



**TO CONQUER
CHAOS**

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I

The barrenland lay on the face of the world like an ulcer, nearly round, more than three hundred miles in circumference. It had been there so long that it was accepted; it was *there* and it was a *fact* and it *was*.

For several days' journey in all directions away from its edge the countryside had formerly been nearly as vacant as the barrenland itself, except that grass and trees grew, which on the barrenland they did not.

With the passage of generations, however, people had crept back, driven by population pressure, or minor shifts of climate, or migration of game, or pure cussedness, until now at least a dozen settlements big enough to be called villages existed practically on the boundary line. The price of living there was the necessity of contending with the *things* that every so often wandered out of the barrenland and killed. But

they endured that. Men endure much.

The barrenland *was*. That was the extraordinary part of it. Not a simple desert, which distance and word-of-mouth transmission of news had magnified into something strange and terrible, but exactly what it was reputed to be. And it was not more than a couple of days' march north of here.

Jervis Yanderman leaned back against the tall tree under which he had taken shelter from the light fall of rain just after sunset, and from which he had not moved even when the shower stopped, and mused over the implications of the news. Three scouts had been sent out. Two had returned already, one to the line of march and one to the camp-site directly a halt was ordered for the night, and both of them had spoken of reaching the vicinity of the barrenland and looking out over it. Their instructions were to do no more than that. Yanderman hoped the lateness of the third scout was due to nothing worse than over-enthusiasm; in any case he would be sharply reprimanded unless his reasons were very good indeed.

He ceased his musing at last, and glanced

around him at the nearby terrain. It was full of dim whitish shapes and little yellow fires like fallen stars in the gloom. When Grand Duke Paul of Esberg moved his army, he did it in style as he did everything else, and with many fresh and original ideas about logistics. People had said it was impossible to move two thousand men at thirty miles a day over unknown country. Yet here they were, settled to camp for the night, canvas up, fires lit, guards posted, as smoothly as though it were a parade drill instead of a risky expedition into unexplored regions.

If he'd got over being surprised at that sort of thing, Yanderman told himself ruefully, he had no business being surprised at the actual existence of the barrenland.

A shadow moved on the slope of the hill crowned by his tree, and a voice snapped out of nowhere at him, demanding his identity. He gave it, heard rather than saw the salute the patrol returned, and—when he discovered three men moving into view where he had imagined there was only one—complimented the leader on the stealthiness of his approach. The man laughed a little self-consciously.

“Used you for practice, if you’ll excuse my saying so,” he admitted. “Spotted you from down the hill, told my men to stalk you like a shy deer. Made it, too,” he added to his companions, and they chuckled.

After a pause, the leader said, “Sir, if you don’t mind—there’s a lot of latrine rumours going around the camp since we sat down for the night. About the scouts finding what we’re looking for. Is it true?”

“True enough.”

The trio of patrolmen exchanged glances. The leader went on, “And—uh—is it what the old stories say? A place of devils and monsters, where nothing honest-to-daylight can live?”

“Devils I know nothing of,” Yanderman answered easily. “I fear more the solid things that go by day than the wispy things that go by night. And as to monsters—why, strange beasts there may well be, but we’ve met savage animals before, and two thousand men’s a force to reckon with.”

One of the other men spoke up, clearing his throat, first, “Sir, if you’ll excuse me—would you settle me a bet, if it’s not presuming?”

Yanderman lifted an eyebrow towards him, but in the dusk it probably went unnoticed. The man continued, “A mate of mine says he’s going to get a charm from Granny Jassy—says the Duke has one he bought of her, which is the ground for his successes. I say no, it’s all dreamy talk, and Granny’s charms are so much stable-dirt, and bet him a day’s pay he was wrong about the Duke.”

The third patrolman, the one who had not spoken, shifted his feet uncomfortably. Yanderman had a shrewd suspicion that he must be the mate in question, and the man who had put the question wanted the bet settled quickly with no room for argument afterwards.

He said, “You have a clear head, soldier. Tell your mate—as I’m prepared to tell him myself if he claims otherwise—that Grand Duke Paul owes his successes to his clever thinking and his thorough planning. He probably wouldn’t know a charm if he saw one. And as for Granny Jassy, maybe she peddles charms on the side, and maybe she makes a little money from gullible soldiers who think she’ll give them luck. But were she to offer one to the Duke, he’d

laugh till he cried.”

He was right about the identity of the other party in the bet. The third patrolman said hotly, “But what did the Duke clutter his train with her for, if not for the luck she can charm on him?”

“You speak over-fiercely, soldier,”

Yanderman told him in a mild tone. “Let it pass. The Duke brings Granny with him for the sake of what she can tell about the way we travel; by some power which she herself doesn’t understand, she knows before we see what ground we’ll come to, what hazards to expect. That frightens her as well as puffing her up.”

“Can she see past the edge of the barrenland too?” the third soldier muttered. Plainly he was the one who was readiest to speak of devils and monsters. Patiently Yanderman amplified his explanation.

“It’s less a matter of seeing than of remembering. In the old days people saw this land, and Granny tells what they saw. But things change. And possibly no man has lived within the barrenland and survived to tell the tale.”

It was a mistake to have put it that way. The three men shifted their feet and looked at each

other. Yanderman hurried to counteract the effect he'd had on them.

"Soldier!" he said to the third man. "How do you like your gun?"

Startled, the man hefted the weapon in his hands. "I like it well," he said. "Fires true, kills clean, as a gun should."

"Then thank Granny Jassy for it, as well as the Duke. It was from a memory she had that the design was drawn. And a man with a gun may venture into the barrenland and face monstrous things with determination—if he has any!"

"Are we going into the barrenland, then?" the patrol leader demanded.

"As yet, no one knows. The decision is the Duke's—and if he says to go there, I'll go with him rather than with any other commander who ever trod ground." Yanderman spoke with finality; the patrol leader caught the tone, called his men to salute, and led them off into the night again.

Yanderman started to make his way down from the hilltop, frowning. It was only to be expected that when they came so close to the legendary barrenland all the old wives' tales

would revive. The difficulty was, of course, that up till now the tales of one old wife in particular —Granny Jassy—had proved to be borne out by facts, and this made it hard to laugh off the alarming notions the men had of devils and monsters.

For himself, the main reaction he got was a quickening of the pulse and a brightening of the eye at the thought of the wonders he was going to see. He'd caught that spirit of wanting to go and see for himself from the Duke, who had much of it. Yanderman wished he could also catch the cool skill in planning for new situations which went with it in the Duke's case. Still, that was a rare gift in any generation, and the Duke had enough for any ten leaders.

There was a sudden commotion across the camp from where he stood. He looked up, seeing a searchlight on another hilltop spring to full brilliance, cutting the night like a sword. That was another of the things that Duke Paul had sorted from the legends and quasi-memories of people like Granny Jassy—those searchlights were cumbersome, but they were wonderfully useful. As soon as camp was pitched the men

tending the lights chose vantage points, filled their ovens with wood, lit their little fires underneath to bake the gases out of the wood, and sat down to wait. When the order came, they had only to turn a little tap, light the gas, and drop an incandescent mantle over the flame. A parabolic reflector of polished silver on a copper base then hurled the beam where it was wanted.

This time they were lighting up a pass between two low hills north of the camp, and dimly in the distance a figure on horseback could be discerned, waving wildly.

At once Yanderman broke into a run. That must be the missing scout. He'd be taken straight to the Duke to give an account of his experience, and when he reported Yanderman wanted to be present.

II

Yanderman stood aside for a moment to let someone else come out of the tent, ducking under the flap that served as a door, and then went inside himself. This was really more of a pavilion than a tent, with flooring of woven rushes put down on the grass, and several pieces of portable furniture spread around. The light came from a wood-gas lamp and made the shadows of the occupants move, big and black, on the hanging walls.

The guard just inside the door saluted. Yanderman acknowledged the gesture, crossed the floor to a spot in front of the Duke's table, and saluted in his turn.

Grand Duke Paul of Esberg raised his dark eyes from the hand-painted maps on the table before him. He was a massively magnificent man. He had one of the largest heads anyone could recall seeing, thatched above and below

with dense black hair and full black beard. His pillar-like neck set into broad shoulders and a barrel chest clad with a shirt of red and black—the Esberg colours—and his legs were thrust into long tan boots. Were he to stand up, he would overtop Yanderman, who was not small, by head and shoulders.

“They just sent to tell me the missing scout is in sight,” he said. “Did you see him?”

“Riding like a madman through the notch in the hills to the north,” Yanderman confirmed. “That’s why I came down.”

“Take a seat. I look forward to learning what’s delayed him so long.” Duke Paul leaned back in his chair, and it creaked slightly under his huge bulk. “I’ve sent also for Granny Jassy, in case she has clues to any puzzles the scout may report.”

Yanderman took a folding chair from a stack in the corner of the tent, and sat down. Beside the Duke his secretary—an ascetic-faced young man called Kesford—pinned a fresh sheet of yellow paper to his writing-board and sharpened the point of his pencil by scraping it half a dozen times on a block of pumice.

It was only a few minutes before Granny Jassy was heard outside, her voice raised shrilly in protest against the way she had been disturbed after the long day's journey. Chuckling, a soldier told her not to be so sensitive, and the flap-door was thrown back.

A gaunt figure in a shapeless black dress, Granny Jassy walked smartly through the opening. She came to the table in front of the Duke, planted both hands on it palms down, and leaned forward.

“Duke or no Duke!” she said, and pulled her sunken-cheeked face into an alarming scowl. “Duke or no Duke, nobody ought to shove an old weak woman around like this! Any more treatment so disrespectful to my aged bones, and I'll go home—I will that, though I have to learn to steal horses to do it!”

Duke Paul raised one tufted black eyebrow and said nothing, but waved at the couch on his right where he slept at night. It was soft and had several plump pillows on it. Granny Jassy, still mumbling her opinions about the way she was handled, turned to sit cautiously down on the fattest pillow.

Another few moments, and they brought the scout into the tent. Duke Paul started up with an oath, staring. All the man's shirt was stiff with blood; his face was pale, though his eyes were bright, and he was leaning for support on a medical auxiliary in green gown and tight black turban. He attempted to salute, but his right arm was disobedient and he had to let it fall back to his side, wincing.

Yanderman stood up. "Move over, Granny," he said softly. "You may be old, but he's injured. We'll give you a chair and lay him on that couch."

"Up! Down! Move here! Move there!" Granny squawked. "I wish I'd never been taken from my own hearth, that I do."

But she groaned to her feet and took a chair instead, and the medical auxiliary unrolled a red blanket from the pack on his shoulder to toss over the couch and protect it from the scout's blood. Clearly the Duke was impatient to hear the man's news, but he asked no questions till the blood-soaked shirt had been cut away, exposing a gash a hand's-breadth long and very deep in his shoulder muscles. A girl came into

the tent with a big pail of clean water and a package of dressings, and the scout, his eyes blank with exhaustion, endured while the wound was washed, closed with three stitches, and covered.

“Yan!” the Duke said sharply. “In that chest there’s a silver flask. Give him a gill of the liquor from it.”

Yanderman glanced around. The chest the Duke pointed to was behind his table on the ground, the lid lowered but not locked. He found the silver flask and poured a little from it into the cup-shaped lid.

The strong-smelling spirit seemed to revive the injured man instantly. With a sigh of relief the Duke picked up his chair and carried it closer to the couch.

“Well, Ampier?” he said. “What hit you?”

Yanderman stood silent in the background, listening. He felt he would never cease to wonder at the Duke’s ability to name every man in his army on sight. The medical auxiliary went on with his work unobtrusively, checking the scout’s pulse, folding a sling for his arm, laying another blanket over him for warmth. The girl

who had brought the pail of water had slipped away again; she returned some minutes later with a mug of steaming broth and a handful of grapes.

Ampier, propped up on the Duke's pillows, shook his head. "What name to put to it, sir, is beyond me. It was the strangest thing I ever set eyes on. According to instructions I rode due north by compass, as well as I could, and not long past noon I came in sight of the barrenland. That's a wonderful thing to behold! On this side, as you may picture it, the grass grows thickish, the rocks boast coats of lichen, there are trees and all manner of plants. In the space of a few yards all is changed. The grass withers, vanishes away, a plantain here and there dots the ground, the stones crop out, dust replaces fertile earth, and from there till the skyline—nothing! I rode along its edge for perhaps a mile, not wishing to exceed my orders by trespassing on the barrenland itself, and—to be candid—much alarmed to find it real and no mere legend.

"Blurry in the east of where I found myself was a stain of smoke upon the sky. Reasoning that man's the creature who makes fire, I fancied

I'd do well to go further and find if a village was there. It would have water, which we'll need, and perhaps food to sell us. So I spurred for the smoke. But before I was in sight of any habitation, the *thing* came out from behind a rock and was upon me like a lightning bolt."

"How was it made?" the Duke demanded. Yanderman leaned forward, because Ampier's voice was weakening. He saw that there was sweat glistening on the face of the secretary Kesford as he noted down what was said.

"Large—of a boar-pig's weight, I'd say. But possessed of a long weaving neck, and on the tip of that a thing less like a bird's hooked bill than like a single great claw with a slash for a mouth beneath it. In colour it was sandy, or tawny, except for this hooked claw-thing, which was white. It could plant its feet on the ground and slash at me upon my horse by using the stretch of this serpent-like neck. I loosed a shot at it, but the slug went wide, and then I strove to cut its neck through with my sword. So swift and flexible was it, though, that I could not, until it sank the claw-beak in me. Then I was able to slash it, and it ran about blindly until it died. The

pain was so great I dared not dismount and cut off part of it as witness to my story, but turned and rode fast for the line of march again. My horse foundered under me as I came through the picket-lines; the *thing* gashed him on the withers, and no man will ride him again.”

Duke Paul ran his fingers through his beard and nodded over the story. Ampier let his head sink back, closing his eyes again. Yanderman glanced around the tent, and noticed that the medical auxiliary had taken up the blood-soaked shirt he had cut from the scout’s body and was turning it over curiously in the light of the lamp.

Yanderman moved closer to him. “What is it you see?” he inquired in low tones.

“That, sir.” The medical auxiliary nodded downwards, holding the cloth stretched in the full beam of the lamp. Yanderman stared.

On the crusting brown blood there was a fine blur of green—like a mould, or mildew. It was alive, for it could be seen to grow, not creeping evenly out over the cloth but seeming to seed itself half an inch or an inch distant from the main part, then to spread at a snail’s pace till the new patch rejoined the original one, then to

pause, then to begin again.

“Show the Duke,” Yanderman ordered, and the medical auxiliary did so.

Duke Paul watched the phenomenon curiously for a while. At last he said, “Take that cloth—in a box, or sealed package—to your medical tent. Test all the strong liquids and powders on it till you find one which will check or stop its growth. And watch that the living blood from Ampier’s wound is not infected with it!”

The medical auxiliary saluted and obeyed, vanishing into the night outside. The girl who had come back with the broth fed some of it to the injured scout; then with the help of the guard from the doorway she guided him from the tent and away to his quarters.

Duke Paul directed Kesford to read back what Ampier had told them, to fix it firmly in his mind. Then he turned to Granny Jassy, scowling at the side of the tent.

“Come to the couch, Granny,” he said. “Let’s find out if your strangely stocked mind

holds any explanation for this *thing* which attacked Ampier.”

Grumbling, Granny obeyed. The Duke drew from his pouch a length of silver chain with a crystal ball on the end, as large as a man’s thumbnail, and set it swinging before Granny’s face. Shortly her eyes closed and he was able to begin questioning her. He persisted for an hour — his patience, Yanderman sometimes thought, was inhuman — without extracting any useful information.

The trouble with people like Granny Jassy, Yanderman reflected, was that they didn’t understand the memories which they could call up. Here now, for example, Granny was telling of strange animals, of many colours and in vast numbers, on which people rode as though they served for horses. Yet when pressed more closely, she described them as being wheeled — not animals, then, but machines! However, they went by themselves; for ignorant Granny, that made them animals, for whoever heard of a machine going by itself?

His mind wandered. How was it possible — the invariable question — how was it possible for

these tales told by Granny and with less colour and detail by several other people in Esberg to be true memories? Yet it seemed they must be. When Duke Paul decided to base experiments on some of these fantastic tales even Yanderman, whose admiration for the duke was boundless, wondered whether he was wasting his time. He was not; many useful instruments, such as the searchlights guarding the campsite, and even the guns which armed the troops, were derived from old wives' tales. You might say, of course, that this was a subconscious fitting-together of available facts which any inventor of new devices applied more systematically. You might. The Duke didn't.

Encouraged, Duke Paul selected another kind of tale for investigation—the tale of a great city three days' journey north of Esberg, with a million people in it. A ludicrous fantasy!

Yet three days' journey north the men he sent out came upon mounds and hillocks clothed with greenery, gnawed by time, and dug into them. And there they found, true enough, pieces of worked metal, shards of strong glass, corroded household utensils, and more objects than

anyone could have imagined.

And indeed now the proofs were beyond arguing. For ever since they set out on this greatest expedition of all, to see whether the legendary barrenland was real, Granny Jassy had been able to tell them of the terrain ahead—not as it was today, but as it might have been in the weird but consistent world of the old tales, when men lived in the gigantic cities of which the ruins had been discovered, when they flew through the air and even ... no, that *was* imagination, surely! To fly in the air was vaguely conceivable; birds and insects did it. But to fly beyond the air, to other worlds, was ridiculous. And even that absurdity paled beside the ultimate: the story of *walking* to other worlds than this.

“You look solemn, Yan!” Duke Paul boomed, and Yanderman came back from his musing with a start. Granny Jassy was getting off the couch. The crystal ball on its length of chain had vanished into the Duke’s pouch again. Kesford was going over his notes, correcting his writing so he could read it back tomorrow.

“I am,” Yanderman agreed. “I grow

confused with the mixture of certainty and fancy which confronts us—as though somehow a little nightmare had leaked into the waking world.”

“Assuredly a beast such as attacked Ampier smacks of some playful god’s whimsy,” the Duke said. He rubbed his hands together.

“Nonetheless he killed it, and lives—or will, providing that green horror on his shirt doesn’t take root in his blood. I confess I held the tales of monsters from the barrenland too lightly, or I’d not have sent out scouts singly. Tomorrow we’ll do otherwise. We’ll send a party of a dozen, fully-armed.”

Yanderman nodded. “I do take it as heartening,” he said, “that men manage to live almost on the edge of the barrenland.”

Duke Paul chuckled. “You noted that! Good, good! Yes, we must gain all the information we can from those best fitted to tell us. Get the exactest details of Ampier’s route, and make straight for this smudge of smoke he fancied he saw. If it proves to be other than a village, go beyond it till you find people.”

Well, that was how one usually received orders from Duke Paul. Yanderman shrugged.

“I’ll do so,” he agreed. “I’ll leave directly after dawn.”

He paused, expecting something further. But as far as Duke Paul was concerned the matter was settled. Already he had gone back to his maps, and his head was bowed as though tilted forward by the weight of his enormous beard.

III

Since the army from Esberg was on a peaceful mission—so long as everyone else was willing to let them go through—and since they were also in a hurry, they moved quickly and without trying to be inconspicuous. They were a most impressive sight on the road, covering their steady three miles an hour: two thousand men with four hundred and ten animals, red and black banners flying, generally singing by companies to keep the pace up.

It was a considerable change, Yanderman reflected, to be going out in the cold grey dawn with ten horsemen who all knew what had happened to Ampier yesterday. They were sensible and courageous men—but, after all, he himself had compared the situation facing them with a leakage of nightmare into the waking world, and a nightmare can reduce the bravest man to cold sweating.

No matter for that now, though. The problem was simply to get ahead to the first possible village on the edge of the barrenland, and to hope against hope that it was something more than a cluster of mud huts full of apathetic peasants. What Yanderman wanted to see was a decent little town where people stood up for themselves against the terrors—of whatever kind—that strayed out of the barrenland. That would be the best kind of tonic for the worrying soldiers.

They rode easily, but without dawdling. After the showers of yesterday the day was fine, though not very warm before the sun climbed well into the sky. Against the wishes of the medical staff Yanderman had got details of Ampier's route from him last night before turning in. That had proved to be far-sighted, for according to this morning's report the man's wound had indeed been infected with the curious green mould and had started to gangrene already.

Which wouldn't make the troops any less nervous, Yanderman thought bitterly.

As the miles went by, though, and there was no sign of anything stranger than country lacking

people to cultivate it, they relaxed. Yanderman kept the line strung out in couples twenty paces apart, as a matter of routine precaution, but he raised no objection when the men changed places with one another for the sake of conversation. He himself rode with his chief lieutenant, Stadham, a man promoted late in life from the ranks, and who in fact commanded the company of which Yanderman was nominally senior officer. Yanderman was no kind of a soldier, though for the purpose of the expedition he was a member of the general staff. He was a man with an inquisitive mind, who wanted to know about the same things as intrigued Duke Paul. Since the Duke was in a position to investigate, Yanderman served him willingly.

A little before noon Yanderman looked about him at the landscape. He felt a quickening of his heart and a tightness seemed to close around his temples. Gesturing to Stadham, he gave a curt order.

“Call ’em in. This matches the description of the place Ampier got to, and the elapsed time is just about right.”

They were earlier here than the scout had

been, of course; the fact that he would have ridden rather faster was cancelled out by the greater distance he had had to cover from the line of march.

Stadham reached for the little brass horn hanging at his saddlebow and sounded the three shrill blasts which were the signal to regroup and confer. Yanderman shaded his eyes and stared at the terrain ahead. There was that suggestive wavering of the air—rising, perhaps, off desert-bare ground ...

He checked that line of thought and turned to address his companions, now assembled in a semicircle facing him.

“From the description Ampier gave me, we’re almost at the limit of the trip he made. In other words, by the time we breast the next rise we should be in clear sight of the famous and legendary barrenland.”

A couple of his men exchanged glances. One might have given an imperceptible shudder; at any rate his horse moved nervously and tossed its head.

“It’s come to my notice,” Yanderman went on steadily, “that some of our men have been

getting—ah—second thoughts now they know the barrenland really exists. They’ve been buying charms from Granny Jassy, for instance, thinking she can sell them good luck as easily as—as a measure of beer. Well!”

He straightened sharply in his saddle and slapped his open palm on his thigh.

“Well, I don’t care what you do with your money. But I do care what you do with your lives. You’re expensively trained soldiers, with craftsman-made weapons about you, and those are hard to come by. I don’t want any of you going a yard further thinking you can trust to Granny Jassy’s luck-charms when what you need is the same as what you always need—a cool head and a keen eye.

“Any of you got a luck-charm about you? Speak up!”

His gaze flashed searingly from face to face, settling finally on the man whose horse had started a few moments ago. He didn’t say anything.

At last, shamefacedly, the man shrugged and drew a little bundle of coloured feathers from the lining of his helmet.

“Augren, I’m surprised it was you,”
Yanderman said. “Anyone else?”

The others all shook their heads. One or two of them grinned at Augren’s discomfiture. Yanderman scowled at them, and they straightened their expressions abruptly.

“All right, Augren,” he went on. “You can do one of two things—throw that charm away and stay with us, or trust to it and ride off on your own. I won’t have superstitious fools in my company. As far as I’m concerned the barrenland is a place like any other dangerous place—and before venturing into it I’m going to prime myself with all possible information from people who’ve seen it before. And if I do go into it I want nobody with me but a man who’ll do his own thinking rather than hire it done by an old woman.”

Augren, his face scarlet with embarrassment now, tried to hurl the charm away from him. Like anything made of feathers, it was impossible to throw. A breeze caught it and carried it out of sight.

“Good,” said Yanderman in a satisfied tone. “Ride on.”

He could feel the tension mounting as the party ascended the next rise—the last, he expected, before sighting the barrenland. It was the last. He drew rein and motioned to the others to copy him.

Now he could feel the tension leaking away as fast as it had built up. Nobody actually said, “So that’s all it is!” But they thought it.

Just bare ground—rocks cropping out of loose, wind-tossed dust and dry, sun-baked expanses of clay. Not a devil or monster in sight. Just land—barren. What else did its name suggest?

“See any smoke such as Ampier mentioned?” he asked Stadham, after scanning the horizon. The older man grunted and shook his head. Yanderman called to the others.

“From here we’ll move off slowly around the rim, the same way Ampier did, keeping well together in case of emergency, and try to spot the smoke he described. A couple of you—you two—watch the sky. The rest, watch the rocks for signs of movement.”

They wheeled their horses and proceeded cautiously. In a little while there was a whoop

from Augren, who had pushed to the head of the line as a blustering compensation for his gullibility in the matter of the luck-charm. Yanderman saw him rise in his saddle and point down into a dip in the ground.

“Keep watch,” he told Stadham, and rode forward to see what Augren had found.

It was the animal Ampier had killed. It was exactly as he had described it, with the claw-beak and a yard of its neck lying severed from its body, except that in the night something must have come by and fed on it, for the belly was torn open and an evil smell rose from the contents. Flies swarmed on the claw-beak, presumably tempted by the blood on its tip, but with a shudder he could not repress Yanderman noted that they would not settle on the rest of the carcass. Meat that flies would not touch must indeed be different from ordinary flesh!

Struck by a sudden thought, he bent low from his saddle to see whether the green mould had marked the carcass anywhere, but apparently it had not. He raised his head again, searching the skyline. Unless Ampier had been mistaken about the smoke—or unless it had been from a

natural brush-fire—they ought to be able to see it from here ...

And yes, there it was, a thin greyish veil on the blue of the sky, rising from the other side of a nearby hill.

The rest of his men had all come now to stare at the dead beast. He let them continue for a few moments—dead, it was less alarming than it must have been in life, and to see it lying so would stamp on their minds that it was an animal, even if monstrous, and not an invulnerable supernatural being. Then he called them back to attention, pointed out the smoke, and ordered them to ride on.

IV

Grey from head to foot with wood-ash, Conrad sat by the soap-vats, in one hand his knife held by the blade close up near the point, in the other a piece of excellent soap—the hardest and whitest he had ever seen set in the shallow wooden pans. That batch was all ready for carrying back to the town, but he had left it where it lay because the attraction of the idea which had come to him was irresistible. Thoughtfully, and with some difficulty because the weight of the knife's handle caused it to swing about, he was shaping a girl's head.

It was meant to be a likeness of Idris, but somehow it wasn't quite turning out like her. He was spending as much time puzzling over the lack of resemblance as he was actually carving it.

Anyway, he had little inducement to make a move. He wouldn't be thanked if he went home

before sunset, and even then he might well have to go and beg a bite of supper at Idris's back door, for no one would buy much soap in the next three or four days—wash-day having just come and gone.

And there was another reason, still more compelling than those, why he preferred to stay out here a mile or more from the town when the current batch of soap was finished. It was the same reason why he preferred this dirty, monotonous job to any other the community might have offered him. If the mood came over him just to sit and think, there was no one to fling mud or stones at him with a shout of "Idle Conrad!"

His mouth tightened at the memory, and he drove it down.

It isn't fair, he thought rebelliously. *I didn't ask for my head to be stuffed with all these crazy visions!*

And yet ...

He let the hand holding the soap carving fall to his knee, and gazed out unseeing over the sun-hot countryside. That was a question he had never been able to answer: if one of the wise

men came to him one day and said, “Conrad, I can wash from your mind these troublesome visions of yours as your soap takes dirt from a man’s hand; I shall do so?” — what would he reply?

Could he sacrifice his dreams of a world in which no one needed to be jealous of anyone else, because everything was plentiful—a world where even ash-grimed, greasy-garbed Conrad the soapmaker had incredible powers to serve his every whim?

He didn’t know. And since the question was never likely to arise—the wise men were not *that* wise—there wasn’t much point in worrying about it. He returned to concentrating on his carving. He wanted desperately to make a good job of it; Idris was the only person in Lagwich who seemed to like him, the only person since the death of his mother with whom he had shared the secret of the dreams that came to him when he lay in one of his trance-like intervals and other people thought he was simply being “Idle Conrad”.

And stoned him to make him wake.

Out here, beyond the town’s land, no one

cared what he did, and he liked that side of the task. What he detested about it was that his vats were sited much nearer the barrenland than the town itself. *Things* came from the barrenland, and usually they were dangerous. There had never yet been an emergency for him to cope with, but he had a dreadfully active imagination.

Consequently, when the red and black waving thing came in sight at the bend of the path which curved around the barrenland he jumped to his feet in fright, letting the carving fall. He dived for the bow and arrows he kept propped against a handy rock, fitted an arrow clumsily to the string, and only then looked again to see what had appeared.

He relaxed, tempted to laugh at himself. What he had seen from the corner of his eye proved to be a length of black and red cloth flying from a pole in the hands of a rider with several companions. He thought of the marrying expeditions which he had sometimes seen come from other towns to look for wives. They rode like this, with some flag or banner, and all done up in their finery. Yet marrying expeditions were a spring-time affair, and it was now high

summer, and anyway although these men were very well clad they were not as gorgeous as the would-be bridegrooms he had seen ...

He waited uncertainly, clasping his bow, while the newcomers reined their horses and conferred. One of them dismounted, raised both hands to show they were empty, and walked to within easy speaking distance. Conrad had a little trouble following his pronunciation, but the sense of his words was clear.

“Greetings! My name is Jervis Yanderman and these are my men. We come in peace. Are you from the village whose smoke we can see yonder?”

Slightly nettled, Conrad gave his own name. “But that’s no village!” he added. “It’s a prosperous town of many hundred inhabitants and a guard of sixty strong men.” He added the last phrase just in case the strangers were less peaceful than Yanderman claimed. “And the name of the town is Lagwich.”

Not that I have any particular liking for the place, he glossed under his breath.

“It’s near the barrenland?” Yanderman said. “Closer than any other town, they tell me.

But we have a strong palisade and a deep ditch with a bridge, and we live safe enough from any danger.”

Yanderman seemed pleased. Looking at him, Conrad decided that he differed in many ways from anyone he had ever seen before. He was bigger than average in all directions—though Conrad’s work involved humping heavy loads and had added muscle to his arms and shoulders, Yanderman was heavier-set as well as being a handspan taller. His companions seemed bigger again, as well as Conrad could judge from this distance.

