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THIS NIGHT NO MORE

Immeasurably huge, the alien ship rested suspended on hazy beams of violet light, while electronic rays scanned the bomb-ravaged terrain five miles below. A glow appeared at her stern, and she began to drift westward, maintaining the same altitude as her speed increased.

Inside the ship silvery screens showed the scene below. Hill and valley, river and forest, slipped by, broken with almost mathematical exactitude by giant depressions - brown, torn craters where nothing grew.

At the edge of one hollow rested tumbled debris which might have been the constructions of a civilised race. The ship sank lower, hovering above the mound. For a long time beams scanned the irregular heap.

Then the ship moved on. If artifact the mound had been, its builders were long since gone. Bushes hid the rubble; trees grew tall and strong over it, except on the crater rim, where they were twisted and short, with yellowing leaves.

The ship passed on and a narrow sea slid away behind. The earth below was wooded, the browns and greens of autumn marked only by the eternal craters, white here with thrown up limestone. The ship halted and signalling antennae upon her back began to radiate urgently towards the void above, where the earliest stars shone remote and dim. Infinitely far, other questing ships heard, and changed their course, driving in upon the planetary system whence the message came.

Darkness hid valley and hills when the alien ship began to drop earthwards on her violet beams. The beings within her felt hope. The fleet of which the ship was one had travelled for many years among the galaxies; had travelled on and on again, solitary, when the fleet separated so that each ship could search alone. Below, at last, was a planet that could become home. And one where there was no apparent intelligent life which might contest sovereignty ....

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Ashley Traderson stood at the mouth of his cave with his lips tightly compressed. Twenty-eight, nearly six feet, and well built, every line of his body told of determination. He turned his grey eyes upon the old man at his side. and his brown, strong-muscled face was hard from his inner fury.

"And has not it always been that the son should have the land of his father?" he demanded.

The old man nodded. "That is the custom among us."

"Then why not this time?"

The old man shrugged. "I am not a lawmaker. Were I, the land would be yours. Your father came among us from elsewhere, and that is the reason given."

Ashley stifled his retort. Old Doc Melvil was not a lawmaker, as he said. The injustice was not of his causing.

"So you don't think it fair," he said.

The other shook his grey head and his face was stern in the low evening sun. "No. But it is not for me to say. They say you are son of the trader, and have no place here -"

"It is one man alone who says it," Ashley accused.

"Perhaps."

"Then I can beat him - kill him!"

Doc Melvil's hand came upon his arm. "You know you cannot. His word is the word of a lawmaker. When I mend men's broken bones I see much of how their minds work. If you try force, you will fail."

Ashley turned his gaze down the valley. Trees lined all its upper slopes. In one place among them was a heap which old people claimed had once been a city, their fathers said. Ashley did not believe them.

Digging amid the brambles and bushes only brought to light rubble fit for nothing. Now, with winter coming, the ruling that he, Ashley, son of the trader, was no longer owner of the plot lower in the valley was more important than legends of lost cities.

"It is Rimaster who wants my land," he growled.

"Perhaps."

Something in the word made Ashley examine the other's face. Old Doc Melvil was always fair - had been a sound adviser before.

"You want to help me," Ashley said.

"Among other things. Not until this moment have I been free to speak. But now nothing holds you here." A gesture took in the cave mouths, the tilled plots, so painfully reclaimed from woodland. " There may be truth in what the grandparents of the old ones said. If there was a city on the hill, what of the people who built it? And what of the legends of death from the skies, raining night and day with a great noise?"

He sighed. "I have travelled, and have seen and heard many things. There are fifty of us in this valley all told. Once, I believe, may have been many more - five hundred, even perhaps five thousand -"

Ashley felt disbelief. He could remember when there had been fewer in the valley. Moreover, a man could travel for many days and see no single person. He laughed.

"The world is as it always was!"

"Who can say?" The sober tone neither denied nor admitted his statement. "But I have heard of a place where other men live - men with ancient knowledge, who call themselves the wise ones. You should seek them. They may intermediate in this quarrel. More, they may tell of things you do not guess."

Ashley was silent. To him, the valley and the wooded hills were all the world. He knew nothing beyond them - and scarcely wished to know. Yet the other's words stirred a deep curiosity.

