stephen's men were in that mob chasing me. Besides, like I told you, *I ran*. I shook most of them off pretty fast: after about a dozen corridors or so, there were only about two or three still following me. Those aren't such good odds for Strangers, not against a full warrior of Mankind, so they gave up too and turned back. I rested, got my breath back—and came here. I used another doorway to Monster territory, though."

"You knew about this place? You'd been here before?"

"Not inside, not in this particular burrow. But you **know**, we were all Alien-Scencers pretty much in the band, some a little more, some a little less. Your uncle had been working on us, converting us, for a long time. Lots of times, when we'd be out on an expedition, stealing food and suchlike, he'd make a special trip inside this structure, and he'd leave us on guard outside. He told us how to get in to the square burrow, how to make contact with the Alien-Science headquarters, **in** case of an emergency. I figured that's what this was—an emergency—and I came here to get help. *Help!*" Roy the Runner looked around and made a face. "From this bunch of yapping, half-female lunatics? More and more of them kept coming in, all

banged up and all talking their heads off. That's the one thing Strangers know how to do—talk, talk, talk, talk."

Eric followed his derisive glances and tended to agree with him. There certainly was a lot of talk going on, a lot of unnecessary recapitulation. But what else was there to do?

A major political and religious movement—with adherents all over the burrows—had just been smashed at one stroke, a concerted blow arranged by chiefs who were normally in a state of unvarying war with each other. The survivors had made for their headquarters which no doubt had been deliberately placed in Monster territory for just such emergencies as this. Arriving here singly and in small groups, they could bind their wounds, rest and discuss alternatives still open to them. In this dangerous, unorthodox hideaway, they could talk and plan in freedom, relatively secure from attack.

But were they? Among this many men, limping and scuttling to doorways to Monster territory, there must have been a few careless enough to have been followed. All this movement in one direction and at one time could well have been noticed in the burrows. And, if they had been followed, if their activity had been observed, then this hideaway might turn out to be a terrible trap—a vast expedition organized by the chiefs might be on its way at this moment to exterminate once and for all the last remnants of the Alien-Science heresy.

No, not very likely, Eric decided upon reflection. With the immediate danger behind them, with their own Alien-Scientists killed or in flight, the chiefs would have returned to a state of hostility and suspicion of each other. For a while, in fact, there would be even less communication than usual between the various peoples, while defense plans—which had been exposed to temporary allies—were being hurriedly altered. Mankind, for example, would be worrying right now about what the Strangers in their midst had noted: the total strength of fighting effectives, the location of the great central burrow and the specific corridors that led into it—and, possibly, particularly desirable women who might be worth a raid. Xenophobia would be snarling through the burrows once more, and alliances would be out of the question, especially an alliance as enormous and manifold as an expedition of this sort would require. After all, a people—no matter how great their need of food and equipment—rarely sent more than a half-dozen men into the complex dangers of Monster territory at one time. They were unlikely to risk the greater part of their warrior force in such a place.

While the Alien-Scientists stayed here, then, they were relatively safe from that kind of attack. But still, sentries should have been posted just in case. It was more military, for one thing. And they would need every bit of military cohesiveness if they were to survive.

Roy the Runner agreed with him. "I told that to the leader—what's his name—Arthur the Organizer—as soon as I got here. But these damn Strangers: what can you expect? They don't know how to run an army. He sort of wobbled his head and asked me if there were any con-

tacts, any secret organization of Alien-Scientists, in the other bands of Mankind. Here we may soon be fighting for our lives, and he's worrying about secret organiza-tions!"

"Well, he can't help it," Eric pointed out. "He's an Organizer. Just like you're a Runner and I'm an Eye. If you lost your legs or if I went blind, how would we feel? Well, he's an Organizer who's lost his organization. It's a terrible thing to happen to a man."

"Um. Maybe. But that's his problem, not mine. Me, I can still outrun any man in the burrows. He also said that if you or your uncle managed to get here, he wants to ask you a couple of questions: I should bring **you** to him right away. That's what he's doing with all these beaten-up characters around him—filling in the total picture, he calls it."

As they made their way through the crowd, the Runner bent down and muttered into Eric's ear: "Let me tell you, Eric, what we need now—in the spot we're in—is not an Arthur the Organizer. We need a first-rate band captain like your uncle. I've seen him when we won and when we lost, he always knew what to do. There was a man, there was a leader! When to push an attack home, when to retreat, when to regroup and attack from a different, unexpected direction—you could really trust his orders. He knew, he just knew." The tall, thin warrior shook his head. "And now he's riding the sewer! It's hard to believe. Eric—what about my woman? Did they do anything to my woman?"

"I don't think so. The only women I saw catching it were the wives of Thomas the Trap-Smasher."

Roy nodded morosely. "Not my wife. Trust her. I'll bet she's where she always wanted to be—in Franklin's harem. The way she'd repeat his name! Franklin, the Father of Many Thieves, she used to say, of *Many* Thieves. Whenever a woman gave birth who'd lain with the chief, Myra would tell me, 'Five in the litter, Roy. Five!

Franklin always fathers at least five.' And her eyes would glitter like a pair of glow lamps. So what if I was the fastest runner in all of Mankind, what if I'd once run the whole length of a larder with two Monsters after me and lived to tell the tale? My family never had more than three to a litter, and Myra knew it damned well."

Eric walked faster, pushing through the noisy, wounded men. Three to a litter! The sour taste of his personal curse filled him again. And it wasn't diluted much by the knowledge that, as things stood, he now had very little chance of having a woman, any woman, to himself. The question of his paternal powers might never come up in this huge, all-male band of outlaws. Any woman they found...

Arthur the Organizer strode out from the clump of vociferous Strangers. He extended his arms in a warm greeting, but his peculiar eyes had nothing to do with warmth. They spun and spun in anxious multiple calculations.

"Welcome, Eric," he said. "Welcome, welcome. I've been hearing a rumor about your uncle. I hope, I sincerely hope, it's not so."

"He's dead. Dead and sewerred." Eric fought to control a sudden, murderous anger. His uncle, it was true, had used him, Eric, had used his band and his wives, but, after all, these had been his uncle's own: they had been his to use if he so chose. His uncle had been his uncle, and a great one in Mankind.

This man—this Stranger—with his Stranger ambitions his Stranger contempt, based on pure ignorance, for what-ever was truly majestic and noble—what did he know of Mankind? What did he know of what it had meant to Thomas the Trap-Smasher to be chief of such a people?

He gave the Organizer the same recent history he'd given Roy, skipping much of the personal detail. Partly, he knew the Organizer wouldn't be interested in these minor touches; but partly, his rage at the outsider, stand

ing there, nodding and grunting and checking off points to himself, his rage kept creeping into his voice and could only be controlled by cutting the story as short as possible.

Arthur the Organizer heard nothing but the words.

"Well, now I know what happened to Thomas the Trap-Smasher and Mankind. So much for that," his attitude

seemed to be. Eric felt as if he had been filling a storage pouch with exactly the right amount for the Organizer who now thanked him, pulled the draw strings tight and dropped the pouch into his haversack.

"Pretty much like the others," Arthur summed up. "Leader killed, all his known followers exterminated, one, maybe two, manage to get away. The whole business a sudden stroke—chief meshing with chief, tribe with hostile tribe—little or no warning. A beautiful job of organization, I'd say, smooth, smooth as hell. Except, of course, for this inexcusably sloppy business of escapees like yourself and Roy here. But that, I'd lay to the lack of any overall coordinating control—there was no single individual running the whole show who was able to see it all in the round and pick out the weak spots. For a piece of what was essentially committee work, nicely done. Very nicely done."

"I'm glad you can enjoy it. Meanwhile, we—the movement—we're smashed, we're through."

"

The Organizer smiled and put an arm around his shoulder. "Not at all, boy. Not in the slightest. We merely enter upon a new phase. To quote the Ancestor-Science of our enemies: Action equals reaction. At the moment, reaction is dominant, so action—our action—must build up its strength and search for other paths. All human burrows are closed to us, but the Monster burrows are wide open. How about it—are you up to a little expedition?"

Eric stepped back and away from the friendly arm. "An expedition? To deep Monster territory? Why? For what?"

"To get more Alien-Science to back us up. In other words, to practice what we preach. Here we are Alien-Scientists, and how much Mien-Science can we exhibit to potential converts? A little of this, a smidgin of that. What we have is tremendous—you yourself have good reason to know that—but it's all bits and pieces, not fully connected, not fully understood. Now, I say this," and here his voice rose, and Eric noticed that they had been slowly surrounded by most of the Strangers who could walk. "I say: if we're going to be Alien-Scientists, let's be Alien-Scientists all the way. Let's get the best, the strongest stuff the Monsters have. Let's get something that, when we bring it back to the burrows, will be absolutely irresistible, not merely as a weapon to back us up, but as an irrefutable proof of the validity of our beliefs. Let's get some Alien-Science that will blow Ancestor-Science to hell and gone forever."

Tired faces around them lit up under their glow lamps. "He's got it," someone said enthusiastically.

"He sure has. Arthur's found a way out."

"Good old Arthur. The Organizer—The old Organizer himself."

Even badly wounded men began to sit up and grin with excitement.

"What exactly," Eric asked in a cold, practical voice, "what exactly is it that we get?"

The Organizer turned and lifted one eyebrow at him for a long moment. "Now if we knew that," he chuckled and pointed up to the overhanging darkness, "we'd know as much as they, the Monsters, do, and our worries would be over. We don't know *exactly*. But we know of a place, at least Walter does, where the Monsters keep their strong-est, most powerful weapons. Right, Walter?"

A nod from the short, chunky Weapon-Seeker as every-one turned to question him with their eyes. "I've heard of it, and I think I can find it. It's supposed to be the last word in Alien-Science."

"The *last word* in Alien-Science," Arthur repeated as if in awe. "Imagine what that must be like. Just imagine! Well, we go there and that's what we come away with. The *last word*/ Then let the chiefs and the Female Society reactionaries stand up to us. Let them try. We'll show them what Alien-Science can do, won't we? We'll show them once and for all."

A man threw his spear up into the air and caught it. He whirled on a blood-dripping leg and shook the spear over his head. "Attaboy, Arthur," he yelled. "Let's show them so they never forget it!"

Eric saw that everyone around him, Roy included, was cheering and waving spears. He shrugged and waved his too. Arthur looked at him; his smile grew bigger, more expansive.

"So they'll never forget it," he repeated. "Now, let's get some sleep, and everyone who's able will hit the trail in the morning. I hereby declare it night."

Roy and Eric went to the edge of the crowd and bedded down together, back to back: they were, after all, the only two warriors of Mankind present. Just before he went to sleep, the Runner said over his shoulder: "What a great idea, isn't it, Eric? Great!"

"Well, at least," Eric muttered, "it keeps us busy and takes our minds off the fact that we're outlaws for the rest of our lives."

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Wandering about next morning, before most of the others were up, Eric observed with contempt that sentries still had not been posted. He had taken it for granted that the leader of a war band would never let his men go through an entire sleep period without setting up a series of guard shifts to watch and give the alarm if enemies approached. True, he had reasoned out last night that, in the present state of resumed hostility in the burrows, they had little to fear from that direction, but that was only a logical hypothesis: one could not be certain. Besides, if a war band was going to function as a war band, function and survive, it had to go through the motions of discipline whether or not they were necessary.

In the face of such sloppy command work, he and Roy had better set up a personal on-off guard system between themselves every night. They wouldn't lose any rest: it was quite apparent that Strangers required much more sleep than the

fighting men of Mankind.

Apparently, they also required much more talk. Never had Eric seen an expedition begin with so much discussion. He squatted off to one side, grinning and chuckling. Roy came over and sprawled beside him. He also found the Strangers hilarious.

First, there was the matter of who should go and who should stay. Badly wounded men definitely could not go. But how many should be left behind to take care of them? And what about a sewer detail to dispose of corpses? And should a reserve force be maintained here in their base: first, in case of an unexpected call on them from surviving Alien-Scientists in the burrows, and second, if the main expeditionary body found that it needed help or supplies of any kind?

Where Thomas the Trap-Smasher would have announced his plans to respectfully nodding followers, Arthur the Organizer asked for suggestions on each point. There were plenty of suggestions.

Everyone had to be heard, complimented if he came up with something good, reasoned with if he didn't. An incredible amount of time was spent persuading one able-bodied man who felt he belonged on the expedition that he would be much more useful staying here among the wounded. Of course, in the end, Eric noticed with a good deal of interest, the arrangements were pretty much those Arthur the Organizer had seemed to want in the first place.

And everyone got up with the feeling that it was what he had wanted too, all along.

He could handle men, even if he didn't know the first thing about giving orders.

Nor did he know the first thing about commanding an expedition on the move, Eric decided. Leaving behind them the wounded and the dying, as well as those who would serve as nurses, sewer detail and reserve, they set off in an impossibly long line of twenty-three talkative, gesticulating men, a line that straggled here, straggled there, and that was bunched at various points by especially friendly or argumentative groups.

One such group milled about Arthur, the commander of this overgrown war band, this expedition that was more like a wandering mob. Even in the low tunnel, where the walls were narrow and everyone had to bend over, a steady hum of discussion flowed back toward Eric from Arthur and his closer associates.

"Security, that was why they were able to smash us so suddenly. Our security was never tight enough. There were leaks."

• "There are always leaks. The trouble was in our communications. We failed to hear about the leaks fast enough to plug them up."

"I think Walter's right. The trouble lay right there in security. All the chiefs had a spy system of one sort or another and we never really got going on counterespionage."

"In that case, how do you account for—"

Eric glanced back at Roy who was staying the regulation distance of fifteen paces behind him. "Hear them?" he asked the Runner. "They're still fighting yesterday's battles. This is how they win. With their mouths."

"Oh, they're Strangers. What do you want? They don't do things our way and we don't do things theirs."

Eric was surprised. He and Roy had evidently reversed positions since yesterday when they had first met. Roystill found Stranger ways very funny, but was forcing

himself to be tolerant of them. Why?

As the harsh white light of Monster territory expanded ahead of them, he slowed down and waited for Roy to catch up with him. He was curious about what was going on inside the Runner, the only member of this ridiculous crowd for whom he felt any kind of kinship.

But just as Roy came abreast, all the way up front, the first man in the long line stepped out from the piece of Monster furniture and into whiteness.

There was a rapid, chattering sound. The man screeched once, danced a single, mad, despairing step—and fell over on his face. Everyone froze.

After a while, the man who was next in line edged forward carefully, poked his head out and stared upward. They watched him relax. "Only one," he said in a loud, carrying whisper. "Only one and Dan's sprung it. Nothing else in sight."

Silently now, they crept forward and, one by one, slipped out of the exit. They formed a loose, nervous group around the dead man, eyes whipping from his contorted body to anywhere in the great Monster whiteness from which danger might abruptly materialize and focus on them.

The sprung trap hung from the enormous piece of furniture directly above, its wires hanging slack except for a fitful shudder which occasionally rippled through them like a last lingering memory of the life they had just taken.

Roy moved up to Eric and slung his spear. Then he put his hands on his hips and gestured at the trap with his chin. "We came across one of those about five auld tang synes ago. Your uncle knocked it out. You can't poke a spear in front of it—it won't go for a spear: there has to be living flesh. What you do, you stick your foot out under it and pull back fast. A bit too slow and," he clicked his tongue, "no foot."

Arthur the Organizer had been listening. "You know traps," he said to Roy. "We can use you up front as, a scout. From now on, you travel well ahead of the main body."

"I know a bit about traps," Roy told him disgustedly, "but I'm no Trap-Smasher. I'm a Runner. You want a scout, at least use an Eye. Eric, here, is an Eye."

"Both of you then. You'll be our advance party. All right: somebody grab the body and take it back inside to headquarters for sewerage. We'll wait for you." He pointed to the trap and thought carefully for a few moments before speaking. "Now, the way I see it—and either of you feel free to correct me if you think I'm wrong—is that this trap was set in place a relatively short time ago. I base this hypothesis on a single fact: the trap wasn't there last sleep-period, when refugees were still arriving. If this is so—and mind you, I'm only thinking out loud, not coming to anything hard and fast just yet—we can conclude that it was all that coming and going of refugees and messengers, the noise and inevitable clumsiness of the wounded making their way here that attracted the Monsters' attention. They tend to set up traps in places where there are plentiful signs of our activity. All right: does my theory hold together so far?"

"Great, Arthur," said a man who had edged up. "Ter-rific. You're right on the head. What a mind! What I'm interested in is, where do you take the idea? How do you figure next?"

"What a mind!" Roy whispered bitterly to Eric. "To figure out that the trap was installed between last night and now—that takes an Organizer, that takes brains!"

Well, what can you expect? Guys don't even know the difference between a Runner and an Eye!"

Arthur, arms folded on his chest, head down, was walking back and forth in front of his anxiously listening followers. "Here's where I take the idea, at least as a preliminary approach. Understand, it's not completely worked out just yet. It seems to me that if the Monsters are aware of our activity in the neighborhood of this particular piece of furniture, if they've seen enough of us swarming in and out of it to justify a trap, and a brand new type of trap, at that, then it's likely that they're on the alert in this entire area. And that, in turn, leads to three conclusions. One, that a scouting party in advance of the main body is doubly necessary, and that the scouts have to be watchful as hell. Two, that until we're a good distance from here, the expedition proceeds in absolute silence, using nothing but hand signals for communication. And three, well, we ought to take a good hard look around before we start out. It's possible we're under observation by the Monsters at this very moment!"

At this, there was a startled look-around by the members of the expedition, all except Eric and Roy who exchanged disgusted glances. As a matter of course, in the last few minutes, they had each been turning periodically in one direction and another to see if there were any sign of the Monsters in the surrounding whiteness. After a trap had claimed a victim, who but a stupid Stranger would do anything else?

But, a bit later, as they had gone off ahead of the rest along the piece of Monster furniture on their way to the distant wall, Roy's attitude seemed to have changed again.

"After all," he said, as if arguing with himself, "it's a pretty big war band, the size of Mankind's whole damn army roster. Takes a real Organizer to handle a bunch this size. An ordinary band captain—like your uncle, I mean—he wouldn't even know how to hold them together."

Eric laughed. "Holding them together isn't half as important as keeping them alive. I don't think Arthur will be too good at that."

The Runner grunted noncommittally. Eric puzzled over him in silence as they came to the junction of the furniture and wall, turning right in the direction of the doorway

that Mankind had used to get back to the burrows. The door lay on the floor: it had still not been set in place since Eric had gone through. The two of them checked the area for new traps; then, without a word, they heaved the door up and worked it back into its socket. When they went on past it, further along the wall into Monster territory, they both grinned at each other happily: they had just acted as respectable warriors of Mankind.

But what was up with the Runner, Eric wondered? What was going on in his head that he should mock Arthur the Organizer one moment and determinedly find some way to praise him the next—even when he showed such obvious ineptitude as a band leader? There was **no** time to ask questions now: they were moving deeper into territory where only Roy had been before, and Eric's job was to follow quietly, learning the way, keeping his ears alert for the first vibrations that would warn of a Monster's floor-shaking approach.

Three hundred and twelve paces beyond the door was the rendezvous that the

Organizer had set with them. Here, a block piece of Monster furniture came close to the wall, a smaller piece than the one they had been in during the night. Eric could see the top of it by twisting his head far back on his neck: it was oddly curved and there were great green knobs sticking out of it. They stopped there, grateful for its cover, and took their first deep breaths. Far off behind them, along the wall, they watched the main body of the expedition trudging a slow single file in their direction. Eric and Roy waved their hands high to indicate that the way was safe.

When the answering waves indicated that the signal had been received, he turned to the Runner and put the question at last. Why this backing and filling, why this talking Arthur up when he was so unequivocally, ridiculously wrong?

Roy thought a moment before answering.

"He's not wrong. I mean he can't be: he's our leader."

"You know better than that, Roy! Not sending scouts ahead from the beginning, letting the men talk and clump up on expedition, not checking the exit overhang for a Monster trap—how far off can he be?"

"He's our leader," the Runner repeated doggedly. "Was your uncle any smarter, with all of his march discipline and trap-smashing? All right, just one mistake—enough to finish him and most of his band. Arthur's alive."

"He's alive because he was safe in Alien-Science Head-quarters all through the blowup."

"I'm not interested in why, Eric. He's alive, and he's the only leader we've got. This band's the only people we've got. We've got to make the best of it and kind of, you know, show them we belong to them."

Eric stared past him into the glaring whiteness. Far off, hundreds upon hundreds of paces away, he could make out the dim outlines of the larder sacks in which the Monsters kept their food. Once, the powerful bands of Mankind had come to swarm upon those sacks and bring minute portions of the contents home to their women and their chief. Once, he and Roy had been proud to be reckoned warriors of Mankind. Now were they to start all over again and learn pride at being Strangers? And Strangers on the run, at that, Strangers without even wom-en to guide them, to tell them what was right and what was wrong!

No, he didn't see it, and he said as much. "I'm not running my head into a spear any more for somebody else and his private plans."

"That's you," Roy agreed. "That's the way you've always been: a rebel, a trouble-maker, an outsider. Me, I've always asked only to be allowed to go along with the other guys. Why do you think I became an Alien-Scencer? Because our band was Alien-Science. If I'd been in an Ancestor-Science band, I'd be backing up the chief right next to Harold the Hurler and Stephen the Strong-Armed and all those reactionary bastards. I'd be carving up

people like you and your uncle any time the Female Society told me to. And I'd believe in what I was doing, just as I believed in what I was doing when I followed your uncle and went around saying that Chief Franklin had to go and that the Female Society stood in the way of progress. Being in the center of a bunch of guys that you can trust because you know their thoughts and their thoughts are exactly the same as your thoughts—that's home, that's the only home there is. Everything else is hunger and danger and sleeplessness, with no one to guard your back."

Arthur the Organizer came up at this point, with the rest of the expedition. He gave his scouts orders as to the next advance point they were to reach.

Once more, Eric followed Roy, his senses alert for a sudden change in the environment, his mind busy with personal problems. He couldn't argue with the Runner: the Runner was right for himself. But would Eric the Eye ever find a home, where friends who thought like him could be trusted to guard his back? He didn't want to think-like other people—least of all Strangers. Going into great danger to find a weapon which might or might not exist!

The entire expedition camped for the night—once Arthur had officially declared it—in the crevice of a gigantic archway that led out of the Monster larder and into another great white burrow. At least sentries were posted, Eric noticed. They had filled their knapsacks with fresh food from the alien containers in the larder, although Eric's stomach twitched uneasily at the prospect of eating anything that women had not first examined. And they had filled their canteens from an opening in a fresh-water pipe to which Walter the Weapon-Seeker had led them.

"This tribe I used to belong to," Roy the Runner commented to a group of men huddling up for sleep. "Mankind, they called themselves—can you imagine that? *Mankind!*—they had a superstition about only using water from the pipes in the burrows. Once in Monster territory, no eating, no drinking. They could die of thirst—better that than give up the superstition." He guffawed. "They were afraid their dead ancestors would get mad and—"

Eric walked out of earshot. Loneliness crouched on his chest.

13

When the expedition started again after the night's rest, Eric found Roy even more unbearable. The Runner had found a small strap somewhere and had bound his hair on the back of his head, Stranger fashion.

And there were three of them now in the scouting party that led the advance through the archway into the next great burrow. Arthur had detailed Walter the Weapon-Seeker to accompany Eric and Roy. The heavy, squat man with the huge, gnarled hands was the only member of the expedition who had penetrated further into Monster territory than the larder. In search of alien artifacts which could be turned into usable human weapons, he had journeyed many, many times into unbelievably distant Monster burrows.

Roy found this fascinating. He refused to let go of the subject. "This funny little tribe I used to go around with—they'd • have called you a back-burrower, they'd have thought you weren't up to them in guts or anything a warrior ought to have. But not one of them had ever gone as far as you, or taken the chances you've taken. The bravest band leader in this tribe, he'd have thought he was really something if once in maybe two or three auld Lang synes he'd have gone to the edge of the Monster larder and poked his head into the next burrow."

"We turn right," the Weapon-Seeker said as they came to the end of the archway. "Watch out for traps. There are always a couple at the larder exit."

"I'll bet you've seen traps that his old band leader—" Roy jerked a thumb in Eric's direction, "—never given knew existed. And *he* was supposed to be a Trap-Smasher. Hey, Eric," he inquired solicitously, "doesn't all that hair get in your face? It's not good for an Eye to get hair in his face."

"I manage," Eric said shortly.

"Well, you know. You're an *Eye*. At least around your people you're an Eye. You're supposed to lead on expeditions, to show the way to the rest. But Walter here, he's only a Weapon-Seeker, he's not an Eye, but he knows the way we're going better than you. That's because Walter and his people, they're the kind of guys who really—"

"Do you want me to move up ahead?" Eric asked the Weapon-Seeker. "How about I act as point?"

"Good idea, young fellow. Your vision's better than mine. We'll just be going along this stretch of wall until the next rest period. If you see anything suspicious, stop right away and signal."

Eric edged around the two of them, the tall, bony Runner and the short, muscular Weapon-Seeker. He moved rapidly off about thirty paces ahead and kept going. At this distance, their low voices were barely audible. He began to feel better immediately.

And he realized how accustomed he had become to the fantastic spaces of Monster territory. It was still difficult to look up and out into the dazzling white illumination—every time he tried it he felt as if *his* mind were about to wander away and get lost—but he could jog along with the wall brushing his right shoulder, peering all the way ahead and experiencing only the slightest discomfort.

Three times he came to small obstacles which could possibly be traps. Then he signaled to the men behind him who did the same to the main expedition in the rear. After that, it was a matter of walking cautiously away from the wall in a wide semicircle to avoid the obstacle and continue on his way. He still felt as frantic as ever until he got back to the wall and had to fight hard for self-control. Something about being out in the open in all that spacious whiteness made him want to scream and panic and run madly in absolutely any direction.