But it wasn’t his size which was most impressive about Yanderman. It was his thoughtful, relaxed way of moving, as if he were at home in any country he visited, even this one where he was admittedly a stranger. Conrad’s heart began to pound with excitement. It would be a very important occasion, the arrival of these outsiders in Lagwich!

He said, “And you? Are you from Hawgley?” He named the most distant town from which marrying expeditions sometimes came to Lagwich.

Yanderman shook his head. “From Esberg—fourteen days’ journey south of here.”

Conrad felt his mouth fall open. He knew it was foolish-looking, but he couldn’t help it. Sometimes, sitting by the soap-vats, he had wondered how big the world was, and had come to the conclusion that it must be quite small, because the people of his visions seemed so ready to leave it and go to look at others. But if you could travel fourteen whole days and find no end to it, the world couldn’t be as small as that after all. Unless—

He grew aware that Yanderman had said something else which he had failed to catch, and apologised for his lapse of attention.

“We’d like to go to your—town,” Yanderman repeated. “To talk with its lord, or governor, or whatever you call him.”

Conrad looked dubious. “I could take you to the five wise men,” he said after a pause. “Indeed, they’ll certainly wish to see you. I don’t believe anyone has ever come to Lagwich from further away than Hawgley, so this is a great occasion for us.”

“Will you guide us to these—ah—wise

men?”

“Surely!”

He wondered for a moment about leaving his soap—whether he ought not to collect a load to take with him. But he dared not risk keeping these important visitors waiting while he did so. He pointed in the direction of the town and set off at once, Yanderman walking beside him and the horsemen following, one of them leading Yanderman’s mount.

There was silence for a while. Then Conrad, plucking up his courage, ventured a question. “Tell me—what’s life like where you come from? I wouldn’t seem inquisitive, but here life’s dull and we see no one from outside, unless a marrying expedition comes in spring, or a peddler, or a man seeking gold in the rocks.”

“Life where I come from?” Yanderman laughed. “Much as it is here, I imagine—only quieter, for we’re further from the barrenland and the *things* that come from it.”

Conrad was startled, and did not easily hide his disappointment. He said, “But surely ...! Uh—the peddlers who come this way with news regale us with stories of a gay exciting life in

distant parts.”

“That the beer may flow more freely and the pack grow light apace as the tale continues,” Yanderman said, and laughed again. “We receive wanderers like that, and—yes, they tell colorful tales.”

Conrad bit his lip to stifle the remark which he had almost let slip. He had been about to demand how it was, life being on Yanderman’s assertion much the same even fourteen whole days’ journey away, he could have visions of a bright rich world served by unbelievable powers known to no one in Lagwich, or Hawgley, or anywhere. But he had long ago sworn to himself that he would never bare the secret of his dreams to anyone except Idris—and even to her he had never imparted the wildest tales he could tell.

It would be far safer to keep silence until he had presented the visitors to the wise men. Maybe later on he would speak to Yanderman again, and the stranger would not be so discreet in his admissions.

Accordingly, he waited till they turned a bend which brought them in sight of the towns land. Then he raised his arm and indicated the

neatly laid-out fields, with men and women working in them and some cattle browsing, and the town itself beyond.

Lagwich sat on a low, dome-like hill around the foot of which a stream curved in a third of a circle. A ditch had been cut in the side of the hill; above the ditch was a barricade of sharpened stakes planted like prickles in a rampart of dirt and stones, with wooden watchtowers every hundred feet or so around the circumference. At the very top of the hill was a stone fort, and the space between there and the palisade—not very large—was cram-jam tight with buildings of three or four storeys. A blur of dark grey smoke hung over the roofs, fading to light grey as it rose.

Yanderman glanced up at the elderly man riding behind him and leading his horse. He said, “For where it stands, it’s no mere bunch of huts!”

Directly they came in view, the people working in the fields had incontinently left their tasks. Accustomed to spring to action on a moment’s notice, they had seized picks, mattocks or anything that came to hand and

dashed up to the edge of the path between the fields ready for violence if need be. On seeing that Conrad was accompanying the strangers, however, they paused uncertainly.

One of them—Waygan, Conrad saw with dismay—shouldered between the rest and sized up the situation. Waygan was the town's hornman; instead of something he could wield as a weapon, he had snatched up his beloved horn. If someone had asked him why, he would doubtless have said it was so that he could sound an alarm for the townsfolk. Conrad suspected it was more likely because he prized the safety of that horn above the safety of Lagwich itself.

Admittedly, it was a magnificent object, worth being proud of. It had grown on the chest of a *thing* that came from the barrenland in his father's day, and had killed six men in broad daylight before his father slew it and claimed the horn as reward. Only Waygan and his eldest son could now wind it and produce the ear-splitting blast of which it was capable.

Waygan looked at Conrad. "Well, useless one?" he said.

Conrad's heart seemed to hesitate, but he

answered boldly and with pride. "I take these distinguished strangers to see the wise men," he declared. "They come from the south, more distant than Hawgley!"

A murmur went through the crowd. Waygan pursed his lips and looked at Yanderman, who said curtly, "I'm Jervis Yanderman of Esberg, trusted agent of the Grand Duke Paul, and these are my men."

Waygan studied them. What he saw impressed him. He bowed and rubbed his horny hands together. "Welcome to Lagwich, distinguished sir!" he purred. "I trust you've not had a false impression of our town from this no-good boy, whose mind is as grimy as his clothes. Come, I'll escort you myself to our wise men—it'll be a pleasure."

"I was taking them there!" Conrad objected. Waygan rounded on him.

"You!" he snapped. "It was an ill chance that put you in their way, wasn't it? Do you think fine visitors like these care to keep company with you, stinking of smoke and rancid grease? Get back to your soap-vats! You waste enough of the day in idling as it is!"

“But—!”

Conrad appealed with his eyes to the newcomers, but they did not respond; this was no concern of theirs. Several people in the crowd laughed mockingly. He scuffed in the dust with his foot.

“Come!” Waygan said pompously, and fell in at Yanderman’s side where Conrad had been. When Conrad glanced back a few minutes later, on his lonely and miserable way back to his vats, they were going up the slope to the lowered drawbridge over the town’s ditches, and to his jaundiced eye it seemed that Waygan had grown twice as tall with inflating self-importance.

V

“Stuck-up—” Conrad drew and scattered the fire from under his largest vat.

“Conceited—” He tilted the vat on its foundation of round stones, using a wooden bar as a lever, so that the contents poured down the channels to the setting-pans.

“*Blockhead!*” he finished bitterly, and picked up the sack in which he was going to carry back a load of the unusually fine white soap he had boiled up yesterday. With his knife he divided the hard slabs into convenient handful-sized chunks and threw them in the sack as they were cut. He was on the point of turning away when something on the ground caught his eye. Why, it was the carving he had been making when the strangers appeared.

Some grains of dirt had got embedded in it, but he could remedy that easily enough. He put down the sack, drew his knife again, and did so.

Then he turned it over in his hands.

There was something distinctly odd about it. It would pass for an attempted likeness of Idris, certainly, even though her cheeks were plumper than that and her lips not so fine. Yet, as he raised the knife to widen the lips a little, he found himself hesitating.

In some unaccountable fashion, it was correct as it was. Not because it looked like Idris, but because it looked like—

He was suddenly shivering, as though a cold gale of recognition had blown out of memory. This carving looked like one of the people who inhabited his mysterious visions of another and happier world.

With determination he poised the knife afresh. It wasn't *meant* to depict anyone out of a dream. It was meant to depict Idris, who was kind to him, and it was about time he stopped giving in to his impulses to drift off into a fantasy existence. No matter how hard and dull his life was, it was his life, and if he took refuge in imagination every time it got him down he would never be able to tell the Waygans of Lagwich what they could do with their horn—

Horn!

He had been so completely absorbed in his musing that he had paid no attention to the thunderous bellow of the sunset horn from the town's gate when it sounded a few minutes ago. He hadn't noticed how late it was getting; why, here it was practically full dark!

He stuffed the carving inside his shirt and fled for the protection of the town, his sack of soap bumping on his back.

He was just in time. He came panting out of the dusk as Waygan finished sounding the second and final blast, and dashed across the bridge as the hornman also was crossing. He felt the swinging sack bump Waygan on the arm.

"You!" Waygan said. "Might I not have known?"

Conrad didn't answer. He lowered his sack while recovering his breath. In the shadows men tugged on ropes, and the drawbridge rose creaking to the vertical. On its underside it bore foot-long spikes of wood sheathed with copper, which faced any oncoming *thing* with a virtually unclimbable obstacle.

"Did you fall asleep over your soap-cooking,

stewboy?" Waygan went on. "You look as though you'd have done well to use some of your produce on yourself."

"If you're so clever," Conrad retorted, "let me see you work all day with grease and wood-ash and come home spotless!"

"Hah!" Waygan slapped his horn, making it give out a hollow boom. "So you're 'working all day' now, are you? What news! We'll have to take care that Lagwich isn't buried under a mountain of soap, shan't we? No, wait—wait! Don't be in such a hurry to leave me. While I see you before me, let me tell you not to go and plague the foreigners while they're here, is that understood? It was bad enough that they should have met you first, instead of someone who could give them a favourable impression of the town. Don't show your dirty face near them again!"

Conrad jerked his sack on his shoulder again and trudged up the narrow alley away from the gate. He was fuming with rage. He was too used to being disappointed to have thought much about it during the afternoon, but it would have been pleasant to gain some reflected glory from

guiding the strangers into the town and taking them to the wise men. And Waygan had done him out of even that meagre reward.

What was going to become of him? Almost everyone mocked him, and he didn't see it was his own fault. Possibly it was because his father was as he was, but to shift blame on to a sick man seemed unfair ...

He was getting near home when there was a clatter of running footsteps ahead. By reflex he drew into a shadowed doorway; that sounded like a gang of youths, and sometimes he had been set upon. The youths halted in front of a nearby house and shouted for a friend to come down to them.

“Come and see the foreigners!” they cried. “Up at Malling's house! Come and look!”

Immediately shutters flew open on all sides, and not only the friend they were calling for but many other people poured into the street, pulling coats about them. Conrad hesitated. That Yanderman—he'd seemed pleasant enough, and polite to Conrad despite his appearance. Perhaps even now there might be the chance of a word of thanks for his help, to make the townsfolk think

twice before mocking him again.

He made up his mind, and followed the crowd at a discreet distance.

Malling was the oldest of the wise men, and his house was one of the five reserved for holders of the office and sited within the stone wall of the fort at the top of the town. The great courtyard was thick with people struggling to get near the house-door where the watchman Gelbay stood with his staff, belabouring the over-eager and ordering them to stand clear.

Conrad was about to try and work his way through the press when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder and he turned, heart sinking, to look into a gap-toothed face.

“Why, it’s my useless son, may the *things* take him to the barrenland!” said his father in a rasping voice. “What d’you think you’re doing here? Get home, you lazy rascal!”

“Why should I?” Conrad said, jerking free. “Wasn’t I the one who showed the strangers the way to the town?”

“Oh, hark at the proud cockerel!” his father

sneered. "I tell you to go, and that's reason enough."

"When did they let you out of the pillory?" Conrad said, astonished at his own boldness. "Your breath is rank as a privy with the stink of sour beer."

His father's face twisted with wild anger. Then he swung his boot at Conrad's shin. He usually kicked, rather than hitting out, for one of his hands was wasted with a childhood sickness, and much practice had made the kicks deadly.

Conrad felt a dazzling stab of pain below his kneecap, and his leg gave way. He went sprawling on the ground.

"Crawl, then!" said his father triumphantly, and jerked Conrad's head back on his shoulders by hooking a toe beneath his chin. That hurt, too, though not so badly. "Are you still minded to argue with me?"

Conrad pulled himself up on his good knee. He saw that a dozen or so youths of his own age, despairing of getting close to the house, had turned to watch the new distraction. Conrad's father was always good for some amusement, whether it was taunting him in the pillory or

egging him on to another fight. One of the youths called out, “Why, it’s Idle Conrad! Did you go to sleep on your feet and fall down there, useless one?”

“Why not use your soap on yourself?” another put in, and they all squealed with foolish laughter.

Conrad braced his sound leg under him and launched himself arrow-wise on an upward slant. His head sank in his father’s belly and hurled him back against the crowd beyond. Many people turned, complaining angrily at being pushed.

“Wish me to the barrenland, would you?” Conrad said between his teeth. Somehow years of frustration had boiled up inside him and turned to pure, clear-headed rage, as the mix in one of his vats would turn to soap of a clean whiteness. “You a father who couldn’t support his family, who begs scraps of bread from his son and barter them for beer so he may wallow in a hog’s stupor till he’s dragged to the pillory! I’ll go to the barrenland if that’s your wish— then you can weep in the streets and no one will pity you!”

His father made to rush at him, but someone had called for the watchman Gelbay, who came now from his post by the door, brandishing his staff. Conrad waited passively, favouring his hurt leg, for Gelbay was a drinking-crony of his father's and he could look for no sympathy there.

"You—fighting with your father!" Gelbay barked. "Disgusting! You're not too young for the pillory, you wastrel, and that's where I've a mind to have you put!"

"Do it!" Conrad said defiantly. "I'm tired of slaving for my drunken father."

"Pillory! Yes, the pillory!" cried some of the eager youths, but a cautious look came over his father's face.

"Perhaps not," he said, plucking at Gelbay's sleeve. "For it would ill serve the town to lack for soap next washday!"

Oh, the beer-sodden hypocrite! Conrad snapped, "What you mean is that you'd lose the money that keeps you liquored!"

"Enough of that!" Gelbay brought his staff down stingingly on Conrad's shoulder. "Get gone—and be thankful that your father pleads for you after what you did!"

The jeers of the crowd were still ringing in his head as he let himself into the dirty upper room where he and his father eked out their existence. As he'd expected, the loaves that had been in the cupboard this morning had gone; one of them had been eaten, as crumbs on the floor testified, but the others would have been traded for mugs of beer.

He let fall his sack of soap in the corner and sat down on his blanket with his head in his hands. What point was there in living like this any more?

Something hard pressed against his chest, inside his shirt. With a start he remembered the soap-carving he had been making. He took it out, his hands trembling. By a miracle it was undamaged, except that a lock of the hair had broken off.

He hadn't seen Idris outside Malling's house, where most other people were, and since unchaperoned girls were seldom allowed out at night in Lagwich, she might well be at home.

Carrying the carving, he crept down the

rickety outside stairs and went to the back door of the next house but one on the same street. He listened for a while in the darkness to make sure he wasn't going to run into Idris's mother, who disapproved of her daughter even talking to someone as generally disliked as Conrad. There was a line of yellow light around the door, and someone was moving around. A clear voice started to hum a tune: Idris's voice. Cautiously he tapped the door.

"Who is it?" Idris called.

"Conrad. Are you by yourself?"

Quick footsteps came to the door and the bolt scraped back. "Yes—everyone has gone to Malling's house to gape at the foreigners. Come in. I daren't let you stay, but—Conrad, you're limping dreadfully!"

He rubbed his injured knee and explained what had happened. Idris's round, pretty face set in an angry expression.

"I think it's shameful!" she said. "You're not lazy—you work as hard as anyone, and no one else in Lagwich can make such good soap, and your horrible father squanders your earnings and on top of *that* Watchman Gelbay says you have

to put up with it. It's a scandal, really. What's that in your hand?"

"Something I made for you," Conrad said shyly. He held it out. "It's only soap, and it got a bit broken when I was knocked down, but I hope you like it."

Her fingers brushed his as she took the carving from him, and he drew away, hoping she wouldn't notice. He had once held her hand, on harvest-day last summer; indeed, then she had let him kiss her cheek. But it was only at times like harvest-day, sowing-day or New Year's that he had a chance to cleanse himself of his permanent layer of congealed ash and grease, and he had never felt it right to ask her to touch him when he was in his usual grimy state. So now he drew back, as usual.

"Conrad, you are clever!" she exclaimed with sparkling eyes. Looking at her, Conrad decided it was just as well he hadn't tried to improve the likeness of the carving. It would take a master to catch the *alive* quality of her face, especially now as she flushed at the compliment she had been paid. Probably it would be easier to make a likeness of the whole

of her; the buxom curves under her working gown would shape pleasingly to the hand. In fact —

Conrad checked his line of thought and reprimanded himself.

“Did you see the foreigners?” Idris asked, turning to put the carving on a shelf behind her.

“Yes,” Conrad told her bitterly, and recounted his story. Listening, Idris stamped her foot at the injustice of it.

“I sometimes wonder,” Conrad said at length, “whether I wouldn’t be better off if I just left here. Walked to another town—there’s bound to be work somewhere for a good soapmaker. Or just went to the barrenland where father wished me.”

“You mustn’t talk like that!” the girl said in alarm.

“Wouldn’t I be better off in another town, though? I’m not quite serious about the barrenland.”

“Maybe ... Only I’d miss you, I think. I really would, if you went away.”

There was a noise outside, of the front door of the house being opened. Idris drew her breath

in quickly and hissed at him. “You’ll have to go! Here, take this—it isn’t much, but it’s all I can spare.” She snatched handfuls of bread, cheese, onions and salad-greens from the table, and thrust an apple at him as well. “Quick now! Thanks for the carving—and we’ll have lots of ash for you tomorrow because we’ve been baking, so I’ll see you then.”

She rushed to open the back door for him, and as quickly as he could he limped out of the kitchen. Only just in time, for a moment after the bolt was slid home again he heard the sharp voice of Idris’s mother calling her.

He ate almost all the food, leaving a little to stop his father complaining when he came back later, and then lay down on the blanket which was the only bed he had. He stared into the darkness for a long time before he fell asleep; when he did doze off, he dreamed that he was riding a horse and waving a long black and red banner on a pole because he had finished carving a life-size statue of Idris without any clothes on and wanted everyone to admire it.

VI

“Nestamay! Nestamay!”

The girl rolled under her blanket and fought against the intrusion of the world.

“Nestamay, time for your watch!”

Grandfather rasped, and prodded her in the side. She jerked and came awake with a sigh to the squalid narrowness of the hovel which was her home, to the smell of fresh food and the howling of baby Dan, alarmed by Grandfather’s harsh shouting. She had slept since noon, but would willingly have slept on till the next one.

However, there was no chance of that. Wrapping her blanket about her, she made her way to the lean-to shed over the stream and attended to necessities. When she came back, her face was shiny-wet and her cheeks were a little flushed with the coldness of the water. There was a bowl of porridge waiting, some sun-dried fruits and a hunk of bread. In silence she gulped

them down.

“Hurry up, Nestamay!” Grandfather rapped.
“You’re going to be late!”

She stifled the impulse to make a sullen answer in some such terms as, “What does it matter?” It *did* matter that every night someone should keep watch even though the automatic alarm had never failed; precisely why it mattered, Nestamay didn’t know, but it had been drilled into her since she was old enough to talk, and she no longer had the emotional equipment to contest the statement.

Sometimes she thought Grandfather must know why it was important to keep the watch, and sometimes she wondered if even he did. But not very hard.

Finishing her food, she reached towards the rack on which the handlights were kept. There was only one in its place, not the one she generally used. Her heart sank. Of course. It had grown dim, and she had set it out in the sun this morning to recharge itself.

Hoping Grandfather might not notice, she made to take the one which was in place.

“Nestamay!” the old man barked, and she

snatched her hand away guiltily. “To each his own—remember? If you were too lazy to bring your own light back before you lay down to sleep, you can just go and fetch it now. And *hurry!*”

Nestamay thought of objecting. But she decided after a moment she would rather face the silent threat of the darkness outside than Grandfather in a towering rage. She nodded, put on her sweater and pants—but not her sandals; it was better to go barefoot in the dark, and cling with her toes if she had to—and slipped through the door.

The darkness wasn’t so bad once she had dived into it. It was clear overhead, and the stars twinkled reassuringly. From adjacent huts—there were some twenty-five all told—came familiar noises—children-noises, mostly, and more crying than laughter. For a long painful second she found herself wishing she was still a child, not forced into this demanding status of adulthood. Then she suppressed the foolish idea and headed, cat-silent, towards the bare ground.

She reached the place where she had left the handlight in a few minutes. It was still there;

when she flicked the switch the beam came on bright and comforting. But she only flicked it on and off. The storage cells were weakening, and there was no telling how much of the accumulated sunlight she might need before morning.

For a few seconds she stood to let the clean dry desert-scented air sweep the last traces of drowsiness from her system, and then headed back, past the grouped hovels, towards the main body of the Station. It loomed up in the night like the back of a sleeping *thing*, pregnant with a menace of its own which a lifetime of familiarity had never dispelled. It could, and much too often did, hatch out horrors.

Something moved on her right, emerging from shadow. With a gasp she threw herself backwards, snapping on the handlight with one hand and grabbing her hatchet with the other. It wasn't much of a weapon to use against a lurking *thing*, but then—what was? Some would even stand and face a heatbeam.

Then a flood of relief and anger filled her. “Jasper!” she cried. “Jasper, that’s a stupid trick to play on someone!”

In the beam of the handlight a tall, rather fleshy youth parted his broad lips in a grin. “You wouldn’t take your hatchet to me, Nestamay, would you now?” he purred.

“No. No. I suppose not,” Nestamay said with a sigh.

“Come on, give me a kiss,” Jasper suggested, moving closer. “I haven’t seen you all day.”

Somewhat reluctantly, Nestamay complied. It had been made clear to her that sooner or later she was going to have to set up a home with Jasper—there was no one else of her age-group who didn’t trespass on her genetic line too badly—and, she reasoned, she’d better get used to his attentions. But she didn’t like the prospect very much.

When his hands crept under her sweater, she protested and pushed him away.

“I’ve got to get up to my watch!” she said sharply.

Jasper laughed. “Why?” he murmured. “Nobody’s going to know if you come away with me for a while instead. I’ve found a place around the other side of the Station where—”

“Stop it!” Nestamay exclaimed, deeply shocked. “Jasper, that’s a dreadful thing to say! Skip my watch—why, that’d be unforgivable!”

“I’d forgive you,” Jasper grinned. “And nobody else would have to know.”

“I’ll tell my grandfather!”

“Him!” Jasper curled his lip. “He’s a pig-headed fool, and you ought to know by this time. Driving everyone to waste time ‘on watch’, as he calls it—slaving over foolishnesses in the Station all day instead of something constructive like making more food or pulling bits out of the Station and improving the huts.”

“But it has to be done!” Nestamay objected.

“Does it? Who says so? Your grandfather and a few other addlepated old folk! I don’t think he believes these stories he feeds us—I think he just uses them to maintain his position over the rest of the people. If he really believes what he says about walking to other and better worlds, why doesn’t he try it himself—on solid ground instead of through some hole in the Station full of horrible *things*?”

White-lipped, Nestamay forced words between her teeth. “My father did try, Jasper!

You know perfectly well!”

“And was never heard of again,” Jasper said. “So much for your grandfather and his tales.”

Almost blinded by rage, Nestamay might have taken the hatchet to him in the next few seconds, but that the night was riven apart by a rising wail from the Station. Jasper whirled.

“Now look what’s happened because you held me up!” Nestamay shrieked, and fled towards the source of the noise. Behind her, the doors of the huts opened and men and able-bodied young women came running out, bearing handlights and weapons. Some of them had been resting after their daytime stint of work in the Station, and hadn’t bothered to put on their clothes.

Once it would have been possible to head straight into the Station and reach the room—Grandfather called it the “watch office”—where someone always waited during the night for the automatic alarms to indicate the arrival of a *thing*. Long ago, however, the direct passageways had become choked with vegetation, and some had caved in, while others held poisonous thorns and grasping plant-

tentacles. Nestamay had to use a roundabout route, up twisted stairways and along rickety catwalks, to arrive at her destination.

Panting, she flung open the office door. There was no one here; day watches were kept by members of the working parties, and they would have knocked off no later than sunset, half an hour ago. She almost fell into the chair, frantically scanning the detector dials. Half of them were cracked and useless, but some were functioning.

And, by a miracle which would conceal her lateness, those dials provided her with the information she needed.

“Nestamay!” her grandfather’s acid voice thundered from a speaker high on the wall. “We’re waiting for you to tell us where it is—we can’t move until you do!”

“Sorry,” Nestamay mumbled. “I was just—uh—making a double check. This is a big one, Grandfather, probably too big to kill. Mass about two hundred kilos. It hatched in Sector 2-A and started moving immediately. It’s somewhere in Sector 4 by now, but there’s a dial broken—just a moment, a signal’s coming up!”

She leaned forward and rubbed dust from the glass over a dial.

“Yes, it’s in 4-C now and still moving. You may be able to hear it!”

A voice in the background behind Grandfather said something affirmative, and, straining her ears, Nestamay caught a faint crash that reached her almost simultaneously via the speaker and directly from the heart of the Station around her.

“Right!” Grandfather snapped, and went on to his companions. “Margin for error in a two-hundred-kilo body is too great—we might not hit a vital organ. Try and flush it into Channel Nine and drive it clear of the Station. Light first, noise next, and only then anything which might enrage it without doing serious harm. Quickly, now!”

There was a pause. Nestamay saw from the dials that the *thing* had stopped moving; more crashes from the direction of Sector 4-C suggested the creature had found something to interest it for a while.

“Nestamay!”

It was Grandfather again. She called an answer.

“Nestamay, it’s a bad one—wild! It charged the handlights and someone’s been hurt. No time for half-measures! I want power fed to the Channel Nine electrofence, and the storage cells for the heatbeams topped up.”

Nestamay’s heart lurched. On this watch of all watches, when a dangerous killer came through, Jasper had to delay her on her way to the office! She was going to give Jasper a piece of her mind when she next saw him—a going-over with a heatbeam would be even better, but hard to organise ...

“Full power!” she reported, having tripped the necessary switches.

“Full power!” Grandfather told his companions. “Move!”

Nestamay jumped from her chair and ran to the window overlooking that side of the Station known as Sector 4. She stared into the gloom under the cracked and sagging roof.

At first she saw nothing. Then glimmering handlights appeared, masked by vegetation and rubble. Caught in their beam for a second, something glistening reared up. A howl at a teeth-rasping frequency split the air, followed by

a vast crash and a completely human scream. Nestamay found she was biting her fingertips in agony.

Then the heatbeams came on. Like dull red pokers, they stabbed through the murk, striking swirls of smoke from anything they touched. Behind Nestamay, there were clicks as the power-level readings dropped with frightening rapidity.

The *thing* howled again and made a couple of stupid rushes at its tormentors, but the heat increased inversely with the square root of the intervening distance, and provided the beams remained steady it was impossible for the *thing* to come closer than some fifteen feet. It realised this at last, turned—howling more than ever—and blundered into Channel Nine, which would lead it to the bare ground beyond the Station.

“Electrofence!” Grandfather ordered. Nestamay dived for the power-switch.

The electrofence wasn’t precisely a fence, but a tubular mesh of wire completely enclosing each channel. Its original function might have been connected with the transportation of goods; currently, it served as their best weapon against

the *things*. It induced microwave frequencies in sufficient quantity to half-cook anything inside it.

With a howl far louder than any preceding, the *thing* felt the first effects, and panic took over. Nestamay hadn't seen whether it had legs or not, but it must have done; nothing else but good, muscular legs could have carried its substantial mass out of the channel so fast. Off into the surrounding desert it fled, trumpeting its intolerable pain to the stars.

It might come back—if it was stupid enough. Men with heatbeams would have to watch for it for the next few days, which meant taking people away from the regular working parties. Not all the *things* were as bad as that—some were huge and harmless, some were little and harmless ... and some were little and deadly, and they were the worst of all. But it had been a long time since anything in a swarm, which was particularly frightening, had hatched out in the Station.

Nestamay wiped her face; it was running with sweat. Now she had to trace the original point of emergence of the *thing*, so that it could be blanked off for ever.

Was there never to be an end to this existence? Would they never find the last hole through which *things* leaked from—wherever they originated?

Those were questions she knew she couldn't answer. She drove them from her mind and went about her work.

VII

The five wise men, Yanderman himself, and the servants who came and went with jugs of beer and plates of cheese and onions made the room crowded. The ceiling was low and the walls were rough. The layout suggested to Yanderman that this fort had been the whole of Lagwich at one time, with perhaps a mere hundred people living in crude cabins around it and taking refuge inside the stone wall when necessary; the palisade and ditch lower down the hill would have followed the expansion of the population to its present figure of eight or nine times the original number.

Six nitre-soaked torches, fizzing and spitting occasionally, were set in wall sconces among relics of past victories—not military conflicts, but struggles against *things* from the barrenland. Some of the trophies were mounted as skeletons; others were skins stretched on crude wooden

frames. Even in death the ugliest of them were still frightening.

He had thought through the probable history of Lagwich with a purpose—as a sort of exercise in deduction. These five who called themselves wise men and governed the town were very ignorant even when it came to facts lying in plain sight. Like the form their town had taken. They might say, “in the time of my father’s father it was said that the palisade was smaller than it is now,” or “That *thing* on the wall was killed by so-and-so, who killed sixty-nine *things* in twenty years—they came more often then.”

In fact, Malling had said exactly that when waiting for the others to arrive. Yanderman found the words disturbing, for a reason he could not yet pin down.

So far he had confined the talk to an exchange of courtesies and some restrained boasts about the wealth of Esberg; they were true enough, but he had no wish to make the folk of Lagwich feel small. They had done well, considering their situation. Of course, they’d have done better if they hadn’t been so stupidly ignorant. How could they say what they said

about change or growth, and yet not grasp the idea that things were *still* changing, even if the world seemed much as yesterday?

Now, Yanderman decided, he could introduce his main topic. Since he was the honoured guest and the centre of attention he had only to clear his throat and they instantly hushed to hear him. He said, “The barrenland seems to me a strange thing. There is nothing else like it.”

The wise men rumbled and agreed.

Yanderman went on, “The *things* that come from it, also, are very strange.”

They agreed to that, too.

“Tell me,” Yanderman said, “what do you believe caused the barrenland?”

As he had expected, the question provoked a blank silence. Eventually Rost, a dried-up man on Malling’s right, gave a shrug. He said, “Caused it? It’s a thing that is, like any natural object. And to speculate on what caused things to be as they are is a futile pastime.”

The other wise men concurred, looking relieved.

“The world changes, though,” Yanderman said. “For example, did you not tell me that in

the old days more *things* came from the barrenland than come nowadays?” He looked at his host.