"The wise ones?"

"So an old man said. He died, telling me. He had travelled far, for one so aged." Dark eyes, keen as a young man's, came upon Ashley. "You will go, son of the trader?"

The sun was going. Wind chill with coming winter sighed for a moment in the cave mouth.

"I will go," Ashley said at last. He saw, now, why Doc Melvil had come to bring the news of the lawmakers' council. Without land, a man was free to go elsewhere ....

Melvil nodded. "I believed you would." He pointed into the fading light of the setting sun. "It is a long way - I will tell you -"

Ashley woke with the dawn wind rustling the trees above. He rose, slung his rough pack over a shoulder, and gazed round to take his bearings.

He had never been so far this way before. The cave village lay four days march behind, and the trail had brought him across a narrow ridge of debris at the upper side of

which a lake extended. Ahead were the two rock pinnacles for which Melvil had said he must look. Staff in one hand, he began to descend.

The valley was narrow, here. Near its bottom was a level strip of some hard, smooth material such as he had never seen before. Wonder- ing, he followed it for twenty paces, when it ceased abruptly amid bushes. He began to ascend the other side of the valley, choosing a path threading through the clump of trees.

The far rim of the valley gave a broad view in the early sunshine. Tree - tops extended all across the slopes, except for a point near the horizon on his left, where the jagged brown outline of a crater cut through the green. It would be one of the evil pits where nothing grew, Ashley knew. Bushes and grass strove to creep down into the pits from their rim, but failed, dying stunted and yellow. The old men of the cave village said that men who walked in them -or even near - died, too. Ashley believed them. He had observed that no bird or animal lived in the craters, and that no growing thing found tenure there. On dark nights, when moon and stars were hid a faint ghostly green radiance shone in the hearts of the pits.

His gaze travelled slowly along the horizon and returned to the crater.

It was by no means the first he had seen. There were two over the hills beyond the caves. But for the first time he wondered at their cause, if they had one. It seemed impossible that they had been made, he thought. Rather must they be natural creations like the hills and streams, clouds and moon.

"You're a stranger here," a soft voice said.

Ashley turned quickly, gripping his staff. A sandy young man of perhaps thirty-five, moderately built and with humorous blue eyes, regarded him from the edge of the trees.

"Thought I knew most of the people of these hills," he said.

Ashley relaxed at the tone of friendship. " I am Ashley, son of the trader. Some call me Ashley Traderson."

The other smiled. "A village dweller. What was your father's name? "

Ashley thought the question pointless. "Hugh."

"That all?"

"Hugh the trader."

"I see. That all you know?"

Ashley frowned. "Should there be more-?"

"It does not matter." The other came across the turf. "I am Martin Kinnaird. Tell me, are there many in your village?

"A great number - fifty." Ashley thought the figure impressive.

It was more than any village he knew- more, indeed, than a man might encounter in a month's hunting away in the other direction where the craters were fewer.

Kinnaird did not look impressed. "So few." The words were half to himself. He gazed at Ashley frankly. "What brings you here?"

"I seek those who call themselves the wise ones. I wish to find if there are such men, and if they can prevent the lawmakers taking away my land."

Interest showed on Kinnaird's face. "Who told you of these- wise ones?"

"An old man who tends our sick. Is it really so?" Ashley felt extreme curiosity. It over-rode even his anger that if he defied Rimaster or the other lawmakers they could take his life. "Are there wise ones? Or is it a legend, like the houses on top of ground?" He laughed shortly. It had always seemed very foolish that anyone might live on the surface, exposed to rain, wind and snow, when caves in plenty existed in the solid ground.

"There are many things in our past that are not- legends," Martin Kinnaird said slowly. " But perhaps we can speak of that later." Some- thing seemed to be upon his mind. His face was serious, his voice uneasy.

"Have you seen anything unusual-"

Ashley thought back. "A flat surface, in the valley-"

Kinnaird shook his head quickly. "Not that. It was a road. Any- thing else."

Ashley wondered at the strange word, and what the purpose of the "road" could be. The flat expanse seemed singularly useless. But Kinnaird's expression was frank, his aspect friendly, and he was clearly unconcerned by it.

"Nothing except that?" he pressed.

"Nothing." Ashley wondered why the question was so urgent, so vital.