He tried hard to analyze the feeling and come to grips with it. He was an Eye, after all: some day it might be necessary for him to lead a group right into the middle of a Monster burrow where there was no wall to provide bearings and a sensation of solidity. But the hysteria seemed to remain in spite of all his efforts; each detour caused by a possible trap was as frightening as the one before it.

After passing the last obstacle, he noticed an odd buzzing sound from the wall. Eric stopped and considered it. A new kind of trap, an invisible one? A warning system that the Monsters used to tell them of the approach of humans? He indicated the sound to Walter and Roy by pointing. The Weapon-Seeker listened too, then shrugged and waved Eric on.

But suddenly the stretch of the wall between Eric and the man behind him developed a fissure. It widened rapidly, as if the fabric of the wall were being rolled back. And then the wall in their immediate neighborhood was no longer there, and they were staring into another great white burrow—and at a Monster who was walking placidly in their direction!

Despite all his warrior training, Eric froze. His arms and legs seemed locked into place. He knew, somewhere **in** his brain, that he hadn't been noticed, but he stood there, unable to move, while one of the six great legs began to come down immediately over his head. The creature was merely strolling from one Monster

burrow to another—it might not even realize it had stepped on a human being.

Walter moved.

He darted away from Roy, who had also become im-mobilized by terror, and ran around in front of the crea

ture. Then he yelled, waved his arms wildly—and ran straight toward it.

The immense Monster seemed to go into paralysis. It 'stood rigidly still for a moment as Walter, screaming, waving his arms, his face contorted, kept coming at it. Staring upward, in fear-anguish, Eric could see the flat gray circle that was the underside of its leg—a circle at least twice the thickness of his own body—barely vibrat-ing and poised in the middle of a step as the creature assessed the situation and made up its mind what to **do**.

Then it reared on its two hind legs, and the entire body as well as the portion of it that had been about to come down on Eric, went up and up into the dizzying distances overhead. A deafening, low register, wailing sound came out of it and rolled massive echoes in all directions. It had jumped, Eric realized, and screamed as it jumped. He saw it turn around in mid-air to face the direction from which it had come: the long, long neck with the tiny head at the end strained forward as if to pull the body behind it as far from Walter the Weapon-Seeker as possible. It came down a substantial distance away in the other burrow, and the floor developed incredible solid waves in response to the impact. Eric was flung off his feet and bounced bone-crackingly from wave to wave. When the waves began to dwindle into ripples and then to mere violent vibrations, when the agitated floor was relatively flat again, Eric got his hands on it and lifted his head.

Far off, in the other burrow, the Monster was still running away from them. Its head, held high in the air by the thin and now-rigid neck, was still bellowing mad panic out of an open mouth. Just behind the head, the little pink growths that encircled the neck were standing out stiffly like so many frozen flames. An incredible stink hung **in** the air. Then the creature rounded a far-distant corner and was lost to sight.

But the fissure that had opened in the wall—**through which the Monster had apparently intended to walk—the fissure was closing. And Walter was on the other side of it!**

Eric saw the heavy little Weapon-Seeker scrambling frantically toward him. If the wall closed Walter would be lost to them forever in the unknown depths of Monster territory!

Roy had run up and stood beside Eric. "Move, Walter, *move!*" the Runner breathed. Walter's face was torn with fear as he forced his short legs to their utmost.

The gap in the wall through which they were watching the Weapon-Seeker narrowed smoothly. When he was about a pace and a half away, there was barely enough opening for a man's body to squeeze through.

Without words, both getting the same desperate idea at the same moment, Eric and Roy grabbed the fissure edge at each side and hopelessly tried to keep it from closing further. To their astonishment, no effort was required. The wall stopped coming together the moment their hands were on it: the gap

got no narrower.

Walter panted through and flung himself on the floor. Eric and Roy took their hands away. And immediately the wall closed and became solid once more.

Eric poked at it, scratched at it unbelievably. It was solid enough to break a man's hand if he hit it too hard. And yet it had opened and closed—and temporarily stopped closing when he and the Runner had merely touched it.

And what had been wrong with the Monster? Had it actually been afraid of Walter the Weapon-Seeker, so tiny in comparison with its own fantastic bulk that it could have crushed, squashed, smeared him with one single casual step?

That was exactly what it had been, Walter assured them, once he had gotten back his breath. "Some of the Monsters are scared to death of us, some aren't at all. The ones who are afraid will bolt every time if you run directly

at them making a lot of noise. Of course, the trick is to know which will bolt and which won't. The ones' who aren't scared will just get a better opportunity to tread on you."

"I've heard of that," Roy said, nodding. "Some of the older warriors sing stories of being trapped outside the burrows by a Monster and seeing the damned big thing turn tail and take off. But there are other warriors who got trapped and didn't come back to sing the tale. You never can tell with a Monster."

"Yes you can. You know those pink tentacles at the top of the neck, right near the head? They're the things to look for. If they're short and a dark pink, almost red, then the Monster will bolt when a human being runs at it. Those Monsters are as safe to be around as a new-born baby in the burrows. But if the neck tentacles are long and are colored a whitish pink—look out. A Monster with those kind of tentacles isn't afraid of you and will step on you every time."

"Why?" Eric asked. "What's the size and color of the tentacles got to do with it?"

The Weapon-Seeker spread his hands wide. "How should I know? And who cares why? Not even the Aaron People know—with all their piles of records. It's a fact, that's all, a very useful fact."

"Saved your life, that fact did," Roy told Eric. "I'll say it's useful. More useful than most of the facts that your uncle knew—your uncle and the whole people you used to belong to, you know, that bunch you used to call Man-kind. *Mankind*, he used to call them," Roy said, turning back to Walter. "As if they were the whole human race!"

"Does anyone have any idea, any theory, why it's so?" Eric kept at the Weapon-Seeker.

Walter glanced back a short distance to where Arthur the Organizer and the rest of the expedition were hurrying up. "What good's a theory? It's only worthwhile if **you** know something for sure. Something that's usable. Do you remember that other piece of Monster furniture, the first rendezvous back in the larder? Wide and black with green knobs?"

"Yes. I wondered about it."

"So did I. Last auld lang syne, I was leading a band from my tribe on a weapon bunt. The pickings had been poor, we hadn't found anything at all good. So on the way back, I thought: who knows, why not, maybe those green knobs are worth something. I sent one of the younger lads shinnying up the piece of furniture. He got all the way to the top, crawled out near the edge and started working away at one of the green knobs. It turned round and round, and he called down that it was getting looser as he turned it. All of a sudden there was a flash of red from the green knob straight up into the air. The lad comes down in a lump, all black and burned, dead long before he hits the floor. Then, the next thing, all the lights go out. Pitch black in Monster territory, none of that whiteness, noth-ing. We have to pick our way back to the burrows with our forehead glow lamps. And just before we get to the doorway my people use, the light comes back on, all clear and white, as if nothing had happened. Well, what did happen? I don't know, I don't care. If I could ever figure out a way to turn it into a usable weapon, I might care a lot. Till then, just another Monster doodad."

"Of course, you understand, Eric," said Arthur the Organizer who had come up and been listening, "you understand that we are interested in the why and where-fore of everything that pertains *to the* Monsters. As devout Alien-Sciencers, we have to be. It's just that there is, if you follow me, a time and a place for everything. All safe and sound, Walter?"

"Damned well safe and sound," the Weapon-Seeker growled. "It was touchy for at bit, though. Is it all right with you if I keep the kid on point and let him lead us the rest of the way? He is an Eye, a first-class Eye. He heard

the buzz of a Monster doorway about to open and warned me. I shrugged it off."

Arthur smiled warningly. "Don't start shrugging at your age. We need you. You know the saying about Monster territory: 'A step in time saves nine in the sewer.' "

Now officially lead-off man for the expedition, Eric received his instructions from Walter the Weapon-Seeker and moved off. He saw Roy scowling. The Runner was to act as liaison between the scout group and the main body: it was evident that he considered it a demotion. Too bad—he just didn't have the blood-line of Eric the Storeroom-Stormer, and he should have learned to live with that fact.

The Storeroom-Stormer had been out somewhere deep in Monster territory with his wife, Eric's mother, when he had been killed. That was what his Uncle Thomas had told him. And it had been on a most unusual Theft. Unusual enough to have called for a woman's assistance. What conceivable kind of Theft could that have been?

Eric stared ahead and around into the bright, white distances of the Monster burrow. Here and there, he could see strange, huge objects, not at all like those in the larder. Were they furniture? Weapons? And had his parents once passed this way and seen the same objects, wondered as he was wondering? Or had they possibly known?

But all the time, his mind was on the alert for danger: that was the prime function of an Eye. And all the time, his mind recorded the route, making whatever deductions, whatever generalizations it could for future use: that was the best part of being an Eye.

He knew so little. Walter, uninterested in theory, knew a lot.

Whenever they stopped for a meal, squatting against the wall, he sought Walter out and explored the older man's knowledge, whatever there was of it. Were there human burrows on the other side of this stretch of wall—how could you tell if there were or if there weren't? That pitout there in the floor, in the middle of Monster territory, could it possibly denote a section of plumbing large enough to sewer a Monster corpse? Why, whenever they saw a Monster humping along in the middle of the floor and froze into absolute stillness in response to Eric's signal, was there no likelihood whatever that it would come over and travel along the wall like humans did? Why did humans journey close to walls and Monsters a substantial distance from them?

"You can think up a lot of crazy questions, young fellow," the Weapon-Seeker chuckled. "But that one's easy. Work it out."

Eric thought. "We travel along the wall for cover. We're in a strange place, a dangerous place. We want to keep our visibility down. But to the Monsters this is home. They walk where it's most comfortable, in the middle, just as we would in our own burrows. They have nothing to be afraid of, nothing to hide from. Is that it?"

"I think so. Makes sense, doesn't it? Only thing, don't expect every aspect of the Monsters to be as logical. They're different from us, they're alien. That's the whole point."

Eric would nod, but immediately come back with another question. Even if the Weapon-Seeker didn't know the answer, he could have a fact which might relate, or which might, upon examination, turn into an important clue—or which might just be important, worth knowing, in and of itself. There was so much to learn, to be worked out. He tore at the Weapon-Seeker's mind as if it were a sack in a Monster larder and he, Eric, were a starving man.

As soon as Arthur declared it night, and they all stopped for sleep, Eric would crawl to where Walter was curled up and begin his questions again. He would ignore a loud remark addressed by Roy to the empty air—"Assistant scouts will go sucking around their chief scout every damn time. Never seen it to fail!"—and ask about

any oddity he had observed on the route that day, what he might be expected to see on the next.

Walter had apparently developed a great liking for Eric. He answered the young man's questions with great good humor. "You remind me of a kid in the band I used to lead back with my own people," he said one night. "The kid asks me: 'Our burrows are in the walls of the Monster burrows, right? The Monster burrows are outside and all around us?' 'Right,' I tell him. 'Well, then,' he says, 'what's outside the Monster burrows?' I look at him as if he's crazy. 'What the hell do you mean?' 'I mean,' he says, 'maybe the Monster burrows are in the walls of even bigger burrows. Maybe there are creatures living in those burrows who'd make the Monsters look tiny. Maybe there are such things as Monster Monsters.' Ever hear anything as wild as that?" The Weapon-Seeker lay on his back and roared with delight.

"It's an idea," Eric said, intrigued. "Why is it wild?"

"Oh, kid, please! You know why. You can't have Monsters, and Monster Monsters a hundred times bigger, and Monster-Monster Monsters a hundred times bigger than that. You just can't have it. The whole thing has to stop some place."

"All right. But suppose—"

"Stop supposing," the Weapon-Seeker admonished. "Stick to facts. They're tough enough and complicated enough. Tomorrow, we'll be heading into the burrow where the Monsters keep the weapon we're after. And don't ask me about that weapon!" he ordered, holding up his hands. "I told you, not a word about it until I see it and we get set to grab it up. I'll know it when I find it—that's my job. But your job is to lead the way, and you're going to need a good night's sleep."

"This burrow we'll be going into—" Eric began.

"And don't ask me about the burrow, either! It's the place where the Monsters keep their best and most powerful weapons. That's all **you have to know**. Now, for the sweet love of Alien-Science, will you let *me* get some sleep?"

Eric gave up. He lay on his side, as he did part of every sleep period, reviewing and reviewing. The conclusions came just as he began to doze. He was more convinced than ever that there was no specific weapon that Walter was leading them to, merely the hope of one. This burrow they were to enter, on the other hand . . .

A low, urgent call from the man on guard duty brought him and all the others awake.

When they saw what had startled the guard, they scrambled to their feet, faces turning pale, bodies sweating and shuddering with overwhelming fear.

Two hundred or so paces away, a Monster, one of the largest they'd ever seen, stood staring at them calmly. The great gray legs supporting the enormous gray body were set wide apart, as a man might stand to study carefully an interesting phenomenon. The extended neck waved slightly to and fro, bringing the head with its unblinking eyes first here, then there. The tentacles at the base of the head—they were quite long, Eric noticed, and a very light shade of pink—undulated in sympathy with the neck as if they too had some sort of eyes and were trying to see as well as they could. But there was no suggestion of imminent attack.

On both sides, there was a dead silence. Neither the trembling humans nor the gigantic, watching Monster made a sound. Eric found himself breathing rapidly: he made up his mind that if sudden panic developed, he would try to run in a different direction from the rest.

What did the terrifying creature want? What precisely was it looking at? And what was happening inside its alien mind?

Abruptly, it wheeled and presented **its back to them**. Then it strode away, off, off into the white distance. Despite its size, the floor shook only slightly as it went. They watched it until it was no longer visible. And the

moment it was gone, everyone began to babble, more than a few hysterically.

"Walter," Arthur the Organizer called out. "What do you think? What was going on?"

They all turned to the Weapon-Seeker. He shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I've never seen one of them do a thing like that before."

14

A council of war was held on the incident, to determine whether it should be allowed to affect their plans. There were three men in the council: Arthur the Organizer, who presided, Walter the Weapon-Seeker, since he alone knew anything

at all about this area to which they had come, and the oldest member of the expedition, a white-haired and surprisingly spry old fellow by the name of Manny the Manufacturer, selected apparently out of deference to his age and nothing else.

Roy and Eric were asked to participate in a non-voting advisory capacity, it being presumed, Eric decided with a wry, internal giggle, that as scouts and front-burrowers they would know something the others did not about unusual circumstances and extraordinary dangers.

"We can go on or we can go back," Arthur the Organ-izer pointed out. "If we go back, we've failed and we don't have much. If we go on, we have to take it for granted that we might be—and please notice that I say no more than *might* be—walking straight into disaster."

Walter the Weapon-Seeker drummed on the floor with an impatient foot. "Sure. They'll be expecting us. And they'll be laying for us."

"Possibly. And then again, possibly not." Arthur held up a finger and faced each one of them in turn. "The Monsters don't think as we do: we have no reason to believe that they react as we do, or give alarms as we do.

This creature might have been simply curious about us. The way it went on about its business would argue for that point of view. It's one of the things we must consider seriously."

"*Consider!*" the Weapon-Seeker spat. "Considering is your job, not mine. Doing something is my job. I say we go ahead and do what we started out to do."

"We don't have a choice, anyway," said Manny the Manufacturer. "If we go back without the weapon we came for, we spend the rest of our lives as outlaws. I don't think lives like that are worth a hell of a lot. And neither do most of the men. I say let's take our chances."

Arthur turned to his two front-burrowers. "Eric?"

Eric the Eye tried to give as much formal dignity as possible to his first opinion in a council. "I believe we should go on. As planned."

"Mind telling us your reasons?"

"Well," Eric unbent a bit. "If there's been an alarm, the Monsters know we're here. There's no nearby doorway into the burrows: we can't escape. They could be waiting for us both ways—whether we go on or whether we go back. At least if we go on, we stand a chance of getting something. And I agree with Manny that an outlaw's life is a pretty damn unappetizing prospect."

"Roy?"

The Runner shuffled and made a large, indeterminate gesture with his left hand. "There's this and there's that. There's a lot to consider. It's awfully easy for some people to sound off and say they know for sure what the Mon-sters are doing—that we should follow our original plans, no matter what. Some people still have hair all over their eyes. The only thing I heard that makes sense is what you said, Arthur—that we should *consider*. It sounds like an intelligent thing to do. I vote to do what you suggested: to consider."

"You don't have a vote," the Weapon-Seeker told him. "All you have a right to give is your opinion. What the

kid said," he pointed to Eric with his thumb, "is about it. If they're laying for us, they're laying for us both Ways, ahead and behind. Ahead's where we want to go.

So let's go."

Arthur summed up. "The sense of this meeting is that at least two of you, Walter and Manny, feel we risk as much by turning back as by going on—and that there are substantial advantages to going on. I'm inclined to go along with that majority view, so long as we proceed with all the caution that these new circumstances make necessary. You see, Roy," he said placatingly, "it's not that we reject your advice, but in a democratic discussion you have to give a little and take a little. **You** can't always have your own way."

The tall, thin young man looked from Arthur to Eric, then pulled a spear out of his back sling and walked off to the head of the column.

"You give Eric some idea of what to look out for," Arthur suggested to Walter. "I'd like to start moving as soon as possible—before there's much more talk among the men."

"Right!" growled Manny the Manufacturer. "Let's get this expedition off the floor."

There wasn't much that the Weapon-Seeker could tell him, Eric found out. It was now quite clear that Walter had only seen this new Monster burrow from the entrance, and very briefly. He could describe the first piece of Monster furniture in the place—and that was all.

From now on, Eric realized, he would really have to be an Eye.

He went through the archway into the burrow that was the goal of the expedition, Walter some thirty paces behind him. When he saw the succession of tall black rods standing on the floor, crisscrossed horizontally with dozens of other rods, he waved to the Weapon-Seeker, who passed the wave on to the men in his rear. Then the chunky chief scout pointed forward, giving Eric the order to move on.

Now came the hard part, the truly frightening part. At least, there were no Monsters about—none that he could see.

Eric swallowed. He left the archway, and the wall. He crept out into open Monster territory, where there was nothing but the harsh white light and stretching vistas of floor.

His heart began pounding. He found that his regular, cautious breathing was turning into noisy gasps. He felt exposed, terrifyingly vulnerable, completely alone. And lost—he felt as if he would be lost in that whiteness forever.

What was he doing here? He belonged back there, cowering against the blessedly safe wall!

But he put his head down and continued to creep forward. Another step. And another. Now he had to force himself to slow: he'd been about to burst into a mad dash at nowhere.

Easy. Another step. And don't look up—just as when you first came into Monster territory, days ago as an initiate warrior. Another step without looking up, without going wild with panic.

How far away was that rod-supported piece of Monster furniture? Did this floor go on forever? Another step. A great frightened gasp. Another step. And another

He had arrived. His shoulder touched a rod. He flung his arm around it and hauled his mind back to calmness. He had arrived. He was near cover again. And at last he could look up.

Still no Monsters that he could see anywhere in the place. He held on to the rod with the crook of his elbow and signaled to Walter at the archway. Walter passed the signal on, shuddered, and then left the wall himself.

Eric watched him sympathetically for a moment, then turned back to examine the thing he was standing under.

It was composed of these black rods, each as thick as his arm and each rising perpendicularly from the floor straight into the dizzy heights above. Every fifteen or so paces, another rod reared into the air. And at intervals, each many times the height of a man, there were the rods running across at right angles to the others.

Here and there, high among the rods, where a horizon-tal crossed a vertical, there was a small, semitransparent cube at the junction point. The light was sharply reflected from these cubes, making it difficult to look at them steadily, but some of them had strange shadows flickering inside them. Did the shadows have anything to do with a weapon they might be able to use?

Eric found it was impossible to stare upward very long; he looked back at Walter to see how the chief scout was progressing. Not well: the man's face was almost purple with the overseasoned mixture of effort and fear. His feet were beginning to splay; his knees were folding forward and down. He wouldn't make it.

Taking a deep breath, Eric flung himself away from the relative safety of the rod and leaped across the floor. By the time he reached Walter, the man had almost col-lapsed. He grabbed Eric's arm with both hands—his eyes were tightly shut by now—and would have pulled him down if fright had not so thoroughly loosened his muscles.

"The wall—" he babbled. "Give it up—let's get back to the wall!"

"Easy," Eric said. "Easy, Walter. We're almost there."

He guided the Weapon-Seeker the last few paces to the rod. Walter held on to the upright post as desperately as Eric had and fought for breath. It was no simple thing for a human being to leave the wall in Monster territory.

Fortunately, there were plenty of upright rods in this structure. They weren't thick, but they were solid: they would give the feeling of cover and at least the semblance of cover to all the men in the expedition. But he and

Walter would have to distribute them down the rows of rods—no point in having too many men grouped around any one post. And they'd be dealing with panic-stricken lunatics who would tend to hang on as if for life itself to the first solid things they encountered.

Roy came across next. He had a hard time, but he didn't do nearly as badly as Walter. It was obvious that the younger the man, the more resilient he was psycholog-ically, and the more capable of taking the shattering ex-perience of negotiating open Monster territory. They guided Roy to a rod: he wound himself around it for a dozen tortured breaths before coming to and taking a look up, down, forward, backward.

The rest of the expedition came over in groups of three. They had their hands full with men who slumped to the floor and wound themselves up in tight little balls of refusal, with men whose eyes suddenly rolled up in their heads and who wandered jerkily off in this direction or in that, with men who started to run away and who would bite and kick and gouge when they were caught. But fully half of the men

made it across by themselves.

When they had been distributed, one or two men to each upright post climbing above their heads into emptiness, Eric, Roy and Walter discussed the next move with Arthur.

"I think we'll stay here for a while and take a break for a meal," the Organizer decided. "Do you agree? I think we should. We'll wait till everybody calms down and comes back to normal. Meanwhile, do you three feel like going on ahead and taking a look at what we've got coming up? How many more open spaces—you know, problems we might be facing—anything that looks like a weapon—whatever strikes you as a good idea."

Eric and Roy followed Walter to the last row of standing rods. They shaded their eyes and stared across a long empty stretch of floor—to where there was another rodlike **structure, very much** like the one they were in.

"What do you think those shiny cubes are?" Eric asked, pointing. Here and there, high in the other structure, were semitransparent boxes just like the ones above them. A few contained liquid shadows.

"I don't know," Walter admitted. "But I intend to find out. They're what I noticed when I passed this way before. They look as if they might be useful. Only, how will we get up to them? Think a spry man might climb up one of these rods?"

Eric and Roy considered the height and the lack of handholds. They both shook their heads. The Weapon-Seeker nodded ruefully.

"Then there's only one thing to do. We go on until we find a structure low enough to climb. Monster furniture comes in all kinds of different sizes. We'll find a low one with some shiny boxes close to the floor. And we'll find other stuff, too. In this place, I have a real strong feel

"Hold it!" Eric grabbed his arm. "**Listen! Do you hear it?**"

The short, heavy man, listened anxiously for a moment, then shook his head. "Not a thing. What do you hear?"

But Roy had also tensed at Eric's warning and leaned forward alertly. "Something's coming this way. It's not *much* of a sound yet, mostly vibration. You can feel it with your feet."

The Weapon-Seeker listened again. This time he nodded rapidly. "Monsters. And more than one." He whirled to face the expedition, strung out at the bases of the rods behind them. Pointing his forefinger straight up **in** the air, he rotated one hand rapidly over his head. This, the most fearful alarm of all to any band, had to be given silently. It meant: "*Monsters are upon us—up there —look out!*"

No reaction from the others, and the three of them groaned to themselves. The members of the expedition were *stuffing* food into their mouths, taking swallows out of canteens, chatting together in low, friendly voices. No one was bothering to watch the scouts.

What a bunch, Eric raged hopelessly. *Baby warriors,* his uncle, Thomas the Trap-Smasher, would have called them.

The rumbling noises were getting louder. Walter made up his mind to dispense with expedition security precautions. "You damn fools!" he yelled. "*Monsters! Don't you **hear** them?*"

That got a reaction. Every man leaped to his feet, knapsacks and canteens rolling away. White faces turned rapidly in their direction, looked off to examine the brilliantly lit spaces above.

Eric slapped the backs of the two scouts on either side of him. "Let's get out of here," he said urgently. This was traditionally an every-man-for-himself situation among the peoples of the burrows. He pointed across the floor to the other rodlike structure. "There! They'll be after the bulk of the men in this one. Let's go!"

Without waiting for a reply, he darted out into the open. From the corners of his eyes, he was conscious as he ran of huge gray Monsters materializing out of the whiteness on all sides. Those things could move fast when they wanted to! And in relative silence, too—the floor was vibrating no more than it had this morning when the creature watching them had walked away.

He ran fast, forcing every bit of speed out of his legs, not at all aware now of the openness of the space he was on. The only thought in his mind concerned the Monsters all about him. Would he be stepped on? When? Would he feel it when it happened—or would it be over too fast?

A moment before he reached the other set of rods, somebody passed *him* and leaped into hiding among the posts of the structure. Roy the Runner, starting late, had the legs to make up for lost time. Then Eric was there too, cowering behind a rod. He watched Walter the Weapon

Seeker stumble the last couple of paces and fall gasping two rods away from him.

But the rest of the expedition was **in** trouble. The men scrambled about, mindlessly, shrieking, inside the rod structure they had quit. Five Monsters now stood around it in silence, making any escape to the outside almost impossible.

The Monsters had known where the expedition lay hidden—they had made directly for it. And they were doing something in an organized fashion. What?

Eric strained his eyes to see, but the movements of the gray bodies were unfamiliar and unclear. Suddenly, from each one of them, a long green rope dropped to the floor. The ropes seemed almost alive: as they lay on the floor they quivered and bits of darker color slid up and down their coils.