Malling was big, and ruddy-cheeked, and Yanderman would have guessed if no one had told him that he was the senior of the five, because he was much the most conservative. He said, “I concede that is so. Nonetheless those that come are if anything more dangerous than before. And the ways of devils are not as plain as the ways of men.”

“Devils?” Yanderman said. “All the *things* I’ve seen were animals, for they could be killed. What is a devil?”

“Oh, we have seen one,” the wise men hastened to assure him. “It’s in Rost’s house, across the yard of the fort.”

Yanderman, wondering what in the world they meant, showed his interest, and Malling obtained Rost’s permission to send a servant for the “devil”.

“This one,” Rost explained, “came from the barrenland not so many years ago—ten, or twelve. It had a voice, as I myself heard, and formed some sounds like words, and for some

time there was argument to and fro as to whether it was a natural being. It was weak, and could easily be restrained, though sometimes it struck out at those who went near it. In the end it was agreed by the wise men of the time—I had not been chosen then—that since it had been seen to come from the barrenland it could not be a natural creature. There it is.”

Yanderman started forward from his chair with an oath, and plucked a torch from the wall as he halted near the door. Two brawny servants were carrying through the narrow opening the “devil” that Rost had spoken of.

And it was a man.

The corpse had been desiccated to preserve it—probably by exposure to hot sun and dry wind, while shielded from flies and carrion-eaters. Now its skin was stretched drum-tight, yellow in the flickering light, over the skull and ribs. The internal organs had been removed, so that below the ribs there was a hollow, but the arms and legs also had the skin on them. The feet were nailed to a wooden platform, and thongs had been threaded into holes in its back to tie the spine to a supporting post. It was very dusty.

“But that was a man,” Yanderman said slowly. Under his breath he added, “Poor ‘devil’!”

“It was not,” insisted Rost and Malling simultaneously. “Men do not live in the barrenland. Therefore it was a devil. True, it took the semblance of a man, but perhaps that was because we had killed so many of the other monsters that it tried to disguise itself.”

Yanderman ignored their babbling. He had the mummy brought into the middle of the room and studied it minutely. Whoever this man had been, he was not of a stock that Yanderman recognised; his head was much rounder than most people’s, his cheekbones were higher and his jaw shorter.

But he was certainly human. And he had come out of the barrenland, where nothing was supposed to exist except monsters ...

He turned to the wise men. “Is it not possible that he was from another village—town—close to the barrenland, and wandered into it and then out again, close to Lagwich?”

“Impossible,” Rost hastened to assure him. “For one thing, he was different in certain ways

from any man we have ever seen—his build, the colour of his skin. For another, we sent to inquire of all the other towns we could, and heard no account of any such man being lost.”

So either he had come from the far side of the barrenland, or ...

Yanderman checked himself, despite surging excitement. He put the torch back in its sconce and indicated that the servants could carry the gruesome trophy away.

The wise men spent the rest of the evening trying to convince him that it really was a devil, and he paid no attention.

Rather than have his party split up among lodgings all over the town, Yanderman had organised them under canvas in the yard of the fort. The townsfolk thought the visitors off their heads for planning to sleep on a stone pavement, and Malling had insisted that Yanderman at least have a proper bed. Yanderman wasn't sure he was getting the best of the bargain; the “proper bed” was made of straw and stank of fleas.

Before turning in, he went out to the yard

and found Augren and Stadham talking quietly by a small fire.

He joined them, asking how they fared and telling them about the bed he was being given; they chuckled together for a moment. Then he looked around to make sure none of the curious natives was in earshot, and addressed them in low tones.

“I suppose you’ve realised that if a town like this can be maintained so close to the barrenland, it can’t be so terrible as we once believed.”

Sensitive on that score after the episode of the luck-charm, Augren took it on himself to answer. “As a town—” he said, and spat into the darkness. “But the point’s good, sir.”

“Add this one to it, then, and carry both to Duke Paul first thing tomorrow. Did you see, borne across the yard to Malling’s house, a thing in the shape of a dried-up man?”

Augren looked blank, but Stadham nodded. “It went by when we were watering the horses,” he said. “Two of them caught its dusty scent and shied at it.”

“I heard the whinnying,” Augren said. “But I was elsewhere.”

“That was the body of a man who came dying of hunger and thirst out of the barrenland.”

They looked incredulous. Yanderman went over the story as he had heard it, emphasising the important fact that the man could not be from any of the local towns. He finished, “This must be taken to Duke Paul as soon as may be; if he’s not changed his plan, the army will camp once more and be here the day after tomorrow. Augren, you’ll ride with the news; Stadham, assign a man to go with him. Yourself, you’ll spend tomorrow riding about the nearer countryside to select a good camp-site. A permanent one, of course—when the army gets here the Duke will want to scout the whole perimeter of the barrenland, and that’ll take several days. If possible, choose a place with its own water-supply; we don’t want to antagonise the townsfolk by fouling theirs, and once it’s past here the stream they use is undrinkable, I imagine. Clear?”

They nodded, rose with him to salute, and sat down again as he moved away.

He had much trouble going to sleep—not from the fleas, or the prickly hardness of the mattress, but because of what he had learned. A man coming out of the barrenland!

For the first time Yanderman admitted to himself what must lie at the back of Duke Paul's mind. Never a man to be satisfied with half-measures, the Duke. If a problem caught his attention, he would worry it till its back was broken, or at least till he knew it was insoluble with present resources.

Surely—and Yanderman felt a quiver of alarm—nothing would content him short of marching into the barrenland to see if there was anything there.

Legend said there had been, once. Legend was turning out far too accurate for comfort, too—what with confirmation of the former existence of vast cities, time-beaten but still rich with metal and glass, what with Granny Jassy's uncanny fore-knowledge of the terrain they had traversed since leaving Esberg.

Suppose the remaining legends proved true, as well! The tale went that in the old days when man went to other worlds (but what *other*

worlds? Where was there room for them?) they walked at last, instead of travelling in machines. And some of those “other worlds” were strange, perilous places.

He had heard descriptions from Granny Jassy, but to him the words she parroted made no more sense than they did to her. He would have left it there; Duke Paul would not.

Vaguely, however, a few consistent threads of narrative emerged. A sickness—a kind of contagious insanity. A disaster. The building of a barrier around the place from which you—walked to other worlds, too late to stop the plague from spreading. Just as Lagwich had once been merely a stone fort and no town, possibly the barrenland had been ... the barrierland?

And a man had come out of it. Within living memory.

How would you move an army of two thousand men across territory without usable food or fuel, even for three or four days? How would you organise water? That was the worst problem. Water so bulky and indispensable to a marching man ...

Streams, maybe. Streams in the barrenland

itself. Take animals along and test the purity of the water on them. But a sickness might take days to show itself, and ...

Maybe leapfrog a party across the bare ground: half the men carrying provisions, breaking off at the end of the day's march and coming back, leaving the others to continue with the extra rations—but this would mean you'd reach your goal with a fraction of the original force to meet any challenge ...

Yanderman was still wrestling with the problem when he fell asleep.

VIII

His father was still snoring on the other side of the room when Conrad woke up. One of the town's watermen was crying in the street outside. Cautiously, wanting to try his knee before he risked hurting it again, he went down and traded half a lump of soap for a pail of fresh water. It was stupidly extravagant when he could have gone to the stream himself, as he usually did, but his leg was very painful.

Washed, he ate what was left from the night before—his father must have been too drunk to be hungry when he came in—and went with his sacks to collect the ash Idris had promised.

Her mother and brother were busy with her in the kitchen, racking the new loaves; it was not until he had filled two sacks and got dust all over himself as usual that Idris had a chance to whisper to him in a corner.

“Have you heard the news about the

foreigners?”

“Who’d tell me, except you?” Conrad countered sourly.

“Why, it’s unbelievable! There’s a great army of men coming here, two thousand of them it’s said, from a city far to the south!”

“Fourteen days’ march,” Conrad muttered, thinking how close he had come to having this news direct from Yanderman. *Blast Waygan!*

“Idris!” A shrill interruption from her mother. “Are you talking to that no-good boy again? There’s work to do, have you forgotten?”

“Coming, mother! One more sack and that’ll be all!” Idris put her head close to Conrad’s again. “Won’t it be exciting? All the strangers from the south! They’re sure to visit the town while they’re camped here!”

“Idris!” her mother exclaimed. “Leave Idle Conrad to get on with it by himself—he’s quite capable.”

“But mother! Conrad’s hurt his knee!”

“That’s his lookout. You do as I tell you!”

“Go on,” Conrad urged her with a sigh.

“This won’t take me long.” He gave her a smile and picked up the first sack; somehow, to

prevent her feeling bad about it, he stopped himself from limping as he carried it to the door.

The news must have travelled with the speed of the wind, for as he trudged towards the gate of the town, his sacks of ash trailing behind him on a sledge of crossed branches, and paused at intervals to collect dollops of stale fat and grease from kitchen doors, he heard several people discussing the good effect the army's visit would have on trade. Old Narl, the weaver, was less optimistic than most; Conrad heard him say grumpily to a friend, "I don't like it! That many men could take all we have, not bothering to leave payment."

"What could we have that they want?" the friend said cynically.

Soap made by Conrad? The presumptuous thought crossed his mind as he moved out of earshot. And yet ... why not? It was good soap; men who had marched for two weeks would welcome a chance to clean up properly. If he made as much extra as this load of ash would run to, then he could salt away a little profit from selling it to the army camp, hide the cash where his father couldn't find it and spend it on beer.

Soon he was lost so deeply in thought that he ignored Waygan's usual mocking greeting from the gatehouse and all the shouts from the youths and girls working in the fields. It was not so warm as yesterday, and there were clouds in the west.

The moment he came in sight of his soap-vats, though, his reverie was broken.

The vats had been overturned—more: scattered. They were made of inch-thick pottery, and even when empty they were hard to lift; full, they could only be tilted on their bases of smooth round stones. Yet something had tossed them aside like so many drinking-cups. And the pans in which yesterday's soap had set had also been broken up.

Clearly, a *thing* had come from the barrenland and wrought this havoc. It was unlikely to have gone back.

Conrad realised sickly that in his panic to get home last night before the bridge was drawn up he had abandoned his bow and arrows. He was not a good shot, but merely to have a weapon would be reassuring. Lacking anything better, he snatched up a couple of large, sharp-cornered

rocks from the edge of the path and stared about him. His blood was very loud in his ears, and he cursed the fact, fancying he might be deaf to the noise of the *thing* if it approached.

But there was no sign of movement nearby.

Cautiously, he went closer to the vats. The soap had been spilled from the setting-pans before it was hard, and there were marks on the ground suggesting that the creature had walked around in it, perhaps surveying the damage, before making off. Conrad had never seen animal feet like these—the prints were of a kind of hoof forming three sides of a near-perfect square, with a short pointed projection forward from each of the closed corners. But that was small wonder. Few of the *things* which came from the barrenland resembled anything that had gone before.

The marks led away among the rocks, growing fainter. The soap was hard, which meant the trail was some hours old. His confidence oozed back.

Letting fall the rocks he had picked up, he ran to where he had left his bow and arrows. But the thing had trodden on the bow, breaking the

shaft. He had six arrows intact, and nothing to fire them with.

He balanced them on his hand, irresolute. Before he tried to set up his vats again, he decided, he ought to make sure there was nothing lurking among the rocks. Two out of three *things* moved by night, but that was slim odds. Breathing hard, moving awkwardly because of his stiff knee, he began to walk in a spiral outwards from the vats.

He was on the point of giving up when he found it, lying in shadow between two rocks.

Cramming his fingers into his mouth to stifle a cry, he drew back until he was just peering over the nearer rock. It seemed to be asleep, but you could never be sure—*things* from the barrenland weren't like ordinary animals.

It was about as long as a tall man. It had a head, domed like a melon and ridged in somewhat the same way, with a blind-looking white eye on the front of it. But below the eye was a not-quite mouth, a ring-shaped opening with a double fringe of sharp little eroding teeth, somewhat after the style of a leech. The head was set direct on the body without a neck, and

green and brown skin hung about that body like an ill-fitting garment. There was a tail. There were two big limbs ending in the square-but-clawed hoofs whose prints he had seen, and two smaller ones with a sort of soft pad on which three scales glittered like metallic nails.

Conrad dodged out of sight again, heart thumping. That was a killer! The nearest he had ever come before to one of the *things* in life was when the whole town was called out to reinforce the guard—and now here he was, alone. What was he to do? The sensible thing was to return to the fields and call up an armed party to deal with it. But it would be just his luck if the *thing* awoke while he was gone and made off without a trace.

With his bow, he might have risked shooting into that bulging white eye—at ten feet he could hardly miss. But to stab it with an arrow ... He dismissed the idea.

And then he thought of the sacks of ashes.

He was surprising himself all the time now, he reflected as he stole back up among the rocks with the soft sack on his shoulder. It couldn't be bravery. It must be sheer desperation driving

him.

He poised the sack on the rock overhanging the creature. A tug on the drawstring would open its neck and let down a cascade of blinding dust. The next part would be more difficult—it involved getting one of the pottery vats up here too.

He managed it somehow, though his knee hurt abominably, and several times he almost lost his footing. Each time he waited in horror for the noise to wake the *thing* and bring it over the rim of the rock, yowling and ready to kill.

He got the vat on the rock, sideways so it would roll, and steadied it with one hand. He closed his eyes and wished, opened them again, sighted, and let go.

The barrel-like vat struck fair on the domed head, making a soft revolting noise like a fist going into mud. The *thing* came awake instantly, shooting its limbs out in all directions, and the vat smashed to fragments as a convulsion tossed it aside like a pebble. The strength it had! Conrad suddenly felt he had been insane to attempt this. Mouth dry, he opened the sack of ash.

Then he fled.

At the foot of the slope he snatched up the wooden bar he used to tilt the full soap-vats. Brandishing it grimly, he waited to confront the maddened beast. It was fully ten minutes before he plucked up courage to go back and look.

He found the *thing* had lived only a few moments after the vat fell on its skull; it lay half-buried in the pile of ash, and its sucker-like mouth was choking-full of grey dust as he had intended. Runnels of brownish ichor mingled with splinters of black bone in the ruins of its head.

Conrad felt he wanted to sing. But more than that, he wanted people to know what he had done. He scrambled down to the beast's level and tried to drag it away by its tail, but it was much too heavy for him with his bad leg.

Well ... there was no chance of it waking up and going away now. It was bound to be there when he brought someone back to look at it. And even if he had to whip them here, he was going to bring the townsfolk to admire his action. He was sick of their sneers. Then afterwards he could have the hide tanned and give it to Idris,

and her mother might be a little less grumpy ...

His thoughts running blithely ahead of him, Conrad started back towards the town.

A cry rang out from the leading man of the party, and Stadham's mind snapped back from consideration of this area as a possible site for their long-time camp to more immediate matters.

"What is it, Berrow?" he shouted.

"Don't know!" the soldier called back. "My horse shied at something—and there's a foul stink around somewhere!"

"Close in on Berrow!" Stadham ordered his other companions. "Take it slow and keep alert!"

The soldiers nodded grimly and set their guns on their saddle-bows as they urged their steeds up the rocky slope in front. They were all nervy, as Stadham knew. They'd located two or three possible camp-sites—all with drawbacks—and Stadham had decided to work through the area at least until noon before settling for one or other of them. In the men's view, *nowhere* could be a good camp-site this close to the barrenland, and they didn't see there was much to choose

between the possibilities.

Berrow was trying to calm his horse as it attempted to back down-slope; he could coax it no further. When Stadham found his own mount balking in the same way, he swung to the ground and threw his reins to his nearest companion. Gun ready, he strode up the rise past Berrow, and came in a few moments to a place where shadow fell between two rocks.

He started and gave an oath, slapping his gun to his shoulder. But before he fired, he realised it was pointless. He gestured to Berrow to approach him.

“Here’s what scared your horse—a dead *thing!*”

The men moved closer, two or three of them dismounting because their horses also shied, and stood soberly regarding the carcass. “They breed ’em out there, don’t they?” one of them remarked in a solemn tone.

“But this one’s dead, like the one that attacked Ampier!” Stadham reminded them sharply. They exchanged glances; it was clear they didn’t like the beast much better for all that.

Stadham came to a decision. “You two!” he

snapped, addressing the men whose horses had come closest without taking fright. “Get this thing on one of your mounts! I want to show it off when the army gets here and prove that the things from the barrenland aren’t invulnerable.”

The soldiers hesitated. One of them muttered something, and Stadham rounded on him.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, lieutenant.” The man’s face was pasty-pale. He got down from his horse, but looked at the carcass for a long time before bringing himself to lift it with his comrades’ help and set it on his saddle.

Thus burdened, they moved away.

And, half an hour later, Conrad stood sick and bewildered before a group of impatient, hostile meant-to-be-witnesses, wondering if the universe was conspiring against him. Because if the ground hadn’t opened and swallowed the *thing*, what else could possibly have happened to the proof of his single-handed triumph?

IX

Night-long, the people of the Station had waited anxiously in the dark and the cold, flashing their handlights occasionally to make sure a lurking shadow was simply that—a shadow.

The dawn washed, shell-pink, over the underside of morning clouds, and they stretched cramped limbs, wiped eyes stinging with sleeplessness and the dust that blew off the apparently infinite barrenness around them, and went to count the cost.

Still not fully recovered from the narrowness of the chance that had prevented anyone else knowing she had been overdue at her post—except Jasper, and he wasn't likely to boast about *that*—Nestamay picked a path for herself through the eternal twilight of the main Station dome, bearing a big canister of hot broth and a bag half-filled with chunks of dry bread.

She had already called on three or four of the working groups busy assessing the damage. It hadn't taken their reactions, but only the evidence of her own eyes, to tell her the bitter truth. Last night's misadventure had set them back months of painstaking, backbreaking work.

She rounded the side of some large, inexplicable complex of ancient machinery dented in now by a blind charge of the intruding *thing*, and came on another working party in the centre of which her grandfather was standing. She stopped, knowing he would be angry if she tried to interrupt what he was saying for anything as trivial as food and drink.

Resting the heavy canister, still more than a one-arm burden, on a convenient support, she stared at the time-worn face of the grizzled old man, heard his harsh words echo away under the deformed curve of the roof.

"Now I've had reports already from Clagny," Grandfather stated. "He went on directly after dawn, and lost the *thing's* trail a couple of miles out, among the East Brokes. It might be lairing up there to lick its wounds. If it is, the chances are against it returning to the

same side of the Station, but in favour of it coming back sooner or later—the current count for returns runs about six to four runaways. If we're lucky, it may pick up the Eastigo Creek and work its way downstream, in which case we've seen the last of it. Nestamay!"

The girl gave a start. "Y-yes, Grandfather?" she said in a thin voice.

"How do I know it probably won't follow the creek?"

Nestamay gulped. Grandfather was forever playing this kind of trick on her—shooting unexpected questions in public and demanding an answer that would shame the hearers. He was obsessively proud of the fact that his family was the only one in living memory to add significantly to the traditional stock of Station lore. Sometimes Nestamay wondered if it had been as a by-product of that well-founded pride that her father, whom she barely remembered, had been persuaded to undertake his foolhardy journey away from the Station and off into the vast unknown—the journey from which he had never returned.

For a long moment she stood confused. Then

a stir of memory came to her aid. Something acrid about a scent which she had detected drifting into the air of the office late last night, when the *thing* had been driven away ...

“The smell!” she said, suddenly positive she was correct. “When the heatbeams seared it, the smell it gave off didn’t resemble the smell of a water-seeking creature!”

Grandfather looked surprised for an instant. “Very good,” he said. “Anybody else spot that?” His fierce, bloodshot eyes swept the members of the working party. “No? Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves? Here’s my granddaughter, only a few weeks past adulthood, knows it as well as I do, and you lot with all your combined years of experience have to be told! She’s perfectly right —the stink that comes off when a heatbeam hits a water-seeker is heavier, damper, a little sweetish at the back of the throat. The smell we got last night was acrid, dry, and eye-watering.”

He paused. Nestamay, relying on the momentary favour she was enjoying, caught his attention and indicated the refreshments she was bringing; a curt nod gave her permission to distribute them, and she proceeded to do so

while he resumed his diatribe.

One or two of the men, dipping their hands in the bag of bread, looked dismayed as they felt its hard stale texture, and shot accusing glances at Nestamay as though to blame her for its condition. A little resentfully, she glared at them.

“Any idea how much power we used last night? There wasn’t anything left for the ovens this morning!”

That didn’t make them any more pleased, of course. Glancing skyward through the rents in the Station dome, they could see the cloudy sky which meant the recharging of the power storage cells would proceed extremely slowly today. Everything at the Station was so interlocked, Nestamay reflected; when a dangerous *thing* hatched, power had to be set aside for heatbeams or activating electrofences, which meant food became short, or had to be eaten cold rather than hot, clothing due for recycling had to wait no matter how dirty and torn it had become, and at night the people had to huddle together against the chill ...

She served the last of the working party with his cup of broth and hunk of bread, and prepared

to move on. Once again Grandfather interrupted her.

“Nestamay, don’t forget I’ll want to see you this morning. You’re due for a test on last week’s instruction!”

Nestamay nodded. She’d hoped Grandfather might be too preoccupied with the emergency to remember, for she was very tired now. Nevertheless, it was no use railing against events. This was the course the world had taken, and she knew of no way to change things for the better.

That was her last call on this side of the Station. From here to the other side, she would have to go circuitously. Only cautious, fully-instructed working parties dared venture into the central area under the monster dome, because it was there that the—the trouble, the problem, the danger, whatever one chose to call it—the central mystery, perhaps, was located.

On her way past, Nestamay checked and stared at the enigmatic bulk of the inaccessible zone. It was changed, and yet unchanged. It had

been part of her life since she was born, and still it retained its aura of alienness.

Twisted now and sagging, the arch of the dome spanned a good three miles of ground. Huge gashes, five or six times a man's height, gave limited access to its interior. In the north was the least inhospitable section—some thousands of square yards were safe even for children, and it was there that the machinery on which the precarious life of the people depended was situated. There was food—ovens for bread, cauldrons for broth, vast hydroponic trays yielding fruit and vegetables from which spores of alien plants had to be scrupulously excluded. The north, too, was the side from which it was relatively safe to pillage scrap, to build or repair the miserable one-room shacks which served as their homes. Every now and again a working party managed to push back the limits of the safe area, either permanently—which was rare—or long enough at any rate to salvage some useful odds and ends.

Just what was hidden in the rank heart of the dome, no one could do more than guess.

Over the rusting structure creepers swarmed,

bearing black sticky fruits that, if left to themselves, burst after a few months and sowed spores over everything—clinging spores, able to use anything organic as food. Nestamay had heard from Grandfather about unwary people who were struck by the spores in the old days, and who could not even be buried but had to be cremated with heatbeams lest another plant spring from the grave.

Pullulating fungi, a sickly orange in colour, grew on the branches of the creeper. Flowers, some of them of incredible beauty—and incredibly deadly, because the scent they gave off dulled the senses and laid one open to attack by swinging plant-tentacles—shone out here and there. Great toothed pseudo-leaves sprawled over the ground below, ready to close like a shroud on any trespasser ...

Nestamay's heart turned over, for at this very moment one of those pseudo-leaves opened in sight of her, with a grunting, scratching sound, exposing to view a disgustingly slimy object which at first she thought might be human remains.

A second look reassured her. It was only a

thing which the plant had found indigestible after much trying. Now it was a shapeless jellied mass which the pseudo-leaf was attempting to displace over its edge, by humping up and forcing it to roll. The spectacle nauseated her. She went quickly on her way.

Every so often, the idea came from a hothead like Jasper that what was needed was to march straight into the central area under the dome, heatbeams blazing, and clear out the entire fetid jungle. Every time, Grandfather or someone else vetoed the idea instantly.

In some incomprehensible way, their existence depended on leaving that central area alone—driving back the vegetation, killing any *things* that emerged from it, but otherwise enduring its hateful presence. Something was inside there, behind the sporulating fruits, the fungi and the pseudo-leaves, from which they derived their food, clothing, warmth and other basic necessities. Nestamay had pestered Grandfather over and over when she was a child with questions about this strange hidden master of their fate, and the answers had been confusing.

It wasn't a person, but it could think. It wasn't a machine, but it was out of order. It was practically everlasting, but a single touch from a heatbeam might destroy it. It provided their food, but it also hatched out *things* to plague them in the night. To Nestamay as a little girl it had seemed rather like Grandfather on a vaster scale — capricious, often bad-tempered for no discernible reason, but a kind of rock in the turmoil of their lives, to which one must turn for support because there was nothing else available.

Now she was nominally an adult, she recognised that Grandfather must one day die, and when that happened it would be up to her and others of her age-group to apply the knowledge Grandfather had passed on from his father and his father's father. And that knowledge was designed to overcome the arbitrary power of the not-a-person thinking there in the stinking green swelter under the dome.

There was no stability in this life, except the bareness of the desert ringing the Station. That didn't change. It was disturbed occasionally, by footprints. But the wind wiped them in the night,

and the next day the desert was the same as before.

For that reason, when Nestamay turned from contemplating the hideous tangle of the miniature jungle beneath the dome, she looked long at the unalterable desert—just as inhospitable, but not actively hostile. It was *there*, and it was a *fact*, and it *was*.

Oddly comforted, she hurried to complete her rounds with the canister of broth and the bag of bread.

It was at the next call but one that she found Jasper, cursing and sweating over the removal of a large pile of scrap metal which the terrified *thing* had upset last night as it howled away from the torture of the electrofence. Tightening her lips, Nestamay left him till last of the party to receive his rations. He noticed the fact; he was meant to.

“Not looking very cheerful this morning, Nestamay!” he taunted. “Grandfather been scolding you—hey?”

“No,” Nestamay contradicted with a toss of

her head. “As a matter of fact, he’s been praising me for a change. No thanks to you, you—!”

“Ho-o-o-o!” Jasper raised his eyebrows. “I suppose it’s my fault now, is it? I’m responsible for hatching out *things*, and I do it during your watch to make trouble for you!”

“You do your best to make trouble for me, and you can’t deny it!” Nestamay retorted. “Suppose I’d been taken in by your wheedling last night, and skipped my watch—what would have happened then?”

Jasper laughed. It wasn’t a friendly sound. He said, “You were the one supposed to be on watch, my dear, not me. I didn’t know. After all, you didn’t tell me that was where you were going!”

The barefaced audacity of the lie shocked Nestamay into paleness. Stamping her foot, she snapped, “Jasper, you make me sick to my guts!”

“Too bad,” Jasper said with a shrug, turning away. “A time will come when I make you literally sick for a much better reason—because my kid’s kicking you in the belly. And you don’t have much choice in the matter, do you? Not even if you go weeping to your precious

grandfather. He doesn't think tears are constructive."

Unconstructive tears blurred Nestamay's sight as she moved away. For, like it or not, what Jasper said was undeniable.

X

Yanderman ducked under the door flap of the Duke's tent and saluted. The Duke leaned back so that his chair—as always—creaked with his weight, and smiled in the depths of his enormous beard.

“Well, Yan? What do you think of our progress so far?”

Yanderman ignored the question. He said curtly, “Ampier died in the night—did you know?”

“Of course. I was informed directly it happened; I'd given instructions.”

“Have you seen the body?”

“No.”

Yanderman shuddered. “I saw it. They were carrying it out for burning as I came by. He looked as though he'd simply rotted to death. He was completely covered in that filthy green mould.”

Duke Paul nodded. “So they told me. Obviously the beak of the *thing* he killed was infected, and poisoned his wound. The medics said they could find nothing that would stop the mould growing without killing the sufferer, so I ordered the burning of everything Ampier had touched—his bandages, the blanket he was wrapped in, his clothes, even the tent where he lay dying. And told all his attendants to burn their clothes and scrub themselves from head to foot with good strong soap. Does that answer what you were going to say?”

Yanderman took a chair. “I guess so,” he agreed, feeling conscious relief that the Duke had been so thorough. “But I’m afraid the death is having a bad effect on the men.”

“We mustn’t let it,” the Duke countered briskly. “We must keep them busy.”

“They’re busy already,” Yanderman pointed out. “With reconnaissance parties surveying the boundary of the barrenland, the fact-finding teams compiling data on the *things* that have been killed over the years by the people of Lagwich, and arms practice—in fact, I ought to be out-drilling my company right now, but I told

Stadham to look after it.”

“Why?”

“So I could come and warn you about the way the men are being affected by Ampier’s death,” Yanderman explained with forced patience.

“Go on.”

“It’s probably contact with the townsfolk that’s doing it,” Yanderman said. “That, and the latrine rumours that were on their rounds even before we got here. Granny Jassy is doing a roaring trade in charms, too, despite all I can do to make the purchasers look foolish.”

“I don’t see much help for that.” The Duke frowned. “But contact with the townsfolk could be cut off if necessary. What strikes you as so bad about it?”

“They have small minds in Lagwich. They feel it necessary to brag about themselves to counter the natural boasting of our men about Esberg. So they magnify the danger of the *things* from the barrenland beyond all measure. *You’ve* heard them—you’ve talked to Malling and Rost and their other ‘wise men’.” Yanderman put a fine ring of sarcasm into the last words. “But you

can't cut off contact now, I'm afraid. It would be very bad for the men who've been too occupied so far to take time off and go into the town. The townsfolk seem to be treating our arrival as something like the visit of a marrying expedition, and they're showing our men the best time they can and positively urging them to court the local girls."

Duke Paul grunted. "Yes, I'd realised that," he said. "I've been hoping that something pretty savage and large might come out of the barrenland so we could deal with it. It was a good idea of your lieutenant's to bring that carcass into camp and peg it up for the men to look at. But there's a psychological difference between just seeing a carcass, which could have been killed by an accident, and actually vanquishing a dangerous monster."

"Especially since Ampier died of the encounter he had with a *thing*," Yanderman agreed.

"Ye-es." The Duke ran his fingers through his beard. A fat, buzzing fly which had somehow got in through the door-flap soared lazily past him. He swiped at it, but missed. "By the way,

how was that *thing* killed—the one Stadham found?”

“I don’t know.” Yanderman shrugged. “One of the townsfolk must have tackled it, I guess. I didn’t think to inquire. I suppose I could ask around if you think it’s important.”