Kinnaird looked relieved. "Perhaps there's nothing, after all." His voice was low and he became lost in thought.

"You will not let the lawmakers take away my ground, or kill me if I disobey?" Ashley urged.

The other seemed to have forgotten. "We'll see. But we do not usually interfere in tribal law."

"It was my father's ground before me-"

Kinnaird was not listening. "Look," he breathed. He pointed.

Far away to the left, almost upon the rim of the crater, a shape had appeared. It hung for a moment as if suspended from the sky, then slid down over the rim of the crater. Ashley had a momentary view as of two long arms reaching out, scratching at the torn brown earth, then they disappeared.

"So there is something," Kinnaird breathed.

Ashley looked at him and saw his face was white. He wondered what the object had been. Too far to distinguish, it had clearly been of considerable size.

They watched for a long time, but the object did not reappear. At last Martin Kinnaird turned his intent gaze away, down into the valley.

"There's only one thing for it, son of the trader - we must go over and see!"

"But the pits kill men!"

"So do other things."

The ridge decreased in height until the outline of the crater was no longer visible. Ashley studied his companion. Kinnaird was not of heavy build, but looked capable of pushing on all day. His clothing was less shapeless than that of the cave dwellers, and more finely woven. He was quiet, intelligent, self-reliant.

"What is the purpose of the- road?" Ashley asked abruptly.

The blue eyes flashed at him momentarily. "It has none, now. Many years ago people travelled along it."

Ashley felt the reply explained nothing. "How many of you are there?" he asked.

"Too few. Not a score."

"You live in caves?"

"No. One day you may see."

They trod rising ground under trees and the scene opened out anew. Right was a steep drop with a wide, swiftly-running stream. The stream came through upthrust rocks which Ashley could just discern as lying at the rim of the crater. To cross to the other side of the valley, where the object had appeared, they would have to ford it.

Kinnaird shook his head at the suggestion. "Look at the banks. son of the trader."

Ashley did. The stream made a brown weal. No plant grew in the rippling water, or within the distance of two paces from its edge. The nearest vegetation was stunted and unhealthy, contorted saplings and bushes with light yellow leaves. Ashley felt his nerves creep.

"It is poison from the crater- ?"

"Yes." Kinnaird's voice was bitter. "You could call it that. Probably a powdered isotope meant to be scattered over many square miles."

Ashley sensed that questions and explanations must wait. As they could not pass through the stream, a long detour lay ahead. They went on and he realised that the hills round the caves were much more friendly. There, birds nested and animals moved in the undergrowth. Here, nothing stirred, as if all living creatures shunned the place, some instinct warning it was evil. From one spot a view of the inside of the distant crater was visible, and something glowed there, forming the core of a scar over which hung a faint blue luminosity. The stream flowed from the scar itself, percolating through torn rock strata. Kirmaird said some- thing inaudible, gazed at it a moment, then went on. His face was bleak, suddenly hardened as by inner suffering.

Hasty movements sounded in the bushes and Ashley halted, grip tightening on his staff. Branches were pushed aside and a face looked out- a girl, breathing heavily, eyes wide in terror. She paused as if on the point of flight, then stepped from the bushes. Ashley saw that she was trembling. Slender, agile, with a mobile face, her golden hair was in disorder and her fear manifestly great.

"Th-they were- following."

She looked back, listening. Her voice was musical, afraid. Kinnaird's expression showed that he did not know the girl, and Ashley touched her arm.

"We're friends. Don't be afraid."

Her gaze conveyed her thanks but the drawn look on her face remained. "There were so many-"

"So many what?" Kinnaird asked quietly.

She looked at him and her lips trembled. "I- I don't know. I've never been this way before. I lost my path and slept in the forest. When I awoke they - they were in the trees above me."

Her voice shook and she put both hands to her face. Ashley patted her trembling shoulder.

"What is your name?"

She gazed at him through opened fingers. "Lilowen, daughter of Bate, but- " Her eyes turned back towards the trees. "There were so many -so many. At first they did not seem to follow me. Then they did. I hid in bushes. When they went away I ran, but they must have seen me-"

Ashley smiled. "We will help you, Lilowen Bate."