There was a click from one of the Monsters, then a long, scraping musical note. The ropes began acting even more like live things. They slid into the rodlike structure and among the upright posts. Wherever they touched a man, they turned completely dark and he was carried along with them, apparently stuck to their surface.

"All together, now!" Eric heard Arthur the Organizer yelling. "Stay together and work on these ropes. All we have to do is get each man free—" Then a rope touched him in passing and he became just another shrieking attachment, alternately tugging and pushing at it. In a few brief moments, every man in the other structure was a madly wriggling prisoner. -

"They seem to want us alive," Walter whispered to Eric. "And do you notice how these Monsters move around? They're a lot more deliberate than any I've ever seen before."

With their clusters of screaming, arm-waving humanity, the green ropes were picked up one at a time by the Monsters. Eric saw that the long necks came down and the pink tentacles near the head did the grasping. The tentacles, then, were the equivalent of hands—or fingers.

"There goes the entire expedition!" Roy called out hysterically. "What do we do now? What the hell do we do now?"

Walter shot an angry scowl in his direction. "Keep your voice down, you damn fool! If you lose control of yourself, we're all three dead."

As if in corroboration, a long neck twisted down out of the whiteness above, and a Monster's head swung to and fro inquiringly outside the rodlike structure in which they were hiding. It was only a man's height above the floor and Eric, nauseated with fear, felt that the eyes, in each of which a narrow, purple iris swam, were staring directly at him. And that pointed, stinking mouth—at least three men could disappear into it without creating a noticeable bulge!

He forced himself to stand absolutely still, although every muscle in his body yearned to leap off and make a run for it. Those pink tentacles—this close, for the first time, he saw how incredibly long they were—they could probably grab him up with ease.

But the monster, though staring directly in his direction, did not seem to see him. The head poked around among the rods and a corner of it touched Roy where he stood rigidly a short distance away.

The Runner threw his hands up, screamed—and ran. Instantly, the head was pulled up out of sight. Roy flung himself to the other end of the structure.

"Now we're in for it," said Walter the Weapon-Seeker grimly. The two of them saw a rope drop among the rods near Roy. It slid toward him smoothly, caught him—and kept going. It was going for them.

"We scatter," the Weapon-Seeker ordered. "Good luck, **kid.**"

They leaped apart in opposite directions. Eric bent over, trying to keep his body low, for minimum visibility,

and sped in a zigzag course among the rods. If he could get to the other side, there might be another structure nearby

He heard Walter yell, and he spent a precious moment on a look. The Weapon-Seeker was now caught on the green rope only a few paces from the struggling Runner. And the rope was sliding swiftly at Eric, pulling both men along with it.

Eric straightened. Visibility was unimportant now—he might as well be running as fast as he could.

He heard the yells of Walter and Roy coming closer and closer behind him. He could not run any faster. *He just could not run any faster...*

Swift, terrible cold touched his side and he was pulled off his feet. He found himself screaming. He hammered at the green rope, dark black where it was attached to his hip. It was like a part of him—it couldn't be pulled off. He screamed and screamed and screamed.

A Monster head came down and one of the pink tentacles grasped an end of the rope. Up they went, the three of them, screaming, flailing their arms and legs, beating against the rope with their fists, up they went, higher and higher, into the dizzying whiteness, up, up they went to where the floor was no longer visible, to where the Monsters could examine them, the Monsters whose prisoners they were.

15

Eric was never able to remember clearly what happened afterward. It was as if a

massive hysteria had crashed into his mind and obliterated most of the record. There were isolated, scattered impressions: the rope from which he hung being passed from one neckful of pink tentacles to another, a great purple eye coming intently close, a gust of stinking, suffocating Monster breath—but over all beat thememory of men screaming as they dangled from the heights in clusters all around him, his own will and self-awareness completely lost in that hoarse, unending chorus of the doomed.

The impressions he retained of that moment became coherent only after the rope to which he, Walter and Roy were attached had been dipped by a Monster into a large, transparent box and he suddenly found himself able to walk again on a floor. Near him, the other two scouts were getting to their feet, yells subsiding into painful, sobbing breaths; while over their heads, the rope, of which they were at last gratefully free, was being pulled back into the heights, its color no longer bright but a dirty greenish gray. A large proportion of the expedition was already standing all around him, and the rest arrived in the next few moments as rope after rope was lowered into the transparent box, discharged its prisoners, went limp and was pulled away.

Boxes? Transparent boxes? Eric stared down intently. Through the bottom, he saw layer after layer of intersect-ing rods under his feet. Every once in a while, at the junction of a set of rods there would be a large box, such as the one he was in. Some of the boxes contained hu-mans; others were empty.

Walter met his eyes when he looked up. "Sure," the Weapon-Seeker said with a grimace. "Those shiny boxes with shadows in them. The shadows were men. The boxes are cages." He cursed. "Walter the Weapon-Seeker, they call me. And this big, new weapon I was going to get from the Monsters turns out to be— We got it all right. We got it good."

The other men had been listening. Manny the Manu-facturer came up, holding a forefinger in the air. He looked right past them, his old, wrinkled face heavy with thought. "Cages," he muttered. "There was a legend about these things in the old religion—in the Ancestor-Science we used to believe in. What was it? Something about what

happened to people who fooled around with Alien-Science, who had too much to do with the Monster's—Let me remember—"

They waited while he shook the forefinger slowly at his mind. "Cages. Yes. Once, when I was a boy, I heard these things described in terms of Ancestor-Science. The Cages of Sin. That was it—the Cages of Sin! And there was a line about them that went like this: *The cages of sin is death.*"

"Are death, you mean," someone corrected. "The Cages of Sin *are* death."

"That's not the way the line went," Manny insisted. "Not the way I heard it. It went: *The cages of sin is death.* Just like that" -

A chilled silence followed. After a while, a man dropped to his knees and began muttering an Ancestor-Science litany used by his own people. Another man from the same tribe knelt beside him and joined in. The chant filled the cage, awoke guilty memories in all of them.

0 ancestors, 0 ancestors, I have failed and I have forgotten. Forgive me. I have

failed to hit back at the Monsters in the ways you taught. Forgive me. I have forgotten to follow your ways. Forgive me, forgive me...

Eric shook himself out of the hypnosis of misery the words induced. Give in to this sort of thing and they'd be worth nothing. The whole bunch of them would be so much sewerage.

He still burned with shame when he thought of how the mass panic had swept him up a short while ago. That was no way for an Eye to act—and he was an Eye. An Eye should observe and record, no matter how fearfully unusual the circumstances, even if death seemed imminent. Wherever and however he found himself, an Eye must store impressions for future use: he must act like an Eye.

This cage, now— He walked away from the group surrounding the kneeling men. Roy the Runner and Walter the Weapon-Seeker gave him a startled glance, then fell in behind him. They passed Arthur the Organizer, sitting on the floor, his head in his hands. *"Forgive me,"* Arthur was intoning. *"Forgive me, forgive me.... "*

Less than ten paces by twelve paces, those were the dimensions of the cage. Not very much room for so many men—they were pretty crowded. The Monsters would probably make some provision for feeding them: there was no point in taking them alive if they weren't intended to be fed. But there would be the problem of garbage and body waste. Eric studied the floor and saw how it sloped to one corner of the cage where there was a rod junction. A hole in that corner went down into a rod: evidently the rod was hollow. But a very small, single hole for such a large number of men—how did the Monsters propose to keep the cage from becoming foul?

Eric put the problem aside temporarily and walked to one of the four perpendicular walls, Walter and Roy still following him and trying to read the reactions on his face. The wall was transparent and solid: Eric made sure of that by thumping it with his knuckles and trying to scratch it with a spear point. He threw back his head, estimating the distance to the top. About three and a half men high, with a lip that curved in and down for about an arm's length. Still

"We could get four husky men to stand side by side against it," he suggested to Walter. "Three men standing **on** their shoulders, two men on theirs. A pyramid. Then a man could scramble up their bodies and pull himself over the lip."

The Weapon-Seeker considered. "He might. But four and three and two—that would leave nine men behind in the cage. Who'd volunteer to be left behind?"

"That's not your problem," said a weak voice behind

them. "Your problem is what you do when you get out of here."

They turned. There was an odd-looking man lying on the floor in the midst of the woebegone expedition. He didn't appear to be a Stranger, Eric decided, and he certainly wasn't a member of Mankind. While his hair was tied in the back of his head Stranger-fashion, he was dressed in some ridiculous garment that was not a loincloth and certainly not loin straps—a short leather skirt with pockets all around its circumference. From several pockets, unfamiliar articles protruded.

And he was badly hurt. The upper part of his face and the whole right side of his body showed wide, dark bruises; his right arm and leg were limp and apparently broken.

"Were you already in the cage when they dropped us in?" Eric asked.

"I was. But you people had too many troubles of your own to notice me." He groaned and shut his eyes before going on. "You see, if you get out of here, you've nowhere to go. The walls of the cage are as smooth outside as inside—you'd just drop to the main floor, a full Monster-height below. And even if you made it to one of the rods—what good would that do? No handholds, nothing to grip anywhere along their length. Now, what I've been lying here wondering is this: could you pool your hair straps and your loin straps, braid them into a rope—"

"We could!" Walter broke in excitedly. "I know how, and there are other men here who—"

"But then I dismissed that idea, too. At most, you'd get a rope that only one of two men could use and would have to take with them from rod to rod. You're dealing with fantastic heights, remember. And from what I know of the quality of the leather you people turn out—no, it would just be another way to get killed." He paused, thought a bit. "Although, maybe not a bad way. Not a bad way to get killed at all."

The three of them soaked that in, shuddered. "Speaking of people," the Weapon-Seeker said in a low voice. "What are yours?"

"My tribe, you mean? That's my business. Now—kindly go away. I'm—I'm afraid I'm going to suffer a bit."

Roy the Runner grunted angrily. "We'll go away. Be glad to. Get in touch with us when you learn some man-ners and friendliness."

He walked off. The Weapon-Seeker scratched his head, looked at Eric, shrugged. He caught up to the Runner.

Eric squatted next to the wounded man. "Can I help you in any way?" he asked. "Could you use some water?"

The man licked his lips. "Water? How would you get water up here when it's not feeding time? Oh, I forgot. You warrior types, you carry canteens around with you. Yes, I'd very much appreciate some water."

Unslinging his canteen, Eric brought it to the man's mouth. The fellow certainly was no warrior—he seemed to know nothing of drinking discipline while on expedition. He would have finished the whole canteen, if Eric, conscious always of what must be set aside for an emergency, had not gently pulled it back and stoppered it.

"Thanks," the man sighed. "I've been taking pills for the pain, but I haven't been able to do anything about thirst. Thank you very much." He looked up. "My name's Jona-than Danielson."

"Mine's Eric. Eric the Eye."

"Hello, Eric. You're from a—" pause, as a twinge of pain arched through the prone body—"from a front-burrow people, aren't you?"

"Yes, my tribe calls itself Mankind. The only one that's left from it, who's still with me, is that tall fellow, Roy the Runner. The one who got mad at you."

"The only one that's left—" the man seemed to be talking to himself. "I'm the only one left. Fourteen of us,

and they got every one. Just one kick from a Monster. Broken bodies all over the place. I was lucky: the foot barely touched me. Smashed my ribs—internal hemorrhages—I don't think anyone else got off so lightly."

When his voice trailed off, Eric asked hesitantly: "Is that what we can expect? Is

that what the Monsters will do to us?"

Jonathan Danielson jerked his head impatiently, then winced as the movement hurt him. "Uhht No, of course not. All of that happened when I was captured. Anything as crude as a kick—that's the last thing the Monsters are likely to do to you here. You know where you are, don't you?"

"This cage, you mean?"

"This place. This place where all these cages are. It's a Pest Control Center."

"Pest? Control Center?"

The battered face grinned up at him sourly. "You and me. Humans, generally. We're pests as far as the Monsters are concerned. We steal their food, we upset them, we infest their houses. They'd like to get rid of us. This is a place where they do research on ways and means to get rid of us. It's a laboratory where they test all kinds of homicides: sprays, traps, poisoned lures, everything. But they need laboratory animals for the tests. That's what we are, laboratory animals."

Later, Eric made his way back thoughtfully to the center of the cage where Roy and Walter sat dispiritedly with their arms about their knees.

"People are getting tired, Eric," the Runner said. "They've had a hard day, a real bad day. They'd like to go to sleep. But Arthur just sits there mumbling his pray-ers. He won't talk to anyone."

Eric nodded. He cupped his hands at his mouth. "Lis-ten, everybody!" he called. "You can go to sleep. I hereby declare it night!" "Do you hear that?" Roy sang out beside him. "Our

leader has declared it night. Everybody go to sleep!"

All over the cage, men began stretching out gratefully on the floor. "Thanks, Eric. Good night. Good night, Eric."

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hHe pointed to Walter and Roy. "You'll be sentries on the first watch. Pick any two men you trust to relieve you. And give orders to wake me if anything out of the ordinary ppens."

When they had taken their posts at opposite walls of the cage, he lay down himself and put his arms behind his head. He had a lot to think about, and it was hard to fall asleep.

Pest Control Center ... Laboratory animals .. .

Where they test all kinds of homicides ...

16

There was no need to declare it morning. They were awakened by breakfast, quantities of food being dropped into their cage out of a long transparent tube held over the edge by a Monster. Some of the food was familiar to those of them who had seen it freshly stolen from a Monster larder; some of it was new and disquietingly different; but all of it was edible.

After a great pile of the variously colored lumps had rained into their midst, the tube was withdrawn and they saw it inserted in other cages of the rod structure. Shortly after they had finished eating, the Monster brought the tube back and hung it over one corner. Water poured out of it now, so that the men could drink, but it also poured down the sloping floor to the hole in the opposite corner, washing away all

leftovers and whatever waste matter had accumulated during the night.

Simple enough, Eric thought. So much for sanitation.

There was a dense crowd pushing and-- shouldering around the stream of water—he'd have to organize them better the next time. Meanwhile, it would compromise a leader's dignity to join their scramble. He gave his canteen to Roy, telling the Runner to fill it and also see that the wounded man had plenty to drink.

When the Runner looked doubtful, he said simply and definitely: "That's an order, Roy," and turned away. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Runner trot off immediately and follow his instructions. Eric felt relieved —after a night's sleep and the general recovery of nerve, he'd been afraid that his position might be questioned.

The important thing, he decided, was to give the men plenty to do. It would keep them from worrying and would at the same time emphasize his new status as leader.

Arthur, his predecessor in command, was a good place to start.

The water from the tube abruptly died to a trickle and the tube itself was pulled away from the lip at the top of the cage. Several of the men who hadn't managed to fill their canteens protested loudly, but the Monster, its pink tentacles holding the dripping tube firmly near its spear-point-shaped head, walked off about its business.

The Organizer brought his canteen down after a long swallow and wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. Eric crossed to him, conscious that most of the expedition was watching.

"We have a problem in organization here, Arthur," he said. "Something for you to handle. We can't have all the men jostling in a bunch, each man trying to fill his own canteen. That way there'll always be somebody doing without. Think you could work out a better system?"

Arthur was apparently quite content to have given up the function of command decision in favor of the second-level administration planning which he knew so well. He smiled affirmatively. "Yes. I've been thinking about it. I don't see why we couldn't—"

Eric gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Don't tell me. Show me. I'll leave it completely in your hands." He had seen his uncle, Thomas the Trap-Smasher, talk to his men in precisely this way—and he knew it worked.

It worked. Arthur began detailing a group of men to act as guards around any future water supply and another group to practice as a canteen brigade. Eric called Walter the Weapon-Seeker to his side.

"I want you to requisition all spare leather straps that the men are carrying. Braid them into experimental ropes. Try it different ways, two strands, three strands, whatever occurs to you. Let's see how strong a rope we can get."

The Weapon-Seeker shook his head. "Don't expect it to work. We can't do much braiding with the short lengths the men are liable to come up with. I've been turning it over in my mind, and that wounded Stranger was right. The kind of straps we have—they're fine for holding hair in place or even a knapsack, but if you tie them into any kind of length and expect them to support real weight, say three or four men, they'll just snap."

"Try it anyhow," Eric urged. "And use as many men as you can. If they're busy enough, they won't have the time to get scared." He paused. "How come you called the wounded man a Stranger? Isn't that a front-burrow term?"

"Sure. But we back-burrowers use it too. For people like him." Walter gestured with his thumb. "I've seen that kind of skirt before, with pockets all over. You know who wears those skirts? The Aaron People."

Intrigued, Eric stared in the direction that Walter was indicating. The Aaron People again. The legendary people from which his grandmother had come. The people who had refused to join in the Alien-Science revolution, but who also, it seemed, had not particularly opposed it. The man did not look so very different. He was responding to

Roy's ministrations feebly, but—except for his clothes—he might just as well have been any one of the men in the expedition who had been wounded.

"Why wouldn't he identify himself? Why keep it a secret?"

"That's the Aaron People for you. They're goddam snobs. They think they're better than the rest of us and that we shouldn't have any idea of what they're up to. They're always like that, the bastards."

Eric was amused to note again that a back-burrower like Walter was as uncertain intellectually relative to the Aaron People as a warrior of Mankind might be when confronted with the superior material culture of almost any Stranger at all.

But he himself was a warrior of Mankind—and most of the expedition was probably aware of it. How long would they follow a front-burrower?

"Get on with those ropes," he said. "We may need them. I'm planning on a mass escape."

"Seriously?" There was a momentary flash of hope in Walter's eyes. "How?"

"I'm not too sure, just yet. I'm still working on it. Something we used to do back in my home tribe."

The Weapon-Seeker went off to organize groups of men for rope research. He must have passed on what Eric had said to him: from time to time, a group would whisper excitedly when its young leader walked by.

Eric had seen them sitting around glumly the night before: he knew that men without hope are worse than useless. And he—or somebody else—might come up with a usable idea at any time. The men should be on their toes and ready to move when that happened.

But there was no sense in lying to himself about his primary reason for starting the rumor. He needed it to reinforce his position. Men had to be given reason for believing in their leader—especially when the leader came from a background most of them despised.

He had reached the quiet, flat conviction that he was the best chief they could have, under the circumstances. It was not simply that he'd been the first to recover last night and had taken over because somebody had to. No. He'd seen more than enough of back-burrow methods on expedition: their poor march discipline, their disorganized re-actions to the unexpected, their interminable talk when a quick decision was necessary. He was willing to admit now that almost any Stranger knew more facts and possessed more processing skills than he, was a better man when it came to large-scale burrow politics or the intricate details of religious discussion—but it took a warrior of Mankind, trained from childhood in the dangerous front burrows, to point the way to survival amid the constantly recurring catastrophes of Monster territory. And he was a warrior of Mankind, the son of one

famous band leader and the nephew of another, a proven Eye in his own right. He was the best chief this bunch could have.

Meanwhile, they must be kept occupied and hopeful until a good plan for escape materialized. If a good plan for escape materialized.

A Monster's neck writhed out of the harsh white illumination in the direction of their cage. Pink tentacles held a jerking green rope above them for a moment, while the wet purple eyes looked here and there as if making a choice. Then the rope came down near an upward-staring man and fused itself to his back, ripples of darkness pulsating along the part of it that touched him.

When the rope was pulled up, there was a single, startled yelp from the man who went with it. After that, he relaxed and stared curiously about, awaiting developments while he was being carried off. He was evidently not nearly as frightened of this strange method of locomotion as he'd been the day before, the first time he'd experienced it.

Eric strode over to the wounded man whom Roy was tending. "What's going to happen to him?"

Jonathan Danielson had grown worse. His entire *body* was blotchy and discolored. He gestured toward a corner of the cage with dull, uncaring eyes. "You can see from there. Take a look," he said weakly.

Most of the men followed Eric to the corner. From that point, with a view pretty *much* unobstructed by rods or other cages, they could see a flat, white surface supported by rods coming up from the floor all around its circumference. At such an enormous distance, it looked rather small, but when the Monster had deposited the captured man on it—carefully fastening down his spread arms and legs with great clips attached to the surface—Eric realized that the entire population of his own tribe, Mankind, could be accommodated there with plenty of room to move about.

At first it was hard to see clearly just what the Monster was doing. A collection of green ropes was assembled near the fastened man. Some of the ropes were short and thick and curled, others were thin and seemed fairly rigid. The Monster would pick up a rope, poke it at the man or touch him with it, then **put** the rope down and select another one.

The man's body seemed to strain against the fastenings more and more violently. They all leaned forward squinting their eyes.. Suddenly, Eric understood what was happening. A long, low groan heaved itself from his chest and tore out of his mouth.

"It's pulling his skin off!" someone behind him said in horrified disbelief.

"It's tearing him to pieces. Look, it's ripping his arms and legs apart!"

"Those bastards! Those bastards! What do they want to do a thing like that for?"

Now, long red lines were radiating from the man's broken body in every direction on the circular white surface. He must have been screeching from the moment the Monster bent to its work, but this far away they could hear nothing.

And still the Monster went on calmly and studiously, this rope, that rope, poking, prodding, slicing, tearing.

All around Eric, the members of the expedition were turning away. Some were throwing up, others were cursing monotonously and hopelessly to themselves. One man kept asking himself in a dazed, pleading voice: "What do they want to do a

thing like that for? What do they want to do a thing like that for?"

But Eric forced himself to watch. He was an Eye, and an Eye must see all there is to see. He was also responsible for his men—and anything he could learn about the Mon-sters might help them.

He saw what was left of the man's body grow still and quiet in its puddle of blood. The Monster's neck bent to one side, came back with a transparent tube. Its pink tentacles unfastened the corpse. Then they held the tube directly over the body. A stream of water shot out, wash-ing the dead man and all the blood that had poured out of him into the center of the white surface where there was a dark round hole. *He* disappeared into the hole. The Mon-ster played the stream of water over its collection of green ropes, apparently cleansing them. It put the tube down and walked away from the circular surface, now all white and clean again.

Head bent, his stomach rolling hideously inside him, Eric stumbled back to where Jonathan Danielson lay all alone. The Stranger answered his question before he put it:

"Dissection. They want to find out if you people are like the other humans they've taken apart. I think they dissect one man in every group they capture." He moved his head restlessly back and forth and drew a deep breath. "When they placed me up here, there was another man from my party still alive. Saul Davidson. They kept Saul down there and dissected him."

"And the rest of us," Eric said slowly, "are to be used up in other experiments."

"From what I've seen happening in the cages below--yes." Jonathan Danielson's lips curved in a gray, humorless smile. "Remember my saying that if a rope broke and you fell to the floor of the Monster burrow, it would not be a bad way to die?"

"Those green ropes, the ones the Monsters use—do you know how they work?"

"The basic principle is protoplasm affiliation. The Mon-sters have been doing a lot with protoplasm affiliation lately. That's why my band was sent out here."

"What kind of affiliation?"

"Protoplasm affiliation," the injured man repeated. "Ever see one of those doorways they set up in walls? They open and close like a curtain; if they're so mpch touched, they stop moving."

Eric nodded, remembering the fissure that had suddenly appeared, and which he and Roy had been able miracu-lously to hold open long enough for Walter the Weapon-Seeker to run back through.

"The doorways reverse the principle. Protoplasm rejec-tion.

"I think I understand you, but what's this word you keep using—this protoplasm?"

Jonathan Danielson swore softly. "Sweet Aaron the Leader!" he said. "I've been carrying on a conversation with a savage who's never even heard of protoplasm!" He turned his face away, sighing hopelessly.

Feeling as inadequate and inferior as when he had first met Arthur the Organizer in the huge piece of Monster furniture, Eric stared down and shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Are you from the Aaron People?" he asked at last in an uncertain voice.

No answer.

"My grandmother was from the Aaron People—so theytell me. Deborah the Dream-Singer. Have you heard of her?"

"Oh, go away, go away," Jonathan Danielson mur-mured. "I'm dying, and I have a right to die with a few civilized thoughts in my head."

Eric tried to bring himself to ask another question and found he couldn't. He wandered away disconsolately, feeling less like a leader than the youngest initiate ever assigned to a war band.

Someone was trying to attract his attention. Walter the Weapon-Seeker. The chunky man was waving a rope made up of many short straps knotted together and then braided. "We're ready to test the first one. Want to watch?"

"Yes. I guess so. Listen, Walter," Eric said with great casualness. "You have all kinds of specialists here from the back-burrow tribes. **Do you know anybody who's done work in protoplasm?**"

"In *what?*"

"Protoplasm. Protoplasm affiliation or rejection. I don't care which. You know what protoplasm is, don't you?" "I do not. I never heard of the stuff."

"Well, then, don't bother," Eric told him, feeling immensely better. "I'll take care of it. Let's try the rope."

They set a man at either end of the rope and had him pull against the other. It held. But when the men let the rope go slack and abruptly jerked it taut, it broke in the center.

"So much for the first experiment," Walter said. He placed the palms of his hands together and bowed his head over them. "*Oh, well,*" he said in a low voice, "*back to the drawing boards.*" He looked up shyly at Eric. "I hope you don't mind my using a little Ancestor-Science. That's one of the oldest invocations known to my people."

"Use anything, from any faith. We've had far too much religious narrowness and fanaticism."

The next morning, after they were fed and watered, a

Monster appeared again with a searching green rope. But this time, the man selected was removed only after a good deal of uproar. The occupants of the cage stampeded in a tightly packed, roaring mass from one end of it to the other. Eric, fighting for the self-control necessary in a leader, tried to stand aside, but the hysterical mob picked him up and absorbed him in one of its headlong swoops across the cage.

Through it all, the Monster was quite patient, its tentacles twirling the length of green just above the cage until the man it was after was temporarily separated from his fellows. It evidently knew exactly which human being it wanted. Down came the rope, touching the man on the shoulder and pulled him up again. A few of his friends tried to hold on to his legs, but they were forced to let go when they were drawn as high as the upper lip of the wall. Some other men angrily and helplessly threw spears, but these bounced off the Monster's skin. Then they stood weeping in the corner and watched him being carried to the flat white surface.