“Not really.” Duke Paul stared at the swinging canvas of the tent wall. “It just put me in mind of a possible way of—ah—arranging for a suitably savage beast to be killed in plain sight of some of the men. What would you say the chances are of going secretly to some of the more venturesome people in Lagwich and persuading them to guide a few picked men into the barrenland to find a *thing* and drive it towards the camp to be killed?”

“Absolutely nil,” Yanderman stated emphatically. “The townsfolk do not—repeat *not*—set foot on the barrenland. Most of them, for all their high-flown talk about their bravery, stay as well clear of it as possible. Which in turn puts me in mind of what else I was going to mention to you.

“Now that the townsfolk have made up their minds what the purpose of the expedition is, the

men are getting the news from the worst possible source.”

The Duke blinked. He placed his hands on the arms of his chair as though about to jerk to his feet. He snapped, “What do you mean by that, Yan?”

Yanderman stared levelly at his chief. “Well ... At first they were suspicious over in Lagwich, thinking we must be on a mission of conquest, for all our peaceful asseverations. They’ve recovered from that idea by this time. Now they’re beginning to suspect the truth, and naturally they’re passing it on to the soldiery.”

“What do you think the truth is, Yan?” The Duke spoke low.

“That you mean to march into, and probably across, the barrenland—and to hell with its population of devils and monsters.”

“And they’re telling the men this?”

Yanderman confirmed with a nod, feeling a momentary relief. From the Duke’s tone it seemed he was astonished, and that—he hoped—implied the story wasn’t true after all.

But the Duke stood up and started to walk back and forth on the woven-reed mats forming

the floor. After a brief silence he said, “And what do you think of the plan, yourself?”

“I?” Yanderman tautened. “I think it’s grandiose and—and ridiculous.”

“Why?” The Duke rounded on him. “The barrenland is a living sore on the face of the country, isn’t it? It’s been here far too long. Something should be done about it—and the first thing is to find out its true nature. Till the old fool Rost showed us his ‘devil’ I’d had nothing more in mind than the scouting of its confines and the gathering of folksay about it. But if there are people living within the barrenland, Yan, isn’t it about time someone went to the poor bastards’ rescue?”

“Living within the—? Oh, I see what you mean. Hmmm!” Yanderman rubbed his chin and cogitated for a while. At last, however, he shook his head. “It’s a conceivable explanation, but I’m not sold on it. I’m more inclined to think, despite what the local people say, that Rost’s ‘devil’ wandered into the barrenland from outside and then stumbled back again. And ... what do you think your chances are of getting the men to march with you, anyway?”

“Excellent.” The Duke answered crisply. “I didn’t pick the riffraff of Esberg to make this trip, but the best and bravest men I could find. I chose you also, Yan—remember that.”

“That’s precisely my point,” Yanderman said. “Forgive me for being blunt. If you’d been heading for a battlefield, you wouldn’t have picked me for anything more demanding than supervising commissariat—correct? But this isn’t a straightforward military operation. It’s unique, unprecedented, and calculated to play hob with everyday ideas. My honest belief is that on the order to march half the men will immediately mutiny and lay down their arms, and the other half will use their comrades’ desertion as an excuse for refusing to go. Now they’ve heard the fables rife in Lagwich.”

Duke Paul was quite motionless, his gaze riveted on Yanderman. Now at last he spoke, his voice as soft and steady as before.

“Do you trust my judgment, Yan? If you don’t, why did you consent to come along in the first place?”

A bead of sweat trickled unpleasantly down Yanderman’s nose. He answered, “I’ll grant this

—that if anyone walks the world who could lead this army into hell, it's yourself. I just don't want to see you discount the men's present mood."

"You've left me no room to do that," Duke Paul grunted. "I'll make sure they get accustomed to the idea—somehow."

"Ah—it might help if they were given some hints as to the practicability of the project," Yanderman suggested, feeling a sort of helplessness as though he had been hanging by fingertips over a precipice and hadn't noticed till now that exhaustion had finally loosed his grip. "How are you going to take two thousand men across land without food, fuel or water?"

The lazy, irritating drone of the fly started again, and it buzzed up from the place where it had landed on the Duke's night-couch. Again the Duke swiped at it and missed. He said, "The barrenland is three hundred miles around. So its diameter isn't much over a hundred. If there's anything there, it's at the centre, one may presume. We'll carry maximum loads a day's march from the edge, transfer the unconsumed portion to those who are going on and send back part of the column. We'll continue like this and

come to the middle with a party of a few score, hand-picked, who can make it back to the outside world without further support on minimum rations and forced marches.”

“A few score? To cope with whatever hell’s brood we may find?”

“I’m *convinced* that people are still living in the barrenland!” the Duke snapped. “Think it out, Yan! We’ve learned from clues dropped by Granny Jassy that part at least of the barrenland was created deliberately, to serve as a quarantine area around some source of danger in the middle—correct?”

Yanderman shrugged and nodded.

“In that case, we don’t have to think of the barrenland as a natural desert with no resources at all. We’ve established that there are streams flowing out from it, which are drinkable when they emerge, so we’ll manage for water—our worst single problem. Fuel—well, this isn’t a long march, is it? A slow one, certainly, but it’s summer! And consider this, too.” He leaned on the corner of his big table.

“We know beyond doubt that the *things* from the barrenland are coming in smaller

numbers than they used to. I'm sure this isn't accident. If they were spawning and breeding in the barrenland, you'd expect them to multiply! No, I suspect that there are people living in the middle of the barrenland: a party of volunteers—or their descendants, by now—charged with preventing the *things*' access." Again he swiped at the annoying fly, missing it the third time. "And the diminishing plague of *things* here at Lagwich is a measure of their relative success."

His eyes blazed at Yanderman, who moved uncomfortably on his chair. Foolish or not, it was a grand design to re-establish contact with such heroes. And hearing Duke Paul speak of it was enough, surely, to convert the most cautious audience. Maybe it could be done. It would certainly be magnificently audacious to try it ...

The Duke's hand flashed through the air and closed this time around the fly, squashing it. He glanced down at his palm before wiping off the messy remains, and in that pose he stiffened. Yanderman looked at his handsome profile, and likewise froze.

After a moment, he said, "Sir ..." His voice sounded peculiarly cracked and squeaky.

“Yes?” The Duke didn’t look up.

“Sir, there’s a patch of green among your hair!” Yanderman leapt to his feet and came close. “It looks like the mould which was on Ampier!”

The Duke nodded and held out his hand with the fly on it. Yanderman tore his eyes away from the deadly fuzz he had seen on his chiefs head and examined the insect. On its hairy legs, quite distinctly visible, was more of the same green mould.

Two and two came together in Yanderman’s mind. The fly had circled the Duke’s night-couch—on which Ampier had been laid! He strode over to it and whipped aside the cushions.

There, perhaps where a drop of Ampier’s blood had fallen: there, where at night the Duke’s head rested, was a smear of the alien greenness, concealed to the casual glance by seeming to form part of the pattern on a multi-coloured blanket, but now blazing out at Yanderman so fiercely he felt its shape imprinted on his very brain, like a branding-iron.

“Bring me a medic,” the Duke said after a small eternity. “And—Yan! Tell nobody else!”

Do you understand? Tell nobody else!"

XI

“Of course I believe you, even if no one else does!” Idris insisted. But a little imp of doubt rode snickering on the words, and Conrad’s heart sank.

“No, you don’t,” he said. “You think this is just another of my stories. I’ve told you so many tales you think I can’t keep my life and my dreams apart any longer.”

In her eyes he could read that his guess was correct, but he had no chance to hear her confirm or deny it, for at that moment the kitchen door of the house, which she had been holding ajar while speaking to him, was snatched fully open.

“Idris!” Her mother’s bony-knuckled hand fell on the girl’s shoulder and pulled her back. “If I’d known you were talking to Conrad I wouldn’t have let you come to the door!”

Past the woman’s acid face Conrad saw the interior of the kitchen. There was a man standing

there, legs astraddle on the tiled floor—tall, brawny, finely dressed, watching the scene with some curiosity.

“Now you listen to me, Idle Conrad!” the mother shrilled. “Idris doesn’t want you plaguing her any more, understand? And I don’t want you around here either—my daughter’s meant for someone better than a no-good stever of soap! If I catch you at this door again except to fetch the ashes, I’ll lay about you with a broomstick, is that clear?”

Yes. It was all too clear to Conrad. It was clear to anyone in Lagwich who had a girl with an ambitious mother and who was not already formally betrothed. That man standing behind Idris there, with a sneer on his face, now lifting a hand to twist his fine black mustachios—that was a prize in the sight of Idris’s mother. All the mothers of the town seemed to regard the arrival of the army as a glorified marrying expedition, and there was already an unspoken competition to be the first to have a daughter pledged to one of the Duke’s soldiery.

Conrad looked at Idris. Idris looked at the Esberg soldier, at her mother, then back at

Conrad, and could not meet his eyes. She lowered her gaze to the floor and her cheeks grew red.

Wordlessly, Conrad turned away, and the door was slammed behind him.

The whole universe *must* be conspiring against him—either that, or he was going out of his mind. He *had* killed the *thing* from the barrenland ... hadn't he? Yet when he came back there was no carcass to bear him witness—only the broken vat and the pile of ash, tossed now and scattered by the wind. They had wanted to beat him for tricking them; as it turned out, they were content to laugh, and drove him away to hide by himself and yield to unstoppable weeping.

Was his life ever going to be worth living?

He walked moodily down the streets, kicking at pebbles, dodging out of sight whenever he heard young people approaching. He saw several groups of soldiers on their way to visit with families for the day, proud, overweening, mocking this little town simply by the way they walked.

Arrogant bastards, Conrad thought bitterly.

All of them, from their Duke down to the lowliest chowhand, acted as though being born in Esberg made them the next thing to gods.

Maybe it would be better to go to the barrenland—his father had wished him there often enough ...

Go to the barrenland?

He stopped in mid-stride. As though the lightning of an idea had welded shut a circuit in his mind, he found himself remembering clues picked up from gossip of the past few days.

Go to the barrenland! Of course! If he was ever to shake the dust of Lagwich from his shoes, he might best do it now, while opportunity offered. The chance might never come again.

Next morning he rose very quietly so as not to disturb his father—who as usual had come home late, full of beer, and who now snored as though he might never wake. He had gone last evening to the stream and cleansed himself as thoroughly as for a harvest-day. Now he sorted out from the bag which held his entire clothing

the least tattered and most presentable garments he owned; some of them dated back to his early teens and were ridiculously tight on his full-grown body, but they would have to serve.

Then he collected from its hiding-place a sack of the fine white soap which he had put away in accordance with his plan to sell soap at the army camp. The plan had come to nothing of course. The loss of two of his vats alone meant that he had no surplus to spare from the town's requirements; moreover, since the disastrous episode of the disappearing carcass there had been some houses where he could not face calling for ash or grease—the occupants were too ready to lash him with taunts.

But this little batch of good soap wasn't for sale. It was just evidence of his ability as a soap-maker. He wasn't sure how to use it—maybe it would be best to march smartly up to the camp and say he wanted to give it to the Duke ...

He postponed a decision. He would have to play it by ear.

When he sneaked out of the house, he sensed even through the veil of excitement and tension his decision generated that the mood of the town

had changed overnight. He didn't care any longer what became of Lagwich and its people. But—no doubt of it: something serious was wrong.

Puzzled, he made his way through the streets, more boldly as he discovered that the people up and about so far had their minds on something other than jeering at him. He cast his memory back, hunting a reason. There had been some sort of commotion during the night, he recalled vaguely—shouting in the streets and the tramping of feet—but he'd stirred, half-waking, and assumed it was merely the military police taking a drunk in charge, the sort of thing he'd heard a dozen times in the past few days.

The biggest shock, and the measure of how wrong he'd been about last night's uproar, came when Waygan forgot to gibe at him as he passed the gate, but called to know if he was going to the army camp.

Almost, Conrad spat out the defiant answer that rose to his lips: "Yes—to join them and let Lagwich go to hell!" But he checked himself in time; it would be too easy for Waygan to remember to be rude as usual and ask what made

him think the Duke would want a layabout like him.

He confined himself to a cautious nod and a heft of his sack. Then a point which he had so far overlooked struck him, and he blurted out a question.

“There are no soldiers in town this morning, are there?”

Frowning, staring towards where wisps of smoke indicated the camp-site, Waygan confirmed the suggestion. “Something’s gone amiss, and I’d dearly like to know what it is. First they come clamoring in the middle of the night and call all their men back to camp—now this morning they turn away with insults everyone who goes to peddle goods. ... I’m beginning to think they weren’t so friendly disposed after all.”

He waved Conrad out of the gate. Heart thumping, the youth complied. So they were turning trade away today! It wasn’t possible that he’d delayed too long—was it? He wouldn’t be able to stand it if, after finally summoning the courage to make a break with Lagwich, it turned out his chance was gone!

It cost him all his self-control to keep from hurrying until he was out of Waygan's sight. Then he burst into a frantic run.

The camp was an impressive change for so short a time to have wrought in the local landscape. Palisaded all around, with a ditch and a rampart, with gates knocked together from lengths of wood carried by the soldiers and tents set up orderly by streets inside, it was three times the size of Lagwich. Conrad rested his sack and stared, his mouth going dry. How in the world was he to find the—the gall to march in and demand to be recruited?

“Hey, you!” A sharp voice rang out behind him. Conrad spun to find two outpost guards with levelled guns coming towards him.

“What are you doing here, boy?” snapped the taller.

Conrad swallowed hard and tried to make his garb of miscellaneous castoffs look dignified. He said, “I’m the best soapmaker in Lagwich. I’m tired of the place and I want to join the Duke’s army.”

“He wants to join it—hear that?” Guffawing, the shorter guard elbowed his companion in the ribs. “Makes a change, doesn’t it? Well, he can have my place any time he asks!”

“Shut up!” the tall one snapped. Addressing Conrad again, and emphasizing his words with waves of his gun-muzzle, he said, “Listen, boy—you picked a bad day. You take that sack right back to the town and be grateful you’re near home.”

Finding a moment’s worth of boldness deep inside him, Conrad stood his ground. He said, “What’s wrong? Has something bad happened at the camp?”

The guards exchanged glances. After a pause, the shorter one said, “No business of yours, boy. And you’re lucky, like my friend told you. Now get on your way.”

Still Conrad hesitated. The tall guard lost patience and barked at him. “Move, or you’ll never move again!”

So something was very wrong indeed. Slowly Conrad raised his sack to his shoulder, sick with disappointment. He moved away as the guards directed, but not back towards Lagwich—

vaguely in the direction of the soap-vats. He wouldn't be able to face returning to the town till he'd digested the bitter pill of this setback.

Suddenly there was a shrill and distant blast on a horn, and he tensed, taking it for Waygan's danger signal. But the sound hadn't come from Lagwich—there was a man dimly visible at the nearest gate of the camp, blowing on a shiny metal bugle. The noise made Conrad's scalp prickle.

But at least it got rid of the two outpost guards. At the first note they had shouldered their guns and headed incontinently for the camp.

At the sight of their retreating backs, Conrad felt a fresh stiffening of his resolution. Was he to let a couple of chance-encountered soldiers undo all his hopes? Not in a lifetime! He was going to stay out here in sight of the camp, watching and waiting for things to return to normal, then seize a favourable opening to get the ear of—of Yanderman, perhaps, who would remember him from their first meeting. Of course: that was the way to get a hearing. He should have thought of it at once.

He looked about for a convenient vantage point from which he could keep an eye on events, and settled in the shade of a tree on top of a rise not far away. Peering down, he could make out that there was some turmoil in the camp—men going and coming, officers shouting orders so fiercely that their voices, though not their words, drifted up to him.

Vindictively he hoped that whatever was going on the man with the black mustachios whom he'd seen in Idris's kitchen was right in line for the biggest trouble. Then he made a moody correction. He didn't care about the man with mustachios. He didn't care about Idris, either, or anyone else in Lagwich. He was through with them for good and all.

For a long while—at least an hour—nothing much happened down at the camp. The shouted orders ceased; judging by the red and black formation of banners in the centre of the camp-site there was some sort of parade or review in progress. It was distinctly uninteresting to gaze at it from this distance, so Conrad let his attention stray to the sun-hot glimmer of the barrenland stretching over the horizon.

Go to the barrenland ...? *Was* it true that it was the purpose of Duke Paul's venture to march into the barrenland and empty it of terror? Conrad shivered as he considered that consequence of his decision. Now if the barrenland were as he could picture it in his visions—green and pleasant, full of friendly smiling people in gaudy clothes who commanded such powers as one might only dream of ...

His mind drifted off in the familiar half-delightful, half-terrifying manner to which he had been accustomed since childhood, conjuring up the spectacle of an impossible world.

It was only the sudden crackle of gunfire that brought him back to the present. With a start, he swung to look at the camp again. The orderly ranked banners had vanished. From near where they had been a thick column of greasy black smoke was swelling into the air. Shrieks mingled with the shots. The sun glinted on bright metal as on broken water. Gasping, Conrad jumped to his feet.

And the nearest gate of the camp flung open to release a flood of shouting men on the

countryside—a mob, less organised than ants whose nest has been disturbed, heedless of their officers, their arms, anything.

Was this the stuff of which Duke Paul's army was made? Conrad stared in horror, while in the wake of the fleeing men flames leapt up randomly to consume the neat rows of tents.

XII

Up to the very last moment Yanderman thought—hoped—wished fervently that the Duke was going to be able to carry his men with him. Even in the dreadful minutes that followed realisation of failure, he found himself thinking: *it might have come off, but for this damned green plague!*

“Tell nobody else!” It was easy to say, and impossible to achieve. Within twenty-four hours it had been whispered through the camp: *Duke Paul is sick of the mould which killed Ampier!*

The medics did their best—shaving the infected area, burning the infected blanket, setting the men to kill flies with swats and sprays—and for a while Yanderman had expected a false alarm. After all, as Duke Paul himself argued, Ampier had been a sick man, badly wounded, weakened by long and free bleeding. A bull of a man like himself would toss off the

infection easily.

Not true.

Shaving and antiseptics, first to be tried, failed first. Up till then the Duke had easily been able to disguise his condition—his hair and beard were so dense and matted he could simply comb over the shaven area to hide it. Then the fresh outbreaks rendered that impossible; there had to be bandages, and the staff officers had to know the minimum fact that the Duke was being attended by the medics.

All the strong liquids, all the curative powders, all the ointments, were tried in turn. They slowed the mould. For a night Yanderman would sleep peacefully, thinking the trouble was over because all day the Duke's head had been free of the creeping evil.

But in the morning, a dozen more patches of the stuff.

They tried, at last, the desperate expedient of cauterisation, burning away the skin with hot irons while the Duke sat in his great chair, impassive except that his knuckles showed very white on his clenched fists. It was while the cauterisation was actually proceeding that they

discovered the mould on the whites of his eyes

...

Even then Duke Paul would not admit defeat. He still addressed his officers as though his plans were to go ahead; he still disputed with the heartsick Yanderman about the likelihood of people surviving within the barrenland.

Meantime, the news spread as the green mould spread—unstoppably, every advance reflecting a weakening of the infected body. In this case it was the entire army. Granny Jassy was plagued with requests for charms against sickness. Under their breaths at first, then openly, men voiced the opinion that this disease had been visited on the Duke because he planned to invade the barrenland.

If, at that point, the Duke had been able to go out and speak to his men as he would speak before a battle, fill them with the excitement and crazy courage he alone could inspire, the situation could have been saved. But he could not. He was in his tent, alone but for attendant medics and the ever-present secretary Kesford, his shaven, burned head turning into a nauseating mass of green mould.

It was just after midnight when a white-faced soldier called the sleepless Yanderman from bed to see the Duke at once.

As he ducked under the door-flap he could not repress a gasp of dismay. The disease had progressed with unbelievable rapidity in the last few hours.

The Duke caught the sound and gave a rasping wheeze which might have been meant for a chuckle. "I guess I look pretty repulsive by now, Yan!" he whispered. "That's the only consolation—I can't see myself in a mirror."

Indeed, from under his brows to his cheekbones the orbits of his eyes were now unrelieved masses of the green mould.

"I shall die tonight, Yan," he added abruptly, in a tone more like his normal voice. "I *know*. Already it's at the surface of my brain—I can feel it, as though mice were gnawing at me."

Yanderman tried to say something reassuring, but the Duke cut him short.

"I *know*," he repeated. "That's why I sent for you. I may only have minutes before my self-control fails me, and when that happens, the medics have my orders to act. I don't know what

it will be like when the final stage comes, but I—I find that I, Paul of Esberg, who have faced hell, cannot face this to its end. So I must turn to others—as I turn to you, Yan!”

Numbly, Yanderman waited for the words he feared. They came.

“Kesford!” the Duke whispered. At once the pale-faced secretary came alert, having to swallow hard as he forced himself to look at his master.

“Kesford, you have the draft with all those legal terms—read it over. Yan, hear what’s said and repeat it. Let me hear you repeat it!” On his couch the Duke tensed as though to—draw himself up, but he was too weak now. Beads of sweat wandered over his forehead and lost themselves among the foul greenness covering his eyes.

Kesford began to recite monotonously, a phrase at a time. “I, Jervis Yanderman, loyal subject of Esberg and of the Grand Duke Paul Manuel Victor Mark, and of his designated heir Victor Gort Fury Mark—”

Tonelessly, as though the Duke were speaking for him, Yanderman echoed each

phrase.

“—do receive into my charge command and authority over all forces of the city Esberg and all goods chattels livestock and other appurtenances whatsoever at this present time in the neighbourhood of the town known as Lagwich adjacent to the so-called barrenland situate—”

Yanderman had to wipe his face at that point. Kesford went on: “And do undertake to direct the said forces in all respects as far as my ability shall allow as my master the Grand Duke may while in life instruct me—”

Yanderman stopped there. He said in a thin voice, “No!”

“What?” Now the Duke did rise up on his couch, his horrible blind head turning to seek the source of Yanderman’s voice.

“Sir, I—I can’t undertake to lead them into the barrenland!”

“You must! You *shall!*”

Yanderman took an involuntary pace backward. Glancing about him helplessly, he caught the eye of the medic in his green gown standing at the head of the couch. *You must.* That

was the message in the man's eyes. *You'll kill him if you don't!*

Yanderman hesitated, torn between personal loyalty and his deep-rooted unwillingness to make promises he knew he could not keep. The hesitation was too long.

While he was still forming the lie, the Duke screamed. He fell back on the couch, choking and gasping for air. The words he forced out were barely comprehensible.

"Take him—traitor—Yanderman—lied to me—burn him—nail him at the city gate—curse his name and his family name—burn his house—find me a man of honour—am I the Duke or am I a mud-grubbing peasant—traitor—weakling—!"

The tirade lost itself in a bubbling sound so loathsome it was barely conceivable a human throat could utter it. Yanderman's heart lurched. Frozen, he watched as the medic picked up from a table beside him a long thin razor-sharp knife.

"I witness—" That was Kesford, clutching his note-board as though it was a plank supporting him in time of shipwreck. "I witness this to be your duty, and affirm the Duke's

command. Sir!” —to Yanderman, turning. “Say the same!”

“I witness this to be your duty and affirm the Dukes command!” Yanderman gulped, and added to the medic, “Is there no hope now?”

“I saw Ampier die,” the medic answered, and plunged the knife home.

Mechanically Yanderman attended to the formalities; Kesford had them stored away in his capacious memory. Send to the town to recall the liberty-men; detail an honour guard for the tent, to stand with arms reversed till the funeral; detail a pyre-party to assemble fuel on a scale fit for a princely corpse; post general orders for funeral drill at dawn, a funeral as soon thereafter as possible because of the risk of keeping the body unburned; carpenters to make a coffin, tailors to make a shroud—which would have to be draped over the remains, not wrapped around them, for the medics forbade it ...

An officers’ parade to pay posthumous respects, during which certain incongruous whispers were uttered regarding relief at the end

of the Duke's mad plan, resentment at his allotting command to Yanderman instead of a regular officer ...

A session with Granny Jassy to try and stop her filling the men's minds with nonsense about this being a supernatural vengeance upon the Duke, ending with the threat of scourging despite her sex and age which sent her away tight-lipped and white with fury ...

And all the time frantic casting about for a way to avoid the ultimate showdown and the risk of mutiny.

The chance never came.

Or rather Yanderman was unable to make it come.

The rush of the night's events had left him no time to spare for the process of adjusting emotionally to Duke Paul's death. That adjustment came in one blinding second, leaving him at the mercy of his own fury and condemning him to provoke the very mutiny he was desperate to avoid.

He was inspecting the funeral guard—the

entire army, of course, drawn up in open ranks by companies with arms reversed—when between two of the men he happened to glance at the rank behind, and there saw a soldier: grinning.

The sight was like a trigger to his thermite-hot rage. He stormed between the files and halted in front of the grinning soldier as he tried to compose his face.

“What’s funny, soldier?” he said softly.

The man looked woodenly ahead of him.

“Pleased that your Duke is dead, is that it? Pleased because you think now he’s not here to lead us any longer your lily-white liver will be spared the risk of venturing into the barrenland?”

All around him there were hisses of indrawn breath. Trying to watch without moving their heads, nearby men eaves-dropped.

“Well, you’re wrong!” Yanderman blazed. He spun to the sergeants accompanying him. “Two of you arrest this man! Hold him till after the funeral. We won’t dismiss on pyrelighting —” Deliberately he raised his voice to let the whole army hear. “We’ll continue! A dishonourable dismissal in full form! And a

discharge to the barrenland for this coward who welcomed Duke Paul's death as saving him from it!"

The reaction went through the parade like wind through grass.

After that, there was no backing down.

The pyre was lit at last, pouring greasy-black smoke high into the clear blue sky. With its crackling as a background to his words, Yanderman licked his lips and uttered the first command of the dismissal drill.

Here and there among the soldiers, a man did move. Checked. Looked at his immobile comrades. Went back to his place and stood, like the rest, rock-still.

He repeated the command.

"We're not sending anyone to the barrenland!" a voice called from a distant corner of the parade, and instantly he was echoed by a stormy chorus. "Right! No! We'll not send a man to the barrenland—it's fit only for devils, not for men!"

Head swimming, Yanderman looked at his fellow officers. Not one of them was making any move to counter this insubordination. On most of

their faces, indeed, was a look which implied, “Serve him right—he wasn’t fit to inherit the Duke’s authority!”

Only Stadham moved towards him, speaking almost without moving his lips.

“There’s no hope for it now, sir. I’ve seen this sort of thing before. We’ll be lucky to escape with our lives!”

“Esberg!” shrieked the men at the back of the parade who had first voiced the refusal. “Back to Esberg! If they won’t lead us home, we’ll go on our own!”

“Right! Yes!” Again the storm of agreement, and now the men began to break ranks, their noncoms unable to decide what to do.

“But if we go”—a piercing voice carrying above the tumult—“we might carry the green plague with us! Do you want to carry that back to your families?”

“Burn the camp, then!” came the mad howl in answer, and all at once the army was a mob. Some of them hurled their arms down and snatched brands from the Duke’s pyre to wield like torches as they led the rush; others paused long enough to hurl final insults at their officers

—Yanderman was prepared for an instant to be picked up and thrown into the flames with his master—and then they were headed for the camp gates, screaming and starting fires as they went.

XIII

After his first moment of shock, Conrad had dived for concealment in a small hollow between two clumps of shrubs. For what felt like a century, and might in reality have been some hours, he lay there on his belly trying to follow the progress of events from the sounds that reached him and very occasionally, when things quietened down, daring to raise his head and peer out.

Directly they emerged from the camp, the soldiers seemed to split into two main factions, and there was a great deal of shouted argument. Conrad caught snatches of phrases—something about the green plague, and going the same way as the Duke—and was transfixed by the realisation of what had presumably happened: the Duke, whose leadership had been praised by the soldiers who came to Lagwich, must be sick or dead.

Some of the soldiers, however, headed back into the camp almost at once. Shots followed, and sometimes screams as well; then from behind the now dense veil of smoke they began to re-emerge singly and by groups, laughing and staggering under loads of loot—gaudy clothing, fine swords, jars and kegs of liquor and bags so heavy they must contain precious metal or coins.

Before that, however, the larger portion of the army—consisting of those men more afraid of the green plague than eager for easy pickings—had formed up in rough order under ad-hoc leadership and set off shouting and chanting in the direction of Lagwich. Watching them, Conrad knew that it was his strict duty to sneak back to the town's land somehow and warn the people. But when he desperately cast about for a possible route, he could see no cover—and if he showed himself, it was much too likely he would be shot down on principle.

He was almost overwhelmed by relief when he realised, some minutes later, that others beside himself had decided to keep an eye on the army camp. The familiar blast of Waygan's horn sounded an alarm, and the disappearing tail of

the rabble-army broke from its formation and ran out of sight in a way which suggested anger—anger at not falling on an unsuspecting prey, was Conrad's guess.

Then more shooting drew his attention back to the camp, and he peered between the leaves of the sheltering shrubs and tried to figure out what—apart from looting—was happening there.

A group of three soldiers, burdened with their prizes, was heading straight for him.

His heart paused for a long second. Then he concentrated on making himself as nearly invisible as he could.

“Bunch of fools!” one of them said in a rough bass voice. “Taking cloth and clothing when everyone knows it was a blanket harboured the green plague in the Duke's tent!”

“But only where a spot of blood had fallen,” corrected a second voice, rather wheezy as though the man was trying not to pant hard.

“That's not why I kept my hands off such stuff,” the third said—a fruity baritone with a slight chuckle. “Too bulky! Why drag cloth around when there's good coin?” Something jingled, and the man laughed.

“Coin weighs, though,” the bass voice grumbled. “Ah, to the barrenland with this sword! Why should I need two of ’em? Here’s enough money to buy a horse and pay my food and lodging back to Esberg!”

A thump announced the discarding of the sword.

“Are you sure that’s wise?” the wheezy voice inquired. “Where, for one thing, are you going to buy a horse? Not in Lagwich! By this time the plague-scared fools’ll have shut the town up oyster-tight—and do you fancy sitting here till they starve open the gates?”