The golden hair shook in a quick negative. "You could not! They were so many - and so high among the trees-"

Her self-control went and she began to sob, crouching on the ground like a terrified child. Her wiry frame, her quick eyes and clear voice - all spoke of self-reliance and hardihood. Ashley wondered what she had seen to cause such dread.

"Perhaps we should get under cover," Kinnaird suggested.

With easy swiftness Ashley picked her up. Her limbs trembled in his arms and she clung to him. They crept under low bushes against rocks on the hillside and Lilowen became still and quiet.

"What followed you?" Kinnaird asked quietly.

She was silent for long moments. "I did not see well- I was too startled, too afraid. They moved quickly, silently, like- like nothing I had seen before." She paused, staring out from under the curtain of leaves. "I- I'm sure they won't have given up the search so easily...."

Over the ridge of the hills the searchers floated at tree-top height, passing and repassing over the spot where the creature had seemed to be.

Their senses strove to locate her, or to discern any minute time-space distortion which would show a solid object moved within the area they searched. The world below was strange, and their unease great. Twice their leader returned to the place and time where he had first sensed her waging movements, and twice he failed to keep the trail. Time flowed round him, and he lost her again, and then a second time. Awareness of his failure passed to his companions, and from them came the thought that she had escaped.

The searchers became still, striving together to analyse the space around and below. But knowledge of their defeat drifted soon into their minds. Below was much movement, slight, repetitive, baffling- analysed at last into swaying and fluttering of a thousand branches. And from far away, where the crater was, extended a force that was almost as of a distortion of the spatial continuum itself.

Side by side they drifted over the ridge of the hills. If an object moved they would know. Space was distorted by its presence, and move- ment a rippling like waves on water. The flow of time itself gathered where objects were, fluttering moment upon moment like crossing threads when objects moved.

Only after a long time did the searchers drift away. In their minds was a warning engendered of the strangeness of the planet they had found. But meanwhile work more urgent, more vital, waited.

Lilowen Bate looked out from under the branches. "They haven't followed me," she said. " We'd have seen them by now."

She crawled out stiffly and Ashley and Martin followed. Ashley wondered what Martin Kinnaird thought. He had questioned Lilowen for a time, then some sixth-sense had seemed to warn them to be silent and still, though nothing had moved in the narrow strip of sky visible through the fronds. Lying there, his mind had gone back to Rimaster's injustice. Without land a man was a worthless wanderer. Ashley's spirit rose in inner fury each time he recalled how Rimaster had cheated him. Nothing but Doc Melvil's counsel had kept him from open defiance of Rimaster's words, consequences be what they would.

"We intended to go right round to the far edge of the crater," Martin said.

"To discover what is there." The words had a clipped, hard ring.

Never before had Ashley seen Martin Kinnaird's face so set with a determination which killed even the humour of his eyes.

She stared at him. "You suspect- something?"

"I do. An old man was out this way a week ago and returned with a garbled story no-one could make into sense. It was that brought me along these hills." Kinnaird's tone was decisive. " Old Samul has been a fool- but never a liar. Some men might invent such a story, but not Samul- he hasn't the brains."

Ashley looked from one to the other. Lilowen was small - only a girl- but brave. Martin's face showed he would go alone, if necessary. Ashley shrugged, eased his pack so that it lay comfortably upon his shoulder, and took up his staff.

"We will go," he stated simply.

Cold rain that might proceed snow was falling when daylight began to fade. The detour was proving long, and Ashley realised that they had spent more time hiding than they had supposed. They ate from his pack, rested, and went on, talking little.

Soon it was so dark that walking was difficult and Martin halted.

"We'll camp for the night."

Lilowen's face showed as a pale oval. "We're not far from where I slept."

"We can keep watch," Ashley pointed out. Attempting to press on could only be dangerous.

They found shelter under thick trees and settled down to wait. Ashley felt sleep impossible, and he sat staring into the gloom, which slowly deeped into total darkness out of which pattered the chilling rain.

" Who is his old man you call Samul? " he asked once.

Martin Kinnaird stirred, unseen in the dark. " One of us. Aged, but not given to imagining things." His voice dropped. " His story fits in pretty well with what Lilowen told us."