At least he died quickly. This was no prolonged dissection, but a brief though quite nasty moment of agony in an experimental trap. Again, Eric observed to the end, memorizing the features of the trap for possible use some time in the future.

Again, bloody fragments were washed down a round hole in the middle.

"*Hit back at the Monsters,*" a man near him was praying. "I don't care how. All I ask is one day to know that

I've hit back at them."

Eric agreed. The truth in these ancient chants! Mien-Science or Ancestor-Science—whichever would work—anything to hit back—anything!

The stampede had resulted in a casualty. Roy the Run-ner showed Eric where Jonathan Danielson lay, life tram-pled out of him by scores of feet. "I saw him try to roll out of the way. He was too weak, poor guy."

They examined the dead man's possessions. Most of the articles in the pockets of his skirt were unfamiliar except for an odd, short spear which someone recognized and called a clasp knife. It looked useful, a bigger version of the shaving tool used by warriors, and Eric appropriated it. Arthur the Organizer removed Jonathan's skirt and spread it over his face.

"If he's one of the Aaron People," Arthur explained, "that's the way he should be sewered. They always cover the faces of their dead."

Sewering was a problem, however, despite the stern injunction of the burrows that it be done immediately. They couldn't get him down the tiny hole in the corner. But they couldn't leave a rotting corpse among them.

Just as Eric had arranged to get the body up the cage wall and have it dropped down the other side, Monster watchfulness and observation took the problem out of his domain. A green rope fell from above and coiled about the body, lifting it into the air with the skirt still held carefully against the face, exactly as Arthur had disposed **it**.

Did the Monsters understand and respect human reli-gious observances, Eric wondered? No, they probably just took men's bodies as they found them. He saw the corpse carried to the circular dissecting surface and dropped with an unceremonious splash into its central black hole.

Then, astonishingly, the Monster came back to the cage, lowered the green rope once more—and plucked Eric out.

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It all happened so fast, so utterly without warning, that Eric had no time to think of running across the cage or struggling to evade capture. One startled yelp escaped

him as he rose high into the air and saw the upturned faces of his companions recede into indistinguishable white dots.

And then he was moving through vastness, dangling from the end of the Monster's rope. There was a cold streak making a diagonal across his back where the rope had welded itself to his flesh. But worse was the cold dampness in his mind, the liquid terror that was con-gealing into the certainty of imminent and very painful death.

Dissection? No, according to Jonathan Danielson, the Monsters were satisfied with a single sample from each group. More likely another trap to be tried out, something as ugly as the one he'd just seen chew up a man.

*... a laboratory where they test all kinds of homicides: sprays, traps, poisoned lures, **everything** ...*

Which of these was he to experience? In what Monster test was he to scream out the last tortured shreds of life?

In one respect he was fortunate. He knew roughly what to expect. He would be no

docile laboratory animal—that at least. He would fight, as long as he could, in any way that he could. His hand moved to the back sling for a spear, then stopped.

No. Don't waste a spear until there was a chance of a good cast. Wait until he was set down and was close to a vital organ, an eye, say, or a mouth open enough to expose the inside of the throat. A badly thrown spear now would only alert the Monster to his murderous determination. Not that he had too much hope in human weapons: he'd already seen spears bounce harmlessly off that thick gray hide.

What he needed now was one of the unusual implements of warfare that a man like Walter the Weapon-Seeker might come up with. That soft red stuff the chunky man had given him on their first meeting—it had blown the head off Stephen the Strong-Armed—

He still had some of that left! His first Theft—Eric had intended to keep evidence of it until his dying day. But, from the appearance of things, that day had moved into the immediate present.

A weapon Walter had stolen from the Monsters, to be used now against them!

He reached behind him, felt around in the knapsack until he located the stuff. How much should he tear off? A very little bit had done for Stephen quite spectacularly. But the Monster: look at the size of the creature! Better use it all—and make it count.

As he spun from the rope's end, facing first one way, then another, in the soaring white space, Eric weighed the irregular red ball in his right hand and waited for an opportunity. It was going to be complicated: he had to spit on the stuff before he threw it, and, once it was moist-ened, he had to get rid of it immediately. That meant he had to figure his opening exactly right—if the spin were turning him away from the Monster once he'd spat on the red ball, he'd have to get rid of it anyway; he'd have to throw his only real weapon away into emptiness and waste it.

Obviously, then, as he began to face the Monster, a moment before it was in full range—that was the time to go into action.

Eric began paying careful attention to the duration of each spin, absorbing the rhythm with his mind. There was no fear in him now; instead there was the beginning of an exultation that almost burst from his lips in a song. If he were successful, he knew, it would be the end of him. Once the explosion occurred, once the Monster was killed, he, Eric, would fall—with or without the rope—an enormous distance to the floor. He would be dashed to pieces upon it. But the life of his captor would have been extinguished first. At last a man would have done what so many men had dreamed of for so long

Hit back at the Monsters!

The members of his own expedition would see it, Roy, Walter the Weapon-Seeker, Arthur the Organizer, they would see it and cheer themselves hoarse. Hit back at the Monsters! Hit back at them, not as a nibbling annoyance, as a thief of food or artifacts, but as a full and deadly antagonist. Hit back at the Monsters—and with their own weapon!

He hoped the expedition could still see him. The Monster had passed the circular table used for dissection and testing and was going on. Where?

It didn't matter. Nor was it important if he were out of sight of his caged friends. Only one thing counted: get the rhythm of the spin right, make a throw at the exactly correct moment—and take a Monster with him into the sewers. What a trophy to

exhibit before the ancestors!

Eric was positive he had the timing now. He allowed himself one more spin, however, and went through the whole process in his mind..

Here I spit. Here I throw. Here it hits, just as I begin to turn. Here the explosion. And here, as my back is toward him, the Monster begins to topple!

Yes, he had the rhythm. He started turning toward the Monster again and held the soft mass near his mouth, working up saliva. He began to see the creature out of the corner of one eye.

Now.

Slowly, carefully, he spat on the ball, turning it round and round in his hand. The arm went back and waited while a portion of his mind beat out the pulsations it had learned. Then, when the Monster was almost in front of him, he threw. He threw in a high arc, aiming for the creature's head which quivered to and fro at the end of that impossibly long neck. It would hit. Holy Ancestors, he had thrown right!

But, as he began the turn away, Eric saw that some-thing had gone wrong. The Monster had noticed the red ball. And its head had moved down to meet it, mouthopened avidly! The Monster was swallowing it! *It was swallowing the weapon!*

The last thing Eric saw on that turn was a ripple that went down the length of the great throat. And in the ugly purple eyes—unmistakable enjoyment.

Then the spin had turned his back to the Monster. He waited despairingly for the sound of an explosion—a cataclysm that would tear the immense creature apart from the inside. He didn't hear it. There was a sound at last behind him, not at all an explosion, but loud and odd nonetheless. Eric allowed himself to hope again. The rope from which he hung jerked back and forth.

He twisted his head and strained his eyes as the spin back began. Where was it?

There!

Yes, there it was. He could see the Monster again. And his whole body went limp with defeat.

Ripples continued to run down that long stretch of throat, smaller and smaller ripples as the effect, whatever it was, evidently began wearing off. Whenever a ripple came down to the point where the neck joined the body, there was a repetition of the loud, odd' sound Eric had heard when his back was to the Monster. Now, facing it and seeing the entire creature, Eric could almost recognize the sound: not quite a sneeze, a little more than a cough, and more than reminiscent of a human moan of pleasure—with the same enjoyment-filled upbeat at the end.

Yes, the effect was definitely wearing off. The odd sounds came at longer and longer intervals; they were less and less loud. At the end of the curving neck, the triangular head probed about restlessly in great arcs, searching, with what seemed to be a delighted hunger, for more red balls. The Monster's eyes were alight with ecstasy.

Apparently, it did not in any way connect its tiny human captive with the pleasures it had experienced.

That was just as well, Eric decided, hanging from the green rope where it adhered to his back. There was enough

of a humiliation involved in having the knowledge all to himself.

Eric the Monster-Toppler. Eric the Alien-Killer. That's how he had seen himself in those few fierce moments of anticipation.

"How about Eric the Monster-Tickler?" he asked him-self bitterly. "That's a good name."

What had gone wrong with the weapon? Well, to begin with, he realized, it had probably not been a weapon in the first place. Walter the Weapon-Seeker had stolen it from the Monsters and found it could be used as one—against humans. You added your saliva, threw it against a man—and he exploded. But among the Monsters, it could have been something totally different. A food, a condiment of some sort. A drug, perhaps even an aphrodisiac. Or, conceivably, part of some complex game that they played. Mixed with human saliva, its properties had no doubt been altered. But not in the direction of any danger to the Monster. Eric's carefully mounted attack had given the alien no more discomfort than a concentrated, highly indi-vidualized orgy.

There was an important lesson here, something that attacked the foundations of Alien-Science with its belief that man could learn important and useful information from the Monsters. What was utterly inimical to humans could be salutary to the Monsters: it might be healthful, it might be merely pleasant, it might be both. And, logically, the proposition should be sometimes true in its reversed form. What nourished or stimulated humans might destroy Monsters—if such a thing could ever be isolated or dis-covered!

The thought suggested a line of approach to a weapon that men had dreamed of for countless downtrodden cen-turies—a true Monster-killer.

Eric began to get excited, to run through **possibilities** for research in his mind. But his captor's abrupt halt brought him back to where he was at the moment: he had no weapons at all except his good right arm and a couple of spears. And if he was going to do any fighting before he was torn to pieces, he'd better get ready.

They had arrived at the Monster's destination. The green rope to which he was attached was being lowered purposefully. He pulled at his back sling and, after a moment's thought, selected a light spear for his right hand and a heavy one for his left.

If he had a chance, if the creature's head came at all close, he would try a cast with the throwing spear. And he would use the heavy one to ward off the various dissecting ropes and implements. Not that he had much hope: the distances were too great for any decent aim, the power and strength which he faced were too far beyond his own.

But he was Eric the Eye, a warrior and a man.

He looked down. Odd, there was no flat white surface below him. Instead, there was—there was another cage! He was merely being transferred!

Eric sighed out his relief gustily. He was about to replace the spears, but just then the rope lowered him into the exact center of the cage and withdrew from his back. He looked about, examining the place.

The spears he held were what saved his life when the naked girl came at him.

PART III COUNSELORS FOR THEIR WISDOM

Since he had dropped into it, still hanging from the rope, the cage had appeared empty. Once on his feet and master of his own motions, he had begun to turn about leisurely. And then that swift, determined patter behind him, a little softer than it should sound when a warrior ran ..

Eric whirled, a careful smile on his face, the beginnings of a peaceful greeting on his lips. And he found himself unable to speak.

Because there was a girl charging at him, a stark naked girl with a great mass of light brown hair that spiraled down in one direction to her shoulders and then in the other direction to her hips. And there was a spear in her hands, quite a heavy spear with the longest point Eric had ever seen. The point was aimed at his belly. The girl was coming fast.

Pure reflex. Eric realized that he had parried the spear upward with one of his own spears.

The girl drew back a pace, set herself and lunged again. Again Eric knocked it away but barely: he felt it go past his throat by half a handbreadth.

Again she came back. again he parried, again and

again and again. He felt as if his mind were giving way—this was like a nightmare you had back in the burrows after a full meal and a big celebration. How could a woman be carrying a weapon? How could a woman be attacking a warrior in direct combat?

She was not going to give up. She was absolutely set on killing him, that was certain. Her eyes were narrowed intently and a red bit of her tongue projected thoughtfully from a corner of her mouth. She held the spear tightly, looked him over for a vulnerable, undefended area, then lunged once more. Eric, using his spear as a club, warded off the thrust.

How could he stop her? He couldn't counterattack—there was the danger of hurting or killing the girl. Alien-Science or Ancestor-Science, whatever you believed in, you always accepted as axiomatic that a nubile woman, a woman of child-bearing age, was **untouchable** with a deadly weapon, was automatically holy. A warrior who killed such a one ceased to be human: even if he were a chief, his tribe would declare him outlaw.

But she was liable to get through his guard sooner or later. And he couldn't try to take the spear away from her. He'd have to let go of his own spears in order to do that, and the moment he stopped parrying her thrusts she'd run him through.

Meanwhile, all he could do was protect himself. And she was so damned determined! They were both breathing heavily to the rhythm of weapon hitting against weapon. Eric jumped as the girl's long spearpoint missed his eyes infinitesimally.

"Almost got me that time," he muttered.

The girl stopped in the middle of a lunge. She teetered a moment, barely holding her balance, staring at him with widened eyes.

"What did you say?" she breathed. "You *said* some-thing."

Eric stared back, wondering if she were insane. Should he take the chance now, while her mind was busy with some unexpected problem, should he drop his spears, leap at her and try to take her weapon away?

"Yes, I said something," he told her, watching the spear in her hands carefully.

"So what?"

She lowered the spear and stepped back a few paces, strain going out of her face. "I mean **you** can talk. You have a language."

"Of course I have a language," Eric said irritably. "What the hell do you think I am—a Wild Man?"

The girl answered by flinging her spear aside and dropping to the floor of the cage. She lowered her head to her knees and rocked herself back and forth.

Eric walked away and retrieved the spear. He slung it, along with his own weapons. When he came back to the girl, she was sobbing. And, puzzled as he was, it was evident to him that the sobs were relief and not pain or sorrow.

He waited. Now that she was disarmed, he could afford to be patient. If she turned out to be crazy after all, he'd have to decide what to do with her. Sharing a cage with nobody but a murderous lunatic was a very disagreeable prospect. On the other hand, even a crazy woman was still sacrosanct... .

She stopped crying finally and wiped her eyes with the back of one arm. Then she leaned back, locked her arms behind her head and grinned at him cheerfully. Eric felt more disturbed than ever. This was a real odd one.

"Do you know," she said, "that's exactly what I thought you were. A Wild Man."

Eric was astounded. "Me?"

"You. And I wasn't the only one who thought so."

He looked around the cage. There was nobody else in it. This girl was a lunatic beyond *any* doubt.

She had followed his glance. She chuckled and nodded. "No, I'm not referring to anyone in the cage. I'm referring

to that fellow up there. He thought you were a Wild Man too."

Eric looked up along the line of her pointing thumb. The Monster who had brought him still stared down into the cage, the enormous purple eyes unwinking, the pre-hensile pink tentacles perfectly still. "Why? Why should he—it—think I'm a Wild Man? Why should you?"

A part of him was deeply outraged. To be mistaken for the mythic, terror-inspiring Wild Men—that was too much! You frightened naughty children with stories about hordes of semihuman, hairy creatures who had sunk below the level of language, below the level of weapon and artifact, who had lost, long auld lang syne ago, the universal burrow taboo against cannibalism. You hazed gawling young apprentice warriors with tales of vast, ravaging mobs that came out of nowhere and fought your spears with teeth and nails, mobs that fought not for victory, for territory or for women, but for the ripped-off arms and bloody, broken haunches of their antagonists. And when you asked an older warrior how could there really be such a thing as Wild Men, since nobody you knew had ever seen them, he told you that they were a plague peculiar to the back burrows. Wild Men, he would tell you as he himself had been told by the warriors under whom he had studied, Wild Men did not live in Monster territory and they did not live in the burrows. They lived in another place entirely, a place called the Outside. And when you asked him to explain or describe this Outside, he'd shrug and say, "Well, the Outside is a place where the Wild Men live." You'd go away, proud of your maturity for having at last realized that Wild Men were strictly horror-story stuff, as improbable as any of the other

burrow legends of lurking creatures: the blood-sucking Draculas, the packs of vicious police dogs, the bug-eyed men from Mars, and, worst of all, the oil-seeking wildcats who drilled for all eternity from one burrow to another.

But Wild Men were not merely the stuff of legend; they were the material of curses and opprobrium. A severely retarded child might be called a Wild Man, as might a warrior who disobeyed his band leader or a woman who was expelled from the Female Society. When someone in the tribe perpetrated a particularly ugly crime and managed to escape to distant burrows before punishment, you said: "May the Wild Men get him. He belongs with them." A Wild Man was anyone who had failed the test of humankind.

But what right did this girl have to pass such a judgment on him? She couldn't possibly know that his own people had declared him outlaw. And she herself—look at her!—a woman in Monster territory where no woman had a legitimate reason to be—she was a fine one to go around insulting people.

"So that's the primary reason I thought you were a Wild Man," the girl was saying. "Because the big fellow did. He's already deposited two Wild Men in here with me. Luckily, he dropped them in one at a time. I was able to kill each of them the moment they landed, before they could collect their faculties and see how pink and edible I was."

"You mean— There really are such things as Wild Men?"

"Really are such things as Wild Men? You've never seen one? Sweet Aaron the Leader, where are you from?"

From Mankind, Eric started to say, with his old, stiff-backed pride. Then he remembered how it sounded to Strangers—he had learned a lot lately. "I'm from a front-burrow tribe," he said. "A rather small one. I don't think you've heard of us."

The girl nodded. "A front-burrow tribe—that would explain your unlaced hair. And anyone with hair hanging loose is somehow related to the Wild Men as far as the Monsters are concerned. They seem to know enough about me to suspect I'm female—one of the few fully

human females they've ever caught, I guess—but because my hair hangs loose they keep hauling Wild Men in here for me to mate with. And it's gotten pretty hectic, let me tell you! The way I feel about myself, a mate for someone maybe, a dinner no. I'd been conditioned to expect nothing but Wild Men, and the moment I saw you with all that flopping hair, I said to myself, Rachel, here we go again. If I'd had any sense, I'd have paid some attention to the fact that you were carrying spears and knapsacks and all kinds of fully human equipment."

"Your name is Rachel? Mine's Eric, Eric the Eye."

She scrambled to her feet and held out a small hand warmly. "Hello, Eric. I'm Rachel Esthersdaughter, Rachel for short. It's good to have someone to talk to. A front-burrower," she mused. "Naturally, you've never seen Wild Men. They practically never get to the front burrows—it's too far from the Outside for their comfort. But my people have to be battling them back to their wide open Spaces all the time. The Monsters have apparently been picking up a lot of them, though, for experimental purposes; they must have traps all over the Outside. Hey, look."

Eric followed her gaze upwards. The Monster who had brought him was swinging ponderously around and moving off.

Rachel giggled. "Ah-h, how sweet. He feels he's made a match at last. He wants to leave the lovers alone. First time in a long while he hasn't had to remove a corpse from this cage immediately afterward."

Feeling awkward and embarrassed, Eric inquired: "What made him decide that everything is all right?"

"Well, first, the fact that I didn't kill you, of course. Then he sees us shaking hands. I don't think they know any more about us, really, than we know about them. They probably think the act of shaking hands is *it*. You know, Love's Old Sweet Song, one mad moment of pas-sion, my soul shudders and my senses reel,"

Eric felt his face turning red. He'd never come across any woman as direct and as casual as this; it was particu-larly disconcerting in combination with the unbound hair that denoted an unmarried state. He tried to change the subject. "You're from the Aaron People, Rachel, aren't you?"

She had started to walk away from him to a corner of the cage. Now she turned back. "How did you know? Front-burrowers rarely reach our base.... Oh, I remem-ber. I called on Sweet Aaron the Leader."

"That was part of it. And there was your name. In the cage I came from, there was a man of the Aaron People with a name like yours. Jonathan Danielson."

She clutched at his arm. "Jonny? Alive?"

"He died just before I was taken out of the cage. He said that someone called Saul Davidson had also been captured alive, but the Monsters dissected him."

Rachel's eyes shut tight. "Ooh. Saul was my cousin. He was my favorite cousin. We were thinking of asking per-mission of the Aaron to mate after we came back from this expedition."

Eric patted her hand which was digging into the muscle of his arm. "Well, the other news I got from Jonathan Danielson is not too good either. He said all - fourteen members of the expedition were killed. One blow from a Monster's foot."

Shaking herself, the girl straightened. "Nonsense. I was part of the expedition, and I wasn't harmed. I know of at least three others who were captured and used for experi-ments. Jonathan Danielson was a bad, bad leader, like all our men in this kind of situation—they're too scholarly, they're not able to handle action and emergencies. He didn't see what happened to the rest of us because he was in a blind panic at the time."

"A band leader who panicked? I never heard of such a thing."

She took a deep breath and the wild, merry grin came

back to her lips. "There are more things between the front and back burrows, Eric, my friend, than are dreamt of in your= philosophy." She punched at him lightly. "Now, don't get mad—I'm honestly not making fun of you. Your face gets all squooshy when you get upset. Come over here: I want to show you what I mean."

In the corner of the cage, a great expanse of material was laid out. Every few handspreads, there was a pocket from which one or more unfamiliar objects protruded. It was very similar to the skirt worn by Jonathan Danielson and in which his face had been wrapped when he died. Except, Eric realized, this was much, much larger and rather like a cloak than a skirt: its owner would probably be several times more consequential among the Aaron people than Jonathan Danielson.

"Is this yours?" he asked with cautious respect.

"Mine, all mine. My head goes in that hole and I wear it all around me. It's waterproof."

"Waterproof?"

"Yes. Water runs off it without it getting wet. I've worn it on trips to the Outside where water falls on you from the ceiling. It's also a sort of portable laboratory. You see this intriguing object?" Rachel had pulled a contraption out of one of the pockets. It was a rod folded in sections which she proceeded to open to its full length; at the end of the rod, a few wires attached it to a couple of small cylinders. "Now this device was the whole purpose of the expedition, not so much the device itself as the testing thereof. A group of us in the Female Society developed it and we had the idea it might neutralize the green ropes that the Monsters use. As you probably know, the ropes are based on the principle of protoplasm affiliation."

Eric coughed and nodded gravely. "Like the Monster doorways that reverse the principle. Protoplasm rejection."

Rachel pointed a delighted forefinger at him. "Right! Well, neutralizing protoplasm affiliation is something my people have been trying to do for a long time—and right now it's more important than it ever was. They sent us off, one woman scientist and thirteen men who were supposed to protect her, they sent us off to find out if the thing would really work. And it worked. It worked only too well."

She put the device back in its pocket and stared at it for a moment before going on. "We made it through the burrows all right, and all the way into Monster Territory without a casualty. Which is pretty good going for the Aaron People, I'm ashamed to tell you. We encounter a Monster the moment we get here to the lab, and little Rachel steps out to expose herself in the great good cause of scientific research. The Monster lets down a rope to grab me, I apply our neutralizer to it, and it works! The rope turns dark, goes all limp—no adhering capacity, no capturing quality, nothing. Cheers, you know? Applause from the multitude, V for victory, hooray for us and all that sort of thing. As far as I'm concerned, we've accomplished our mission: let's be on our way and bring the glad tidings home. Besides, this Monster territory is not what I'd call cozy. I go stepping off, back to where the expedition is hiding, very happy over the fact that the Monster is all upset and rattled. He's dropped the rope and is examining it with a stupid expression on his silly face. He doesn't connect its failure in any way with Rachel, and, for the moment, he isn't the slightest bit interested in Rachel. Or in her thirteen little protectors. They, unfortunately, have other ideas."

"Jonathan Danielson was a brand-new band leader, and he was itching for glory," Eric suggested. "He saw the chance of bringing a trophy home—a deactivated Monster rope, something that had never been paraded in the burrows before. I don't know if I can blame him."

"I can. Let me tell you, I can. It was a direct violation of our original marching orders which were to get back as soon as possible with information that was vital to the

future of our people. But what's a woman going to do? Once she's completed the heavy thinking, she's got to follow the leadership of the men and obey their instructions in operational matters. Sexual differences are sexual differences, and who am I to put obstructions in a nice straight burrow? So, there I was, halfway

back to the safety of the wall when Jonny Danielson gallops past me followed by the rest of the expedition. They all have those heroic masculine looks on their faces. Me—I just stop and watch. They run to the rope that's lying limply on the floor and they're about to pick it up. They're not too worried about the Monster, because we can see it's not carrying an-other rope—and who ever heard of a Monster picking up humans without a green rope? Those tentacles on the neck are just for fine manipulation. But I'm looking at those neck tentacles, and what I see scares me into absolute fits. Those tentacles are the wrong size and the wrong color."

Eric remembered what Walter the Weapon-Seeker had told him. "You mean they were short and reddish, instead of long and light pink."

"That's exactly what I mean. Hey." Rachel Esthers-daughter twisted her head at him appraisingly. "You know an awful lot for a front-burrower."

"Well—" Eric shrugged. "I've been around and I've kept my ears open. Especially lately. But I thought those short-tentacled Monsters are the least dangerous. They're the ones who run and panic when a man goes directly at them."

"If they have a place to run to. This Monster was too close to the wall—not by our standards, but, you know, in terms of the big, big steps that they take. And the men of the expedition were coming at it in a great semicircle. It panicked, all right, but it didn't run. It threw back its head. One tremendous, ear-splitting bellow—you never heard so much quantity of sheer fear packed in a single noise! I saw Jonathan Danielson freeze where he stood.

And then *he* went into panic! Instead of realizing what had happened and leading the men back immediately, he threw his spear away and began to run back and forth in a crazy zigzag pattern, yelling his head off. The men looked from him to the Monster, not knowing what to do next. Some followed him, others kept on going for the rope. Suddenly the Monster kicked out. It was a blind, fearful kick, more like a twitch than a kick, but when it was over there were smashed and bleeding men all over the floor. And then other Monsters came hurrying from all directions and grabbed up anyone who was still alive. I was too upset myself—panic again, or just plain shock, I don't know—to think of using my neutralizer on the green rope with which they took me. By the time it occurred to me, I was too high in the air."

"Sure. You'd have been killed if you'd made the green rope let go of you. Then they brought you here."