Bass-voice snorted. “Let ’em play siege-engineer all they like. They’ll not have patience to succeed. After a few nights this close to the barrenland, when they think of their snug tents burned behind them, they’ll leak away and have to beg or fight back to Esberg. Whereas we, my friends, will be home and dry, with a little over for a celebration.” A heavy slap, as on a leather bag stretched tight by the weight of its contents. “Move along! We’re ahead of the game, but we have to stay ahead.”

Their irregular footsteps, accompanied by

the jingling of their stolen coin, faded.

Mouth dry, Conrad finally ventured to lift his head again. The very first thing that met his eyes was the discarded sword, the sun glinting on its hilt.

Out—and back. Clutching the weapon as though to draw supernatural comfort from it, Conrad gazed anxiously around to make sure no one had noticed his brief emergence. But the only people in sight were the backwash of the looters coming smoke-grimed from the ruins of the camp. In knots of half a dozen they made their unsteady way towards Lagwich and their less greedy comrades.

A bitter taste rose in Conrad's mouth. So this was the true nature of the men whose ranks he had hoped to join, thinking their life better than his own in Lagwich! Where was their pride? What had happened to their smart organisation? What in truth must Esberg be like, if its soldiers could turn in a few short hours into ignoble banditry?

For a long moment he turned his eyes downward to the bright blade of the sword, thinking: *It's keen—it would drive home cleanly*

to my heart. And then ... blessed peace.

He choked off the thought. No: that seemed a cowardly solution. And it would leave far too many personal debts unpaid.

The last of the loot-laden soldiers passed out of sight in the direction of the town. A new idea struck him. It wasn't a particularly honourable idea—but what did these men know of honour, if they were ready to besiege and rob Lagwich, where the townsfolk had welcomed them? The point was, they could not by any means have stripped this enormous camp in the short time they had been at work there; they must have left behind many valuable and useful things because they simply couldn't carry them. Things which might enable Conrad, his other courses of action blocked, to make his way to some other town and there set up a little business.

It didn't have the glamour of service with the Esberg army. But it didn't have the continuing misery of return to Lagwich, either.

His mind was made up in an instant. The sword he had retrieved was complete with belt and frog. He rose and buckled it around him as he had seen soldiers do in the town when they

got up to leave a drinking-shop. Setting his shoulders back, not caring any more whether anybody saw him, he strode down the hillside to the reeking remains of the camp.

Fires were still spreading, but sluggishly, for there was virtually no wind now. A hot puff of air made his eyes sting as he stared through the open gate and down the avenue-like axis of the camp. Why, there in plain sight was a vast bronze cauldron which made him jealous on sight; it was big enough to outdo two of his pottery vats.

By the same token, of course, it was no good to him—he might have attempted to get it away if he'd had a waggon, but what had become of the army's vehicles he had no idea. And he was unskilled in the management of draft animals, anyway.

He took a deep breath and walked into the camp.

For the next ten or fifteen minutes, his confidence growing, he picked and chose among the abandoned miscellanea. Scattered baubles which someone might buy in another town. A first-rate steel knife. A helmet in exactly his own

size. A pike which would have solved most of his problems if he'd had it handy to spit the *thing* he had killed. Two good hatchets and some other carpenter's tools. A knapsack belonging apparently to a tailor, full of fine thread and needles of a quality he had never seen in Lagwich.

He was shrugging the knapsack on when he heard the noise.

Dropping everything he carried, he snatched at the sword and whirled. He was approximately in the centre of the camp now; there was a large open space, at one side of which a pile of wood-ash smouldered sluggishly, and on the other three sides of which tents had been torn down. The sound had apparently come from one of the largest tents.

Cautiously Conrad approached it, and saw, protruding from under a flap of charred canvas, the leg of a man, stirring slightly.

In that condition he wasn't much of a menace, he reasoned. He pulled the coarse fabric aside and found himself looking at Jervis Yanderman.

There was a large livid bruise on

Yanderman's temple, and a sword-cut—not more than a scratch—ran across his right upper arm. Gasping, Conrad bent down to examine him more closely. The deep-set eyes opened briefly, screwed up again, opened a second time and stayed open.

“It's—it's the soap-maker,” Yanderman said faintly. “Help me up, boy.”

Conrad dropped his sword and hastened to obey.

“I think I can stand by myself,” Yanderman said when he was upright. “Thank you. Oh, by the fame of Esberg, but this is the sorriest mess—!”

Breathing hard, he gazed over the ruins of the camp.

“Where've they gone?” he added.

Conrad gulped. “I think to lay siege to Lagwich,” he said after a pause.

“I thought they would. I thought they'd all go, being afraid of the green plague. And then some came back, and ...” Yanderman wiped his forehead. “This was the Dukes tent, you see, and that his funeral pyre. When we saw them swarming back to loot, we stood our ground here

as well as we could, but there were only three of us, the others—damnable cowards!—caring more for their own possessions than the Duke’s. After this, I *spit* on the name of Esberg.”

There was a red and black banner crumpled on the ground near him. With sarcastic deliberation he carried out his promise literally. Then he caught himself.

“Three!” he snapped, and bent to drag aside the fallen canvas of the Duke’s tent. “Stadham! Kesford!”

Conrad made to help him, and between them they rolled the fabric back to expose his companions: ascetic-faced Kesford, a surprised look on his face and a second mouth opened in his pale throat, and grim Stadham, his chest blood-blurred from two bullet-wounds.

Yanderman knelt to them long enough to determine that they were dead. Then he shrugged and drew back, pausing only to detach from Kesford’s hand something which glittered; a small crystal ball on a silver chain, which he put around his own neck. Then, without a word to Conrad, he walked to the dying pyre and drew from it a hot brand, which he plunged into the

ruins of the Duke's tent. In a moment flames licked up. Conrad stood by in silence until Yanderman ceased his contemplation of the ensuing fire.

"And you, soap-maker?" Yanderman said at last. "What are you doing here?"

Boldly, Conrad met his gaze. "I had meant to try and join your army," he said. "After what I've seen today, I think I'd have been a fool."

Yanderman laughed. It was an ugly sound. He said, "That's so. But what drove you from Lagwich? By all accounts, you're its best soap-maker, and that's a worthwhile position for you. You're young yet!"

His eyes strayed back to the burning tent, and he absently began to swing the crystal ball on the end of its chain.

Conrad, wondering what made that worth retrieving from Kesford's body rather than anything else, answered Yanderman's question at some length, explaining just why he had finally decided to break with Lagwich.

"I see," Yanderman said finally. "Well, you may thank the older man who burns here before you for your misery. He is well rewarded, isn't

he?"

"I—I don't understand," Conrad countered, glancing down at the smoking form of Stadham. His clothing was alight now.

"He took away the carcass of the *thing* you killed. We have it here in the camp, nailed up to prove that *things* from the barrenland die like any ordinary beast."

A cry of anger rose to Conrad's lips. He bit it off. What use was there railing against a dead man? That was over and done with, and he hoped never to think of it again. While he was debating what next to say, Yanderman went on, raising his head and continuing to swing the crystal ball.

"So we are two of a kind, boy! After what I've seen today, I care not whether I hear the name of Esberg spoken for the rest of my days. And you are finished with Lagwich. Where shall we go? To the barrenland? Why not to the barrenland? I was charged by my dead Duke to lead his army there, but the army is gone. I remain—I remain!"

He closed his hand fiercely on the crystal ball as though he would crush it. It seemed to

remind him of something, and he let his eyes rove anew.

“What became of Granny Jassy, I wonder?” he said under his breath.

“Of—? I didn’t hear—”

Yanderman grimaced. “What does it matter?” he shrugged. “Should I lead—instead of an army—a stupid old woman with a headful of visions? We’d have been better off without her charms and her crazy tales of a time when this barrenland was a rich region full of people powerful as magicians ...”

Conrad could hardly believe his ears. Unable to stop himself, he caught at Yanderman’s arm. “Visions?” he demanded. “What sort of visions? You mean there are other people who can—

He broke off. Yanderman was staring at him wide-eyed.

After an eternal moment in which there was no sound but the gnawing noise of flames on dry wood as tent-poles blazed up close to them, the older man spoke in a strangely gentle voice.

“Boy—Conrad, isn’t that your name?—yes, Conrad: there are other people who see these things. Didn’t you know?”

Conrad licked his lips and shook his head dumbly.

“Have you never seen one of these?”

Yanderman opened his fingers to expose the crystal ball.

Again a headshake.

“Well then!” A note of triumph came into Yanderman’s tone now. “It’s about time you tried its effect, I’d say. And if all goes well, Conrad, and if you’re as desperate as you’ve told me—and as I feel right now—we’ll try this lunatic venture and turn it from a joke into an epic tale that men will chant around the hearth-fire for a thousand generations! Conrad, will you take your revenge on Lagwich for laughing at you even if it means the risk of death?”

Looking into Yanderman’s blazing eyes, Conrad—terrified, but somehow exalted—could make no other response than a simple, whispered, “Yes!”

XIV

“Nestamay! Pay attention, girl!” Grandfather barked, leaving the tip of his pointer-stick on the plan where it was. The plan was unbelievably old—a pattern of faded dark lines on a yellowish, crackling substance which, to stop it breaking into pieces, had been carefully pasted on a well-cured piece of leather from a dead *thing*. As well as the lines, which were more or less self-explanatory—showing the general features of the Station below the dome—there were all kinds of curious symbols marked; it was these whose significance Grandfather was trying to explain.

“I—I’m sorry, Grandfather,” Nestamay said, pushing back her long hair with a limp hand.

“Sorry!” Grandfather took the pointer-stick in both hands now and looked for a moment as though he would break it. The tone of his voice frightened baby Dan, and he gave a howl.

Grandfather glared at him. The howl stopped magically.

“That’s better,” Grandfather muttered, and turned his attention back to Nestamay, resuming his former fierce tone. “Sorry, you said! A lot of use it is being sorry for not listening—nobody can help it but yourself! Do you think I like giving you these extra lessons after a hard day’s work? Do you think I do it just to annoy you and keep you away from Jasper? I do have a purpose, you know! Our family’s kept more of the old lore and cleared more fresh ground under the dome than any of the families here—you know that as well as I do because I’ve told you till I’m sick of repeating it. What’s going to become of us if we let things slide? Who’s fit to look after the fate of the community who doesn’t possess every ounce and scrap and tittle of information that’s available?”

Abruptly Nestamay put her head forward on her knees and burst into tears.

For a long moment Grandfather was dumbfounded. He looked at the pointer-stick in his hands as though expecting it to turn into a venomous thing; he looked at the plan displayed

for Nestamay, but there was no counsel there, either. He looked at the blank irregular wall of the hovel, and when he could not reasonably delay a comment any longer, he set the pointer-stick aside and cleared his throat with a harrumphing noise.

“Come here, child,” he said, putting out his hand. A sort of rusty kindness coloured his voice, creaking like a hinge not used for a generation. “There’s something been preying on your mind lately—I know it. I thought you’d get over it by yourself, but if you can’t, you’d better tell me all about it.”

Nestamay snuffled and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. She said, “It’s—it’s just ...” Then she took a deep breath and tried again. “It’s just what you said about my not wanting to listen to you because I’d rather be with Jasper. Grandfather, it’s not *true* Because”—now the words came in an unstoppable rush—“I *hate* Jasper! He’s a fool, he’s dangerous, he’s selfish, and I wish a *thing* would get him!”

Appalled at her own ferocity, she stopped short. Her eyes were very wide as she stared at Grandfather, wondering what his reaction would

be.

It began with a sigh. It continued with the rolling up of the plan of the Station, its return to the shiny metal case with a locking lid in which it was kept for safety, and its replacement on the wall by a chart she had seen scores of times—a chart dealing with another of the myriad subjects of which Grandfather kept track better than anyone else in the community. Her eyes sorted out the family names, linked by vertical lines for descent and wavy lines for generation-kinship and dotted lines for future associations.

Desperately, before Grandfather could launch into the patient exposition of her genetic situation and a repetition of the factors which made Jasper the best possible choice as the father of her children, she clutched at his rising arm.

“You don’t understand, Grandfather! Weren’t you listening?”

Grandfather blinked. Astonishingly, he gave a warm chuckle. “Beginning to talk my language, hey? All right, what’s the point I missed by not listening? Out with it!”

“I said Jasper was dangerous,” Nestamay

emphasised. She had refrained from telling this story for days on end, thinking it might be selfish or spiteful to do so. Now, though, it was clear that Grandfather had to be informed.

“In what way?” Grandfather was suddenly tense.

“The—uh—the other night when the *thing* hatched and we chased it out of Channel Nine, I was late reaching the office for my watch.”

“I thought you were rather a long time getting there. I also thought the experience had frightened you badly enough for you not to do it again. What has this to do with Jasper?”

“The reason I was late,” Nestamay said very carefully, “was that Jasper tried to make me skip my watch and go with him to some hiding-place he has around the other side of the Station.”

Grandfather gave a thoughtful nod. He said, “You didn’t let him persuade you. And it wasn’t the alarm which saved you, either. Am I right?”

“Y-yes.” Nestamay tried to reduce the hammering of her heart by drawing in another very deep breath and letting it out as slowly as she could. It made her throat seem to shudder by itself.

“In which case it’s bad—he shouldn’t do it, and must be punished. But it hardly sounds dangerous, unless he came extremely close to persuading you.”

“Not me,” Nestamay said, and closed her eyes. Here it was at last: the thing she had learned afterwards, the thing which had really brought on the tears. “Not me. Danianel. She—she wasn’t so obstinate.”

Grandfather’s eyes switched to the kinship chart. There was a steel-blue blaze in them. He said, “Danianel?” And put his index and middle fingers, parted like a draftsman’s compass, on the two names on the chart.

“Yes.” Nestamay put her hands up to cover her eyes. She was thinking of the months—years, almost—through which she had compelled herself to endure Jasper’s attentions, knowing she would sooner or later have to suffer them permanently, and thinking like an idiot that the unpleasant truth which was so clear to her after Grandfather’s instruction must be equally clear, equally significant to Jasper.

“Danianel’s last watch was last night,” Grandfather said. “How much of it did she

skip?”

“I don’t know.” Nestamay tossed her hair back again. “I wasn’t there.”

“Then how do you know?”

“Jasper boasted about it to me. This afternoon. When he was out with the working party at the ovens.”

There was a long silence. At last she looked at Grandfather, and was surprised and shocked to see that he had put his head forward in his hands, as she had often done.

She moved to his side instantly, her arm going as though by reflex around his shoulders. She felt his body shaking in a slow old-man rhythm.

“Sometimes I wonder, Nestamay—” His words came gravelly and reluctant. “*Is* there any point in going on? There’s nothing I can do about Jasper, girl. He’s what he is, and all the talking-to and all the beatings in the world won’t cure him, and he’s still the only possible mate for you of the young men we have. Look at the chart!”

He straightened, rubbing his nose with two fingers. “I wish it were otherwise! But see—he

preserves two genetic lines which are otherwise united with lines forbidden for you! Are we to lose them? Are we to lose a pair of hands when we have so few?" He made a lost, helpless gesture. "When we're reduced to this, I'm not sure any longer whether we can continue the struggle."

Horrified, Nestamay drew back her arm as the old man moved to a more comfortable position. His gnarled fingers sought and clasped her work-toughened young ones. He continued in a haunted voice, pleading for understanding with his eyes.

"I remember foreseeing this a long time ago, Nestamay! I talked about it, over and over, with you father. I've never discussed your father with you, have I? Or not properly. For all I know, you may think I drove him to his death out of overweening pride!" He gave a short bitter laugh.

"I didn't drive him. He went, bravely and willingly. He knew—I knew—we'd come in a little while to the state we're now in, where we have to keep a tainted genetic line because we have nothing else to replace it. Generation after

generation there's been a fining-down; at first the mixing could be random, but the recessives showed up eventually, and lines which could have masked them were lost in accidents or because *things* came out of the dome and killed ...” He wiped his brow with his hand.

“It was baby Dan who drove your father out, if anyone drove him,” He wiped his brow with his hand.

“Baby Dan?” echoed Nestamay in an incredulous tone. She stared at the pasty-pale fatness of her brother, playing with his blanket on the other side of the hovel.

“Of course. Only an accident kept the same thing from happening to you. He's a mere three years younger than you, you realise—a total failure as a human being, a mere vegetable, an infant until he dies. He's proof of what I'd previously just warned about. When he was a year old, or thereabouts, it was beyond doubt that he was an imbecile. And, seeing he could hide the truth no longer from himself, your father — my son also, remember! — set out to hunt for someone else. Anyone else! Anyone would be better than your Jaspers, your Danianel's, and

the other blockheads of this generation!”

After that they sat in silence for a long time. Baby Dan grew tired of playing with his blanket, rolled over and went to sleep as unfussily as a real baby. Nestamay watched him.

“You should have told me before, Grandfather,” she said. “I—I thought some very bad things about you because you didn’t.”

“I don’t like talking about it,” Grandfather snapped. “Didn’t I just remind you your father was also my son—my only son?”

He picked up his pointer-stick and sighed heavily. “Well, it’s no use fretting about what might have been. We have to make the best of what we’ve got. And you’re the best of what we’ve got right now, Nestamay—the brightest member of your generation, the only person in the Station who could possibly learn everything I know and hope to add to it.”

“But—!” The tortured cry was wrung from Nestamay. “But what for? If our genetic lines are all going to produce a baby Dan sooner or later, what’s the use of struggling?”

“We aren’t the only people in the universe,” Grandfather said. “Sometimes it seems like it.

But somewhere there are other people, and some day we may find them, and when we do meet strangers we must be able to say to them, 'We kept up the struggle.' Because if we can't say that, what right will we have to be respected as human beings?"

XV

Conrad was completely dazed by the speed of events after Yanderman forced the insane-seeming promise out of him. A score of times a protest or withdrawal rose to his lips; always Yanderman forestalled the utterance with some point requiring immediate action.

A safe place for them to go, first. Conrad dredged one up from the not-so-distant past—a hideaway under an overhanging shelf of rock on the eroded side of a hill, where he had sometimes taken refuge from taunting children when he was ten or twelve years old. (He had sometimes dreamed of one day taking Idris there, in privacy. That was dead.)

Things necessary for them to take, next. Yanderman's directions were crisp and rapid. Certain things he chose himself; Conrad would never have known they were important, for he didn't know what they were at all. A magnetic

compass, for instance. He had never seen one in Lagwich.

On the other hand, he knew very well what a gun was. The fact that he didn't even consider looking for one was due to his assumption that a gun was the last thing the departing soldiers were likely to have abandoned. Yanderman knew better. Intensive searching located several, of which he chose the two best, as well as a bag of ammunition. Conrad was awed when the weapons were handed to him, but his companion allowed him no time to examine them.

"Get on with it, boy!" Yanderman rapped again and again. "The soldiery will be back some time, you know—they'll regret wrecking the camp, and they'll drift back when they get bored watching Lagwich defy them."

"Yes—what *about* Lagwich?" Conrad countered. It was as near as he could come to breaking his given word.

"Do you care?" Yanderman grunted. "You said not any more. And I certainly don't. Let 'em sweat it out as best they can. Pick up that side of meat over there. I thought I'd never have an appetite again, but I'm getting hungry. And you

look as though you never had a square meal in your life “

Obeying, Conrad persisted, “But what’s going to happen to Lagwich? What’s going to happen to the army?”

“It doesn’t matter what happens to them!” Yanderman exclaimed. “Oh—! Oh, I guess the town can stand a siege for a while, and the men aren’t properly officered and we didn’t come equipped to tackle even such rudimentary fortifications as Lagwich has. Maybe some bright character will put a ballista together and toss some incendiaries into the town—smoke the people out. More likely he won’t be able to organise a big enough squad of co-operative men. They’ll drift away, pick up some loot from the camp, or wander to another town and raid it before the people get wise.

“And back in Esberg there’ll be political chaos, and half a dozen would-be usurpers will impugn Duke Paul’s heir and try to confiscate his property and withdraw his titles on the grounds of wilful malfeasance, and—and the *hell* with them.”

He settled an immense burden of salvaged

equipment around himself on an improvised harness made from half a dozen soldiers' belts, and ended, "Right! Lead me to this safe hiding place you told me of."

That was the point at which Conrad almost turned and fled. The single thing which restrained him was his burning need to know what only Yanderman could tell him: the explanation of the mysterious visions which had plagued him all his life, and which—having believed them to be unique to himself—he now knew were shared by a certain Granny Jassy and any number of other people.

"That's better," Yanderman sighed, rubbing his fingers on a tuft of grass to cleanse them of grease from the meat they had charred, rather than cooked, over a clear smokeless fire of minute wood-chips. "Now, Conrad, I'll ease your mind a little. Pass me that canteen of water, will you?"

Conrad did so. Yanderman sucked lengthily at it and gave it back with a murmur of thanks.

"Yes!" he resumed. "It was sheer sick anger,

of course, which made me conceive this crazy plan in the first place—this plan to venture into the barrenland. That was before I knew about you. And then, when you said what you said, all of a sudden the idea seemed less crazy. In fact, it began to make excellent sense.”

He gave Conrad a shrewd glance. “Don’t know what I’m talking about, do you? I can read it in your face—deep down you’re scared stiff of the suggestion. If you had anywhere else to go, any friends to turn to, you wouldn’t be out here in the lee of a sandstone hill with a foreigner whose head is ringing with grandiose delusions!”

Conrad managed a threadbare smile in reply.

“Did you hear from any of our men who had liberty in Lagwich how we worked our way here—how we knew what sort of terrain we had to cross even before sending out scouts?”

“No—uh—I don’t think so.”

“That was thanks to Granny Jassy. And this.” Yanderman caught up the crystal ball and let it swing on its chain. “Take a good look at it. In fact—keep on looking at it while I tell you the story.”

Puzzled, but eager for information and less

frightened now he had filled his belly and rested a while, Conrad did as he was told.

Yanderman's voice droned evenly on, recounting how Duke Paul had decided to investigate the fantastic tales some people told in Esberg, how ideas copied from these tales, which hitherto had never been taken seriously, had proved to work in practice and had given Esberg a complete military ascendancy over its rival cities to the south, how men had gone to dig up mounds and found ruins and relics in incredible quantity, how Duke Paul had then turned his attention to stories about the barrenland and come to the conclusion that it was artificial, *made*, and even now—on the evidence of Rost's so-called “devil”—must have people within it.

Conrad, his eyes moving back and forth with the unending motion of the crystal ball, found the willpower to voice a foggy objection. He remembered the coming of the “devil” from the barrenland, and the arguments used by the wise men to show it could not be human. Yanderman dismissed them curtly, never varying the swing of the crystal ball.

“Think now about the visions you've had,

Conrad,” he urged. “Have you seen the barrenland as it might once have been? Have you seen it peopled, built on, prosperous?”

Conrad gave a sluggish nod. All his old resolutions never to share his secret with anyone except Idris had faded away. He was sure Yanderman wasn't going to mock him, and it meant so much to him to be taken seriously that he let the words stream out of their own accord.

As he talked, the shiny ball of crystal from which he now could not tear away his fascinated gaze seemed to expand and fill his entire field of vision. Dazzling, it blinded him. And then, out of the blindness, something new and yet familiar emerged. The forms were the forms of his old visions, but the detail, the colour, the words were a thousand times clearer than he had ever known them before.

He came to himself with a start. It was growing dark, and the little smokeless fire had gone out. Yanderman was sitting facing him with an enigmatic smile, the crystal ball hidden now inside his shirt.

“Awake, Conrad?”

“I—I haven’t been asleep. Have I?”

Intensely puzzled, Conrad rubbed his eyes automatically.

“Not exactly, no. You’ve been in a trance, which isn’t quite the same thing.” Yanderman stretched his legs as though he felt cramp after sitting a long time in the same position; the action informed Conrad that his limbs too were appallingly stiff.

“Then—oh, explain!” he demanded.

“I’ll do my best. As nearly as we were able to work it out, Duke Paul, myself and the other Esberg thinkers who tackled the problem, these visions aren’t simply dreams, but memories which have become available to us in a way we can’t account for. Possibly the time to which they refer was a time when there were simply so many people that their minds resonated together and created a—” He checked. “You don’t understand that analogy, I see. Have you ever handled a musical instrument?”

“Yes, a clay flute.”

“I meant a stringed instrument. You can see the phenomenon clearly there. Well, never mind.

Let's just say that we're satisfied that these memories are based on realities of the distant past. In every generation since whatever catastrophe undid the greatness of those days, a few people have been born who were capable of describing their visions; from these descriptions word of mouth transmission has evolved a number of folk tales and fables. The recurrence of those with direct perception has kept the tradition from being hopelessly garbled. Granny Jassy was the best subject we'd ever found in Esberg, but I must say that what you've been telling me these past few hours puts everything Granny Jassy ever said completely in the shade." He gave a sober headshake.

"Me?" Conrad was startled. "Do you mean I'm one of these—how did you put it?—'few people in each generation'?"

Yanderman shivered for no perceptible cause. He said, "I'd go further. You're not one of a few, but *unique*."

It seemed that this ought to be a source of pride. Conrad tried to regard it as such, but his brain was still misty with the after-effects of his recent trance.

“Did nobody in Lagwich care about your gift?” Yanderman pressed him. “Didn’t a single person take it seriously?”

“Until a day or two ago I’d have answered that at least one person did,” Conrad muttered. “A girl called—oh, never mind. She turned out like all the others in the end.”

He looked miserably down at the ground near Yanderman’s feet, and for the first time became aware that there was a pile of yellow paper there, covered with close scribbled writing. He gave the older man an inquiring glance.

“Call it the first fruit of my research into your mind,” Yanderman explained. “I made notes of as many of the things you described as I could manage. You can visualise the barrenland before it was made barren, as you know; in two or three more sessions it should be possible to extract from what you tell me the kind of information which will enable us to cross it and survive. Most importantly, you remember the course of streams and rivers. You can visualise distances, too, with impressive accuracy. What I want to prepare”—he took up a pencil and a

fresh sheet of paper—“is a map of the nearer part of the barrenland on which we can work out a path involving not more than a few hours’ travel away from water at any point. We can carry food and fuel between us, enough for the whole journey, if we can avoid having to load up with more than a canteen of water apiece.”

He sketched a rough circle on the paper, occupying almost the entire square of the sheet. In the centre of it he put a cross.

“But even more important,” he said under his breath, “is to know what was sited there in the middle.”

“Why?”

“Rost’s ‘devil’, of course.” Yanderman stared down at the paper for a long moment, then grunted and put it aside. He rose to his feet, stretching limb by limb.

“I still don’t see how it’s possible for these visions of mine to be memories of the past,” Conrad ventured. “Or rather I don’t see why they necessarily have a connection with anything real.”

“Don’t you?” Yanderman sounded surprised. “Boy, where in Lagwich would you have got

concepts like the ones you describe? I suppose mere imagination could carry the mind from a Lagwich-sized village to a city of a million people. But there's a gap between anything in your direct experience and the notion of self-controlling machines, of flying through the air, walking to other worlds. As a matter of fact," he added with a rueful smile, "that last one is so fantastic I'm inclined to wonder whether it's not an exception."

"Yes—*what* other worlds?" Conrad agreed eagerly. "Where? Where's there room for them? And if the world we know is big enough for you to march fourteen days here from Esberg, surely it ought to be big enough for anybody's taste! Why would they have *wanted* to go elsewhere?"

"For the same reason Duke Paul wanted to lead his army into the barrenland," Yanderman said. "I confess I thought he was—oh, not exactly crazy, but at least excessively confident. And in one sense he was, for his army deserted on his death, and might well have mutinied even if he'd survived. But in another and more important sense he was absolutely right. Here you've had Lagwich existing for centuries on the

edge of the barrenland—long enough to get to know the limitations of its dangers if anyone had wished—and you’ve had yourself, born with a gift that provides access to information once thought to be lost beyond recall. Put the two together, as I’m doing, and at once the idea of crossing the barrenland becomes a practical proposition. And it’s ridiculous to hold back from a practical proposition simply because nobody’s ever done it before.”

There was a gap in that chain of reasoning, Conrad felt. But at the moment he couldn’t locate it. He was suddenly drowsy, as though his stock of nervous energy had run dry, and within another few minutes he was stretched on the ground under a pillaged blanket, limp as a child’s toy.

XVI

Yanderman's air of calm confidence lent Conrad a veneer of boldness. But it remained only a veneer until after the irreversible step had been taken and they were deep in the barrenland — so deep that when they looked back they saw nothing of the green and fertile country around Lagwich, only the dusty rolling slopes and snag-toothed rocks which they had traversed.

And then it sprang upon Conrad's mind like a lightning flash. *This* was the barrenland—solid ground, very quiet, dead-seeming, but not utterly alien. It had once been like the land he knew, and might perhaps be so again.

Sensing a change in his companion's attitude, Yanderman gave him a crooked smile.

"Not so bad once you're in it, hey?" he suggested.

"No, I guess not," Conrad admitted. "The only thing is, it's *so* barren it's not very

surprising people haven't wanted to enter it. I mean there's nothing to temp you in!"

"There could have been plenty of temptation," Yanderman contradicted. "The mystery of it, for instance, should have been enough. Lack of guts held people back—and that's odd in itself, since even your white-livered townfolk in Lagwich were bold enough in tackling *things* that trespassed on their land."

He settled his heavy load of equipment more comfortably about him and trudged on. A few paces behind Conrad followed. It was all too true what Yanderman had said about carrying water; even though they had confined themselves to what Yanderman regarded as indispensables they were still immensely burdened, and some of the items were awkward.

Like this gun, for example. Yanderman had explained its working in simple terms, and Conrad had caught on quickly because similar things had cropped up in his visions. But it was a devilish difficult problem keeping it comfortably slung among the various bags, cartons and bundles he also bore.

He preferred the sword hanging from its frog

at his waist.

The proof that Yanderman was right about the content of the visions came the afternoon of the first day. They located a stream running south-eastwards which had been marked up in advance in their crude map. Conrad was glad to slake his dusty throat and rinse his sand-eroded feet.

Yanderman, however, was not quite so eager. He chose to walk around on the bank for a while, studying the lie of the terrain. When he returned, it was to beckon Conrad and point out to him some curious marks in the soft ground near the water's edge.

"A *thing* has been here recently," he said.

For a moment Conrad suffered a giddy return of the fear which the mention of *things* from the barrenland used to evoke in him. Then his eyes focused on the marks. They were made by strange hoofs in the form of three sides of a square, with a forward projection from each closed corner.