Silence followed and Ashley guessed that they slept. The time went slowly. Once he thought he heard a low, distant humming, but could not be sure. The sky was starless and black, the presence of the branches above known only by the patter of rain on their leaves, and though the humming seemed to come nearer, then recede, nothing showed. He shivered, wishing dawn were nearer.

The rain ceased while it was still dark and the drip of moisture around them stopped.

On the stillness came a sound that made cold fingers move along Ashley's spine. A whoop, whoop as of a long, tight string being twanged, it went on and on, its distance and bearing impossible to decide.

"There is something," Martin whispered. His breathing was uneven near Ashley's ear.

Movements sounded, and Lilowen's voice. "What is it?"

She crept near them. They did not answer. Sometimes the hooting faded almost to inaudibility; sometimes it increased to a twanging with a strange, unnatural intonation which froze Ashley's limbs. With extreme relief he saw the sky was lightening with dawn. As it did the whooping died away in silence.

Lilowen hung back when they rose and stretched. "Must we— go on?" she asked.

"I think so." Martin bit his lips. "Just to make sure."

Ashley judged it near noon when they approached the last rise beyond which the crater lay. Martin halted.

"There may well be danger. If so, it's foolish for us all to expose ourselves. I shall go alone. You two wait here."

Protestations died on Ashley's lips. Kinnaird was right. He was, moreover, the self-appointed leader, and probably best able to assess what he saw. They stood under trees, watching him until he was gone from sight. Ashley examined his companion frankly. The colour had returned to her cheeks and her beauty was undeniable. Her lissom slenderness pleased him, and the quick intelligence of her clear eyes.

"You were travelling alone?" he asked.

The golden hair bobbed. "I have been alone this many months. since-"

She hesitated and he knew she was thinking of her father. There seemed nothing he could say. As they stood in silence the bushes were opened with scarcely a rustle and an old man stood before them. Wizened, slightly bent, his eyes were nevertheless bright and told of no failing wit.

"The Sentinels are too close here," he stated factually.

They stared at him, astonished at his silent approach, his appearance, and his words.

"Sentinels?" Ashley found his voice.

"Aye. I call them that because they're always watching- watching." He seemed to find some secret joke in the word.

"Watching?" Lilowen's voice shook. "What?"

"Just- watching. Everything."

Ashley felt a chill similar to that which had come with the whooping drumming. "Where?"

"Over by the crater."

They looked that way and saw Martin hurriedly descending the slope.

Ashley was startled by the whiteness of his face, by the tremble of his lips, not wholly hid, and by the expression in the eyes that would not meet his. Instead, Kinnaird's gaze settled on the newcomer.

"You here again, Samul."

"Aye. Been warning this pair that the Sentinels will likely enough see them."

Martin Kinnaird did not question the name, obviously not new to him. "But it was not that that brought you, Samul."

Samul scratched the side of his nose. "Things that watches others ought to be watched themselves."

"And why do you think they're- watching?"

" 'Cos that's the way it strikes me. Sentinels they are -watching. Though that's as much as I or any man can say. They sees us, too.

They saw me. When I ran and fell and knocked me head I thought I was finished. But they never came any nearer, as I told you."

"Is it- safe to stay?" Lilowen's voice suggested she believed it was not.

Ashley looked at the brow of the hill, and at Martin, and an almost unendurable curiosity burned within him.

"You saw these- these Sentinels, Martin?" he breathed.

Martin drew in his lower lip. "I saw them. More, too. They're- building-- "

"Building?" Samul's voice shook.

"Yes. What, I don't know. I couldn't see everything. It wasn't safe." Suddenly he appeared to reach a decision. "Everybody must be warned! I can go to our folk. Ashley Traderson must go to his. Everyone must know - and soon!"

Ashley looked at the hilltop two hundred paces ahead. "I should see for myself-"

"There's not time! It would do no good -might endanger us all."

The words seemed final in their obvious truth. Ashley strove to quell his desire to see what the others had seen- to know for himself.

"I- I have no standing in my village," he pointed out. "I own no land, am not a lawmaker." He knew, as he spoke, that he must return.

Something lay beyond the hill- and that something threatened them all. "I will come with you," Lilowen stated simply.