"Then the Monsters brought me here," the girl agreed. "And now, Eric, they've brought *you* here. To share this cage with me."

X19

Eric moved a short distance away from the cloak of many pockets. He squatted ceremoniously, placing his hands on the floor and bowing his head. This was the position he'd seen assumed by band leaders high in the councils of Mankind when they wished to consider a matter carefully. And there were many significant details in Rachel's story to turn over in his mind.

First, it was now overwhelmingly clear that Strangers, however superior they might be in knowledge, were not worth a damn as expedition leaders—compared, that is, with the warriors of his own people. They knew so incredibly little of elementary precautions (Arthur the Organizer letting one of his men walk into a trap

immediately after

leaving the piece of Monster furniture—and remember the execrable march discipline all the way to this place?). And, as commanders, they were downright dangerous when something unexpected happened (Arthur's absolute funk upon arrival in the cages of sin, Jonathan Daniel-son's inexcusable hysteria, a hysteria stimulated by nothing more substantial than noise, but which had cost the lives of almost all his followers). You might make a useful rule out of it: the further back in the burrows you went, the poorer the quality of the leadership in any emergency situation—when you got to the Aaron People, the *back* back-burrowers, so to speak, you had band leaders capable of committing their men to any imaginable idiocy. The closer you got to Monster Territory, possibly because of the unremitting, day-to-day dangers of existence, the more likely you were to find in any given warrior the caution, the alertness and the adaptability that a man had the right to demand of his superior officer. And Strangers seemed to recognize this too: it had been easy for him to take command of the cage away from Arthur. Imagine a Stranger warrior as young as Eric taking over, in a similar position, from his uncle, Thomas the Trap-Smasher!

On the other hand, looked at with a different set of values, the rule reversed itself. The deeper into the burrows you went and the further from Monster Territory, the more complex the technology, the more extensive the knowledge and the more powerful the conceptual daring. Eric had always known that his tribe had traded off its excess food and occasional Monster artifacts to other peoples in the burrows to the rear for the finished spearheads and soft knapsack material which it was incapable of making for itself. Only recently had he learned of the existence of men like Walter the Weapon-Seeker, always on the lookout for strange Monster goods which could be turned to effective human use, and Arthur the Organizer, with his dream of a United Burrows practicing the new religion of Alien-Science. And now the Aaron People, capable of developing equipment which could combat and immobilize the Monster's own weapons—this was truly carrying the fight to the enemy of Man!

If someone, someday, could ever fuse the two, the battle courage and cleverness of front-burrow tribes with the knowledge and imaginative valor of the back-burrowers, what glories might humanity then accomplish!

He looked up at Rachel. She had been studying him for some time. Her arms were crossed on her chest and her eyes were staring down at him intently.

"Do you know?" she said. "You're not at all bad-looking."

"Thank you, Rachel. This neutralizing device—you say the information about it was vital to the future of your people. In other words, it's part of a plan to hit back at the Monsters?"

"Of course. But so is everything that human beings do these days. Do you have a mate?"

"No, not yet. What kind of a plan? I mean, is it an approach through Alien-Science or Ancestor-Science?"

She fluttered her left hand impatiently. "In the Aaron People we have nothing to do with either of those superstitions. We gave them both up a long time ago. Our Plan to hit back at the Monsters is real and entirely new. It's different from anything

you've ever heard of, and it's the only one which will work. How come a healthy, handsome young warrior like you doesn't have a mate?"

"I've only been a full warrior for a short time—I just passed my initiation ceremony. If your plans are neither Alien-Science nor—"

"**Is** that the only reason for your not having a mate? The fact that you've just celebrated your initiation cere-mony?"

Eric rose with dignity. "There are—well, some other reasons. But that's a personal matter. I'd rather not discuss

it. What I am interested in is this Plan your people have to hit back at the—"

She smiled and shook her head. "Men and women. Practically two different species. If it weren't for sex, they'd have *nothing* in common. Now I can't tell you *any* more about my people's strategy with the Monsters—I've talked too much already—but what I do want to canvass with you is the subject of mating. Mating, and nothing but mating, is our agenda, as far as I'm con-cerned. Mating, the pros and cons, the shades, the nu-ances, all about mating. What are those other reasons, Eric? I have to know."

He hesitated. "I'm a singleton," he said at last. "An only."

"A *what?* A singleton— Oh. You mean you weren't part of a litter. Your mother had just the one child—you. And the girls back in your tribe were afraid the condition might be hereditary. Well, that's not what I call a prob-lem. Anything else?"

"No, nothing else," he told her angrily. "How can you say it's not a problem? What's worse than having no decent litter potential?"

"Many, many things. But let's not go into them. Among the Aaron People, you may be interested to know, small litters are quite prevalent. Twins are about it for the average woman. For the very largest litters you have to go to the Wild Men whose women never come up with less than six at a birth. I think it has something to do with the amount of genetic distance from our ancestors. Or, per-haps, the differing infant mortality rates. But me, I'll be quite satisfied with a singleton delivery—especially here, with no midwives from the Aaron People to help me at the confinement."

Eric gaped at her. "Confinement? Here? You mean what you're thinking about—what you're suggesting—"

"My dear barbarian stalwart, I am not thinking and I am not suggesting. I am proposing. I am proposing analliance betwixt me and thee, from this day forward, to have and to hold, in sickness and **in health**. Do **you** ac-cept my proposal, or do you not accept my proposal?"

"But why? You've never seen me before—you don't know anything about me—we come from different peo-ples. Look, Rachel, it's not that I'm trying to raise objections. But—but, I haven't been in the cage long, and you're moving kind of fast. Too fast for me to understand you. There must be a reason."

"Yes, there is. In fact, there's more than one reason, Let's skip lightly over the fact that I'm not getting any younger and a girl has to think of her future. Let us also merely note in passing that your appearance pleases me and your personality pleases me and that you don't seem to have any vicious characteristics. All well and good, but not crucial. The following, however, is crucialL"

She moved closer to him and took his hand. Eric felt excitement begin to build inside his body as he appreciated the girl's nakedness now. All his life he'd been surrounded by girls conventionally naked. But it was different when you realized that very shortly you and she . . .

"The important reasons," Rachel said softly, "have to do with saving lives. Your life, and probably mine. There were three other boys from the expedition up here with me originally. I saw them taken out, one by one, and I saw them being—each one **was**—oh, you know. **You've** seen it."

"I know, all right," Eric told her fiercely. "I saw what they do to us."

"Once they took me out, and I thought it was the end. But after passing me from one green rope to another—four or five Monsters were in a huddle over me—they returned me to the cage. Sammy Josephson—he was the last one left here—Sammy suggested that they might know I was a female and, well, something of a rarity in Monster territory. We talked about it, but before we were sure or had worked **out any conclusions**, it was **Sammy's turn**.

What they did to him—oh-h! I think that was the worst of them all."

She shook her head heavily from side to side. Eric found himself squeezing her hand. She smiled at him tremulously, nodded, and went on: "And then came the succession of Wild Men, followed by you—all with long, unbound hair, just like mine. It's apparent that the Monsters do know I'm a female, and that they're trying to mate me. Now, Eric, I don't particularly want to cooperate with them in their search for knowledge about human behavior, but on this point and by this time, I'm more than willing to let them have their way. If we don't, they'll take you out of here eventually and tear you apart in an experiment. And they'll probably get tired of waiting and do the same to me. The best I have to hope for, once they remove you, is more and more Wild Men coming in here with their fangs all shiny and that gleam in their eyes which says, 'Food! On two delicious legs, the way it should be!' I'm tired of fighting and killing. That's a man's job. You be my man and do it for me."

Eric adjusted his knapsack straps self-consciously as he absorbed her analysis and her final entreaty. She was right. Given the situation, the only sensible thing was to let the Monsters know they were satisfied with each other and were mating. And he'd fallen into pure luck—Rachel constituted a fantastic prize, far beyond his wildest dreams of a mate. A girl with this much knowledge would outrank anyone in the Female Society of Mankind—probably in most Stranger Female Societies as well. That would automatically mean a tremendous boost to his own rank, if he ever got affiliated with a specific people again.

All well and good. **But** he was a man and a warrior. And mating was a serious business: it must be conducted with dignity, and according to tradition.

"Turn around," he ordered. "Let me look at you." Rachel obeyed with complete docility, as he knew she would. Front-burrow or back-burrow, Aaron People or

Mankind, there could not be that much difference in the customs of humanity. A man's Right to Examine was everywhere the same.

She stepped away a pace and turned round and round slowly, spreading her hair high behind her with the backs of her hands so that the lines of her body could be completely visible: This also brought her breasts up a bit more prominently: they were by no means the largest breasts he had seen on a girl, Eric noted, but they were

pretty enough and would probably do. And while her thighs and hips were a shade too narrow as well, he had to remember that the demands of a singleton birth—the greatest probability here—were much smaller than those of the multiple deliveries a husband usually had to take into consideration.

On the other hand, she had an absolutely lovely, well-shaped rump, which, within the limitations posed by the narrowness of her hips, left nothing to be desired. And her face—he let go of the rump, turned her around again and took hold of her chin with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand—her face was infinitely appealing. Large, glowing brown eyes above a small, impudent nose, a soft mouth full of femininity that held an uncertain smile for-ever imprisoned at its corners, warm, beautifully curving cheeks, a high, white forehead, and, finally, clouds upon clouds of brown hair that was certainly of decent, adequate length. While her face was the least relevant portion of a woman's attractiveness, Eric had always had certain weaknesses in that respect which he had admitted only to himself. He was glad her face was the best part of her. Add to the face that truly first-class rump, consider that neither her hips, thighs nor breasts were outright failures, throw in the well-stocked mind which provided a magnificent dowry and thus substantial advancement for her man in any conceivable tribe—yes, Eric had to admit that Rachel was a treasure worth shedding blood for.

It would hardly do to tell her so, of course. Members of the Male Society must always maintain a certain essential diplomatic reserve toward members of the Female Society.

He moved back, folding his arms slowly and emphatically on his chest to indicate that the Examination was over.

Rachel relaxed, letting out a huge breath. "Are you satisfied?" she inquired with exactly the proper amount of anxiety. Eric was terribly pleased: he'd been afraid from her jocular manner of speaking that she knew nothing at all of formal behavior.

"I am satisfied," he told her, using the decorous phrases of the courtship formula. "You please me. I want you for my mate."

"Good. I am glad. Now I claim the Right of Invitation. You may not approach me sexually for the first time until I give you leave."

"That is your right," Eric agreed. "I will wait for your call. May it come soon! May it come soon! May it come soon!"

And it was over. They stood apart and grinned at each other self-consciously, observing mutual individuality return as the ritual prototype was sloughed off. Above them, below them, around them, lay the white vastnesses of Monster territory, the transparent cages in which fellow humans awaited fate and the Monsters' pleasure. But here in *this* cage, they were mate and mate, Eric *and* Rachel, two separate people who would become one, when the girl felt the time was ripe to beckon.

Suddenly Rachel giggled. "I was so nervous! Were you nervous?"

"A little," Eric admitted. "After all, from start to finish, it was a pretty fast mating. One of the fastest I ever heard about."

"I hope we didn't leave anything out, Eric."

"No, we didn't leave anything out. Nothing that was important, anyway. Except," he suddenly remembered with annoyance, "except for a condition I wanted to make."

Something I wanted you to agree to do before we went through the ceremony. Then I got so caught up in the ritual responses that I forgot all about it."

"Your tough luck," she sang out and began a mad little dance around him. "Too late, too late! Agreements *before* the mating—never after." At the angry expression on his face, she stopped and took his hands. "I'm only joking, Eric. I have too much of a sense of humor for my own damn good. Among my people, there is a saying: 'Most children are born with a wail. Rachel Esthersdaughter was born with a laugh. And she'll probably die with a laugh.' You tell me what you were going to **ask**, and I'll do it. Whatever it is. Anything."

"Well" Now that he had come to it, Eric found difficulty in the phrasing. He didn't know if a man had ever asked a woman such a thing before. "I want you to teach me. I want you to teach me everything you know."

"You want me to—you mean, you want an education?"

"That's it, Rachel, that's what I want," he said eagerly. "An education. Knowledge. I don't expect you to tell me the secrets of the Aaron People's Female Society—I'm not asking you to break any oaths. But I want to know what at least the average man in your people knows. About the Monsters, about counting, about the history of our ancestors. How Alien-Science came to be, how Ancestor-Science came to be. How Strangers make the things they do, what the things are used for. How— What— I don't even know what I want to know!" he broke off miserably.

"But I do," she said gently touching him on the face with an open, caressing palm. "And I'll be very willing to teach you, Eric, very willing indeed, darling. Don't you worry about my Female Society and its secrets: engineering is the last thing we'll get to. Do you want to start now?"

"Yes!" he exclaimed, his eyes shining. "I want to start right this moment!"

"Then sit down." She lowered herself to the floor and took some writing implements from one of the pockets of the nearby cloak. Eric squatted beside her. Now that he'd been able to put it into words, he found himself filled with a hunger such as he'd never known. The hunger for food, the hunger for sex—they were nothing like this. This was a singing hunger that filled your mind and made it want to hear more and more and more of the song.

Rachel looked at him quizzically for a moment. "What a way to begin a mating! With scratcher and repeatable slate. If my friends back in the Aaron People ever heard of this! If *your* friends— But Eric, seriously, I'm very pleased. That was the only thing about mating with you that really bothered me: you being a front-burrow barbarian. In our terms, of course, and who are we to say that our terms are right? But it did bother me. I'll teach you everything I know. Where do you want me to begin?"

Eric leaned towards her, his whole body tense. "Begin with protoplasm. I want to know all there is to know about protoplasm."

20

Pursuing knowledge, Eric discovered, was like running through the burrows. The corridor you were traveling kept forking off into two or three others. Most of the time, you could only see a little ways ahead; suddenly, you came around a curve into a confrontation that astonished you.

Astronomy, for example, was such a confrontation. At first, it seemed utterly useless: a body of arcane, almost incomprehensible data, unrelated to anything at all real. You learned astronomy by rote, associating the various strange names with little circles scratched out on the re-peatable slate.

First there was Earth, Earth which was to be won back from the Monsters. Earth was some kind of ball which hung, or revolved, or wandered in something that was called space. Earth was a planet, and there were other planets in space; there were also stars and comets and galaxies, dust and gas and radiation, all of them likewise in space, most of them incredible distances from Earth.

Eric kept repeating the names of planets and astronomi-cal objects which meant nothing to him, which simply accumulated in his head like so much fuzz, until one day he stumbled on the trick of analogy. If you thought of Earth like a warm, safe corridor that you were in just before you opened the door to Monster territory, well then, opening the door was like soaring off Earth. Monster territory with its alien environment and incredible dangers would be space, and on the other side of it you might find another doorway leading to a strange new burrow—that would be another planet, or another star.

All right, that helped, it made it a bit more understand-able; but certainly no more pertinent or useful.

Then came the confrontation in Eric's mind—and he gasped as he came around the curve.

He remembered the conversation with Walter the Weapon-Seeker while they were on expedition to this place. Walter had talked of a boy in his band who had wondered what lay outside of Monster territory itself, what it was that compared to the Monster burrows as the Monster burrows compared to the human ones. Walter had dismissed the ideas as too much for the human mind to contemplate. But it wasn't! Here, here in astronomy was the answer. A much larger place, Earth, lay outside and all around Monster Territory. And a much, much larger place, interplanetary or interstellar space, lay out-side and all around Earth. The Monsters, in terms of what

they ultimately inhabited, were as trivial, as insignificant, as infinitesimal as any human beings.

.And were human beings truly insignificant? They hadn't always been. Eric thrilled with the pride of belong-ing to a race that had worked out a system of recorded signals as clever as the alphabet, that could take ordinary numbers and squeeze them into unrecognizable shapes, pulling out a piece here, a piece there... .

"No, Eric, no!" Rachel announced definitely, flinging her scratcher down on the cloak near which they were sitting. "There's no point in discussing this any further. You're trying to push me into an explication of Homer's method and synthetic division—and I absolutely refuse. My math isn't that good in the first place, and after all, sweetheart, this is supposed to be a survey course and no more. You're a glutton: you absorb and absorb and ab-sorb. Sometimes you frighten me. You could go without sleep for days, couldn't you?"

Eric nodded. He felt as if he were on a war band foray. Who wanted sleep when you were filled with the excite-ment of what you might capture if you only kept going? But women, he remembered, were different. They never seemed to feel that

particular excitement.

He considered his mate carefully and with tenderness. She did look tired. Well, they had been at their lessons almost from the moment they had opened their eyes. "Do you want to go to sleep, darling?"

"Ooh, I'd love to!" she said, her voice throbbing tragi-cally but her eyes still grinning at him. "I've been thinking of nothing else. But I can't. You're the man and the leader here. You have to declare it night."

"I do," he said. "Night. Let's sack in." He lay back on the hard cage floor and watched her put the writing ap-paratus away in the proper pocket of her cloak. Eric thought to himself how graceful she was, how very, very desirable. And how much she knew! Much more than she had taught him. This synthetic division, for example, he pondered as she nestled her head into his shoulder—how would you do it? Was it at all like ordinary long division? If it was

Yes, he thought, while he was opening his eyes and about to declare it day, yes, the pursuit of knowledge was like a trip through an unexplored section of the burrows. Once in a while, you'd say, "That little corridor off there—where does that one lead?" And your teacher would say, just like your band leader had when you'd been an ap-prentice warrior, "I don't know, and it's not important right now: pay attention to where we're going."

Eric paid attention, and he learned. He learned some chemistry, some physics, some biology. He learned about chlorophyllous plants which he had never been near in his entire life and about one-celled animals which had been around him and about him all through his life but which he had been unable to see any more than the plants.

"And your people really have? Through those micro-scope things?"

"Not microscope things, Eric—microscope *thing*. We have exactly one set of clumsy, hand-ground lenses. In the time when our ancestors owned the Earth, they had—oh, **they must have** had *dozens*. But they were an advanced, technologically oriented civilization: it was no trick for them to make two, three, even five microscopes at once. I mean that—don't look dubious—I'm not trying to feed you myths and legends. These were people, remember, who had achieved space travel themselves before the Mon-sters arrived, not interstellar flight, as the Monsters had, and not colonization as yet of other worlds, but they were making their way from planet to planet of their own system in ships that were almost as wonderful and compli-cated as those the Monsters suddenly turned up in. Our tragedy was that all the peoples of the Earth had at their disposal no more than about ten space ships—simple in-terplanetary exploring craft—when the Monsters came pouring out of the stars with an invasion fleet of thou

sands. Another century of development, maybe only fifty years, and we'd have had a space navy that wouldn't have been brushed aside by the first Monster patrol to arrive in the solar system."

Eric smiled and stared through the bottom of the cage at other cages suspended in the white vastness where human captives lay sleeping or walked about restlessly. "*The suddenness of the attack . . .*" he quoted.

"What?"

"Oh, it's part of the catechism I had to learn as a boy—from the Ancestor-Science faith I was brought up in. I remember how shocked I was when

my uncle said it was all garbage. I was so upset! But then I learned to live with the idea. You know, that it was garbage, a flock of nonsense imposed on us by our elders to keep us from asking questions and learning the truth about our past. And now, here I am again, learning that the people who have searched out more records concerning our ancestors than anyone else in the burrows—they have no more to say, basically, than that, as to why humanity succumbed. *The suddenness of the attack* . . . It makes me wonder whether any beliefs are true. Or—I don't know—whether *all* beliefs are true."

"Hey, there." Rachel reached up and grabbed a hand-ful of his hair. She pulled his head back and forth gently. "Just a little education and you feel you're ready for metaphysics."

"Is that metaphysics?" Eric asked, delighted to have rediscovered an ancient human technique all by him-self.

The girl elaborately ignored his question. "You have a lot of hard facts to learn yet," she went on, "you old Eric the Eye you, even if you do gulp down information like so much drinking water. Maybe all beliefs are true—in cer-tain ways, for certain people, at certain times. They wouldn't be beliefs if they didn't contain some significant core of reality. Like the stories that have come down tous of a group of our ancestors who believed that man was getting too much above himself, and that the arrival of the Monsters constituted a judgment, a judgment from some supernatural force to obliterate our civilization. They felt that space travel and atomics were just the last straw, and that once we developed those, the supernatural force was compelled to write us off. Well, you know something? They might have been right."

"They were? How?"

Rachel slid the repeatable slate, covered with scientific diagrams, back into a cloak pocket. Then she walked to the wall of the cage near which they had been sitting and leaned against it, rubbing her forehead against t'e smooth, cold surface. She looked very tired.

"In a couple of ways, Eric. You take your pick. First, religiously. It's always possible that there was—or is—such a supernatural force, capable of coming to just such a judgment. And when you look at how puny, how ridicu-lously tiny, our species appears today, scuttling about the dwelling places of the Monsters, it does seem that back then, in our last great period, we did get slightly above ourselves. Now, if you ask me why—to use some ances-tral phraseology—we should be cast down and the Mon-sters raised up, I tell you frankly I don't have the least idea. I only say that if you postulate a supernatural force, you are not necessarily postulating a mode of thought understandable by human beings nor necessarily sympa-thetic to their aspirations."

Eric rose and stood beside her. He leaned against the wall With his back, not taking his eyes off her, completely fascinated by the concepts which her pretty mouth was shaping. "Nor," he suggested, "do we necessarily postulate a mode of thought sympathetic to Monster aspirations."

"Perhaps. But what do we know of Monster aspira-tions, of the way they live with each other, compared to the ways human beings have always lived with each other? They might be, among themselves, decent and brotherly

creatures--and how would we find out? We know as little about them as they know about us. They don't even seem to consider us intelligent, to connect us with the planet-wide civilization they destroyed centuries ago. Well, who knows? In their eyes, maybe it wasn't a real civilization, maybe we look more natural to them in our present state. And us? We don't understand the first thing about them after I don't know how many auld Lang synes of observa-tion—what kind of government they have, *if* they have a government, what kind of language they have, *if* they have a language, what kind of sex life they have, *if* they have a sex life."

"What they originally used the explosive red blobs for, why some of them will rush and trample us and others will panic and dash away," Eric added, thinking of the practical problems with which he had been grappling at the times when Rachel had been asleep and he had paced back and forth in the cage by himself. "All that you're saying, though, is that they're different: they're not prova-bly better. Maybe this supernatural force thought so, but then I'd argue with it: I'd question its assumptions. On what other basis did our ancestors—this group of them who believed the coming of the Monsters was a judgment —on what other basis could they have been right?"

Rachel smiled at him, her eyes a tiny distance from his face. "You'd argue with the supernatural force, would you, Eric—you'd tell it that it was wrong? I'll bet you *would*: I can just see you doing it. You're the sum of everything that was ever good and bad about the human male. The second basis is moral; you might say it derived from an abiding and justified sense of guilt."

"Justified? What *kind* of guilt?"

"Certain beliefs, as I said . . . somewhere, in each, there's a significant core of reality. Man was lord of the Earth for a long time, Eric, and for that long time he was guilt-ridden. All of his religion and all of his literature—the literature that was written by sane men and not mad-men—was filled with guilt. If you put the legendary part aside and just look at the things he really did, he had reason to be. He enslaved his fellow men, he tortured and humiliated them. He destroyed his fellow civilizations, he demolished their temples and universities and used the stones to build outhouses. Sometimes men would trample on women and mock their hurt, sometimes women would trample on men and mock *their* hurt. In some places par-ents would keep children in chains for all of their growing up; in other places children would send useless parents out with orders to die. And this was with his own species, with *homo sapiens*. What did he do with species that were brothers and with whom he grew to maturity? We know what he did with Neanderthal man: how many others lie in the unmarked graves of anthropological history?"

"Man is an animal, Rachel! His duty is to survive."

"Man is more than an animal, Eric. His duty compre-hends more than survival. If one animal feeds on another and, in the process, wipes it out, that's biology; if man does the same thing, out of overpowering need or mere caprice, he knows he has committed a crime. Whether he's right or wrong in taking this attitude isn't important: *he knows he has committed a crime*. That is a thoroughly human realization, that it cannot be dismissed with an evolutionary shrug."

He moved away from the wall and strode up and down the cage in front of her, opening and closing his hands uncomfortably, clasping them together and pulling them apart. "All right," he said at last, coming to a stop. "Man murdered his brothers

all through history and his brother species all through prehistory. Suppose I don't dismiss it. What then?"

"Then you examine the criminal's record a bit more thoroughly. What about the other species—those you might call his cousins? I've told you of animals he domesticated: the ox, the ass, the horse, the dog, the cat, the pig. Do you know what is covered by the word domestication?"

Castration, for one thing, hybridization, for another. Taking the mother's milk away from her young. Taking the skin away from the body. Taking the meat away from the bones, as part of a planned economic process, and training one animal to lead others of its kind to slaughter. Taking the form away from the creature so that it becomes a comic caricature of its original self—as was done with dogs. Taking the purpose away from the generative powers so that it becomes a mad, perpetual factory of infertile eggs—as was done with hens. Taking its most basic expression of pride and turning it into drudgery or sport as was done with horses and bulls.

"Don't laugh, Eric. You're still thinking of man's survival, but I'm still talking of man's very ancient moral sense. You do all those things—to your fellow creatures, your fellow species, your fellow men—you do all those things for millennia upon millennia, while you are examining the question of good and evil, of right and wrong, of decency and cruelty, you do all those things as your father did, and his father before him, and do you mean to tell me that whatever plea is made to justify you—by science, by philosophy, by politics—you are not going to feel forever and omnipresently guilty as you stand shivering and naked in your own awful sight? That you're not going to feel you have accumulated a tremendous debt to the universe in which you live, and that the bill may one day be presented by another species, slightly stronger than yours, slightly smarter, and very different? And that then this new species will do unto you as you have done unto others from the beginning of your life on the planet? And that if what you did when you had the power was justified, then what will be done to you when you no longer have the power is certainly justified, is doubly, triply, quadruply justified?"