"Then it won't be bothering us," he said.

“Why not?”

“It’s the spoor of the *thing* I killed and your lieutenant took to show off in the army camp,” Conrad explained.

“Are you sure?” Yanderman demanded, and then went on before Conrad could answer, “It’s not that I doubt your memory. It’s just that—well, might there be more than one such *thing*?”

“Never since the foundation of Lagwich have two *things* that looked alike emerged from the barrenland,” Conrad declared positively. “Indeed, that’s one of the reasons why the wise men insisted on their devilish nature—what known beast can exist by itself, without others of its kind to help it reproduce? And yet, as you’ve argued to me, this doesn’t fit with their substantial form and the way they can be killed like an ordinary animal ...” He shook his head. That problem was still too deep for him.

“Then I guess we can relax,” Yanderman agreed. “But by night we’ll keep watch in turns.” He squinted towards the point where rocks closed in around the little stream.

“If we follow this bank to the bend I’ve marked on the map, that should be a good place

to spend the night. And in the morning we can strike virtually due north to the next water.”

The first night’s watching was a fearful experience. Shadows acquired lives of their own; twice Conrad woke his companion in alarm at what proved to be nothing worse than a breeze stirring the dust. The second night was not so bad. The day which followed, however, was the worst part of the trip; according to Yanderman’s map, it was necessary to cross dry ground for a full eight hours to avoid a wasted trip to the east, and at that point the going became rougher—less sandy and much more rocky.

They were at the mid-point of this eight-hour stage when Yanderman, slightly in the lead as usual, stopped abruptly and gave a gasp that turned Conrad’s heart over.

“What is it?” he demanded.

“Look!” Yanderman pointed at a sheltered cranny between two boulders, and Conrad peered down.

There was a plant there—the first they had seen on the barrenland. But it was no

reassurance. It did have leaves and stems like an honest vegetable, but the leaves were a blackish brown stained with white fuzz, and the stems were brittle and dry-looking.

“Don’t touch it!” Yanderman warned. “I’ve never seen anything like it, have you?”

Conrad shook his head.

For a little while they remained, studying the curious intruder; then Yanderman sighed and made to move on. “Keep an eye out for any more plants,” he ordered. “If it’s true that there’s an island in the barrenland where people have clung to life, we may get a guide towards it from an increasingly dense vegetation.”

There was no real increase in density, however; only a thin scattering of alien plants, perhaps one in a hundred paces, whose single comforting quality was that unlike the things which moved they did occur in distinct family groups.

The next two or three hours found them scrambling among rocks and plodding down rain-eroded gullies. The sensation was akin to being an ant crawling over a skeleton, and Conrad felt a prickling of the scalp every time he

encountered another of the mysterious plants. Yet nothing moved or seemed to threaten them; he forced himself to concentrate on making progress rather than giving way to wild fancies.

Yanderman had just paused to make another distance-mark on his map, and to promise a sight of water within the hour, when the welkin rang with an ear-splitting hoot from a short distance away. Map forgotten, gun swinging to the ready position, Yanderman ordered Conrad to dive for cover.

When long minutes of staring had failed to reveal the creature which had given that appalling bellow—it was certainly an animal noise—he got up slowly.

“I think it’s close,” he whispered. “Perhaps over that rise to our left. Come with me, but move carefully.”

Conrad complied, wishing he could head in the opposite direction. But when they topped the rise and could see the thing that had hooted, he felt ashamed of the panicky impulse.

It was as enormous as its voice, but it was clearly no danger to them, for it was dying.

As long as twenty men, the *thing* lay among

boulders in the slanting afternoon sunlight. It had no discernible head or limbs—only a vast massing of bulbous bladders of many hues and all sizes from that of a man’s head to that of a horse’s belly. Between the bladders trailed ragged white membranes, dry and curling at the edges as though the sun were too much for them to withstand.

A wide smeared trail indicated the direction from which it had come: roughly, from the north. By what means of progress? By crawling? That seemed absurd to Conrad—why should such a colossus have to crawl?

Yet apparently that was the truth. For now it heaved and humped itself and tried to move onwards, and the source of the incredible noise was suddenly clear. A sharp boulder struck one of the distended bladders, ripped it, and the gas within came gushing out to the accompaniment of another deafening hoot, leaving behind more of the drying whitish membrane.

“It’s helpless,” Yanderman said softly. “We can leave it be.”

“I’ll be glad to!” Conrad admitted. “What—what *is* it?”

“If it’s true that there are other worlds than this, and the things hail from them, that might have been born on a world of the kind where—” He checked himself, then resumed with a shake of his head. “Where things weigh less than they do here. This is another aspect of the story I’ve never understood. Weight is weight, and you’d think—but never mind. What matters here and now is that the course this creature has followed leads back to its point of origin.”

“You mean we should go that way?” Conrad gasped. “To the very place where the *things* come from?”

Yanderman cocked his head. “Has it only just struck you?” he said with genuine astonishment. “Logically, if we’re hunting for survivors in the middle of the barrenland whose duty is to try and stop the *things* emerging into the world, we have to go where they are—to the middle.”

“I suppose so,” Conrad said. “But I wish ...”

Yanderman clapped him on the shoulder. “Bear up!” he said. “Tomorrow afternoon at latest we should reach the centre of the barrenland, and all our questions will be

answered. Mark you, for every question that's answered we'll probably learn to ask a score of new ones, but that's hardly to be helped."

Conrad essayed a smile at the joke, gave a last glance at the dying monster, and moved on.

It was more disconcerting than ever when late that night Yanderman mentioned the possibility of the survivors at the centre regarding strangers with hostility. Again, Conrad had had the information to go on, and hadn't used it. If Rost and the wise men of Lagwich could argue that a man from the barrenland was by definition a devil, the cut-off community here —if it existed— might feel similarly.

Yanderman had a precaution against that risk, however. He sketched in a line of rocky hills to the east of the centre point, which he had located in one of Conrad's visions. A detour in that direction, he argued, would give plenty of cover for their final approach, and a chance to sum the place up before showing themselves.

It made sense. But when he was scrambling among the rocks late the following afternoon,

Conrad found himself once again wishing he was anywhere but here. His mouth was dry, his feet were blistered and cut, his hands were scratched, his shoulders ached from the weight of his equipment—

And he had forgotten all his discomforts within the past second. Flat on his belly beside Yanderman, peering over a rim of rock, he saw the most incredible sight he had ever dreamed of, far surpassing anything in his familiar visions.

A sort of dome lay ahead, between them and the setting sun, so vast that one had to turn one's head to take it all in. Gashed and holed, slightly buckled, it was still mind-shaking. Like a super-monster it lay stranded in the sea of the desert, blotched with smears of greenish vegetation, creepers and free-standing plants. At one end there was a cluster of smaller buildings —*buildings*, for all that they were tiny and ramshackle. At the other, so dwarfed by the immensity of the dome, there were ...

“Are those people?” Conrad said in a shaking voice.

“Yes!” Yanderman's answer was equally unsteady, and when Conrad glanced around he

was astonished to see that his companion's cheeks were bright with tears. "Yes, Conrad, they're people, and it's true, it's all true! I was so terrified we might come here and find only desolation, but we were right!"

Conrad stared towards the insect-sized group of human beings again. They were moving purposefully, following a plan, under orders. They knew what they were doing. They must hold the key to the mystery of the barrenland and the origin of the terrifying *things* which wandered out of it to Lagwich ... And surely they couldn't be hostile visitors from the outside world. They'd know there was an outside — why, if Rost's "devil" had been a man, that implied they'd even attempted to reach it! What could have gone wrong? He and Yanderman had made the crossing uneventfully enough, but of course they'd had a compass and the aid of his own vision-memories —

He was so lost in thought that at first he didn't realise what was happening at the foot of the dome before him. Only a cry from Yanderman and the snicking of a rifle-bolt brought him to full awareness.

Something had emerged from the dome, from among the jungly green vegetation there, and the group of people off to the left had scattered and run. Something monstrous had come out!

A *thing* twenty feet tall, waving uncountable limbs like whips, shrieking now as though maddened by pain and being driven by some invisible force straight towards the rocks among which Conrad and Yanderman lay hid!

XVII

That day began like any other for Nestamay, although an hour earlier than most, for it would again be her turn to keep overnight watch after sunset, and shortly after midday she would have to try and catch up on her sleep; that apart, everything was as usual.

Washed, and having attended to baby Dan's vegetable-like needs, she fetched their day's rations and prepared a quick breakfast. She hardly spoke to Grandfather—indeed, since that unexpected cracking of his self-control which had followed her accusations against Jasper, he seemed deliberately to have hardened the shell around himself again, and spent more time than ever in silent anxious musing.

Their frugal meal was almost over when there was a bang on the door of the hovel, patched together like the rest of the building from salvaged scrap. The caller didn't wait for

an invitation to enter, but stepped in at once.

It was Keefe, a burly man with only one eye, the other having been lost years ago to a newly-hatched *thing*. He carried a large cracked plastic dish in which rested a clump of soil containing a sickly plant.

“Sorry to disturb you, Maxall,” he said. “We found this out towards the East Brokes, or rather my kid found it. She doesn’t think she’s seen one like it before, and nor do I.”

Grandfather grunted. “It could happen,” he said sceptically. “Let’s have a look at it.” He reached out a casual hand and took the dish.

Rubbing his hands, Keefe waited. It was logical that he should bring a problem of this kind to Grandfather, Nestamay knew—nobody else had so much information so clearly memorised. But it was obvious he didn’t like the chore. If only Grandfather didn’t have this gift of making even grown, knowledgeable men feel like ignorant children ...!

“Nestamay!” Grandfather’s sharp voice broke into her meditation. “Get my microscope, will you?”

Nestamay jumped to her feet and went to the

row of shelves at the back of the hovel on which were kept the few serviceable scientific instruments their family had culled from the mess below the dome. She took down the microscope gingerly and bore it to the old man wrapped in its antirust cloth.

“Is it something new?” Keefe ventured.

“D’you think I’d be bothering with the microscope if I was sure?” Grandfather retorted, picking off a sample leaf and sliding it into place under the objective.

Keefe rolled his eye as though seeking strength from above, then caught Nestamay’s attention and gave her a grin which he probably intended to be sympathetic. But the girl had a sudden attack of family loyalty and tossed her hair haughtily.

“Hah!” Grandfather said a moment later. He put aside the leaf and held out a hand towards Nestamay. When she didn’t immediately understand the gesture, he snapped his fingers. “Knife, you little fool!” he exclaimed. “Do I have to tell you every time what it is I want?”

Flushing, Nestamay fetched the knife. Maybe she shouldn’t have made such an

unfriendly response to Keefe after all, she thought. Grandfather could be incredibly maddening. Sulky, she dropped back to her seat.

His age no handicap to his deft fingers, Grandfather sectioned the stem of the plant and selected a tiny roundel to examine with the microscope. Adjusting the focus minutely, he addressed Keefe.

“Out towards the East Brokes, you said?”

“That’s right. The way the *thing* went after we kicked it out of Channel Nine the other night. I thought it might have come through on the *thing’s* hoof, perhaps—in a lump of mud.” He hesitated. “That is, if it *is* something new.”

“It’s new,” Grandfather confirmed, leaning back with a sigh. “Either that, or else an unreported life-stage of some plant we already know. But that’s improbable. It’s a matter of years since we had the last stranger, and any variant form would have been spotted before this.”

Nestamay bent to the plastic dish and stared at the innocent-looking plant in it. Rather commonplace: quite small as yet, standing a mere four or five inches high, with dark green

stems and curious little red thorns. But she knew better than to voice such a reaction. The first—and last—time she had doubted the necessity of keeping a check on any and every intrusive plant, Grandfather had taken her by the ear and marched her around the dome to the point from which the pullulating miniature jungle within the Station could be most clearly seen. There he had stopped. He had said, “Once *those* were harmless-looking seeds!”

That was one lesson of Grandfather’s which she had never needed to revise.

“What ought we to do about it, then?” Keefe inquired.

“Nestamay, what are your assigned duties this morning?” Grandfather said, turning.

“Uh—well, it’s my watch-night tonight. So I’m on half-day general assistance.”

“Perfect. Keefe, get this plant of yours out on a stand at the mouth of Channel Nine—about two o’clock of the dome. Nestamay, make the rounds of the community. Everyone is to have a sight of this plant within the next hour. I mean everyone, down to and including toddling children. But particularly I want to make sure

that there's no infection in the hydroponic trays, so call there first. All free-day worker adults are to report to Keefe and study the plant and conduct a ground-search for any further specimens. Begin on the trail of the East Brokes *thing*, and work outwards in a fan-pattern. Send that little girl with the good sketching talent here to me so she can draw the anomalous micro-features and we can file them for reference, and tell her that she'll be wanted to draw the thing *in vivo* as well."

Nestamay nodded. "That's—uh—Danianel you want to do the sketching, right?"

"Yes. Well, don't just sit there! Get moving!"

When they heard the news, most people sighed and shrugged and accepted the necessity of doing as Grandfather ordered. There were a few half-hearted objections, naturally; Egrin, sweating as always in the humid environment demanded by the hydroponic trays, wiped his face and snarled, "If the old fool thinks I could have overlooked a strange plant in my own trays

he must be crazy!” But even he, after boiling off his annoyance, went compliantly to study the specimen and memorise its characteristics for future reference.

It wasn't until she had completed her round of the community that Nestamay realised she had not yet located and spoken to Jasper.

Frowning, she wondered where she could have missed him. She had called at his family's hovel, she had notified the chief of the party with which he usually worked ... Where could he have got to?

She went in search of one of his kinfolk, and found his mother returning from her dutiful trip to inspect the plant and listen to Keefe.

“Where's Jasper?” Nestamay demanded. “I haven't told him yet.”

“It's his free-day,” Jasper's mother countered.

“So?” Nestamay was impatient. “I know that —I've spoken with people from his working party. But Grandfather said I was to tell absolutely everyone, and I particularly don't want to leave out Jasper because—”

“I know why not!” his mother rasped. “If I'd

known our genes were going to tie him down to the choice of you for a mate, I'd have chosen differently myself!"

"Tie him down!" Nestamay blazed. "What about him making Danianel skip her watch the other night? What's tying him down there? I'm not—I'd as soon live single!"

"You've got no right to spread these foul-mouthed stories about my son!"

"A good way to stop them spreading would be to stop him behaving the way he does," Nestamay said, and marched away before the flabbergasted woman could reply.

She felt rather pleased with herself for ending the argument with such a telling phrase. As a result, it was some minutes before she recalled she still hadn't found Jasper. And if she didn't manage to find him and send him off to join the party scouting in the East Brokes direction for more of the intruding plants, there was bound to be someone who would leak the information back to Grandfather and earn her a bawling-out.

He couldn't possibly be around the far side of the dome in this secret love-nest of his, could

he? Nestamay paused, a frown furrowing her young brow. If so, he was there on his own—all the eligible girls of the community were accounted for and had gone to report to Keefe.

Even so, she would have to check that possibility.

She took a firm grip on herself and went around the dome, her mind full of thoughts of Jasper as he related to her future. The past day or two a possible solution had suggested itself to her. Even if the community dared not risk losing Jasper's genetic lines, or blending them with anyone else's but her own, did that necessarily imply that she had to live with Jasper as his permanent mate? Couldn't she mother two children by him and continue to live with Grandfather, and then have her own home when Grandfather died? It was against custom and precedent, but it was possible Grandfather might give his consent—after all, the community was approaching a really desperate pass, and old-fashioned ways of organising such things might have to be sacrificed anyway ...

“Why, it's Nestamay! I didn't know it was your free-day!”

The mocking words recalled her to the present. She spun to see Jasper emerging from a dark hole among the tangle of ruined machinery and collapsed dome-struts which marked this side of the Station.

“It isn’t my free-day,” Nestamay said after a pause. “I wish you’d told somebody where you were going! I’ve had to hunt all over the place for you.”

A broad smile spread across Jasper’s face. “Well, well! What happened? Did Danianel give you such glowing reports of this little hideaway of mine that you couldn’t resist having a look at it—is that it?”

He moved towards her. Automatically she took a step back.

“Stop it!” she rapped. “Listen! I have to tell you to go and see Keefe around the dome near Channel Nine. He found a new plant. All free-day workers have to report to make a search for it.”

“What?” Jasper’s smile vanished. “On a free-day? Who says so?”

“Here and now *I* say so!” Nestamay exclaimed.

“Oh! It’s your old fool of a grandfather again, I suppose!” Jasper wiped his lips with the back of his hand. “Well, I’m not going to turn out and sweat over bare ground all day for his sake! Let him look for the damned plants himself!”

“You won’t get away with that,” Nestamay warned. “The order says for everyone to go, including you.”

“I didn’t get the order,” Jasper said bluntly. He waved at the dome. “Nobody in sight, is there? Nobody except us! You can say you told me as much as you like, and I’ll say you gave up looking before you found me. How’s your beloved grandfather going to like that, hey?” The smile oozed back.

“But I tell you what!” he went on, before the dismayed girl could think of a foolproof answer. “I will go ... on one small condition. That’s if you come in there with me for—oh, an hour or so, not more. Then if anybody asks what took you so long, I’ll be quite honest. I’ll say I was in there and you didn’t know where exactly to find me and it took a long time to track me down. There, how’s that for a bargain? Afterwards I’ll

show up like a good boy for this damned search-party, and you'll get a pat on the head from your grandfather for devotion to duty."

He put his hand out to take her arm and lead her inside the dome to his vaunted secret lair.

Abruptly, at his touch, a flood of rage and loathing boiled up in Nestamay. She had tumbled with all the other children of her age-group, boys and girls alike, in their crude wrestling games, and had often overcome opponents older and heavier than herself. On becoming a nominal adult she was supposed to have put all that behind her, but the grip of Jasper's hand seemed to trigger a reflex response. She hardly knew what she was doing, she was so furious, but seconds later Jasper was cartwheeling over her back, taken totally by surprise, and sliding on his face in the dust.

Panicking, she jumped away, thinking he would fling himself on her and seek revenge. But he didn't do so. Panting, getting slowly to hands and knees with a huge graze-mark bleeding down his cheek, he fixed her with coldly cruel eyes.

"You'll be sorry for that, Nestamay," he

whispered. “I warn you! You’ll wish you were dead before I finish getting even with you for this!”

There was something in his look and his voice which made him seem suddenly inhuman. Nestamay repressed a desire to scream, spun on the spot and took to her heels.

XVIII

She was still too shaken to think clearly when she found herself outside her home a few minutes later. She had never seen such a savage look on anyone's face in all her young life. It was as though a newly-hatched *thing* had taken human form. The shock had made her physically giddy.

Little by little she forced herself back to a state of comparative calm. She grew aware that Grandfather's irascible voice could be heard from within the hovel, ordering Danianel to hurry with her sketching and get out to join the search party under Keefe.

Taking a firm grip on herself, she thrust open the door and blurted out her news.

"Grandfather, Jasper refuses to report for the search party! He said he wouldn't admit that I'd found him and told him your instructions unless I—I went with him for an hour first."

Danianel, a slight, quite pretty girl a little older than Nestamay, looked up startled from the eyepiece of the microscope. Several sheets of neatly executed drawings were piled up alongside the instrument.

“Go with you?” Grandfather said frostily. “Where to? I suppose I don’t have to ask what for!”

“I don’t know where exactly,” Nestamay muttered. “He has this hideaway inside the dome. Ask Danianel—she’s been there!”

“What do you mean?” Danianel demanded indignantly, cheeks colouring. Nestamay ignored her.

“Please, Grandfather, you must help me!” she exclaimed. “I had to beat him off, and I hurt him, I guess, and he said I’d wish I was dead before he finished getting even.”

Grandfather pulled himself to his feet. “You stay here and finish that drawing, Danianel,” he rapped. “I’m getting tired of young Jasper, and I think it’s about time he was told to behave himself.”

Immensely relieved, Nestamay fell in behind him as he set off with long strides to the place

where Keefe was assembling the search party.

But as they rounded the dome he checked and put up a hand to shade his eyes. “I thought you said Jasper had refused to join the party!” he snapped. “Look there!” He flung out an arm.

It was definitely Jasper, meekly listening with everyone else to Keefe’s exposition.

“I swear he told me he wouldn’t do it on his free-day,” Nestamay gulped. “Please go and ask him how he came by the graze on his face, at least!”

“Now see here, child,” Grandfather said, turning to face her. “I know you dislike Jasper. I know you hate the idea of having him as a mate. But we’ve been over all that, and I’ve explained why it’s got to be that way and there’s no alternative. Are you deliberately trying to incite me against him?”

Nestamay went slowly white. Between clenched teeth she forced out, “Go and ask him how he hurt his *face*!”

“He’s turned out for the search,” Grandfather answered curtly. “That’s as I ordered. Leave it at that.”

“Don’t you care about him trying to rape

me?” Nestamay blazed. “Doesn’t it matter to you? Doesn’t it matter any more than sending my father out to his death in the desert? You and you talk about being able to show pride when we finally meet other people again—oh, how I hope you’ll be dead before then so I won’t weep with shame to hear you say you’re human too! You’re not! You’re a machine—you’re a *thing!*”

With all her force she slapped him stingingly across the face, and turned to flee.

Terror at what she had done haunted her the rest of the day. She dared not go home when she should have done—at noon, to try and sleep before keeping the night watch. Instead, she cowered alone in a concealed nook on the far side of the dome, shivering uncontrollably and sometimes giving way to dry-eyed sobs.

Only one coherent thought filled her mind during the slow-passing hours. She hadn’t reached the decision consciously, but rather by an instinctive leap.

She was not going to stay and endure Jasper’s revenge, whatever form it took. If he

caught up with her and tried to attack her physically — which she thought unlikely, for he had always seemed a coward — she would use her knife on him this time. But in the more probable case that he resorted to some subtler and crueller indirect attack, she was going to leave the Station as her father had: walk away into the desert and take her chance of dying of thirst or hunger.

There was no one to whom she could turn. If even Grandfather thought she was slandering Jasper to get out of living with him, she might as well be dead already.

And there was nothing she could do to forestall Jasper, either. How he would go about getting even with her she could not guess, but the most likely way was simply by a series of petty persecutions kept up over months, becoming intolerable as they accumulated. If the community had liked her family, such a plan would not have worked, but Grandfather had been overbearing and domineering for years, and while everyone had to respect his vast knowledge nobody actually liked him. And this reaction extended now to include herself.

By late afternoon she was immensely thirsty. Wondering if she could get to water without anyone seeing her, she peered out of her refuge. A group of weary searchers returning from their hunt around the Station was passing, heading southwards around the dome. She ducked back out of sight, but not before she had recognised Jasper among them. He was too far distant for her to see his expression, but a mere glimpse of him was enough to make her tremble again.

She was glad he hadn't been looking in her direction. In a little while now Grandfather would be calling for her—it was after all her night to keep watch in the office; that hadn't changed. But people would hardly take to the idea of being sent out to hunt for her in the dark.

And there were footsteps close by.

She froze, wondering what she would do if she was discovered by chance; the possibility had scarcely crossed her mind. But whoever the footsteps belonged to wasn't looking for anybody. The angle of the sound changed constantly, approaching the side of the dome, then entering it and continuing, blurred now, inside.

It couldn't be Jasper. Could it?

Yet who else would venture so confidently into the Station from this side with darkness near?

With extreme caution Nestamay craned past a large rusty machine at the back of her own hiding-place and tried to confirm her suspicion. But it was useless; in the long-shadowed evening gloom under the dome all details blended.

Then the footsteps were returning, and she ducked again. Straining her ears, she heard a muttered sentence.

“That'll fix the bitch!”

Beyond any doubt, that was Jasper. She let her hand fall to the handle of her hatchet. Where was he going now? Out of the dome to rejoin the returning search party, or straight to the north, back to the clustered hovels?

North, and without a pause. She saw his shadow stride past a few seconds later and heard him begin to hum, apparently very pleased with himself. What could he have done to “fix” her? Rigged a trap of some kind, perhaps? Nestamay frowned intently, attempting to turn familiar routes within the dome back to front, so as to

determine whether Jasper had been able to reach any of the mazy paths up to the office in the short time he had spent inside. She failed to decide; it was a problem she had never tackled before, relating this unfrequented side of the Station to the safe paths within it. The answer, however, came of its own accord, and only minutes later.

It took the form of a tremendous crash, followed by grinding and tearing noises. Nestamay leapt to her feet. Was that the result of Jasper's visit—the springing of some sort of deadfall trap aimed at her, but operated by someone else or of its own accord?

The idea had barely framed itself in her mind before she realised it was false. For the grinding and tearing noises continued, and a fresh sound joined them: an animal bellowing.

That left only one explanation. A *thing* had just hatched inside the dome—and as the alarm hadn't sounded to signal the random operation of the mysterious process responsible, that meant Jasper must have disconnected it!

Everything else driven out of her mind, Nestamay broke from her hiding-place and raced

in search of someone—anyone—to warn. It didn't matter now about escaping into the desert, or avoiding Jasper. He had done something completely unforgivable, thinking perhaps that the odds were against a *thing* appearing in the short time before Nestamay was due to begin her watch and hoping that she might find herself trapped inside the Station with an unsignalled monster.

Surely even Grandfather couldn't stomach a crime like this!

Panting, she came in earshot of the returned search party gathering at the south side of the dome. She shrieked at them as loudly as she could.

"There's a *thing* just hatched! Big—inside the dome still!"

Keefe, at the centre of the group listening to reports of the day's search, turned his one eye on her in amazement.

"There's been no alarm!" he snapped.

"It's not working!" Nestamay gasped.

"Jasper turned it off."

"What?" An incredulous chorus greeted the assertion. "But that isn't possible!"

“Well, maybe he broke it!” Nestamay snapped. “But the *thing* is there and the alarm didn’t work and Jasper was in the dome a short while ago. Get around and spread the word!”

She took to her heels again, heading north in search of Grandfather.

But long before she located him, the *thing* in the dome had proved its existence beyond doubt. It was the most monstrous to be spawned by the incomprehensible forces of the Station in living memory. Fully twenty feet tall, it was recognisable as animal only because it moved and roared; that apart, it was a confused tangle of long grasping tentacles set so thickly on its body it was impossible to see its underlying shape. It was immensely strong, too. From its point of origin in the zone of the dome made inaccessible by the tangled alien vegetation it had headed straight for the exterior, breaking or throwing aside whatever was in its way. By the time Nestamay saw it, it was already out in the open, and a huge sagging gash in the dome wall marked its point of emergence. Even if they had had the alarm to warn them, there would have been no question of herding this into one of the

dome's exit channels and tormenting it with the electrofence—it was simply too big!

Frantically men came running from all directions, some carrying heatbeams, some with hatchets or other makeshift weapons, only to stop irresolutely on seeing how vast this *thing* really was. Towering over them, it seemed that not even a heatbeam on full power could possibly do more than madden it.

A frightened man swung around and saw Grandfather approaching behind Nestamay. In a scream like a child's, he demanded to be told what to do. Grandfather, taking in the size of the monster, paled, and Nestamay felt a pang of spiteful amusement.

“Heatbeams!” Grandfather shouted at last, and Keefe caught the order. He had already anticipated it; he was manhandling one of the bulky projectors with its trailing umbilical cord of insulated cable. Now he supplemented it.

“Get between it and the dome! Drive it away!” he yelled.

Grim-faced, men moved to obey. Down came a lashing tentacle, sweeping clear an area twenty feet in radius, and caught at the cord of

one of the heatbeams. It snapped like thread. The man bearing the useless weapon shouted and tried to run; he stumbled. The tentacle cracked across his back like a whip, and he lay still.

“Don’t stand looking—do something!” Grandfather bellowed.

Keefe was already doing it. He had used the distraction of the past few seconds to get his beam set up between the thing and the hole in the dome. Now he switched the power on.

The thing’s narrowest, topmost tentacles blackened instantly. It howled. It lashed out. The heat increased inversely with the square root of the tentacles’ distance from the projector, and four tentacles at once shrivelled to ash. Another projector started up, blazing away their accumulated power at something like a megawatt in three minutes.

But the heatbeams told. The thing began to sidle away; paused on discovering that the pain lessened; lashed out anew and lost more tentacles. Men dived out of its path as it began to retreat, and screamed with excitement and relief. They picked up rocks and hurled them from safely beyond the range of its tentacles. Others

who had taken the time to fetch weapons now joined in pursuit, using javelins and arrows fashioned from scrap metal. Nestamay found she had been biting her lip so hard she could taste blood, and forced cramped jaw muscles to relax as the danger dwindled.

“Why was there no alarm?” Grandfather shouted—at Keefe, wrestling with his heatbeam.

Nestamay clutched his arm. “Grandfather, I told you! Jasper turned the alarm off!”

“You’re out of your mind, girl!” Grandfather blazed. “No one could turn it off. No one would think of turning it off and putting all our lives in danger.”

“Then where is Jasper?” Keefe rasped. He set down the heavy projector and wiped his face, his one eye on the fleeing thing as it headed for the East Brokes. “You’ve got to tackle him on this point, Maxall! The alarm’s never failed before, and I for one want to know why it failed this time!”

There was no doubt that the monster was in flight now. It was outdistancing its pursuers, and their rocks, javelins and even arrows were falling short. Watching it, Grandfather licked his lips.

“Not this time!” Nestamay said fiercely.
“What’s the good of my having Jasper’s children and keeping up the line if he’s going to wreck the Station with his insane behaviour?”

“That’s right,” Keefe said, and spat sidelong. Grandfather’s mouth worked, but no words came out.

And then there were two explosions in the distance.

A pause.

Two more.

They whirled to stare in the direction from which the noise had come—the direction taken by the injured *thing*. They were just in time to see it stumble, if such a polypodal beast could stumble, on the lower slopes of the East Brokes. It halted, swayed, began to topple.

Two more explosions, and it fell writhing, and from beyond it, from among the random rocks, a figure rose into sight. And another. Nestamay felt the world begin to spin around her.

Two strangers. Two *strangers!* Two *new human beings!*

XIX

To Conrad, seeing the towering monster approach, it had been for an instant as though the rest of the universe had ceased to exist. All his childhood terror of *things* from the barrenland leapt up to dominate his mind. Here was that terror incarnate, howling and flailing its uncountable limbs. The dome, the people, the outside world ceased to matter. There was only Conrad and the raging menace.