They mounted the path to the village together. The cave mouths were even rectangles just large enough for a man to pass. Some people said the caves themselves had been made by earlier generations, but Ashley did not believe that to be so. They were of an even, stone-like material, and extended into the hillside. They were warm, dry-and there was the old folk's story, gained from their grandparents, that it was safest to live underground. Those foolish enough to live on the surface all died, the story said. Fires like blue sunshine burned from heaven to earth and consumed them.

"Will they believe you?" Lilowen asked.

Ashley's grey eyes were troubled. He was, he admitted, better at lighting than at using words. But determination and purpose were not lacking.

"They must do so, Lilowen."

"And if they do not?"

He did not reply. Doc Melvil had appeared at one cave entrance, recognised him, and waved. Behind him came a heavily-built man of thirty, dark haired, with a wide face scornful yet surly. Ashley's grip unconsciously tightened on his staff. This was Bernard Rimaster, who over-rode others with a roughness based on self-esteem.

"You look angry." Lilowen murmured.

They reached the level before the square-cut entrances. Rimaster stood unmoving in their path.

"I had not expected to see you back, Traderson."

Ashley's anger simmered up anew. Behind Rimaster, Doc Melvil shook his head slowly, as if understanding and counselling peace. Ashley halted.

"I wish to see the leaders and lawmakers."

"I am both."

Ashley knew he must be content. If Rimaster provoked a row it would not be he who would be thrown from the village, as the contempt and triumph in his hard eyes showed.

"Very well. Something threatens all of us- " As Ashley spoke he decided that Rimaster was not believing him, but instead supposing the whole a fabrication. There was open hostility in the hard eyes when he had finished.

"How could such things be?" Rimaster demanded.

"I don't know, I only know they are there-"

"You have seen them?"

"No. but-"

Rimaster laughed. "If this is some plan to get me alone in the forest, you must think me as great a fool as yourself! You are angry because my justice is not to your liking. In the forest a lawmaker might be struck down from behind, and no one know his slayer-"

"It was not justice, and it nothing to do with this!" Ashley snapped.

"If you fear to go alone, send whoever you choose."

Colour came to the other's wide face. "And have them return naming me a fool for believing?"

He turned on his heel and disappeared into the cave. Doc Melvil watched him go, then fixed his kindly gaze upon Ashley.

"There is truth in this story, son of the trader?"

"In every word I have spoken. Strange things are there, though I myself have not seen them."

"And you think them dangerous?"

"Without doubt."

Melvil's grey head nodded. "And if so- if it is as you say- what can we few score poor villagers do to prevail against them?"

A shock ran through Ashley. What could they do? Nothing, he thought. Nothing. And not until that moment had he realised it!

We- we are not beaten yet," he said gruffly.

"Perhaps only because the battle is not yet joined."

They gazed eye to eye, the words sinking in. Voices came in the entrance passage and Rimaster appeared with three men. Spirits sinking, Ashley recognised them as lawmakers who would say and do as Rimaster wished. The four together could carry through any aim in the council of seven.

"It is indeed Traderson," one said.

A second nodded. "We do not want him here."

Rimaster smiled to himself. "He should be banned the village?"

"Of course," the third agreed. "He is a troublemaker."

Ashley's lips set in a thin straight line. "At least send someone to see that what I say is true!"

"And appear as fools?" Rimaster scoffed.

Three heads nodded. "It would be foolish to go."

Ashley pointed to Lilowen. "She saw! She will tell you also!"

The first man pursed his lips. "Without doubt you have told her what to say."

The second shrugged. "We are leaders and lawmakers and do not believe the words of women-"

The third nodded soberly and Rimaster grunted with satisfaction. "It is as I thought, Traderson. We are not fools, nor to be tricked."

"Indeed not," the third said.

Fury burned through Ashley. His grip tightened on his staff, but a hand came on his arm.

"You must go, it is the only way." Melvil's voice was kind.

"Remember your visit has not been wholly useless-"

Not trusting himself to speech, Ashley turned and went down the path, conscious that Lilowen followed. Rimaster's voice drifted loudly after him.

"You are banned this village, son of the trader, it is our judgment"

Ashley did not look back. Face set, he strode on. If men were to band together to save themselves, each hour counted. He could only hope that Doc Melvil's saner council would find hearers in the village.

"Do not hurry so," Lilowen complained.

He halted, smiling crookedly. "Sorry. It is trying to parley with fools. We will rest when we reach the other side of the valley."