Rachel flung her arms out as she finished. Eric looked at her pounding, sweating bosom. Then he followed the direction of her bowed head and stared once more at the transparent cages filled with human beings that dotted the white space beneath them, cages here, cages there, and cages into the furthest distance.

21

Eric learned many things. He learned about love, for example. He learned about the Aaron People.

Love he found very, very sweet. It started with lust and then became much more complicated. Some parts of it some of the best parts—were downright incomprehensible.

He marveled that Rachel Esthersdaughter, beside whom he was still little more than a bare ignoramus, should defer to his decisions in all matters more and more every day—once she had made the initial decision of giving herself to him. He marveled at the delight she showed in deferring to him, and at the admiration and pleasure she displayed in everything he said and did, he, a brash barbarian who had only discovered from her recently—and then with open-mouthed astonishment—that

the burrows in which he had spent most of his life were no more than air spaces in the insulating material with which the Monsters protect-ed their homes from the unpleasant chills of Earth.

He wondered constantly at other changes in her, the way her mad, wild humor seemed to dissolve in his embrace, the way her flashing grin would be insensibly re-placed by an intense, caressing smile and her customary twinkle by the most searching of looks **in** suddenly serious brown eyes. Those looks tore at his heart: they seemed to express a hope that he would treat her well, along with **a** calm acceptance of the fact that it was entirely his deci-sion to treat her well or ill—and that whatever his deci-sion, she would cheerfully abide by it.

He was entranced by the differences in her body, not the differences he had always noted between man and

woman so much as the unexpected ones: the smallness of her fingernails, the otherness of her skin texture, the in-credible lightness of her vast length of brown hair.

"Most of the Aaron People have your kind of coloring, don't they?" he asked, holding her hair in his right hand and winding froths of it round and round upon his forearm.

Rachel snuggled closer and rubbed the top of her head up and down along his arm. "Most," she agreed. "We're a bit inbred, I'm afraid. It's been pretty much the same genetic pool for generations. We don't capture many wom-en from other tribes and our Male Society rarely initiates an outside warrior."

"But they would take me? I mean, if we ever made it back to them?"

"They would, darling. They'd have to. I have too much knowledge and training for my people to lose. And they wouldn't get me again without you. `You take my Eric,' I'd tell them, `you take my Eric and make him feel nice and welcome and loved or I'll get so unhappy that I'll forget everything I ever knew.' That's what I'd say, and there wouldn't be anything at all to worry about. Especial-ly these days, with their plans about the Monsters and my very specialized and useful set of facts."

"These plans, Rachel: can't you give me some idea what they are? Hitting back at the Monsters in a new and dif-ferent way—it's so exciting, but every time I try to figure out what they could be—"

She rolled away abruptly and sat up facing him. "Eric," she said, "I can't, and by now you know better than you ever did before that I can't. Don't keep asking me. It's a secret that has to do with the future of my people. I've been entrusted with it, and I can't discuss it with anyone who isn't a member of my people. When you are, you'll know—and you'll also be a part of the Plan."

Eric held up his hand in the gesture of peace. "All right," he begged, smiling. "Sorry and never again." Hewaited for her to come back to his arms, but she contin-ued to sit a distance away, in thought.

"You were talking about making it back to my people," Rachel said at last, still looking off in the white distance, through the transparent walls of the cage. "Have you thought of how we might do it?"

"Escape, you mean?"

"I mean escape. From this cage."

"No, but I have a couple of ideas. One that I think might be good. It needs a lot of

working out."

Her eyes swung back and met his. "Work it out then, darling," she said in a low, steady voice. "Work it out soon. We're liable to be pressed for time."

They sat and stared at each other. Then Rachel rose and Eric did too. She came into his arms.

"I haven't wanted to say anything-- I thought— I wasn't certain. I am certain now."

"You're pregnant!"

She nodded, placed her hands on either side of his face and kissed him slowly, softly. "Listen, darling," she whispered, her cheek against his. "Any method of escape is bound to involve a certain amount of gymnastics. And at some time in the not too distant future, little Rachel is going to be a lot less limber than she is now. She's going to be very clumsy about climbing from one place to another—and she's going to be awfully slow if *any* running has to be done. If we make a move, it has to be well before that."

Eric held her tight against him. "Those damned Mon-sters!" he swore. "Their damned laboratory! Their damned experiments! They are not going to get my child."

"It could be children," Rachel reminded him. "You may be a singleton, but a real litter is still a definite possibility."

"There'd be no escape, then," he said soberly. "You're

right: we've got to get out of here before you give birth. The sooner the better."

Rachel pushed herself away from him and turned aside. "Yes," she whispered, mostly to herself. "It was one thing to save our necks by giving the Monsters what they wanted: a breeding pair. But to give them the results of the breeding—"

"Stop it, Rachel! We're not at that point yet." And Eric moved off to make yet another circuit of the cage, yet another examination of Monster territory as it was visible through the transparent walls and floor. He had to be a warrior again, watching for an advantage, looking for a soft spot at which to aim an attack.

All of the plans for escape he had discussed with Jona-than Danielson and Walter the Weapon-Seeker had been inadequate; but here there was a new factor, something that had been nibbling at his mind for weeks. So far it had been only a nibble, not a bite. He concentrated on it demandingly, impatiently, both outer and inner eyes wide open.

There were no more lessons, at least none where the studies were guided wholly by the girl. Now he sat at her feet and asked her questions, pulling her back and forth in the areas of knowledge that corresponded to the places where he felt the nibbling sensation in his mind.

"Rachel, I must know about every single item in the pockets of your cloak. That small, pointed thing, for exam-ple—" ;

"You told me once what your people think this entire Monster dwelling looks like. Could' you draw a picture of it for me—"

"Can you cut up a few small sections of the cloak? Can they be sewn together? You said you had some kind of adhesive, didn't you—"

"Rachel, darling, can you tell me in simple, noncomplli-cated language what you know of the principles behind the various vehicles our ancestors used? Automobiles,boats, airplanes, spacecraft. Whatever you know about them, whatever

you can explain—"

Sometimes he amused her. Sometimes he almost terrified her. Always he ended by exhausting her. "There is a difference between men and women," she would mutter as she fell back finally, locking her arms behind her head and closing her eyes. "And now I know what it is. Women have to rest. Men don't."

Truly, Eric seemed to have no need of rest. He would prowl up and down the cage in long, springy, nervous strides, shaking a single fist over and over again, as if he were trying to hammer an idea open in mid-air. Or he would sit in a corner, staring down at a Monster going by—but while he sat and stared, his whole body would vibrate, faster, faster, faster. Or he would get involved in experiments: experiments with the properties of some piece of equipment in the cloak, experiments that could be conducted only when food was being dropped in, or only when the cage was being flooded and washed, or only when one of their immense captors had, come by to look them over.

In the beginning, Rachel worked with him and tried to help him—that is, when she could find out what it was that he was investigating: frequently he had no idea of the goal himself. But more and more she tended to leave him to his own researches. She would answer the questions he suddenly snapped at her, giving him relevant data or her carefully considered opinions. Otherwise, she was content to lie and watch him work, smiling at him fondly whenever he turned a look murky with concentration in her direction. And more and more, she spent her time stretched out at full length, dozing.

He understood, even though it was infuriating not to have the full, alert services of her well-stocked mind. First, he was her man: she had put herself and their mutual problem in his hands—and she trusted him. But more important, something was at work that he had seen

many times before among the females of Mankind: pregnancy usually created a certain placid euphoria in a woman; it was as if her thoughts were pledged exclusively to the helpless thing growing slowly within her body. With Rachel it was starting early.

Eric understood, but the understanding only made him more frenzied, more restless, more probing and determined. It was up to him and him alone whether his family were ever to wander in the burrows as free creatures—or whether they were to be forever caged and at the mercy of the Monsters' agony-filled investigations. He would escape, he told himself, beginning yet another new line of experimentation. He would. He would.

One day there was an interruption. A Monster came by and dropped Roy the Runner into their cage.

At first, Eric had scrambled for a spear as the strange human, released from the green rope, had struggled to his feet near where Rachel sat, both hands over her mouth and her eyes wide with fear. Then he recognized Roy and called out his name. All three of them relaxed and exhaled prodigiously. They grinned weakly at each other.

The Monster, satisfied after a period of watching that no mayhem was to be committed, rumbled its tremendous bulk away on other business.

Eric had told Rachel about Roy. Now he introduced the Runner to his mate. Roy

was enormously impressed. A woman of the Aaron People, willingly, without coercion ... **His** voice, when he began telling the history of the other cage since Eric had left, was low and almost greasily respectful.

"After they took you out, we didn't have a leader for a while—the men had lost the habit of following Arthur the Organizer. He'd lost something also: he wasn't very eager to give orders anymore. So I tried removing my head straps and letting my hair hang free again. You know, to look like you. I figured if I looked like you, maybe the men would take orders from me as if you were giving them. Only it didn't work. Walter the Weapon-Seeker took over for a while, until the—"

"That's it, Eric," Rachel broke in. "The loose hair. That's why they brought him here." She tumbled the hair at her neck with the back of a hand. "The loose hair. You, me, the Wild Men. The Monsters don't know I'm pregnant. They're still trying to get me mated."

Eric nodded, but Roy the Runner looked very puzzled and stared first at one and then at the other of them. "Go on, Roy. I'll explain it all later. How many of the expedition are left?"

"Practically none. About six, besides me. And not all in those Monster experiments, either. A lot of them died in the fighting."

"Fighting? You started fighting among yourselves?"

The tall thin Runner shook his head impatiently. "No—what was there to fight over? Lots of food and no women. What happened was the Monsters put a whole flock of strange men in our cage, men like you've never seen or heard about. I mean not Wild Men even. Little brown men, about half our size, but strong, strong as hell. They didn't use spears. They had clubs and something they called slingshots. It was hard to understand them. They talked—I don't know, they talked funny, not like other human beings at all. None of the Strangers had ever seen men like them before, not Arthur the Organizer, not anybody. They had names like Nicky Five and Harry Twelve and Beelzebub Two. All of them had names like that—it was crazy."

A small noise from Rachel. Eric looked at her. "I know about them," she said. "They're not from this house at all. They're from another house, the one next to ours. Naturally, another house—they're almost a totally different breed of humanity. Men from my people have visited them and brought back some strange, strange tales."

"What does she mean 'another house'?"

"A Monster house," Eric told Roy. "All of us

Mankind, the Strangers, the Aaron People—we all live in the walls of one particular Monster house. Actually, we all live in just one wing of that one house. In the other wings, there are lots of other peoples, some like us, some different. But people who live in another house entirely have to be very different from us. They've been breeding away from us for centuries, and their language and culture have been changing." At the Runner's bewildered expression, he said: "All right, Roy, I'll explain that later, too. Don't worry about it now. These men came into the cage and started fighting?"

"They did, from the moment they arrived," Roy answered, relieved to get back to a matter that was familiar and somewhat understandable. "They were screaming, just as we were, when the Monsters dropped them into the cage. Then they calmed

down: they stopped screaming and they started fighting with us. They didn't like anything we did. They said we didn't even know how to eat: the only right way to eat, according to them, was stretched out at full length on the floor of the cage, face down. And you weren't supposed to touch the food with your hands—you had to eat it off the floor. There were lots of other things: the way we slept, the way we talked, the way we moved our bowels. Everything had to be done their way—they were like lunatics! Day after day we lived in opposite corners of the cage with sentries posted while we slept, and every time we were fed—or watered—or anything—there'd be a full-scale battle in the middle, spears against clubs and slingshots, and three, four corpses for the Mon-sters to dispose of."

"Finally, though, you beat them?"

"Nobody beat anybody. What happened was the Mon-sters brought up a big sort of buzzing machine and put it over the cage. From that time on, whenever you felt mad enough to kill someone, you got a terrible pain in the head, and it got worse and worse until you thought you'd go clear out of your mind. The moment you stopped think-ing about killing, the pain disappeared. Let me tell you, Eric, we got to be friends, us and those strange little brown men! We got to be friends, no more arguments, no more battles, no more killing—just the Monsters taking a man out every once in a while and tearing him to pieces. You know, good times again?"

Eric and Rachel smiled grimly.

"That's what I expected was going to happen to me when they pulled me out today. Eric, was I glad to see you! I thought you'd been sewerred a long, long time ago. They took Arthur the Organizer out only two days ago. He was lucky: they dropped some black powder on him and he was dead fast just like that. But Manny the Manufacturer—"

Eric held up a hand to stop him. "Pm not interested in that," he said. "Tell me: you said that sometimes there were three or four corpses to dispose of while the fighting was going on. Were they all taken out of the cage togeth-er?"

The Runner screwed up his eyes and thought back. "I think so. **Yes. Yes, they** were all taken out of the cage at the same time. Once a day, whoever was dead, down would come the green ropes and out they'd all go to-gether."

"And whatever they were wearing, whatever spears or clubs might be lying across their bodies—that would go out too?"

"Sure. You saw it. Remember the guy that Walter said was from the Aaron People, the one who died the day after we arrived? They took him out with his skirt wrapped around his face just the way we had placed it. That's the way they dumped him into the black hole—that's the way they do it with everyone who dies in the cage."

"The Monsters do seem to have a thing about death," Rachel mused aloud. "Or at least death as it has to do with human bergs. Their interest in us is strictly *in viva*, as the ancestors would say. But what difference does that make to you, Eric? Once we're dead—"

"Once we're dead, we have a good chance to stay alive," he told her. "And I'm not being funny. Roy, do you want to escape with us?"

After one startled stare, the Runner bobbed his head emphatically. "Do I! Any plan you have, no matter how dangerous it is, count me in. The way I see it, there's

no real future here for an ambitious young man."

"The plan I have is very dangerous. An awful lot of things can go wrong, but it's absolutely the only way out of the cage that I can see. All right, let's get started."

Under his instructions, they went into action. He drove them both the way he'd been driving himself, doggedly, unremittingly. And the work went fast.

But once Rachel looked up and asked anxiously: "Aren't you taking a lot for granted, Eric? You have inference piled on inference. We don't know that much for certain about the construction of Monster houses."

"If I'm wrong, we'll be killed. And if we stay here?"

Rachel put her head down, sighed, and went back to her task.

Another time, it was Roy who exploded. He was learn-ing and growing, too—and becoming less deferent. "Look, Erik, you have no reason to believe these things work. Even Rachel—who's from the Aaron People—even she says she's never heard of these things before."

"Yes, she has. She knows them under another name= the Archimedes principle. And I told you, I've experi-mented with them. I've experimented with them over and over again. They'll work."

When they were almost finished with the construction, they began timing the approach of the Monster who fed them every day. Eric's plan was complicated enough: if the strains upon them were not to be too great, they had to initiate their operation shortly before a feeding time. And it was necessary for them to store food and drinkingwater. Who knew when they would come close to these essentials again?

Rachel looked at her torn and shredded cloak, the equipment from its pockets scattered about the floor of the cage like so much litter. "The only thing," she said in a low, miserable voice, "that I find really painful, darling, is your destroying my protoplasm neutralizer. The work, the research, that went into that gadget! And it was the whole point of my being sent into Monster territory. To go back to my people without it, after all this--"

"If we get back to your people," Eric told her calmly, working away at a folded section of the rodlike device, "the most important thing you can tell them is that the neutralizer works. Once they know that, they can build others like it. Meanwhile, we have nothing else we can turn into a really strong hook. And without a strong hook—even if everything else works right we don't have a chance."

The Runner came across the cage and stood beside him. "I've been thinking, Eric. You'd better tie the hook to *my* hands. I'm at least as strong as you. But you're smarter: I think you'll do better with the opening. I prom-ise to hang on with all my might."

Eric finished twisting the rod of the protoplasm neutral-izer into a serviceable hook. Then he sat back and thought. He nodded. "All right, Roy," he said. "That's the way we'll do it. But don't let go!" He put the uncurved end of the hook into Roy's hands: the Runner gripped it firmly. Then Eric tied the device to Roy's hands, running more straps from it around his arms, back across his shoulders. The hook had become almost a part of Roy's body.

Now they tied themselves and their equipment to the remains of the cloak. The two men adjusted their forehead glow lamps for the last time. Eric put Rachel

between himself and the Runner, lashing her first to Roy's waist and then to his. "Hang on to Roy's shoulders," he advised

her, "just in case the straps go. I'll be hanging on to yours."

When he was through, they were three people who formed a bound-together unit, at the furthest end of which was Roy the Runner holding a long hook that was tied to his hands as an extra precaution. They heard the Monster approaching with the food, and they lay down clumsily.

"Here we go, everybody," Eric told them. "Play dead!"

22

There was no shower of food into the cage. Instead, there was a long, almost unbearable pause in which they sensed the startled Monster was examining them.

They had agreed to keep their eyes tightly closed—as well as their limbs stiffly extended—until they were out of the cage and well on their way. For all they knew, Monster vision might be acute enough to detect their pupils moving. It also might be able to detect respiration, but here they had to take their chances. "Either we try to hold our breath as long as possible," Eric had pointed out, "and run the risk of a large, noisy gasp just when it's watching us most carefully, or we breathe as softly and as gently as we can. Tell yourself that you're asleep. Try to relax and hope we get away with it.

But it was hard. Moment after- dangerous moment,' it was hard to lie there perfectly still and not open your eyes for just one fast look at what was happening directly over your head.

At last there was a sensation of movement in the cage: the coldness of the green rope twined about their bodies, fusing itself to their flesh. A jerk, and they rose upward as a unit, their equipment knocking and slapping against them. Now real self-control was necessary; the experience of leaving a solid floor was terrifying enough, but panic began to screech and gibber behind eyes that could not see because they were squeezed shut.

The worst moment of all came when the Monster held them high in the air for a prolonged scrutiny. The ugly stink of alien breath grew overpoweringly strong—apparently the creature's head was very close to them. They had to appear limp and yet maintain control of their diaphragms. Eric hung on to a last inhalation, keeping his chest absolutely motionless. He hoped the others had done the same.

What was being felt by that enormous hulk of flesh? Disappointment over a promising experiment that had gone wrong so abruptly? Was the feeling at all similar to the one which humans knew? And would the disappointment be sharp enough to cause a change in the routine all three of them had observed the Monsters go through on such occasions?

"The Monsters do seem to have a thing about death," Rachel had said. They did: once a human captive appeared lifeless, they were interested only in disposing of him. A vital part of Eric's plan was based on this attitude; suppose curiosity about the causes of death and the changes inside a human body—suppose curiosity became dominant in the creature's mind. Eric fought hard to control a shudder. He failed. Beside him, in the circle of his arms, his mate's warm body shuddered in response.

Apparently having reached a decision, the Monster lowered them a little and set

off.

Eric felt he could now venture a careful squint. He opened his eyes slightly, keeping his body, legs and arms as stiff as ever. Visibility was poor—not only were they spinning about at the end of the green rope, but the great bladders tied to each of his shoulders rolled from side to side and intermittently got in front of his face.

It was a long while before he could see for certain that they were being brought to the huge white table surface upon which dissections took place. So far so good. In the

middle of the white surface was the dark hole at which his entire scheme had been directed. Would they be torn apart investigatively on the surface, or would they be dropped, casually and immediately, into the disposal hole, as they had hoped and planned they would? At this moment, after weeks of meditation on Monster behavior by himself and after days of reviewing the project with Roy and Rachel, it suddenly seemed too much to expect. He had been an idiot—they would never get away with it! How could he, Eric, have anticipated the thought processes of a Monster!

For that matter, how could the Monster fail to notice the odd equipment with which they were festooned, so unlike that of any other human captives it had ever seen? How could it fail to wonder at the three of them being tied so closely together? Better to untie themselves right now and be prepared to run in different directions as soon as they were deposited on the table top—one of them might survive, might escape. Bound together they'd be completely helpless!

Eric grappled with himself and managed to return to sanity. He must remember the Monsters ignored all human artifacts. He had seen that proven out dozens of times, and Rachel, from her vaster knowledge, had assured him that no exception to the rule had ever been observed. The Monsters seemed to see no relationship between the equipment men carried about and the possibility of intelligence. It was not just that human artifacts and Monster artifacts were so utterly and essentially different. Men were no more than pests as far as the Monsters were concerned, scuttling, unthinking pests peculiar to this planet, pests who nibbled at Monster food and damaged Monster belongings. The things that men wore on their bodies or conveyed from place to place were the accumulations of vermin, the debris, the litter, of creatures rather low on the evolutionary scale. The Monsters apparently saw no connection between the men who bred inside their walls and the once-proud owners of the planet they had brushed aside centuries ago.

Nor was Monster ignorance on this subject at all remarkable, Eric thought bitterly. When you thought of the cultural abyss between the space-wanderers, the poets and philosophers that Rachel had described in her history lessons—and the blinking, fearful things among whom he had been reared . . .

No, the plan might work or it might not, but bolting to another one at this point would be bloody suicide. They would find out soon enough.

As he grew relatively calm again, Eric heard the harsh breathing of his companions and realized that pretty much the same thoughts had been going through their minds: they too had been thinking of cutting themselves loose from each other and preparing to make a run for it once they got to the white table surface. He was recalled to his responsibilities as commander.

"Easy, Rachel. Take it slow, take it slow, Roy," he whispered lightly. "Everything's

working out fine--couldn't be better. Get ready to go into action."

He didn't dare turn to look at their faces, but the tone of his voice seemed to help. Short, convulsive breaths grew softer, gentler. And he remembered where the words had come from. These were the identical reassurances which his uncle, Thomas the Trap-Smasher, used to chant to the members of his band as they came face to face with battle-danger. Perhaps all military commanders, through-out human history, had used the very same words.

And now they were directly over the great expanse of white table. Eric felt his stomach shift and cower inside him. What was the Monster going to do with them? Was it going to

The Monster did exactly as he had figured it would. It lowered the green rope to the dark circle of disposal hole—and released them. If they were dead, they were garbage.

They plummeted down, holding tightly to each other. The hole seemed to widen enormously as they fell toward it.

Just as they dropped beneath its surface, there was a blast of sound. Roy the Runner had screamed. It was not a scream of pain. It was a scream of pure despair, of horror, of overwhelming misery. And, in a flash of sympathetic horror, Eric understood it.

Despite all their preparation and all their discussion, the same mad thought had been pulling against its strap in the back of his own mind, and he had fought hard to keep it from breaking loose. They were going down, if his calculations had been correct, they were going down into the sewers of Monster territory. Only dead people went into the sewers. They were going down to where the dead people were.

What avail were hours or even days of rational, intelligent talk about the use of Monster plumbing as an escape route—what avail was conscious decision against the dread that had lain buried in one's subconscious since childhood, since one had seen the first corpse ceremoniously sewered? The moist, rotting legions of the dead inhabited the sewers, and the dead were vicious, the dead were nasty. They would allow no one to return who made the same grim journey that they had made.

That was what Roy had remembered at the last moment. Not the sewers as a possible line to freedom which the adult Roy was eager to investigate; but the sewers as-a cemetery of time itself from which the child in Roy still shrank back in ultimate loathing. And he had lost control of himself. He had screamed.

It almost cost them everything, that scream.

The green rope whipped down into the hole after them. Craning his neck upward, at the rapidly receding whiteness in which the Monster's pink tentacles were framed, Eric saw the rope come to the end of its length a little more than a man's height above their heads. He saw it grow thin and dwindle in size, still twitching for their flesh, as they continued to fall.

Something hit them a tremendous wallop. It was as if they had smashed into the floor after a drop from a cage high up in Monster territory.

The water, Eric realized, a few moments after impact, as he struggled back to awareness. They had hit the water.

Instinctively, he had held his breath and tightened his grip even further on Rachel. And the straps that lashed them together were holding! Beyond the woman, he could

feel her hugging Roy as they plunged down, down, down through the cold wetness. At least they were still together.

This much of his plan had worked. Now it was up to the bladders he had designed. A pair were tied to each of them at shoulder height. They were made of the water-proof material of Rachel's cloak, filled with air that had been blown into them and sealed with an adhesive the Aaron People had developed for mending garments.

"But Eric," Rachel had demurred. "It's never been tested in those conditions—under so much water and pressure for such a long time."

"Then we'll test it," he had told her. "We'll find out how good an adhesive it really is. Our lives will depend on it."

Their lives depended on additional factors as well. On their falling far enough to enter the main sewer pipe, for example. Otherwise, their bladders would take over and pull them back to the surface of the water in the disposal hole where they would be helpless. The Monster could then pick them out at its pleasure.

They were still falling through the water, but they were falling more and more slowly. When could they breathe again? Down they went and down, and still there was nothing but water all around them. Eric began a slow slide

away from consciousness. He dug his fingers deeper into Rachel's arms. His chest was exploding . . .

Suddenly, the quality of the water changed—and so did their direction. They shot off to one side in the midst of an incredible turbulence, going round and round each other, first this way, then that, up, down, up—and, at last, they stayed up.

They were in the sewer pipes, and they had surfaced.

The bladders kept their heads on top of the swiftly running current. Eric groaned air into his lungs; he heard Rachel and Roy doing the same. Oh, breathing was good, so good! The fetid air of Monster sewage was really *delicious*.

"It worked!" Rachel gasped after a while. "Darling, it worked!"

He forbore to tell her that it **had only** worked **up to** now. The third part of his plan was coming up. If that didn't work out right, everything they had achieved would be useless. Where did the Monster sewers empty? Rachel had suggested the ocean or a sewage disposal plant. He'd rather not find out.

"Are you all 'right, Roy?" Eric called, being careful to lift his chin so that none of the water got into his mouth.

"I'm fine," the Runner yelled back *over* the booming roar of the current. "And I've got the hook ready. **You** tell me when."