Then Yanderman spoke softly beside him. “Aim carefully, boy. Aim at the underside. At this range your slug will strike high rather than low.”

Aim? Slug? With a start Conrad remembered. He had been given a gun salvaged from Duke Paul’s camp, an eternity and an infinity ago. Gasping, thinking the monster was almost on him, he flung down his other equipment and jammed the gun’s stock to his

shoulder as Yanderman had told him.

“Work the bolt and cock the gun,” Yanderman whispered. With a handful of thumbs Conrad managed it, a full second after Yanderman. He closed one eye and squinted along the barrel. Underside? What underside did a beast like that have? It was nothing but a seething mass of—

“Now!” Yanderman barked, and more by reflex than anything else Conrad fired. The two shots sounded very slightly apart, but it wasn’t the combined noise that startled Conrad; it was the way the gun had hit back at him, bruising his shoulder.

“Hold it tighter this time,” Yanderman instructed, as coolly as if the oncoming *thing* had been a harmless bit of game. “Work the bolt now. Aim again.”

The second time was much better. The two shots were simultaneous. The *thing* uttered a pain-crazed scream and seemed to lose control of its numerous legs. It swayed and lowered some of its tentacles, revealing huge smears of bluish-grey ichor on the front of its body.

“We’re getting it!” Conrad yelled, and

without waiting for Yanderman's order fired again. A moment later, having taken more care with his aiming, Yanderman let go his own third shot.

And the *thing* gave a bubbling moan and fell sidelong to the ground.

Conrad jumped up, clutching his gun in both hands, to stare at the dying monster, and would have gone rashly forward had not Yanderman caught his arm.

"It may take a long time to die!" he warned. "Keep well clear of those tentacles. See what I mean?"

As though to illustrate the lesson, a lashing limb had whipped through the air and cracked whipwise to the ground at least thirty feet from the prostrate body. Conrad shivered and took a reflex step back.

"I doubt if it's in a fit state to come after us," Yanderman murmured. "All we have to worry about now is the reception committee. I just hope they weren't saving this beast for some special purpose!"

Conrad blanched. Yanderman sounded appallingly serious, though it was hard to

imagine what purpose a *thing* like this could possibly be wanted for. Nonetheless, it was true that the people who had come in pursuit from the dome at the foot of the slope and who now had seen the two newcomers were approaching with some wariness, pausing to retrieve javelins and arrows expended on the fleeing monster.

“Wait for them to react first,” Yanderman recommended. It was a strain on Conrad, but he complied.

The reaction was a peculiar one. Instead of coming close at once, or even calling out a greeting, the dome people halted the other side of the dying *thing*, out of reach of its tentacles, and stared up the slope. There was some discussion among themselves in tones too low for Conrad to catch, while still more people moved from the direction of the dome to join them.

“Ah, I see,” Yanderman said with a nod. “Waiting for a leader of some kind, I imagine. See the old man, the one with grey hair, being helped along by another man and a girl?” He pointed. Conrad did see the trio he was referring to.

The guess was correct. It was the old man himself who broke the spell after a moment's quick consultation with two or three other mature men of the group. He put his hands to his mouth and called out.

"We are the descendants of Station Repair and Maintenance Crews A through G!" he shouted, his voice cracking a little. "Who are you?"

Silently uttering a prayer in memory of the Duke, who had accurately predicted this encounter, Yanderman called back. "Jervis Yanderman of Esberg and—uh—Conrad Lagwich! I hope we did right to kill this *thing* you drove towards us!"

Conrad gave him a respectful glance. He had barely managed to follow the old man's pronunciation, let alone make sense of the words he used. He whispered, "*What* did he say they were?"

Surprised, Yanderman glanced at him. "Don't you—? Oh, of course not. That was something I dug out of you in trance, which you don't remember consciously. I'll explain later."

"Come forward and be welcome!" the old

man shouted. "It's a long time since we saw anyone from the outside world!"

"How long?" Yanderman asked. There was a pause for consultation. When the answer came, Conrad could hardly believe it.

"About four hundred and sixty years, we think!"

Now some of the old man's more venturesome companions were cautiously closing on the collapsed monster. A last tentacle twitched, and a young man with an axe dived to the ground to avoid it, while one of his companions, wielding a single-edged sword, slashed it in two. The severed part seemed to have a life of its own, and writhed for minutes, making Conrad's scalp crawl.

He tried to concentrate on the people instead. They were all, without exception, short and wiry and most of them were heavily tanned. Their clothing was various; some of them wore jerseys and pants of dark but clean-looking material, while others wore only a kind of kilt supplemented with belts and other body-harness. They were staring at him with just as much curiosity as he was exhibiting, but not at all

uncivily. It was as though they had been waiting personally for this moment ... waiting four hundred and sixty years.

With gravity, the old man bowed to Yanderman and then put out his hand. “Do you —do you have any news of my son?” he said after a pause.

“Your son?” Yanderman said slowly. He looked around the silent group of isolates. “Was it your son who set out to cross the barrenland and reach the outside world? About twelve years ago?”

“Yes.”

“Then I am afraid he is dead. The journey was too much for him. But it was because we found his remains that we set out in search of you.” Yanderman phrased the half-truth instantly.

The old man winced and put his hand on the arm of the girl beside him for support. He said, “So! Still, if his death served to bring you here, that’s a reward.” He coughed, a dust-dry noise. “Well, no matter now. I myself am Maxall— Chief Engineer, I suppose one would say if one kept up the ancient forms. Ah ... Keefe, crew

boss Maintenance,” he went on, indicating the one-eyed man who had helped him out from the vicinity of the dome. “Egrin, crew boss Hydroponics—oh, and my granddaughter Nestamay here.”

The girl at his side shook back her long hair and smiled, and Conrad felt suddenly faint.

He had seen that face before. He had copied that face, struggling to make it more like Idris’s, as he carved his fine white block of soap the day of Yanderman’s arrival in Lagwich, the day his life was turned topsy-turvy for good and all.

But he had no chance to utter the words that boiled up in his mind. Nestamay was looking at him with frank physical interest, and he realised abruptly that among these lean, almost starved-looking people he was as much taller than the average as Duke Paul’s troops had been in Lagwich. Moreover, the days when he had been Idle Conrad, the dirty soap-maker, were past. Now he was Conrad the explorer of the barrenland, Conrad the gifted visionary who could remember the secrets of the past, Conrad the killer of monsters!

Well ... *a* monster, anyway. Nobody could

question this second one.

The girl was smiling broadly now, and there was no doubt what was pleasing to her. Conrad smiled back, hoping the expression wouldn't spread into an idiot grin. He cut it short and tried to look purposeful instead, as Yanderman did.

"Maxall," Keefe was saying, "we can't stand out here till sunset, you know. There's business to attend to—a little matter of an alarm which should have gone off and didn't."

"Yes!" Nestamay took her eyes off Conrad for the first time in some while and turned to her grandfather. "Now you don't need to swallow Jasper's dreadful behaviour any longer!"

The old man sighed and nodded. He spoke to Yanderman in terms of courtly apology.

"It's quite true. We must see why the alarm which usually warns us of the advent of a dangerous *thing* failed to operate this time. You must be tired and hungry after your magnificent journey, and as soon as we've settled this urgent question we'll place ourselves at your disposal. If you'll come with us ...?"

The curious but largely silent group fell in behind the old man and Yanderman, and made

their way towards the dome. Nestamay stepped to Conrad's side.

"Hello!" she said.

"Ah—er—hello!" Conrad echoed. "Ah—er—ah—oh yes! It was—uh—your father, wasn't it, who tried to contact the outside world? He must have been a brave man."

Not a good choice of subject. The girl's face clouded. She said after a pause, "Not brave. Desperate. You two are the brave ones. You weren't driven to it, were you?" She paused. "It must have been a terrible journey."

"No, it wasn't as bad as we thought," Conrad said, wishing he could convey that he wasn't being modest, only speaking the plain truth. "We had a compass, you see, which perhaps your father didn't have, and Yanderman made a map of all the streams and rivers so we didn't have to carry our own water all the time. Eight hours was the longest we had to spend away from water."

"A map?" Nestamay sounded astonished. "Where did you get a map?"

"Yanderman drew it up."

"But from what?" she persisted.

“Well—” Conrad was about to explain, when he realised the party had halted facing the dome. He heard Yanderman.

“You mean the *thing* just tore clear through the dome to the outside?” he was demanding, his eyes on the enormous gash it had left. Conrad glossed the words: why, this must be the place where the *things* originated, as Yanderman had suspected! And yet here were all these people ...

“Ohhhh!” Nestamay’s fingers were suddenly tight on his arm; with the other hand she was pointing into the darkness under the dome.

Something moved there—another monster? No, a human shape. A human shape beginning to scream as it emerged into the open. There was a wave of shock and terror tangible about them.

“Jasper!” she whispered. “It is—it *is!*”

How she recognised him, Conrad could not tell. For his head and shoulders were completely covered with a glistening black jelly-like mass, at which his hands clawed hopelessly while his voice grew weak with shrieking.

For a long second nothing moved except the condemned Jasper. Then Grandfather Maxall stirred and spoke.

“Kill him,” he said in a voice like death itself.

“No! No!” A woman came running from the fringe of the group, clawing at the old man with crazed violence. “No, you can’t kill my son!”

“If you would rather watch him die as the seeds grow on his body,” the old man said, and let the rest hang in the air. The woman paid no attention, but clung to him and cried for mercy.

There was no mercy. There could be none. Again, Maxall gave the order, and this time a white-faced Keefe obeyed it. He took a javelin from a bystander, aimed carefully, and threw. It sank into the black jelly about where the boy’s throat must be. Black-smearing hands reached up to it, failed in the attempt, and fell back as the life leaked out of his body.

“Burn the corpse!” Keefe said harshly, and two young men moved to pick up a heatbeam projector. Jasper’s mother had released Maxall by now, and was kneeling with her face to the dust, yelling curses.

“What—what happened?” Conrad whispered to Nestamay. In a cold voice she answered.

“Because of something I did—or wouldn’t

do—he tried to take his revenge by turning off the alarm which warns us of a *thing* hatching. It was meant to scare me during my night’s watch. Only a *thing* came through before he expected. While all the rest of us were out chasing it away and meeting you, he must have come back to try and cover up what he’d done—re-connect the alarm, I imagine. But in his haste, he ...”

“He what?” Conrad prompted from a dry throat.

“The black stuff,” Nestamay said. “It’s the seed-mass of one of those plants there. We have a working party out every day to cut back or burn off such seed-masses on the outside where we can get at them and they might get at us. But inside the dome there are huge areas where we can’t venture in, and the seed masses grow there, too. That’s why we can’t get rid of the vegetation permanently. And you see they—well, in some fashion they’re sensitive to movement near them. They burst over *things* that go too close. I’ve seen it happen to *things*. I never saw it happen to a person before, and I hope I never see it again!”

She gave a fierce shudder. “They say it

doesn't kill you," she finished. "You just die, and it takes a long, long time."

Conrad swallowed hard. By now the searing heatbeam had reduced the miserable corpse of Jasper to a blackened smear and calcined bones, and Maxall was turning to Yanderman again. He was standing noticeably straighter, as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"One of the dangers of our existence," he said. "Though nothing compared to what you've faced to come to us. I'll send my assistant Keefe to make certain the alarm is functioning, and perhaps we can enjoy a short rest after the day's turmoil."

Yanderman spoke only with an effort. He said, "We faced dangers, as you put it, for a matter of days to get to you. If you've had to endure this kind of thing for four and a half centuries, all I can say is that my friend and I had the better bargain!"

XX

Hoping that nobody was paying attention to him, and sure at least that Nestamay wasn't, because her grandfather had sent her to fetch another jug of the curious fruit-flavoured concoction these people had instead of beer, Conrad leaned back in the corner of the Maxall hovel. It wasn't much of a building compared with the solid stone-and-timber work of Lagwich, but it had one thing in its favour, which it had taken him a long time to track down. The air was cleaner than in a Lagwich house. Partly it was due to the absence of cooking smells, but mostly, he thought, it was because the people had fresh clothing two or three times a week.

He'd been given a suit of the same kind, and found it very comfortable. But he didn't pretend to follow the explanation he'd been given about the source of the garments, any more than he

was pretending now to follow the conversation between Yanderman, Maxall, Keefe and Egrin.

It seemed the local people would never run out of questions—how big *is* the barrenland, how long did it take you to get across, where is Lagwich and how big, where is Esberg and how big, are there any other barrenlands, how many people are there in the world ...? It was about there that Conrad had decided to lean back and shut his eyes. He drowsed.

“More to drink, Conrad?”

He snapped back to awareness. Nestamay was offering him the jug, and in bending forward also a remarkable view of her young bosom. Remembering he was an explorer, Conrad viewed. A few seconds later, however, the sound of his name spoken by Yanderman made him turn guiltily and say, “Ah—yes?”

But Yanderman wasn't addressing him. He was explaining the way they had compiled the map to spare themselves the need to carry water, and Grandfather Maxall was shaking his head apparently at the fact that his son had overlooked this possibility.

Did that imply that somebody here had the

same gift as himself? Conrad leaned forward and paid attention. The answer was no, but there were salvaged scraps of drawings and diagrams from which at least some information about water could have been extracted, although in every other respect they had been rendered obsolete by the creation of the barrenland.

“You had access to similar maps?” Maxall suggested.

Yanderman shook his head and explained about Conrad’s gift, and there were wondering comments all round. Keefe was the most eager to learn more on this subject, and asked Yanderman directly for a demonstration of trance.

“I think my friend is rather tired,” Yanderman countered, and earned Conrad’s lasting gratitude for his understanding.

“I’m so sorry!” Grandfather Maxall said. “Why, here we’ve been plying you with endless questions, and you’re exhausted! We can show you to beds for the night at once if you wish.”

Conrad felt a stir of hope. But Yanderman wasn’t satisfied. He said, “I’d rather ask you a few questions first, if you don’t mind. You realise, much of what we’ve learned from

visions experienced by Conrad here, and by Granny Jassy and others at Esberg, was completely irrelevant, and since we had no idea what might be significant we've never made much sense out of it. To start with: what *is* the barrenland?"

"A quarantine area," Maxall answered promptly. "The term is traditional, though we often call it the bare ground."

"What was it for?"

"It was meant to isolate the Station from the rest of the world."

"How was it—? No, that's irrelevant at the moment." Yanderman rubbed his chin; he had sprouted a fair beard since he last saw a razor, and it was irritating him. "All right: what's this place—the Station, as you call it?"

"A ..." Grandfather Maxall hesitated. "Again, I have to use a traditional name. You see, a lot of things we know, we don't understand. We have the same problem as you—sorting out the useful from the useless information, and I imagine a lot of information which was once useful has been forgotten because the situation altered. So I think I can

best define the Station by reading a passage of the traditional lore to you. Nestamay, give me the locked case!”

The girl hurried to fetch it. Sorting through the various charts and drawings in it, Grandfather Maxall came eventually to a piece of paper yellowed and fragile with age. He peered shortsightedly at it.

“If I stumble in my reading, it’s because I haven’t studied this passage for a long time,” he excused himself. “I meant to go over it with Nestamay, but somehow ... Well, here it is. It begins with a broken sentence, by the way. See if you can make sense of it with your extra data.”

He cleared his throat. “... result of many years of research and development on many different planets.’ That’s the broken sentence. It goes on.

““Its capacity is being continually expanded. Indeed, it will continue to expand to match the growing volume of interstellar traffic for the foreseeable future. No other information-processing system would be capable of coping. Only the organochemic cortex has saved interstellar traffic from being overwhelmed by

its own complexity. It is predicted that in a century's time organochemic cortexes will be handling fifty times the present traffic safely and without error.

““The organochemic cortex combines the reliability of inorganic cortexes with the flexibility and self-programming ability of the human brain. Terminal Station ‘A’ is the first, but it will not for long be the only, interstellar transit station to be completely supervised by an organochemic cortex.’ ”

He put the paper aside, looking hopefully at Yanderman. “Have you learned anything from these memories of the past which will help you to clarify that?”

Yanderman shook his head. “All I gathered was that, first, this place was a transit station, right? In other words, you could really walk to other worlds from here, something which I’d dismissed as absurd. And second, the organochemic cortex—whatever that might be—was very important.”

“It’s not absurd, this walking to other worlds story,” Keefe put in. “After all, that mechanism is one of the ones still functioning.”

Both Conrad and Yanderman looked at him in bewilderment.

“So you finally decided to agree with me!” Grandfather Maxall roared, slapping his knee. Keefe looked uncomfortable, and explained to the puzzled newcomers.

“We say, out of habit, that the things ‘hatch’ in the Station. Maxall has always said that wasn’t right—they must come from somewhere else, where they have others of their own kind to breed with. That much figures. And things like the ovens, the power accumulators, the clothing-dispensers—they certainly have gone on working all this time without much help from us.”

“What’s more, though we don’t know what the organochemic cortex is, exactly,” Maxall put in, “we know where it is. You saw that dense mass of dangerous vegetation which fills up a great deal of the dome? Of course you did. And you probably wondered why we don’t just go in with heatbeams and burn it out. Well, the reason is that according to tradition the cortex is located somewhere under the plants, and without it we’d freeze, starve and go naked because it too is still

working and maintaining the services which support us.”

He gulped down his drink and held out his mug for more. Nestamay hesitated before pouring for him. She said, “Grandfather— doesn’t this mean that we can change that?”

“How so?” Maxall blinked at her.

“Why, if it’s been proved possible to cross the barrenland, can’t we stop worrying about the risk of putting the Station out of action? Can’t we make plans to evacuate to the outside world and then try and burn our way into the dome and —?”

She let the last words trail away.

“That’s not what we’re here for!” the old man snapped. “We are here to maintain and *repair* the Station! In other words, it’s not up to us to wreck it just to prevent a few more lousy *things* breaking through and terrorising us! And now we’re in contact with the outside again, we have grounds for hope.”

Cheeks crimson, Nestamay muttered something about fetching more drink, and slipped out of the hovel again. Conrad stared after her musingly.

“Hmmm ...” Yanderman said at length.
“Now you said the barrenland was a quarantine area. What against?”

“I’ll have to refer to something else I don’t properly understand,” Maxall said. He sorted through his case of documents again. “This is apparently an official decree. It’s headed ‘Bureau of Traffic’ and ‘Bureau of Public Health’, and it says: ‘As of the receipt of this notice Terminal Station A and routes serviced therefrom are to cease operation. Immediate Class One-Plus quarantine restrictions are placed on all stations subject to recent traffic from areas known to be foci of *encephalosis dureri*.’ Legend says this was a kind of contagious madness, by the way,” he added. On Yanderman’s curt nod—*yes, I know*—he resumed.

““Terminal Station A is declared subject to absolute quarantine exclusive only of repair and maintenance technicians, who must sign a voluntary release before entering the banned zone.””

“That clears up a lot of problems I had after listening to you, Conrad,” Yanderman said,

turning. Then: “Conrad!”

With a start, Conrad looked round. “I’m sorry! I was trying to work out ... Yanderman, please explain this. If my visions come from the distant past, how is it that I could have seen Nestamay in them? So clearly that when I tried carving a girl’s head out of soap the day you came to Lagwich, I made it look like her instead of like Idris, as I intended?”

“A family resemblance,” Yanderman said curtly, and went back to his discussion with Maxall.

XXI

Hours later, when he and Yanderman had been left to rest in the hovel—its usual occupants having insisted on moving to another—the superficial glibness of that explanation was still irritating Conrad. It refused stubbornly to let him yield to the sleep his exhaustion craved.

Giving up at last, he rolled on his side and looked in Yanderman's direction. It was far too dark to see him even in outline. A southing breeze turned momentarily to a stiff wind and rattled a few grains of sand on the hovel wall.

"Conrad?" Yanderman said. On receiving a grunted response, he went on, "How do you feel after our epic trip?"

"Not very different," Conrad admitted. "It turned out so much easier than I expected it all feels unreal. And the people here, too—so ordinary in so many ways. You'd expect them to make much more fuss after over four hundred

years in isolation.”

“I know.” Sounds suggested that Yanderman was rolling on his back to look upwards at the low ceiling. “I think there are two reasons why our arrival passed off so calmly. For one thing, there are no precedents. Your people at Lagwich, mine in Esberg— we’ve developed a set of habits for meeting strangers. A marrying expedition comes, and you put on your best clothes and bake celebration bread and clean house and so on; well, all that has just gone with the wind here. And the second reason, it seems to me, is that the pattern of life here is such a tightly-knit one there’s no slack. Some of the demands of the existence you and I know are taken off their shoulders by the ancient machines: they’d have no opening for a soapmaker, for instance, because they have a device which takes in soiled clothing and delivers fresh. And some of the food is automatically produced—I want to investigate that tomorrow. But even so, nine-tenths of their waking time is taken up in meeting the demands of their predicament. Every single day a twenty-man working party is occupied in keeping the vegetation under

control, Maxall says. Yesterday the discovery of an alien plant seeded from the hoof of a recently arrived *thing* meant that those people who should have had a day to rest up had to go out and scour the barrenland for any other specimens. That's how the plants we saw on the way got where they are, obviously. I'm amazed they haven't caved in under this pressure long ago, especially as they have no proper weapons!"

"No weapons?" Conrad echoed in astonishment. "But how about the things they used to burn Jaspers body—the heatbeams? Those looked like weapons to me!"

"Maxall says they weren't intended for such use. They were converted, a long time ago, from devices meant for welding or smelting metal. They've been indispensable, but they consume immense quantities of power which can only be replaced through solar batteries—collecting sunlight and storing it—and they burn out rapidly. Besides, they're cumbersome. You saw how awkward they are to handle."

"There's something else," Conrad said after a pause. "I mean another reason why they didn't go crazy with joy on seeing us. They're

frightened.”

There was a further pause, considerably longer. At last Yanderman said, “You’re no fool, Conrad. Have you any idea why?”

Encouraged, Conrad said musingly, “When I first realised I thought it must be the shock of what happened to Jasper. Nestamay explained why he had to be killed at once, and it sounded horrible. But then I thought maybe it was going on before that. As I understand it, they have this alarm which signals the arrival of a *thing*, and Jasper turned it off. If you’ve been used all your life to being warned of danger it must be pretty upsetting to know one time there was no warning.”

“Ye-es,” Yanderman agreed. “But I think it’s even deeper than that. They had no warning about us, did they? There was no alarm to signal our arrival.”

Conrad started. “Do they think *we’re* dangerous?”

“Try and put yourself in their position. All your life, and during the lifetime of your ancestors, existence at this place they call the Station has had a rigid form, an embracing

discipline. You've never seen a stranger apart from a newborn infant. Though your traditional lore talks matter-of-factly about transport to other worlds, you've never been out of sight of this monstrous dome here. There is only one random factor in your existence: *things* appear every now and then. Maxall says the incidence is about once in two to three days. It used to be higher, and smaller creatures as well as large ones came through, some of them in swarms which took a month or more to dispose of completely. According to him, one of his own ancestors put a stop to this, but at the cost of losing a great deal of the area under the dome to the creeping plants. It was the lesser of two evils. Several irreplaceable specialists, including men who really understood the traditional lore, had been killed within a single year. You were dozing when we discussed this, I believe."

Shamefacedly Conrad admitted that was possible. He said, "You mean they're frightened of us not because we threaten them but simply because our arrival upsets the—uh—the situation they've adjusted to?"

"Precisely. Add one more thing, too. Here

they've been isolated for centuries, charged with a specific task. As a result of losing those irreplaceable men I mentioned, and for various other reasons, they've been driven to the verge of admitting failure. They just don't know what they're doing any more! All their energy goes in keeping the problem under control. They never advance towards a solution of it. And now our intrusion shows them that all this time the world has been going on outside; things have changed incredibly. Maybe, by this time, their dedication isn't relevant any more. Maybe it will turn out that everything they've sweated and slaved for is useless."

"I thought they were being very polite to us," Conrad muttered. "It seemed like an effort."

Yanderman gave a dry, rustling laugh.

"But—" Conrad fumbled for the words. "But haven't they had anyone here who could do what I can do? I mean, have these visions of the past?"

"Apparently not. Maxall was explaining to me that the community is now reduced to a mere handful of heavily-inbred genetic lines. This boy who endangered everyone by turning off the alarm had only been spared punishment

previously because he represented the sole survivor of a particular line and the only possible mate for Maxall's granddaughter. Recessive imbecility has already appeared in the Maxall family; the old man was terrified that if Nestamay had children by anyone else this recessive would crop up in them. And a community like this can't afford to feed unproductive people."

"What's this got to do with—?"

"With your gift? Simply that it's a rarity, and probably due to some factor of inheritance. In this community, the genes endowing people with it aren't present in anybody's makeup."

"I see." Conrad hesitated. An idea had just struck him which seemed almost presumptuous, but he had to voice it anyway. "Yanderman, is it going to be possible to put my gift to use here? I mean—I mean ..." His voice trailed away.

"I don't know," Yanderman said. "That's what I've been banking on, naturally, ever since I heard those extracts from the ancient lore which Maxall read to us. There are clues in there which may lead us through the tangled maze of your visualised images to an eventual solution. It

would help tremendously if you could gain full waking access to your visions, but I doubt if you'll ever achieve it. I know Granny Jassy had been trying for nearly fifty years without succeeding."

"Why not?" That was indeed what Conrad had been thinking of; Yanderman's offhand dismissal of the chance was a blow.

"Hmmm ... You're asking a difficult question for this time of the night, boy! I'm not sure I understand it fully myself, but I'll do my best. You've got at your visions during most of your life by sitting and relaxing and then letting your attention settle on nothing in particular, right? A patch of sunlight on the ground, maybe, or a white pebble, or the tip of your forefinger—anything like that."

"Did I tell you that?"

"No." Yanderman chuckled. "I didn't even have to ask you. Am I right?"

Conrad shivered. "Y-yes. Absolutely right. Is that the way everyone manages it?"

"Most people do. It's autohypnosis. Instead of a crystal ball on a chain, I could use my fingertip to make you go into trance. The—No,

I'm wandering from the point. I was going to say that when you return from self-induced trance you have difficulty capturing the memories of your visions because so many of the things in them don't connect with ordinary life, right? If you tried to recount them afterwards, you probably had to leave out a great deal because you couldn't make sense of it."

"That's so," Conrad confirmed.

"Which probably suggested that you'd had a mere dream. In dreams, logic doesn't operate, and they're just as hard to explain afterwards. Now imagine me questioning you during trance. I can't see or hear what you're experiencing. I have to put broad general questions, and you describe what you can. But what you're seeing may not refer to anything you or I ever saw in waking life. For all I know, indeed, you may have had a vision already in which you saw this Station when it was in full operation—Granny Jassy might have had one, or anybody! But because it connected with what I've always until now believed to be sheer superstition, the tale of walking to other worlds, I'd have avoided putting the right questions to you. Can you

follow me, or am I so tired I'm muddling you?"

"I think I'm following all right. But this reminds me of what I meant to say at the beginning. This girl Nestamay—"

"Who is very interested in you, I notice."

"If she hadn't anyone else to choose except the one who got himself killed it's hardly surprising!" Conrad snapped. "Let me finish!"

"I'm sorry," Yanderman murmured.

"I've seen her in a vision. I tried to tell you earlier, but you said it was a family resemblance. It isn't! The more I think about it, the more I'm sure. And I tell you something else I've remembered." Conrad half-sat up and turned on one elbow, staring fiercely into the darkness.

"It must be ten years or more since I bothered with a vision of the barrenland for any length of time. Did I tell you I had visions of the barrenland as well as of the area before it was barren?"

"No, but I'm not surprised. Go on." Yanderman sounded interested.

Conrad took a deep breath. "Well, I'd almost forgotten that I didn't always prefer to concentrate on the visions of the distant past. I

suppose it must have been after I got interested in girls that I settled for that. There are always lots of people in the—uh—the pre-barrenland visions.

“But I did sometimes have visions of the barrenland just being the way it is, with a few people in it here and there. I think I might have got caught up with these after Nestamay’s father came to Lagwich and was taken for a devil. I’d had all the kid’s grandiose dreams of becoming a famous *thing*-killer like Waygan the hornman, the father of the present one. It was probably with the idea of killing devils instead of *things* that I thought about the barrenland at all. I kept at it on and off for a year or two, and then lost interest.

“It wasn’t till I realised Nestamay reminded me of something that the memory came back. I didn’t recognise her at once for two reasons, I guess: first, I was trying to recall a person, and in fact it was my soap-carving I was thinking of, and second, she’s changed.”

“Family resemblance is still more likely.”

“No! She’s changed. As though—oh, like growing up. In fact, that’s precisely it! My soap-

carving looked like Nestamay as she would have been when she was a little girl, in spite of my trying to make it look like Idris nowadays. What's more —" He checked with a strangled sound, and then resumed in a near-shout of frantic excitement.

"I've got it! That was why I stopped bothering about visions of the barrenland! It was because in them I saw ordinary people instead of the fearsome devils I was after, to kill! I didn't care about little girls and folk who looked like just anybody!"

He dropped his voice again to an awe-hushed whisper, and finished, "Yanderman, I feel I'm beginning to remember all sorts of crazy things!"

"A sensation that you've been here before? That you've seen this place already?"

"Exactly!" Conrad was almost bouncing with excitement.

"It's an illusion," Yanderman said, the words almost stifled by a healthy yawn. "It's very common. It generally passes off in an hour or two at longest."

"But—!"

“Conrad, life begins here very early in the morning,” Yanderman interrupted. “I think we ought to go to sleep, or when they show us over the Station in the morning we won’t understand anything we see.”

“It’s *not* an illusion,” muttered Conrad obstinately. But Yanderman didn’t answer, except by rolling over noisily on his make-shift bed and yawning again even louder.

XXII

Twelve hours later Conrad sat moodily in the hot sun, a piece of unsalvaged scrap of indeterminate purpose serving as a stool, and tossed pebbles from hand to hand.

It wasn't that he had meant to be rude to Nestamay, he explained furiously to himself. It was just—

Well, over there, for example: Yanderman talking intently to Maxall, being fluent and knowledgeable about things of which he had no direct experience, making a tremendous impression on the old man as he had already done on Keefe, Egrin and all the others. It wasn't *fair*. The clues and hints he was drawing on were taken from him, Conrad, the one with the gift of seeing into the past—and Conrad himself couldn't make use of them.