They were skimming down a pipe whose diameter, Eric estimated, must be about one-half the height of an average burrow. The curving top of the pipe was only a short distance above their heads---a little less than an arm's length.

A *difficult* command decision was involved here. The only way they could get out was through a pipe joint. Assuming they could open one from the bottom—and though Roy and Rachel had agreed with him that it was possible, they'd both looked as dubious as he felt—theselection of the joint upon which they'd make their at-tempt had to be a matter of fairly careful timing. It would be useless to try to open one that lay within the boundaries of Monster Territory: there would be nothing but hard, immovable flooring above it. Once the pipe had entered the walls and begun

running through them, it would be surrounded by the insulating material which human beings knew as the burrows. There, any given pipe joint might well be used for garbage disposal and burial of the dead by a tribe living in its neighborhood—and the tribe would have cut an opening in the burrows floor immediately above the joint.

Uncovering a pipe joint from the bottom would be an incredibly difficult and exhausting piece of work; if, at the end, they found a solid floor above them, they would have to enter the water again very tired and very discouraged. Logically, they should therefore make their attempt later rather than earlier. They should wait until they were certain beyond any doubt that they were back inside the walls.

On the other hand, the water was viciously cold, and being burrows creatures, long removed from the Outside, they were not at all used to cold. Furthermore, they kept passing the mouths of tributary pipes which belched more filth—and more water—into the main channel along which they were hurtling. This had two results: it kept raising the level of the water they were in closer and closer to the curving pipe top overhead—and it kept increasing the speed of the current. The first was frightening enough, but the increased speed might shortly make it impossible for Roy to catch on to a pipe joint with the hook that was tied about his hands and arms. And if Roy failed, they'd never get out.

No, Eric decided, he'd better take the very next pipe joint they passed. The result would be a matter of luck—and he had come to feel he could trust his luck. It was certainly much better than his father's: he had managed to get out of Monster Territory, alive and with his mate. 1

He turned his head and peered down the pipe in front of them, examining its top with the beam from his forehead glow lamp. There, above the wild splashes of water and the somersaulting chunks of offal and rubbish, was that it—a dim patch that seemed to be rushing swiftly in their direction?

Eric narrowed his eyes and strained to see. Yes. It was a joint.

"Roy!" he sang out and brought his arm in a wide motion over his head, pointing with his whole hand. "Do you see it? We'll take that one."

The beam from the Runner's glow lamp crept along his own and focused on the patch in the pipe top, now only a short distance away. "I see it," Roy called. "Get ready. Here we go."

He swung his hook up as they sped under the joint, catching an edge of it. For a moment they paused, swing-ing from side to side in the noisy, cascading water. Then they were on their way again. The hook had slipped out.

Roy cursed himself bitterly. "I didn't get a grip on it! I almost—damn it, I didn't get a good grip on it! I should be sewered alive."

In spite of their predicament, Eric found himself grin-ning. That was exactly what was happening to the Run-ner! But he didn't bother to point it out. "My fault," he told him instead. "I didn't give you enough warning. I'll let you know earlier next time."

But he was worried. The cold from the water had begun to numb his body. The other two were no doubt losing sensation as well: that would make it more difficult for Roy to hold on with his hook. How had the ancestors ever been able to survive low temperatures in the Outside? According to Rachel, some had even thrived on it and taken recreation especially in cold weather. What heroes there must have been in

those days!

Well, he was no hero: he found the cold crippling. And it was getting worse every moment. Also the current was observably much faster than when they had started. If Roy managed to hook the next pipe joint, Eric decided, he couldn't be expected to cling to it for long. They'd have to move very fast indeed.

With this in mind, he reached down to his waist strap and pulled out the knife he'd taken from Jonathan Danielson's body in the first cage a long, long time ago. He cut the thongs that bound him to Rachel. Now, only his arms were holding them together, but he'd be able to do his part of the job much more rapidly.

"How are you, darling?" he asked, suddenly conscious of the fact that she had been silent for some time. This was a pregnant woman, after all. She didn't reply. "How *are* you?" he demanded more urgently.

"I'm cold," she said in a low, dull voice. "Eric, I'm cold and I'm tired. I don't have much left."

Frantically, he turned his head again to scan the top of the pipe. The next chance would be their last. He'd better give Roy plenty of opportunity to prepare. And this time Roy had better

The moment Eric saw the faint trace of a patch in the distance, he called out and pointed. The Runner located the joint, set himself. "I won't let go—I promise you!" he said between clenched teeth.

As the joint passed overhead, he thrashed wildly with his legs, rising slightly out of the water. He slammed the hook into a crack that ran along an edge of the joint—and twisted it. The curved end of the hook slid and locked inside the joint.

"Up to you, now, Eric," he gasped. "Go ahead!"

Rachel was still tied to Roy, but Eric, depending solely on his grip, was almost torn loose by the suddenness of their stop. It was by one hand only, a hand slipping up her

arm to her throat, that he still held himself to her. He threw the other arm around her again and pulled himself close.

Then, reaching past her to Roy, he hauled himself up and over both of them, clambering across their madly jerking bodies until he stood on the Runner's shoulders. These were wet and slippery, but he was able to grab the middle of the hook with his left hand and steady himself. He whipped out his knife and went to work, ferociously, on the joint. Under him, the Runner fought for air, as with Eric's full weight upon him, his face would go slightly below the level of the water, slightly above it, then slightly below again.

Eric knew exactly what he had to do. He had been over this sequence in his mind dozens and dozens of times. He had been reviewing it while in the water, while looking for a joint in the distance, while climbing over Rachel to stand on Roy's shoulders. He had to reverse the process of opening a joint that he had used when standing on the floor of the burrows.

It should work.

On the burrows floor, you first tugged the covering plate to the right. Therefore, operating from underneath and using the knife, Eric pried it to the left. He switched the knife to the other side and pried to the right. Now, at exactly the right moment, while the heavy plate was still sliding, pull down on the knife handle, making the knife

into a lever—and pray it doesn't break!

The plate moved upward. Eric let go of the hook with his left hand and grabbed the edge of the plate through the open space he had created. He pushed with all his might. The plate rolled off to one side.

He pulled himself out of the water and through the open joint. Crouched uncomfortably now on top of the pipe, he had flooring directly above him. The question was, what kind of flooring—Monster territory or of the burrows? And if it were burrows flooring, had there been human beings nearby to cut an opening through it?

There had, and he slumped for a moment in abject relief as he saw the familiar outlines of a slab. They could get out! Again he jabbed his knife in the thin space where edge met edge and used it as a lever. Once the slab lifted a bit, he put his shoulders under it, bracing his feet on the pipe—and straightened, pushing up. The slab rose and *fell* away from the opening, rattling the floor with its weight.

Eric, standing fully upright, could see curved walls and low ceilings all around him. The blessed, blessed bur-rows!

He scrambled back down and lay on the surface of the pipe, reaching through the joint. The Runner's face was bluish and Rachel's head lolled limply against his back. "Can't help—you much," Roy panted from the water. "You'll have to—all by yourself, if you can. I'm—I'm finished."

Eric got his hands under *Roy's* armpits and tugged. The Runner and Rachel came up easily about halfway, but there, with no more water to buoy them, they became suddenly far too heavy for him to lift any more. He held on desperately. Then Roy made a last effort. He got his elbows, still tied to the dripping hook, over the top of the pipe and heaved. It was just enough to make a difference. Eric was able to pull them both on to the pipe. They rested for a moment, then Eric and Roy together dragged themselves and Rachel through the opening to the bur-rows floor.

There they lay, exhausted.

But Eric was a commander—and a husband. He had responsibilities. He forced himself upright and cut Rachel loose from *Roy*, *Roy* loose from the hook. Then he addressed himself to his mate.

Her appearance frightened him. She was barely breathing, and her body was cold, very cold. With his own teeth

chattering, he began rubbing her body furiously. He massaged her chest, he worked her arms back and forth, he chafed her feet. "Rachel," he called in agony. "Rachel, Rachel darling!"

After all this, to lose her!

Her eyelids fluttered open. "Hello, sweetheart," she said weakly. She took her first deep breath. She took another and managed a smile. "Hello," she said again in a voice a bit more like her own. "We made it!"

"We made it!" Eric joyfully agreed. He hugged her and kissed the paleness from her face. Then he put the joint cover back in place, and returned the slab to its socket in the floor. He was paying respect once more to the human housekeeping habits of the burrows.

"Take my equipment, Roy. Rachel, put your arms around my neck. I'm going to carry you."

"Where?" the Runner asked, picking up Eric's gear and getting **heavily** to his feet. "Why do we **have to** move?"

"Because we don't know what kind of tribe may use that particular sewer opening—or how soon they're liable to use it again. We're going to get a distance away and find a safer spot before we begin resting."

Rachel was fairly heavy now, and Eric's weariness hurt all along the calves of his legs and the muscles of his shoulders. But he couldn't ask her to walk so soon after the experience she'd undergone. She went to sleep, nestling her head against his chest.

He didn't go far—just a few burrow turnings, past a couple of intersections. "This is where we'll sleep," he said, putting Rachel down carefully. "I hereby declare it night."

"We made it out of Monster territory," Roy marveled. "Out of the Cages of Sin, out of the sewers themselves. We're alive and safe and warm."

"And we have no idea," Eric reminded him, "where the hell we are."

23

Coming awake, Eric paused for a while and thought before announcing the dawn. He caressed his wife as she lay against him, her head on his right shoulder, her mouth nuzzling his chest. Rachel still looked very tired. He decided to stay in this spot and give her another day of rest.

But, once she was up, she wouldn't hear of it. "I know what you're afraid of. You're worrying about a miscarriage. Darling, if it didn't happen yesterday, it's not going to happen. We women of the Aaron People are just as hardy as the females of any front-burrow tribe."

"There's a long journey ahead. Many, many days of travel."

"All the more reason to start immediately, dearest. We don't have food for many, many days. And we can't spare the time for a detour into Monster Territory to pick up more. I'll be all right. If I find I'm giving out, I'll start drooping immediately. I promise not to push myself—I'll droop noticeably and emphatically, all over the burrows floor."

Roy, who had come up and squatted near them, said he agreed with Rachel. "It's not only going to be a long journey, Eric. It's liable to be a meandering one, full of false starts and wrong turnings and going back along the way we came. You said last night you didn't know where we are—it's going to be even harder to find out where we want to go. I say let's start now."

Knowing they were right, Eric nevertheless fought to give Rachel a little more time. First, of course, they had to have breakfast. After that, he ordered their equipment checked and inventoried, their food supply examined for possible damage from the lengthy submersion. He sent

Roy off to empty their canteens and then refill them with fresh water from the pipes that always ran parallel to the sewer system. And, finally, he asked for the map that Rachel carried and insisted on examining it thoroughly for clues as to the route they might take to their agreed-upon destination—the burrows of the Aaron People.

Roy was very much excited by the map: he'd never seen one before. Having returned with the canteens, he lounged behind Eric and stared respectfully at it, trying to understand how this odd network of lines could be considered a picture of the

burrows in which a man traveled with walls on either side of him and fought or avoided enemies. Eric answered his questions patiently and in great detail: every explanation, every digression, meant that much more rest for Rachel. The girl napped on the floor a little distance from them, her face still somewhat haggard and her hands clasped on a belly that was just beginning to look rounder than normal female plumpness.

But as soon as the Runner understood that the place where they were now was not to be found on the map at all, he lost interest. He moved away and began putting his equipment into expedition-readiness, tightening straps, examining his knapsack for any badly frayed area, assembling his spears in front of him and choosing the one he wanted most readily available in the back sling.

"It's like all the other stuff of the Aaron People," Eric heard him grumble. "Just like the rest of these Strangers. They have things that sound great, that are wonderful to look at—only, please, if you don't mind, we can't use it right now. It's not good in this spot, we'll use it tomorrow, we'll use it next week. Damned mouth-warriors and their phoney gear. *Maps!*"

Eric was irritated and wanted to remind him of the Aaron People gear that had helped them escape from Monster territory: the waterproof cloak they had used to make bladders, the protoplasm neutralizer that was the only piece of metal among them long enough to be bent into a hook. And how long was it since Roy had been so pathetically imitating Stranger dress and Stranger habits of speech?

But the three of them would have to stay close and depend on each other in the long, difficult journey that lay ahead. A commander, Eric had noted long ago, observing his uncle, did not allow himself to get into arguments, unless they involved a direct challenge to his authority or some other form of danger to the group he led. Besides, Eric suddenly smiled to himself, Roy's griping really meant only one thing: he was back in the burrows and feeling like a warrior of Mankind again.

So did he, he realized. And it was good to be practicing your trade again. Until they reached the Aaron People, at any rate . . .

He jumped to his feet, then, to get away from the thought that had begun crowding in on him. "All right, everybody," he called, in the ancient band call whose last meaningless phrase was supposed to have come all the way down from the ancestors: "Let's hit the road!"

A few moments later, they were going down the tunnel in single file, Eric in the lead and Rachel in the middle. Since their experience of the day before, he found himself constantly aware of something he had taken for granted all of his life: the warmth of the burrows. It was warmth, he knew now, that the Monsters needed and created for themselves. But it was certainly very comfortable for human beings, too. Man and Monsters, he was beginning to understand, had surprisingly many similar needs.

Where was he leading this tiny band? They were completely lost, in totally unfamiliar and therefore very dangerous territory, yet Eric had an idea. He was an Eye, and an Eye should know the way anywhere he found himself—even if he'd never been there before.

At every branching burrow, he paused and took a good

long look, first at the sides and in the distance for Any' lurking enemies, then at the floor. The floor was most important. Once in a while, he would decide a branch looked promising and turn off into it, the other two following and wondering.

The trouble was, he couldn't expect to see what he was looking for: it was more a matter *of feel*. And for this, this *feel*, his feet were more useful than his eyes. His feet had to find the way. He tried to see with his toes, to watch with his heels, to peer with his soles. He was looking for any information about the floor of the burrow that his feet could give him.

When they stopped finally for sleep and the only big meal of the day, he pulled out the map and studied it. And he was studying it again the next morning, when he awoke Roy and Rachel; he was memorizing this picture of a burrows network far distant from the one they were in. He could see that it didn't make sense to either of them.

"What are you trying to find, darling?" Rachel asked at last, when, after much cogitation, he led them up a branch burrow and, after shaking his head suddenly, turned around and led them back again to the intersection.

"I'm looking for a slope in the floor," he explained. "Any slope, no matter how slight. Your people are known among Strangers and Mankind as the furthest-back burrowers, the bottommost burrowers of all. Whenever Walter the Weapon-Seeker or Arthur the Organizer talked about the Aaron People, they told how they had gone *down to* them. Never *across* to the Aaron People, as when they visited each other's tribes; never *up* to the Aaron People, as when they traded with Mankind; but always *down*. *It's* the only general direction I have. To get *to* the bottommost *burrow*, I have to find and stay on a gradi-ent."

"*And if you do;*" she asked from behind him, falling into step once more, "what then? We may get down to *the*

level of the Aaron People's burrows, but they might be ten or twenty days' march on either side of us. We won't even know *which* side."

"There," Eric shrugged, "I'll be counting on my luck. My luck's been good. And I'll be counting on the map. You see, at that point, the map—"

He froze, flinging up his arms for silence. Rachel and Roy stopped simultaneously in mid-step, staring over his shoulder.

There was a sentry ahead of them. The man was leaning against the burrows wall, facing in their direction, a spear trailing down from his hand to the floor. The light from his forehead glow lamp burned directly at them.

Why didn't he give the alarm? Eric and Roy both now had spears in their hands. Why didn't the sentry try to beat them to the throw?

"He's dead," Rachel breathed. "Don't you see? He's standing there, but he's dead. He's been dead for days. You can smell him."

And they could. Across the intervening space, there drifted the unmistakable odor of a corpse.

The man had died suddenly, while **on** duty. And he had not been sewered.

Very cautiously, one slow step at a time, they crept up to him. His eyes were open and steadfast, fixed on the tunnel he was supposed to guard, but a gray film had formed over them. His body too was gray: a gray liquid seemed to have oozed out of the pores of his skin and covered the powerful biceps, the alert face, the strong

warrior's chest.

Eric looked him over, vaguely puzzled by something he could not quite place. The weapons, the equipment, the clothing—all were slightly alien, and all were, at the same time, tantalizingly familiar.

They went past the guard, walking on the balls of their feet, ready to break and run back at the slightest hint of

active danger. After a while, the tunnel broadened into what Eric recognized as a central burrow, a large, high-ceilinged chamber very similar to the central meeting-place of his own people. Here, at last, they could relax and walk about easily, without fear of attack.

The central burrow was filled, from one end to the other, with nothing more hostile than corpses. Long-dead corpses.

Everywhere, men, women and children stood or sat like so many statues that had been carved to exemplify the full range of human activities. An old crone squatted at the magic of food preparation. A warrior lay on his belly watching her, a corner of his mouth twisted in anticipation. A mother had turned a small child over her knee and had her hand raised, high and angry, over his naked rump. A young man, lounging against a wall, was smiling ingratiatingly at a young girl going by, who, while totally oblivious of her admirer, apparently had no way of passing him other than cutting in close enough to brush against his folded arms.

All had succumbed to the same unexpected flash of death. All were covered with the same gray liquid from head to foot.

Seeing them here assembled, Eric understood what had been so familiar about the sentry. This was clearly a front-burrow people. The differences were minor and subtle ones, but he was standing in the midst of a tribe very much like Mankind. A little further along the wall, no doubt, but they were almost exactly as far from Monster territory as his own people. Their artifacts were as simple, their family and social life the same.

And there, sitting comfortably on a mound, surrounded by three women and benignly overseeing his tribe's activities, was an indubitable chieftain, as fat of body and as craftily stupid of expression as Franklin the Father of Many Thieves. Only the face was different.

Somewhere, nearby, there was probably a youngster who had been preparing to go on his first Theft... .

Rachel turned from a body she had been scrutinizing closely. "This gray, moist skin," she announced. "I know what causes it. A homicidal spray the Monsters use. But I've only seen individuals who've been caught by that spray. Never a whole people."

"Well, the laboratory we were in, the experiments—The Monsters seem to be a lot more serious than they ever were about getting rid of us," Eric suggested.

The girl nodded grimly. "Very serious; indeed. Eric, we've got to get to my people soon. Not for our sake—for theirs. They have to know what's happened here. It's urgent."

"All right, sweetheart. I'll do my best. Is it safe to use any of the food in this place? I'd like to carry away as much as we can."

"Let me look around. Eric—don't you or Roy touch one of these bodies. That gray liquid can make you very sick. On contact."

Eric watched her opening food containers and sniffing at them gingerly. He was amazed at the strength of the feeling that billowed inside him: a tremendous warmth, a tremendous complacency.

At this moment, he felt for the first time that she was truly his wife. She had taught him a large part of what she knew. She had mated with him, and he had poured love into her body. She had conceived his child and was carry-ing it now inside her. But until he had stood in a great central burrow and seen her examining food to see that it was fit for him to eat—as all the wives of Mankind had done from his earliest memory—until now there had been something important that was missing. Now there was nothing missing: he knew he was married.

It was like Roy screaming when the Monster dropped them down the disposal hole that led to freedom. The

scream hadn't begun then. It had been born long, long before.

A baby's first impressions are the adult's last conclusions —with an adjective or two added from a lifetime of ex-perience.

When they left that great central burrow, the cemetery of a whole people, Roy was uncommunicative for a long time. He didn't even join the discussion by which they decided that to sewer this many human beings was utterly beyond their capacity. Eric thought he knew what was on the Runner's mind. Before they went to sleep, he told him of the similarities he had noticed between this tribe **and** Mankind.

"I keep thinking of Franklin and Otilie and Rita the Record-Keeper," Eric told him. "I kept wondering if this spray had been used on them, if they were all standing around at this moment—everybody we knew—gray and wet and stiff and dead."

Roy lay back on the floor. "Mankind's dead," he mut-tered. "It's dead to me, anyway. I don't give a damn about Franklin and Otilie and the rest." He turned over on his side.

But the next morning, when Eric awoke, Roy was sitting up, his hands clasped around his knees. He was staring at Rachel. There was a peculiar expression on his face which Eric found hard to analyze.

It was not at all like desire, but it had an uncomfortable intensity. Was the Runner thinking of his own mate, back in Mankind? Had he too observed Rachel selecting food—and had it reminded him of his own wifeless, completely outlaw state?

Eric didn't like it. As he led off after breakfast, he was unpleasantly aware of two situations: Rachel was immedi-ately ahead of Roy where the constant sight of her would likely aggravate whatever was bothering the Runner; and he, Eric, was ahead of Rachel, his back an easy target for a spear cast by an angry, brooding man.

He thought of placing Roy in front of him: as a com-mander, that was his privilege. But Roy was no Eye, and an Eye was needed to find the way. Damn Roy! Trouble among themselves was the last thing they needed. Eric kept going, alert for any unusual noise behind him.

As a result, he almost led his command directly into destruction. He'd been so intent on what was going on to his rear that he'd failed to be properly aware of the sounds ahead. But as he was crossing an intersection, he heard them clearly. He shot one startled glance off to his left and immediately cupped a hand over his forehead

glow lamp to obscure the light. He scrambled backward, shoving Rachel and Roy into the shelter of the branch from which they'd come.

"Wild Men!" he whispered. "A tremendous pack of them coming this way. Get your knapsacks off. We'll have to make a run for it." He wondered how fast Rachel could run. She'd barely been keeping up.

"Let me do it," Roy said, slipping out of his overloaded knapsack swiftly. "You two stay here."

Before they could stop him, he had darted out to the intersection with his forehead light uncovered. He looked off to the left, stiffening as if he couldn't believe what he saw. Then he threw his arms over his head and screamed. He screamed like one gone mad with terror.

The Wild Men heard him and saw him. They bellowed a wall-shaking hunger call in reply.

Roy turned and ran off to the right, screaming as he went. A moment later, the Wild Men roared past the branch in pursuit.

24

Eric and Rachel had flattened themselves against the left-hand wall. They clung to each other, afraid to breathe, as the horde thundered past the intersection. If

only one of these horrible creatures glanced in their direction, they were done for. They'd never be able to get out of their knapsacks in time, to pick up any speed.

But with live meat visible up ahead, the Wild Men concentrated on that alone. From time to time, they threw their heads back—it seemed in perfect unison—and screeched out a repetition of their hunger call. The rising and falling notes bounced savagely off the walls around Rachel and Eric and made their muscles go rigid with terror spasm. That was the main purpose of the call, Eric realized: to freeze the prey in his tracks. It also served to encourage the slower members of the pack and keep them aware of the hunt's direction.

He'd never seen a Wild Man before, but one look down the corridor had been enough to tell him that the legends had all been true and that Rachel's experiences in the cage had been fully as ugly as she had said. They were as Rachel had described them: a chilling throwback to some original version of the primate horde, and yet with over-tones of an all-too-human mob. The mass of hairy bent-over figures, their fingertips dragging along the floor, shambling along in a tight pack shoulder to immense shoulder—somehow even the Monsters weren't as upsetting. These things were foul.

Since there were children among them—tiny bits of shrilling ugliness who bounced past as much on the knuckles of their hands as on their splayed feet—the pack had to consist of both males and females. Yet it was almost impossible to tell one from the other. Perhaps the shorter were female. But short and tall, they all looked alike: they all had vast tangled quantities of head hair—and they all seemed to have beards.

They poured past the intersection in a run that was part roll, part hop and part fast walk, and that had a surprising amount of speed to it. Many of them were holding grisly lanterns: tom-off heads which still had the glow lamps of warriors bound above the eyes. But they carried no weapons, they wore no clothing. They merely

pounded on the floor with their fists as they ran and reiterated the slobber-ing screech of their call. And they exuded an enormous, collective stink that seemed to fill the burrows with its fog.

When the last bellowing straggler had scuttled by, anx-iously considering its chance of getting a bite of the distant meal, Eric and Rachel each took an opposite strap of Roy's knapsack and, heavily loaded themselves, began carrying it back down the tunnel in the direction of the last place they had slept.

There wasn't much chance they'd ever see Roy again, but if he escaped from the Wild Men, this was the only possible place for him to meet them. They got there, unloaded themselves and sank to the floor in each other's arms.

If was time for food, but neither of them even thought of eating. Food reminded them of the Wild Men—and the Wild Men's hunger.

Eric folded his arms and leaned against the wall near which Rachel was sitting. His ears were alert for any sound indicating the approach of Wild Men, but there was a deep, painful puzzle in his mind. "I've never seen any-one do that before," he said. "I've *heard* of such things, but only to save a tribe or a mate and children. And I thought—I was worried about Roy. He was so upset, so angry."

"He was miserable, darling. The closer we were getting to my people, the more he was brooding about his position once we arrived."

"You mean that he'd be nothing but an ignorant, front burrow savage? I'm facing the same problem. I try not to think about it."

Rachel made a face. She lifted a foot deliberately from where the sat and kicked at his leg—hard. "You're my

mate," she pointed out. "The husband of Rachel Esthers-daughter will automatically be a personage among The Aaron People. And you're not an ignorant savage any= more. At least, you're not ignorant," she added with a tiny, warm smile. "But Roy—he felt he had no skills, no knowledge, which would be useful where he was going,' nothing to set him off and give him hope of winning a mate. He's had nothing, really, ever since he joined us **in** the cage. All the planning was yours, all the leading was yours. You pointed the way to every action and did what-ever was important. And you were the one with a mate. Roy was feeling that he was just an extra—not at all necessary."

"He was sure as hell necessary in that escape from the Monsters. You'd never have been able to hook the sewer joint, Rachel, and hold on long enough for me to open the thing."

"But you never told him that, darling. Did you? And if Roy thought about it at all, he probably decided that any full-grown man who happened to be along could have done just as well. Roy wasn't *necessary*: nothing about Roy himself was necessary to anything we've done."