Yanderman's explanation of why not was very convincing. It was perfectly true that his

visions had always had a dreamlike quality which rendered them difficult to recapture. But being right on that score didn't make him right on everything!

With a rebellious expression Conrad flung his pebbles into a patch of dust.

Why should his feeling of having seen all this before be a mere illusion? Yanderman was willing enough to accept that his visions of the barrenland before it was barren corresponded to a past reality; wasn't there room in a span of four and a half centuries for a whole lot of true visions? The more he thought about it, the more Conrad came to the conclusion that he really had visualised parts of this area around the so-called Station in the brief period following the arrival of the "devil" — Nestamay's father — at Lagwich. He hadn't been interested in things like that for long. Other visions, those in which he dreamed of a prosperous and fertile landscape populated by marvellous people with astonishing powers, offered a more attractive contrast to the boredom and depression of reality.

The haunting, disquieting sensation of almost remembering had come and gone during

the whole of this morning. Every now and again it had become acute—when Maxall was showing them the device which maintained their clothing, for example, and again when he showed off the solar power accumulators and the heatbeams which had drained them yesterday.

It was terrifying, Conrad reflected in passing, how narrow a margin these people had between survival and extinction. A single *thing* as big and dangerous as yesterday's not only did extensive damage—a working party had been busy since dawn assessing the result of its blind passage to the outside from its point of emergence in the dome—but also wasted their stored power so that everything depending on it failed. Today was bright and sunny, so the recharging would proceed quickly. But on an overcast day it would be fearful, having to wait and watch the power supplies creep back to a useful level, knowing that at any moment the alarm might signal a vicious monster and the heatbeams were temporarily out of service—

Wait a second.

Conrad turned and stared towards the broken whaleback of the gigantic dome. He didn't know

much about the storage or use of this hard-to-conceive energy; in Lagwich, things like cornmills and looms were driven by inefficient single-cylinder steam-engines, but that was about the most advanced machinery he had ever come in direct contact with. Nonetheless, out of the mist of half-memory which this place evoked in his mind a few vague concepts were beginning to emerge.

It seemed logical that if everything else which still operated here at the Station, like the clothing machine, the ovens, and the heatbeams, required a supply of power, then the mysterious, capricious entity supposed to be screened by the dome and the impenetrable jungle of alien vegetation would require power also. Where was it coming from? Presumably, from the same source—the solar accumulators. The ... the production ... no, the transport of *things* from their own worlds (Conrad was struggling now) must involve effort of some sort. Was this a fact he had recalled from a scene in one of his visions, or a simple exercise in deduction? He couldn't decide, but there was a feeling of rightness about the idea.

He glanced round, half-intending to go at once to Yanderman and put the suggestion to him. But Yanderman and Maxall, lost in discussion, were strolling away from him and around the curve of the dome.

Conrad hesitated. Then he made up his mind. Until last night's conversation with Yanderman he had been half-afraid of the offhand manner in which the older man could put him in touch, as it were, with his incomprehensible visions. He had assumed there was something almost magical about the crystal ball Yanderman employed. But if it was true that the tip of a finger would have served equally well, and if it was also true that sitting relaxed and staring fixedly at a mere pebble on the ground was a path into trance, why should he not attempt it himself? Not this time as a simple escape from boredom and misery, but with a deliberate purpose: to recapture the elusive visions now plaguing him with the sensation of having been here before.

Conrad took a deep breath. He shifted his position on his uncomfortable perch and looked along the vast curve of the dome, trying to get

straight in his mind what aspects seemed most familiar. He had only one incontestable point of recollection so far: the resemblance between Nestamay and his little carving. Was there anything else which struck him?

The dome itself? He couldn't be sure. And its most remarkable single feature—the tangle of unhealthy-looking vegetation spreading over the nearby ground and swarming up through gashes in the roof—had been so imprinted on his mind yesterday when the pitiable Jasper had emerged from it as a condemned victim that there was little point in trying to separate direct experience from apparent memory.

Beyond that screen of leaves and stems, though, there was this half-godlike, half-demonic master of the Station's fate: the organochemic cortex. What must it be like? Something which thought, presumably, after a fashion of its own. In his commonest visions he had encountered machines endowed not only with mobility but even with the ability to make decisions, designed to save their masters the trouble of attending to repetitive tasks varying only in minor detail. Conrad had no idea how such a machine could

be arranged, yet it was comparatively easy to accept the concept if one had already agreed that it was possible to walk to other worlds. And even the knowledgeable Yanderman had been forced to give in on that score.

So—the heart of the problem. Conrad stared with aching eyes at the masking foliage, hardly seeing that members of the daily working party were approaching from the southern side, spotting the deadly blackish forms of the plants' seed-masses and either reaching up with long poles to smash them or trying to burn them with the feeble power available to the heatbeams.

The thinking machine hidden in there ... what must it be *like*? Anything like an ordinary human brain? Why not? Consider the long poles with which that working party was destroying the seed-masses. You want to reach something further away than you can grasp it, so you pick up a stick; your arm is a little like a stick, long and straight, so what you're doing is making your arm longer. You want to go somewhere faster than you can walk; you get on a horse,

which has four legs to your two and is stronger into the bargain. You start by looking for something which already does the same job, but more efficiently. If it comes to the job of thinking, why not start with the human brain as a pattern? Nothing else would be handy which was better at the job ...

Conrad gasped. For one ultimately shocking instant he had had the impression that he was no longer here, sitting on a chunk of scrap and staring at the dome, but in the dome and aware of looking at Conrad, and at Yanderman, and at Maxall, and at Nestamay and Keefe and Egrin and everybody and at the same time aware of what he was seeing and what Yanderman was seeing and Maxall and Nestamay and Keefe and Egrin and not only that but aware of things in the dome and *beyond* the dome not in any ordinary direction but as though the interior of the dome had become the mouth of an infinity of tunnels —help me!— reaching to an infinity of hells —*help me!*— through which a lost soul wandered —HELP ME!

HELP ME!

HELP ME!

HELP ME!

The moment wasn't over. The moment was as infinite as that countless cluster of tunnels-through-nowhere, stretching forward and dominating his thinking as though a mould had been placed on his mind and squeezed tight for an infinitesimal quantum of time, leaving him helplessly altered. Subjectively it was like being tossed leafwise on a torrential river, battered by waves of concepts and impressions and deafened by a shriek saying HELP ME! HELP ME! HELP ME!

Conrad moaned and clutched his temples, crazily fearing the blasting of the mental imagery now overwhelming him might smash physically out through the thin bones of his skull, smearing him black to his shoulders as Jasper had been smeared, condemning him to death in torment or death in the next second. The moan welled up and took the form of the inaudible scream echoing around his head. He was on his feet, swaying, and his throat was raw as he gave words to the mental message.

“Help me! Help me! *He-e-elp me!*”

But before the startled members of the

nearby working party could reach him, he had fallen headlong—not into unconsciousness, but into a kind of hall of mirrors of delusion, in which the mirrors were whole human personalities, myriad in number, between which the blinding images reflected, reflected, reflected, and at eternally long last began to seem familiar, recognisable, interpretable into words.

His eyes snapped open. He was lying on the rough bed where he had spent last night. Above him a curiously misshapen and discoloured form with pinkish bars crossing it—a hand holding a cloth. Nestamay’s hand holding a wet cloth with which she had been wiping his fever-hot face. She saw him come to himself and bit her lower lip in a seeming frenzy of worry.

“He’s awake,” she said after a pause.

The room swirled. Conrad found himself sitting up, not having formulated the intention, and was looking past the girl at her grandfather and Yanderman, who had been studying more of the old man’s treasured documents and now

turned like two sections of a single unit to look and frame questions. There was no time for questions. There was only urgent actions.

“Conrad! Are you—?” Yanderman began.

“Listen!” Conrad exclaimed. “I have it now, but we’ve got to be quick.” He was scrambling up from the bed, twisting into a kneeling position facing them. “Do you hear me? I know what’s wrong and I know what has to be done! Maxall, you have to cut the power off—I mean ... Well, stop it getting to the cortex but not completely, just hold it down to a sort of trickle and—”

He stopped, aware that he wasn’t making sense to his listeners. A bead of sweat ran down his face like an insect.

“Get a grip on yourself, Conrad,” Yanderman advised, moving close in an effort at reassurance. “You’ve had some kind of a shock, and—”

“I know, I know!” Conrad clutched at his arm. “it’s because I’ve seen what’s got to be done! You were wrong about the visions people like me get—they’re not memories, they’re *messages*, and I’ve had a message that tells me

what to do! We've got to *cut back* the power to the cortex."

"But this is impossible!" Maxall snapped. "We depend on it—it runs everything. If we cut off its power we starve, we freeze, we're done for."

"But We've got to cut back the power. Not shut it off, just keep it low. Ohhh!" Conrad's frantic words dissolved in a moan of desperation. "Look, is a madman crazy when he's asleep?"

"What?" Yanderman jerked his head.

"Is a madman crazy when he's asleep? I don't think so. And he's not dead, either, so it's not killing him to make him sleep." Conrad stared up at the low ceiling. "I almost have it all, you see, but I'm still—still arranging it. I think there's a way of ensuring that only a trickle of power gets to the cortex, enough to keep the automatic things going like the heating and foodmaking, but not enough to—Oh, no *wonder* you don't understand." He slapped his thigh. "The most important thing is what I haven't said.

"Look, this—this thinking machine inside the dome. It's laid out like a human brain. There's a level which attends to routine matters,

comparable to breathing, and this never stops or goes wrong and uses only a little power. But there's another level, responsible for big decisions, which uses all the power it can get and when the power is low is—is unconscious.

“And on this level the cortex has been hopelessly insane, with brief lucid intervals, for four hundred and sixty years, ever since it was infected with the disease against which the barrenland was created ...”

XXIII

There was a stunned silence. Maxall broke it, shifting his weight with a scuffling sound as he spoke.

“How do you know? I mean—how do you *think* you know?”

Conrad felt an overwhelming wave of relief. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall of the hovel.

“I’ll try and tell you, but it’s got to be quick, because there isn’t much time. It’s sunny today and the stored power is building up rapidly. My head’s full of pictures which I scarcely understand, all jammed in together in a single instant ...” He pressed his fingers hard against his forehead. In a slow, effortful voice, with many hesitations, repetitions and gropings for words, he pieced out the explanation which had come to him.

First: the nature of his visions, and Granny

Jassy's, and all others similar. They were not extraphysical recollections of the past. They were received messages, or signals.

And the burden of the message was simple:
Help me!

In a time when the world was covered with cities of up to tens of millions of people, and not this world only but others, circling other stars, there had come a point at which the sheer numbers wishing to walk to other worlds—restless, bored with their long lives, hungry for the sights, sounds, sensations of alien environments—threatened to outstrip the capacity of the equipment handling the incredible traffic. The means used, in itself, was so complex it had always had to be managed at second-hand—not by individual persons, but by massive thinking machines. And the machines were inadequate.

Hence the development of the organochemic cortex: to all intents, a manufactured brain, with a personality, the gift of consciousness, all the discrimination of a human genius combined with

the tireless reliability of an insensitive machine.

Such a cortex was installed at Terminal Station A, the largest centre for interstellar transport on the planet. From the three-mile dome arching above the Station it was possible to walk to any of a thousand distant worlds.

And back.

And from one such distant world somebody returned bearing in the cerebrospinal fluid of his body the virus of a disease named in the traditional lore of the Station as *encephalosis dureri*, which incubated and brought insanity.

No plague had ever before been transmitted on the scale of this one. Within days of the first outbreak it was on a hundred different worlds; within weeks, it had reached every planet known to mankind. As though one had emptied a bucket of sand into a precisely-tuned engine, the sophisticated complex of interstellar society ground to a halt.

Stripped of their sanity, people died—in accidents, in fires, by famine or explosion or a myriad other disasters. In the midst of primal chaos, the very few who were naturally immune stood as long as possible against the searing blast

of the collapse, until they too were overwhelmed.

The ancestors of those now living at the centre of the barrenland had been a group of such natural immunes, sent to try and repair this largest of all interstellar transit points.

They started work under the impression that what had gone wrong was the simple consequence of a madman's interference—some diseased mind among the Station's human staff, they believed, had altered control settings or distorted the instructions given to the organochemic cortex. At that time, the cortex operated everything in the Station area: not just the actual process of transportation, but every service provided for the convenience of travellers.

The cortex knew better, and could not explain.

There was something so completely human about the despair Conrad had sensed that it had overcome him; it was as if he himself had been in the tormenting plight which the manufactured organochemic brain had endured uncounted times since the onset of the contagious madness.

Which was to know that it was going insane, and to be able to do nothing about it.

The cortex was powered by the same source as the rest of the Station—the original emergency power supply, switched on to keep the cortex functioning after the disaster. When the stored power was low, as for instance after expenditure on the use of heatbeams, the cortex was practically unconscious. As the power built up again, its level of activity rose to a kind of incipient awareness. In this condition, it was sufficiently conscious to realise that when the power reached maximum the sleeping layers of its personality would arouse—and be insane because in the nutrient fluid bathing the entire artificial organism the viruses were still multiplying.

They were not like ordinary viruses. In some manner they made false connections between brain cells; the energy available at a synapse was a sort of stimulus to them. As it were, they caused innumerable short circuits and hence random patterns of response.

The effect on the cortex was to bring into operation an overload device intended primarily

to limit the number of simultaneous traffic problems it was coping with. By that time it was no longer able to reason; it sought to expend energy and hurl itself into unconsciousness again for a period of recuperation.

And the way of expending energy which came most readily to the rescue was to initiate an interstellar transportation process.

From worlds once colonised by human beings, where now the native fauna roamed among ruins abandoned by disease-crazed savages, the insane artificial brain brought anything which blundered into a transportation terminal. It had just sufficient discrimination left, at this stage of its madness, to select for objects resembling its vanished human masters in mass —plus or minus a factor of about ten— and mobility.

The operation concluded, and signalled to the community of the Station here by an alarm which one of the immune technicians had rigged up after the very first such happening, the cortex relapsed into its torpid state.

And the cycle resumed, varying in length each time according to how much energy had

been used up through other channels like the electrofences and heatbeams, which in turn naturally depended on the ferocity or docility of the *thing* from an alien planet snatched at by the desperate cortex.

Vegetation, too, had come through in the form of seeds or suckers transported with the animals, and not long after the original disaster had spread to form a jungle-like screen around the site of the cortex, into which unprotected men dared not venture, and which they dared not destroy randomly for fear of wrecking the cortex as well.

When perhaps as much as two centuries had gone by in this vicious circle, the cortex began to recover a little. Self-adjusting, it was able to cope to a limited extent with the harm the virus caused. By that time, however, the people trapped at the centre of the barrenland had suffered the loss of so much information and so many irreplaceable personnel that the best they could do was hold the ground they had gained; they could not advance.

What to do? The cortex was no longer equipped to communicate verbally—it had once

been provided with vodors, but a massive monster had smashed the equipment as it stampeded from the arrival area.

Helpless, dumb, the cortex faced the recurrent cycle of insanity in full awareness, and the mere intensity of its longing for a return to the orderly past began to solve its problem.

This was where Conrad, even though he had experienced the actuality, began to lose his grip on the slippery concepts. It seemed, he thought, that there were—perhaps had always been—people slightly sensitive to the thoughts of others. At some time, somewhere, a person so gifted thought with longing of the happier past of which legends had survived, and responded to the neural currents—subliminally faint—generated by the organochemic cortex. Its maximum power consumption was on the machine level; its signals might be as strong as a radio's.

Relaxed, in an autohypnotic state, someone like Granny Jassy or Conrad could tap the very thought-stream of the cortex in its lucid moments. Pictures of the past mingled with pictures of the present, but the present was

hateful and discoloured by frustration, whereas the cortex was yearning for the past, and so little attention was paid to the available knowledge that people survived in the barrenland. Conrad had opened his mind to impressions of that sort only because he was thinking of growing up to kill devils like the one which had come to Lagwich, and had glimpsed Nestamay's likeness and later dredged it from his subconscious; however, like most people, he abandoned pursuit of barrenland images and preferred to seek visions of the distant past.

But today, within a shorter distance of the point of origin of the signals than anyone else with his gift had ever reached, he had happened to turn his maximum concentration on the idea of the organochemic cortex at precisely the moment when it realised the mounting power level made its return to insanity imminent.

As though a bolt of lightning had flashed between his mind and the artificial brain, the truth had stormed in and taken possession of him.

He stopped talking. There was much more that he hadn't said, but his sense of urgency was growing. He looked at his hearers. Nestamay, withdrawn into a corner, was staring at him with round-eyed wonder. Yanderman, his forehead etched with a deep frown, was biting the back of his knuckles and wrestling with the facts Conrad had offered. Maxall had his head forward and his fingers buried in the thick hair at the back of his scalp.

"It makes a kind of sense," Yanderman ventured at last. He glanced at Maxall.

"But why *him*?" the old man groaned. "He was never here before! I know you told me he was right about water in the desert and helped you to find your way here—" He checked, raising his head.

"Now explain that!" he challenged. "You've said that these visions of yours are messages from the cortex here; well, how is it that the cortex happened to think about the location of water so conveniently for you? Hey?"

Sickly, Conrad realised the old man was looking for any excuse to avoid believing the story he'd heard. It was too great a blow to his

vanity to accept that a total stranger could cut through the fog of mystery which had baffled him a lifetime long, and his ancestors before him.

“It was a *total* awareness!” he exclaimed. “It’s not limited the way you and I are. It’s got usable senses still—it can see outside the dome, for instance. And not just that. If it sees you, it automatically pictures to itself what you can see from your point of view, and the same applies to all the other people around it. Similarly, when it remembers the past, it remembers in a way which is much fuller and more comprehensive than we can manage. It remembers everything simultaneously. After all, if it was designed to direct literally hundreds of processes at once—Oh, what’s the use? You’re not even trying to follow what I’m saying, are you?”

He put his head in his hands.

Unexpectedly, Nestamay moved in her corner. She said in a low voice, “Grandfather, you should be ashamed of yourself.”

“What?” the old man started and looked around.

“I said you should be ashamed!” The girl

gathered courage and her tone grew firmer. “You’ve taught me all you were able to, and you never managed to show me an explanation which all fitted together. Conrad’s does fit. It may not be right, but it’s got to be tried. You said yourself we were at the end of our resources here. If you were desperate enough to spare Jasper till he couldn’t be spared any longer, just to give us a chance of going on, then you can get desperate enough to do as Conrad tells you!”

She set her chin mutinously and met the old man’s gaze fair and square.

After a long moment, Maxall said, “But— but we don’t know how to cut back the power as he wants us to.”

“I do,” Conrad repeated. “The cortex has always known what had to be done. It just hasn’t any way of doing it by itself.”

XXIV

Rather sullen, some of them visibly scared, the people of the barrenland community stood around Conrad. In the forefront of the group were the thin, tired-faced men and childless women who had spent their adult lives on endless routine working parties, checking the spread of the vegetation, salvaging scrap, clearing up after the destructive passage of alien monsters. Behind were the mothers and children, gazing at him almost without expression.

For a dreadful moment it came home to Conrad that their lives depended on him. They hung on the thread of his supposed insight into the secret of the Station. He quailed, horrified at the possibility of having to answer to them for a failure.

But he caught at memory, rigid as an iron bar, and found something less than confidence but more than mere hope. He drew a deep breath

and glanced at Yanderman.

“Everything’s ready,” Yanderman confirmed. He hesitated, then drew closer to Conrad and added in a voice not meant to be overheard, “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“You seemed pretty confident I was right when you decided to cross the barrenland on the strength of what I could tell you.”

“So if you’re wrong I can take the blame. I see.” Yanderman’s cynical words were belied a moment later by a wry smile. He clapped Conrad on the shoulder and turned to pick up the awkward bulk of one of the heatbeam projectors. Keefe had instructed him in its use, with the warning that below a certain power level it would cease to operate altogether; this fitted with Conrad’s idea of a kind of idling condition of the organochemic cortex.

There was no longer any reason for delay. He squared his shoulders and walked towards the huge rent in the side of the dome left by the monster of yesterday afternoon. He would have liked to have his gun with him—it had dealt with that monster in a reassuringly efficient manner—

but the most important aid inside the gloomy dome was sure to be a handlight, and he would need his other hand free.

Already the twining stems of the alien plants were reaching out across the gap the *thing* had torn in their tangled masses. Cautiously Conrad turned the beam of his handlight upwards, in case there were any of the deadly black clusters of seeds nearby. He could see none, and the pseudo-leaves with their toothed edges which were everywhere on the ground had been crushed and ripped by the passing *thing*. It was safe to proceed.

The twilight of the dome interior closed around him. This was not one of the long-ago reclaimed areas, through which even young girls could safely pass at night on their way to keep watch in the office. The office was an improvisation, like the alarm Jasper had disconnected and then, at the cost of his life, wired up again. Presumably the repair team had been already unable to get to the cortex itself, and had needed a remote base of operations.

But Conrad had to go to the cortex, or at least to a point very close. It was a minor miracle

disguised as a disaster, the fact that yesterday's intruder had been so big and had cut such a clear swathe through the jungle.

He kept moving. Behind him, circumspectly, Yanderman and Keefe followed, and then others of the Station community, their voices hushed as though they were afraid of waking a lurking monster, but commenting continually on the nature of the plants now revealed to view.

A hundred yards from the exterior, Conrad paused and turned his handlight upwards. Among the screening tangle of creepers it was just possible to pick out a huge curved structural member which might formerly have supported a walkway.

"We'll have to get up there," he whispered, copying without meaning to the hushed tones of his companions. "Can someone burn a way through the plants?"

Yanderman came up beside him, swinging his heatbeam to the ready. Just before activating it, he paused to ask, "You're sure it won't do any harm?"

"The cortex is over there," Conrad said, pointing directly towards the centre of the dome.

“Don’t ask how I know.”

Reassured, Yanderman activated the beam. A few seconds sufficed to crisp the trailing fronds into ash, and a sickly stench drifted up. Through wisps of smoke Conrad’s handlight shone on a spiral stairway leading upward.

It rang under his boots as he climbed.

Then the way was along the distorted back of the curved girder he had seen from the ground. All around, strange forgotten machines peered from swathes of strong-scented foliage; huge fungi in rainbow colours posed proudly on the ruins of man’s labour. Twice something slithered away from the inquiring beam of light, and Conrad shivered and had to force himself not to think of any danger other than that of the mounting power level in the cortex.

Down next, to a once-level platform a hundred yards square, where the heatbeam had to be used to clear a path a second time. Here there were metal frames, rust-pitted, that might have been furniture—flat tables, skeletal chairs, overturned in the course of the centuries by the feeble pull of the omnipresent creepers.

“We’re getting near,” he whispered. “I can

feel it!”

“Then keep moving!” Yanderman rasped. “We can’t use the heatbeam indefinitely, you know!”

Conrad nodded and crossed the tilting floor of the platform to another winding stair at the other side. No, not a stair this time—a spiralling ramp which he half-expected to move as he stepped on it. But it would not have moved since the Station was switched to emergency power four and a half centuries ago.

The going was slippery with decaying vegetation now. Rather than exhaust the heatbeam here where there were no threatening seed-masses, Conrad called for hatchets and sticks to slash at the creepers. With agonising slowness they ascended the ramp.

“There,” he breathed when they reached the top, and flung out his arm.

Before them, discernible among the close-set creepers and fungi, was the upper surface of a huge once-shiny sphere, posed on a support which they could not see for leaves. In the beam of the handlight it still had a dull lustre, pitted now with centuries of corrosion. It was more

than a man's height in diameter. Once it had been protected by a curved glass superstructure, but the glass had fallen in shards long since and crunched under their feet as they approached.

"This?" Yanderman demanded.

Conrad gave a weary nod. "It's inside the metal ball. Now all we have to do is locate the power controls and adjust them. There's a switch, and it's not far away. Everybody hunt around here!" he added, raising his voice and gesturing largely. "A switch—a red switch on a white board somewhere nearby!"

The others looked blankly about them.

"How are we going to find it in this tangle?" Keefe demanded of Conrad. "I take it we can't burn the plants back without risking damage to the switch!"

"I'm afraid not," Conrad muttered. "But it's not far away, I'm sure of that." He raised his own hatchet and began to chop at obscuring creepers. Within minutes he had laid bare a strange man-tall device of convoluted crystal on a white stone base. But that wasn't what he wanted.

Someone else discovered an array of rusty

metal wheels in a circular frame which, on being touched, ground into movement for a few seconds and emitted a teeth-rasping hum. Again, a patch of creeper was cleared to reveal a human skeleton clutching an untarnished bar of metal with a knob at the end.

“Is that a tool of some sort?” Yanderman speculated, and drew Conrad’s attention.

It could be! Conrad called everyone together in the vicinity of the skeleton, and set to work with redoubled urgency.

When long minutes had passed without result, it occurred to Conrad that the man might have run, in the grip of madness, far from where he had been working. In sudden anger at his own stupidity he stepped back and hurled his hatchet to the floor.

There was a hollow boom.

Conrad stood for an instant like a statue. Then he was on hands and knees levering at the metal plates under him. His fingertips located a small depression in one of the plates, and Yanderman, peering closely at it, asked for the tool found in the skeleton’s grasp. It fitted the depression exactly, and when twisted caused the

plate to rise on smooth counterweights ...
exposing a white board bearing a row of red
switches.

Almost crying with relief, Conrad wiped his
face; his skin was clammy with the sweat of
tension.

“All right,” Yanderman said. “Which of
these is the one?”

Conrad half-extended his arm, then drew it
back. Paling, his eyes riveted on the switches, he
whispered, “I—I don’t know. It could be any of
them!”

Keefe made a strangled noise. The others
exchanged glances of alarm.

“But we must find out!” Conrad exploded,
and reached for the first switch. He had pushed it
home before anyone could stop him.

There was a grinding sound. They looked
up. Huge metal panels were swinging down
towards them from the direction of the roof,
ringing as they struck aside thick branches of
creeper. A slow, tired-sounding voice spoke out
of nowhere.

“Emergency transit operation due. Remain
still.”

Convulsively Conrad forced the switch to its old position. The voice stopped. The metal panels hung like folded bats' wings in the gloom above. The air seemed to congeal with tension.

"Try the one at the opposite end," Yanderman muttered. Conrad complied.

At once there was another voice, equally tired. But this one said, "Emergency power reduction now in force. All travelways are now unpowered. All inessential services are withdrawn. No transits are possible until the system is fully restored."

There was a grinding sound, and afterwards silence.

"Did you hear that?" Conrad whispered, getting to his feet. "Did it say what I thought it said?"

Yanderman nodded, his face set in a mask of awe. "It said something about emergency power reduction, and no transits being possible."

"No transits!" Keefe echoed, almost shaking with excitement. "Does that mean no more monsters?"

"It must!" Conrad blurted.

And at that very instant the alarm which

gave them warning of the arrival of such a monster blared deafeningly.

Somebody screamed. At once there was a panicky rush from the platform. Only Conrad, Yanderman and Keefe stood their ground: Keefe from sheer astonishment, Yanderman in much the same predicament but lifting his heatbeam as though determined to face any monster that might appear, and Conrad because he could not believe he had been wrong.

One or two of the fleeing men paused to hurl curses at him. Then they were gone, and there was a fearful hush.

“A—a fault in the system?” Yanderman suggested from a leather-dry throat.

“There can’t be a fault! Or a mistake!” Conrad passed his hand over his face dizzily, his mind churning with crazy images of Nestamay and Idris, Yanderman and Maxall, Lagwich and the sterile desert of the barrenland.

“Where do the *things* appear, do you know?” Keefe barked. “We do at least have a heatbeam! We might be able to trap it!”

“There, somewhere.” Conrad pointed past the bulky sphere of the cortex. “We ought to be

able to see the—uh—the arrival area there.”

“I’ll make sure!” Yanderman snapped, and hoisted the heatbeam, resting it on the curious twisted crystal structure Conrad had found. A sweep with the beam, and another, cleft the masking creepers and laid bare a path downwards to a dim hollow space hundreds of feet on a side; like a needle hunting a splinter, the beam of Conrad’s handlight stabbed the opening into the gloom.

“Nothing,” he breathed after a minute’s silence. “The alarm must have been—”

“No, look there,” Yanderman whispered. “To the left. Isn’t something moving among the plants?”

Conrad’s heart hammered. Yes, plainly to be seen in the beam of the handlight there was movement. The leaves swayed wildly, as though a *thing* were about to emerge into view.

“Use the heatbeam!” Keefe begged. Yanderman nodded and pressed the activating switch.

And the beam died in the same instant as it began.

“No more power,” Yanderman said emptyly.

“*Now* what will they do? Without heatbeams, if it gets to the exterior of the dome ...” He let the words trail away, gazing accusingly at Conrad, who felt sick with horror and shame at what he had brought about.

So this was the inevitable fate of Conrad, visionary, brave explorer of the barrenland, best soapmaker in Lagwich, unraveller of the mystery of the Station ... He closed his eyes, his mind reeling as it had done under the impact of the signal from the organochemic cortex.

It wasn't for a long time that he realised his companions had begun to make noises. They were laughing—or weeping? Which? Or both together! Yes!

He snapped his eyes open and stared at them. They were embracing each other, making meaningless, hysterical sounds, waving, dancing up and down, trying to sing. Uncomprehending, Conrad turned from them to the slanting hole cut by the last flicker of the heatbeam into the heart of what he had taken to be the arrival area.

And there he saw the thing for which the alarm had sounded.

A man.

A man in strange shiny garments, his head covered with a crystal helmet, his gauntleted hands stretched out as though in acclamation of a miracle—reaching up towards him, Conrad, standing on the platform beside the looming shell of the cortex.

And shouting.

“Earth! Earth! We’ve got through! We reached Earth again!”

And not one man only, but another, and another, and another pouring from the concealment of the alien plants, to stand in a shouting group and laugh and cry and wave at the laughing, crying, waving Conrad and his companions on the platform above.

After four and a half centuries, he, Conrad, had unwittingly opened the way, and the isolated children of Earth had found it possible to return.

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