She was right, Eric decided. One hell of a commander he'd turned out to be! Leading and directing were only a' small part of the command function, his uncle used to say—it was like making love without caresses.

And now there were only two of them again. How long would it be wise to stay here before giving up on Roy? How long would it be safe?

They heard footsteps coming toward them.

Rachel rose and stood behind Eric, who unslung a spear. The footsteps came

closer, grew louder. Roy trotted around a curve in the tunnel.

"Roy!" they yelled, and ran at him with open arms. Rachel hugged him, covering his face with kisses. Eric pounded his back, grabbed a fistful of hair and pulled his head back and forth. "You old Runner, you!" he car-oled ecstatically. "You crazy old heroic Runner, you!"

When they finally let him go, Roy shook himself and inquired mildly: "Where's the food? I built up a bit of an appetite."

Catching sight of his knapsack, he strode over to it, opened it and squatted to eat. There was a jauntiness in the Runner's bearing that Eric hadn't seen for many a sleep period.

They sat down next to him. "What happened?" they demanded.

"Nothing much," he said with his mouth full. "I led them around and around and around. Then I put on some speed and lost them. Most of the time I've been spending has been to get back here."

"You're wonderful!" Rachel told him. "You're abso-lutely wonderful! People will make up songs and stories about what you did."

"Oh, I don't know, Rachel. The whole thing wasn't much of a sprint for a Runner. For a real Runner, that is."

"And that's what you are," Eric said earnestly. "The best damn Runner in the whole twisting burrows! Where did you lose them?"

Roy grinned. "Remember that tribe yesterday? The poisoned people?"

They nodded.

"I led them back there. 'You want to eat people?' I said. 'Here you are. Some people. Eat them.' I hope they get a bellyache they'll never forget."

After the meal, it was a while before they started on their way again. They wanted to continue downhill, but it would be stupid to go back to where they had met the Wild Men. Eric had to find a gradient that ran in a slightly different direction.

He'd been turning an idea over in his mind. Now he took a small quantity of food and squeezed it into a

ball. He rolled the ball up and down several corridors.; When it rolled freely away from them, he picked it up and followed along the slope it had revealed.

In the next five days, they came across two more exter; minated tribes. The situation in each was the same as in the first they had encountered, except that, from the greater abundance of material objects and handicrafts gen-erally, Eric knew that in his own section of the burrows he would have labeled them "Strangers." Death had caughtw, these men and women in mid-gesture also; here and there, a laughing child stood poised on one leg, forever immobile ized in its play.

But there were individuals who looked frantic, or ^{hor}rified. And on the further outskirts of these burrows, they

found gray statues in running attitudes, whose backs were: to their own central burrow. Apparently, there had been some warning not enough.

They replenished their supplies of food and water at each place. No living thing came across their path, until—a full sleep period past the last of these tribal cemeteries they saw half a dozen people at the far end of a tunnel. The other group tossed a few spears which fell harmlessly short, and then fled, shrieking.

Refugees from a poisoned burrow, it was obvious, since there were women

among them. Refugees fearfully roam-ing the corridors in a group too small to put up any effective resistance against Wild Men or tribal enemies. Essentially respectable people who had been catapulted into the position of outlaws by the Monsters' pest control program.

"Alien-Science!" Roy commented heavily. "A religio that sets itself up to study the Monsters! Are we suppose to learn how to do things like this?"

"Is Ancestor-Science any better?" Rachel asked him "You know, Roy, there was a place the ancestors had that they called Hiroshima." She told him about it.

When she had finished, he walked in silence for a few moments. "So they're both filthy. Then what's the an-swer?"

"The answer lies in a totally different direction. Wait till we get to my people. You'll see. A new kind of answer, a new way of—" She broke off. "Eric, what is it?"

Eric had stopped at an intersection formed by five branching burrows. He walked back slowly, retracing their footsteps to the previous intersection. This one was formed by three branching burrows. He pulled out the map, Rachel and Roy crowding around him.

"Do you see?" he said, pointing to tightly packed and crossing lines at the very edge of the map. "I think this is where we are right now." He smiled at Rachel, flourishing his education. "*Terra cognita*, if you know what I mean."

For a moment, they were all excited. Then Roy said: "There could be lots of places where a five-branch follows a three-branch."

"No, Roy, there aren't very many five-branch intersec-tions in the **burrows**. You know **that**. **And** damned few three-branch ones. Most intersections are a simple cross-through of two tunnels that make four branches. I think we've arrived. We've been on the map for some time."

"Well, if it isn't the Aaron People!" Roy called out, walking up to a section of tunnel wall and holding out his hand in greeting. "How *are* you? and how are all the *little* Aaron People?" He came back to them. "Filthy snobs," he said. "They wouldn't speak to me. They cut me dead." He dodged the mighty punch which Eric swung.

But Eric was right, it became more and more evident. Every tunnel they passed through after this curved the way the map said it should; every intersection now oc-curred at exactly the right place and forked off in exactly the right manner. Finally, Rachel told Eric to put away the map. She knew the way and could lead them.

They came to an especially long, straight corridor.

Three men stood guard at the end of it, two of them armed with long bows and the third with a crossbow. Eric recognized the weapons from Rachel's description of them back in the cage. Such arms could only be used in defense of Aaron People territory. Warriors were forbidden by law to carry them elsewhere; this was partially to prevent their falling into the hands of other tribes who might copy them, and partially to avoid alerting Monsters who might be able to construe these complicated devices as signs of certain human intelligence.

As they came closer, the guards fixed arrows into their bows.

"I'm Rachel Esthersdaughter," the girl called out, stop-ping a cautious distance away. "Remember me? I went on expedition to Monster territory. Jonathan

Danielson was our leader."

The man with the crossbow was evidently the officer in charge. "I recognize you now," he said. "All right—keep coming. But, if you can speak to them, tell those Wild Men behind you to keep their hands high over their heads."

Roy spat angrily. "Wild Men! That's pretty big talk from warriors with such itsy-bitsy spears."

"Take it easy," Eric cautioned him. "Those itsy-bitsy spears can go through you faster and smoother than the longest one you ever saw." Still, it was hard to avoid becoming furious as he raised his hands into the air. Wild Men—it was worse than he had expected. And among these people he would have to live from now on. He was glad that Roy would be with him: someone besides Rachel would consider him human.

As they reached the guard post, Rachel pointed to a contraption that ran along the wall—a string telegraph, Eric realized. "Put me through," she said to *the* officer. "I want to speak to the Aaron."

"The Aaron? You mean the guard commandant."

"I do not mean the guard commandant," she told him imperiously. "I mean the Aaron. I want to speak to the Aaron direct. And you'll put me through immediately, if you know what's good for you."

The man stared at her. Then he walked to the string telegraph and began to pull on it in a series of rhythmic, staccato jerks. When he had finished and let go, it immediately began to jerk out a reply, tinkling, in the process, a tiny hammer and anvil to which it was attached. Rachel and he nodded when it had stopped, she in triumph, he with eyebrows raised and very respectfully. "All right," he said. "You're connected. Please feel free to use it as long as you like."

Rachel apparently felt free to use it very long indeed. While she worked away at the instrument, pausing every once in a while to hear a question or a response, Eric, still with hands achingly high above his head, took the opportunity to study his guards.

They all wore the skirts he had seen on Jonathan Danielson, short skirts with many, many small pockets. And their hair was tied in the back, Stranger fashion. Besides the bows with which they were armed, and the quivers of arrows, they each carried a single spear in a rather beautifully decorated back-sling. But the spear was far too heavy to be used for anything but very close infighting, Eric judged. They looked very much like each other—like Jonathan Danielson—like Rachel. These people were inbred!

He found their warrior discipline highly questionable. Depending on the power and swiftness of their weapons, admittedly unique in the burrows, they were standing far too close to the prisoners. One or the other of them was constantly glancing at Rachel and trying to follow the conversation over the string telegraph. From time to time, all three of them would be looking at the girl. Two fast, tough warriors, like Roy and himself, might be able to take them, even from this position.

The Runner, thinking the same thoughts, nodded **at** him. Eric grinned.

Rachel called the officer of the guard to listen as the telegraph tinkled out a last response. "You two men," he said to Eric and Roy, in a relatively friendly voice. "You can lower your arms and do whatever you like. The Aaron says you are

honored guests of our people, and I'm to serve as your escort. Anything you want, you ask me."

They walked past the guard post, leaving the other two men still on duty. "Well!" Eric said to Rachel, "This is more like it!"

She threw her arms around one of his and squeezed it. "I wanted you to come into our burrows as a free man and a proud one. That was the main reason I asked to speak to the Aaron, darling. But it turns out there are other reasons that make it a very good thing that I did. Our people were hardly hurt at all by the spray, but we know now we have to make our move very soon."

"The Plan, you mean? The Plan to hit back at the Monsters?"

"Yes. it goes into action immediately. There's a ship on the roof."

Eric came to a dead stop while he considered what she had said. "The roof" had to be the roof of the whole enormous Monstet dwelling. And "a ship" meant only one thing: a spaceship. Could an entire spaceship—one large enough to transport dozens and dozens of Monsters—could it be accommodated on the roof of a single house? And wouldn't it destroy the house when it took off? He asked Rachel.

She shook her head impatiently. "They don't use rock-ets as our ancestors did. As far as we know, the ships that take off from the roof are combination lifeboats and ferry launches. We have good reason to believe they rendezvous with a mother ship somewhere near Pluto. They enter the mother ship and travel to the destination with her."

"But then—your Plan—"

Rachel kissed him. "I turn off here. I have to go to the headquarters of the Female Society and help assemble our neutralizers—now that we know they work. Everything has been set to go for a long time: we've been held up for lack of an effective neutralizer. I'll see you later in the Aaron's burrow, darling." She stopped on the verge of darting up a side corridor. "Feel free to ask the Aaron any question you want, Eric. I've made him understand what a dear, wonderful genius you are!"

And she was gone toward a slight glow in the far distance.

A few moments later, they came to a huge slab which completely blocked off the corridor, wall to wall, floor to ceiling. The guard officer jerked out the password on the string telegraph which, at this point, entered a wall. In reply, the slab moved smoothly up into the air, disappearing into a snug socket that was cut out of the ceiling.

Eric heard Roy gasp—and agreed with him. The technology of these people! No wonder the homicidal spray had not wiped them out.

The slab slid down behind them, and they found themselves standing before a series of enormous burrows, each one larger than the great central meeting place of Mankind. Monster territory dwarfed these burrows, it was true, but Monster territory alone.

Hundreds of fat glow lamps hanging from the ceiling lit the place. Crowds of people moved about in these burrows, along the floor and along galleries which ran over-head. Any given crowd was the size of the whole population of Mankind. Eric sensed that there were more of them about than usual, and that they were moving faster than they normally did. There was a feeling of hurry, an urgency in the air. People seemed to be packing goods and assembling in groups, both according to

some prearranged plan.

He asked the guard officer if this were so. "Yes," the man said, pulling at his lip and sighing. "We've begun drilling at it ever since I was a kid. And today it stops being just a drill. It's like the difference between real battle and a parade. You guys know what I mean."

"I wouldn't like to leave a home as comfortable and as safe as this," Roy told him.

"Well, it's not safe anymore. That's the point. The Monsters have been reaching out for us: they've been getting closer and closer. And the Plan—the Plan is the Plan. You people came back with the last vital piece of information."

It took them a long time to reach the Aaron's burrow, and Eric had learned a great deal before they got there. He had passed rows of cages filled with rats that the Aaron People had managed to preserve for research connected with the Plan. He had never seen rats before. "As pests, they were indestructible," Rachel had told him. "As food, the legends say, they disappeared overnight."

He waited, highly disturbed, while the strong looking old man, whose cascades of unbound white hair poured down to his shoulders, gave a few last orders to the throng of subordinate officials. "That should be it for a while," the Aaron said. "Don't bother me unless there's a real emergency—Mike Raphaelson will handle everything else. I want to speak, to the man who made this day finally possible for us." He gestured at Eric with his outstretched hand, causing the officials to turn in the direction he pointed with startled, but nonetheless warm, smiles. Off to the right, where he was standing with the guard officer, Roy waved proudly and encouragingly.

"Now then, Eric the Eye, Eric the Only," the Aaron half-sung to himself, picking up a document from the large table in front of him and studying it. "Eric, who successfully planned and led the only escape from Monster cages ever achieved by a human being—let me ask you this: are you willing to join our people? Of course you are, of course you are," he went on before Eric had a chance to say a word. "Rachel Esthersdaughter is your mate, and you have no people of your own. You'll be initiated into the Male Society a few days after we're under way. I'll be your sponsor. We don't have a Theft for a test of manhood, as your tribe does—we have an Achievement. Your Achievement, of course, will be the *escape*. Quite an Achievement. After the ceremony, you'll say a few words. No dance of triumph, or anything like that: just a short speech. It's customary to recite the details of your achievement—very superficially, you understand—then to thank everybody, then to sit down. Any questions? No, of course not—it's simple enough. Now, once you're officially a member of our people, I don't see why I couldn't— Yes, I think I will."

As he bent over the table, scribbling a note into a corner of the document, Rachel Esthersdaughter, accompanied by several members of the Female Society, came out of a passageway nearby and stood behind him, Rachel, like the women with her, was again wearing an enormous neck-to-ankles cloak whose pockets were filled with equipment. She twinkled her eyebrows at Eric.

"The neutralizers all ready to be used?" the Aaron asked, not looking up from the document. "Good. You know your posts—move off. Rachel: you, of course, will stay with me at headquarters, wherever headquarters happens to be. Now, tell me, girl—I'm thinking of making this man of yours a section leader—do you like the

idea? Fm sure you do. The leadership of Section 15 was vacant once you told us of Jonathan Danielson's death. Young man, do you think you can handle the lives and destinies of almost two hundred people? There will come a time when you will be alone in that position, when you will be exclusively in charge. Rachel will be your executive assist-ant, of course. I've put you down for it, and we'll settle the whole matter some time after your initiation. Let me see: we'll need the approval of a Council of the *People*, as

well as the members of Section 15. No problem, there. To move on, however—"

"I don't think I can do it, sir!" Though Rachel had shut her eyes in a wince, he was pleased and astonished to find that he had actually managed to cut in.

The Aaron was even more astonished. He looked up from the document, turned around and studied Eric. Evi-dently, he was rarely interrupted. His flow of thought was listened to, taken as orders and acted upon.

"Eric, my boy," he said, clearly annoyed. "Please do not waste my time with modest noises. I am grappling with a major transition in the life of an entire people; I cannot be deflected for the purpose of administering first-aid to your ego. You commanded a group as large as this in the cages of the Monsters. You have been educated by Rachel, here, one of the finest minds among us. Anything else you need to know, I'll teach you myself, on the way. And if you're concerned about your front-burrow back-ground, let me tell you this: in terms of our ultimate destination, the final goal of our plan, that background fits perfectly. You are an Eye, which none of us ever—"

"Pardon me, sir!" Eric broke in again. "But that's the reason I don't feel I can do it. It's not my capacity for leadership I'm questioning—it's the Plan. Let me ex-plain," he said hurriedly to the Aaron's terrifying frown. "I didn't have any suspicion as to what the Plan was until I got here. I thought it was some combination of Alien-Science and Ancestor-Science, a new way of hitting back at the Monsters. Then, when I heard about the ship, I had the Wild idea that you people were going to take it over, to use their own weapons against the Monsters. All right, it was naive of me—I admit it. But what you're actually planning has nothing to do with hitting back at the Mon-sters. You're just running away from them."

The frown slowly disappeared from the old man's face. He nodded, as if to say, "Oh, *that* problem." He hitched himself carefully up on a corner of the table and thoughtfor a bit. "Try to understand me, Eric," the Aaron said at last, in a totally different kind of voice. "Try to under-stand me: put your preconceptions aside for the moment. Alien-Science, Ancestor-Science—we were the first to be-lieve in each of them, here in the Aaron People, and we were the first to discard each of them, many auld lang synes ago. The Plan we have in mind *does* combine both Alien-Science and Ancestor-Science, but that is purely accidental. The Plan, we have come to believe, is the only real and valid way in which man can hit back at the Monsters. We are not running away from them, even though our position here has become more than a little untenable. We are running amongst them—directly amongst them, do you hear?—where we can hit back at them most effectively."

"Hit back at them how? As vermin?" Eric asked bitter-ly. "As vermin, stealing odds and ends from them for the rest of our existence as a race?"

A gentle, compassionate smile appeared on the Aaron's deeply lined face. "Eric,

what do you think *you* are? What do you think you've learned to be best all through your life in the burrows? Do you think you could change tomorrow and go back to planting crops or tending cattle—as your ancestors did? And if you could, would you want to?"

Eric opened his mouth and shut it again. He did not know what to say. He did not know what to think. Rachel slipped her hand into his and he found himself gripping it desperately.

"That's why we feel our Plan is thoroughly realistic. Our Plan recognizes a fact, Eric: that there are probably more people alive on Earth right now, living in the huge houses of the Monsters, than ever before in human his-tory. And there's something else about human history that our Plan recognizes."

Clasping his arms on his chest, the Aaron shut his eyes and began rocking himself back and forth. His voice

changed once more, this time to a kind of chant. "Man shares certain significant characteristics with the rat and cockroach: He will eat almost anything. He is fiercely adaptable to a wide variety of conditions. He can survive as an individual but is at his best in swarms. He prefers to live, whenever possible, on what other creatures store or biologically manufacture. The conclusion is inescapable that he was designed by nature as a most superior sort of vermin—and that only the absence, in his early environ-ment, of a sufficiently wealthy host prevented him from assuming the role of eternal guest and forced him to live hungrily, and more than a little irritably, by his own wits alone."

25

Nine days later, Eric stood on a ramp leading up to the Monster spaceship and, by the light of the moon, checked off on a repeatable slate the 192 members of Section 15 as they mounted past him on the way to embarkation.

He would never have believed it was possible to move literally thousands of men, women and children—the en-tire population of the Aaron People—so rapidly and so smoothly over such a vast distance. They had come from the very bottom burrows, over a route that went around and around in a gently ascending spiral through the layers of insulating material that packed the walls, all the way to a topmost hole that opened on the roof itself. They had lost not a single individual by accident or in battle, though they had passed across the territories of a hundred differ-ent tribes. Heavily armed men had seen to that, heavily armed men and experienced diplomatic officials who knew exactly when to negotiate, when to threaten and when to buy. Flying squads of trained emergency workers had swarmed to the scene of anything at all unusual; scholars and scouts had cooperated in selecting, from maps madelong ago for this very journey, the best approaches and the most economical shortcuts.

It had been an incredible experience, an amazing per-formance by a whole society. But it had been in prepara-tion for at least a full generation. Every one of the Aaron People had known exactly what to do.

He would never have believed what the Outside looked like—even after all that Rachel and the others had told him—until he had stood on the roof in the screaming sunlight and seen what it meant to have no ceiling at all, to be unable to observe a wall anywhere. At first, he had fought the terror—rising in his throat like a flood of vomit—simply to preserve his standing in the eyes of his section; but as he heard the

whimpers behind him and realized that there were no sturdy explorers among his followers, only homebound artisans and their families, he had forgotten his own panic and gone among them, cheer-ing and chiding and making suggestions. "Then don't look up if it's so upsetting." "Take care of your wife, you--she's fainted." "When you feel you just can't take it anymore, try kneeling and putting your hands on the floor of the roof. It's there, and it's solid."

Still, that first day had been pretty bad. The nights were better: there wasn't nearly as much open space to be seen. They traveled across the roof mostly at night, partly because they found it easier and partly because the Monsters seemed to dislike the night and were rarely abroad in it.

Now, they were embarking at night, climbing wearily up a ramp which led to a hold in which cargo was stacked. They were hurrying too: according to the records kept by the Aaron's planning staff, the ship was due to leave very shortly.

Out of the corner of his eye, as he crossed out the names which their owners announced, he could see his wife, Rachel Esthersdaughter, a dozen or so paces up the ramp from him. She and ten other members of the Female Society were manipulating the unfolded sections of their

neutralizers over the writhing orange ropes which lay across the ramp at regular intervals. These orange ropes were the reason that the Monsters felt so secure about leaving their cargo hold open and the ramp down. Unlike the green ropes back in the Cages of Sin, the orange ropes repelled protoplasm violently. It was impossible for a man to approach them in any way without being knocked flat on his back, at the least. Sometimes, they had killed those who got too close. But now the orange ropes wriggled and were harmless.

Eric remembered a comment he had heard at a section leader's meeting the night before. "The Monsters develop their penetrating spray, and we develop our neutralizer. Everybody makes a breakthrough. Fair's fair."

Roy came up the ramp, waving his hand to indicate that the last of the section had preceded him. Eric checked his list: yes, every name was crossed out, every name but Rachel's. He put the slate under his arm and followed the Runner. Behind him, the leader of Section 16 took his place on the ramp and propped up a slate full of uncrossed names.

As he passed Rachel, Eric lingered for a moment and stroked her arm tenderly. "You look so tired, darling," he said. "Haven't you done enough on this job? You're preg-nant."

Holding her neutralizer in place, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "There are five other pregnant women on this ramp, Eric, or hadn't you noticed? I'm on my last shift. I'll be joining you in the ship very **soon.**"

At the entrance to the hold, where the crowd was still sorting itself out, a young man wearing the brassard of an expeditionary policeman had a message for him. "You're to join the Aaron up ahead. He's with the men assigned to cutting a hole in the wall. I'll take over your section."

Eric gave him his slate. "When my wife comes, please send her directly to me," he asked. Then he signaled Roy to follow and walked along the path indicated by menstationed every thirty or forty paces. Around them, on every side, were great containers piled up to the ceiling. The place was brightly lit, as he now expected

Monster territory to be. Monsters left the lights on while they slept.

He arrived at the wall just as the sweating men finally pulled the slab they had cut out away and to one side. A great mob of people had been watching anxiously. It was getting close to dawn, and everyone knew it.

The Aaron was sweating, too. His eyes were red-rimmed. He looked as if he had just about passed the point of complete exhaustion. "Eric," he said, "this is where we need you most. There are no maps from this point on. In there," he pointed at the hole, "only an Eye can lead us."

Eric nodded, adjusted his forehead glow lamp and stepped through the hole.

He looked about him. Yes, the usual tunnels and corridors. It would have been most unpleasant if the Monsters had not employed their basic insulating material in the walls of their spaceships. Here men could live as they were accustomed to live.

Calling back through the hole, he reported the information to the Aaron. A huge sigh of relief went up from the crowd outside. "Good enough," the Aaron said. "Go on ahead—you know what **you** have to find. We'll be enlarging the hole."

Eric started off. Roy the Runner came through the hole after him, then a series of the youngest, most agile warriors. They formed a single line, constantly enlarging itself from the hole.

He did know what he had to find, but, as he looked for it, past unfamiliar tunnels and completely unknown intersections, he was troubled by an odd factor he had great difficulty in pinning down. Then, as he came around a curve, and into a larger burrow just big enough to provide a temporary though extremely tight meeting place for all

of the Aaron People, he understood what was bothering him. The odor—or rather, the absence of one.

These burrows were virgin. Men had never lived and died within them.

"Good enough," he said. "We can camp here until the take-off." And he posted sentries. No need really, but discipline was discipline.

Roy carried the message back swiftly. **In a** little while, people began to arrive: first expeditionary policemen, who set off areas for each section, then the sections themselves. Rachel came in with Section 15; by that time, the place was getting pretty crowded. The last one in was the Aaron—two husky policemen carried him on their shoulders and had to push hard to make their way through.

They could all hear a distant thumping by then. The Monsters were moving about and working on the machinery.

The Aaron put a megaphone to his lips. "Now hear me, my people!" he called out in a tired, cracked voice. "We have accomplished our Plan. We are all safely inside the burrows of a spaceship which is about to depart for the stars. We have plenty of food and water and can stay out of sight until long after the take-off."

He paused, took a deep breath before going on. "This is a cargo ship, my people. It will make many stops, on many worlds. At each stop, one or more sections will leave the ship and stay in hiding on the planet until their numbers have increased substantially. After all, anywhere that Monsters can live, humans can. Anywhere the Monsters have a settlement, men will thrive. Anything the Monsters provide for themselves, we can probably use. We have learned this on Earth—and we have learned it **thoroughly.**"

The floor began vibrating as the motors went on. They felt the ship shake and start to move.

The Aaron lifted his arms above his head. People every-where fell to their knees. "The universe!" the Aaron cried ecstatically. "My people, *henceforth the universe is ours!*"

When the ship had stopped accelerating and they could move about freely, Eric and the other section leaders collected their groups and led them to adjoining burrows. Men paced off the areas that their families would occupy. Women began preparing food. And children ran about and played.

It was wonderful the way the children adjusted to the acceleration and the strange, new burrows. Everyone who watched them at their games agreed that they made the place feel like home.

ABOUT WILLIAM TENN

Theodore Sturgeon, writing in *If* magazine, had the following to say:

It would be too wide a generalization to say that every sf satire, every sf comedy and every at-tempt at witty and biting criticism found in the field is a poor and usually cheap imitation of what this man has been doing since the '40s. [But] his incredibly involved and complex mind can at times produce constructive comment so pointed and astute that the fortunate recipient is permanently improved by it. Admittedly the price may be to create two whole categories for our species: humanity, and William Tenn. For each of which you must create your ethos and your laws. I've done that. And to me it's worth it.

William Tenn is the pen name of London-born Philip Mass. He began writing in 1945 after being dis-charged from the Army, and his first story was published a year later. His stories and articles have been widely anthologized, a number of them in best-of-the-year collections. Currently he is a professor of English at the Pennsylvania State University, where he teaches—among other things—a popular science-fiction course.