As he walked he wondered what plan could be prepared. One thing was clear- he himself must see what had occupied the area by the crater, so that he could judge the danger. He must also End Martin Kinnaird, and enlist his help.

The combined plan eased his sense of frustration, and they sat on a felled tree to eat. Far away, across the valley, the mouths of the caves where had lived so long were just visible, but no one could be seen. The folk of the village were at work, or within, sheltering from a wind that was cold despite the weak sun.

Later, they rose and went on. Low clouds were bringing darkness early.

"You are content to stay with me, Lilowen?" Ashley asked.

She examined his face, her clear eyes searching. She nodded. "Yes, I will stay with you."

"I know a place on the hills where we may find good shelter. "

They turned that way, climbing still. The vale below was full of dim shadows, details lost in a monotone of gloom.

"Your friend was right, saying we can do nothing," Lilowen observed.

He looked at her in the dusk. "We can try. Why suppose we shall be defeated when we do not even know our enemy? "

"You are brave. But I- I have seen them "

She would say no more. Soon they reached flat ground near the hilltop and Ashley looked back for a last glimpse of the fires which sometimes burned before the caves so long his home. He halted, unconsciously gripping his companion's arm.

The caves were invisible, but from a dip in the skyline he knew their position. Three luminous bodies hung there, seemingly poised on hazy beams of violet light Moving slowly in formation, the shapes passed over the village, swung slowly round together, and floated again over the spot.

"You are hurting my arm," Lilowen said

He released her. " You see them? "Yes."

" It was from them you ran? "

"Oh, no. These are different- and much, much bigger. "

Her voice sounded very small on the open hilltop. The shapes began to rise, ascending until their height must equal the distance across the valley, he judged. Remoteness made their form indistinguishable. Abruptly they vanished, passing through the low clouds. For a moment the hazy violet pillars upon which they floated were visible, then they too vanished.

"We should hide," Lilowen whispered

Ashley found the spot he sought- a shelter of stone slabs under trees, built by someone who had long needed it no more. Tired, cold, they lay down and slept.

They arose at the first light and struck a direct route across the hills. Ashley hoped they would make better time, with the way now known to him.

Once they rested at the barrier of rubble which held a vast lake at its upper side. If such things had been possible, he would have assumed that the barrier had been built

for that very purpose, and still well fulfilled it, despite being crumbled as by a great shock. Yet, he thought, it was obviously foolish and impossible that such a wall had even been built by men. From its far side he studied the configuration of the hills, to choose their way, and decided that the valley below the barrier was the very one in which the strange things seen by Lilowen had taken up lodging. Only a double fold in the hills, which made the valley snake back upon itself, had concealed the fact.

"We may be there even sooner than I supposed," he said

It was scarcely noon on the next day when they emerged into sight of terrain he recognised. With excitement he knew that he could soon be overlooking the rim of the crater itself. Soon, at last, he must know...

They emerged on to more open ground and Lilowen gave an exclamation. "There is someone-"

She pointed. Away along the grassy slope a figure was half crouched, lying as if protecting itself with one arm. They hurried, and Ashley recognised the man as old Samul, oddly twisted up and utterly still. At a few paces distance he halted, a sudden chill, physical in intensity, running through his limbs, his gaze frozen on the old man. Arms, head, body and legs were covered with conical depressions, each exactly similar, the width of two thumbs side by side, and half as deep. Mathematically exact, the conical holes went through clothing, skin, flesh and bone. Each was true as a scribed circle.

Ashley walked the remaining steps jerkily, and touched the old man's shoulder. The body fell over like a doll. Face and chest were the same, and Samul was dead.

Biting his lips, he turned Lilowen away. Her eyes sought his. There was terror in them.

"It was the things I saw . . . He must have come back "

He could only nod. The manner of Samul's dying was more frightening than any signs of battle or violence could have been.

"We- we must not let them catch us," Lilowen whispered

He awoke again to full realisation of their own personal danger. Samul had been old, but strong and quick. Their danger was very real.

Snow was beginning to fall thinly and Ashley wondered what he should do. In the face of this new discovery it seemed unwise to seek pointless exposure to danger, or to leave Lilowen unprotected. Better that they try to find Martin Kinnaird, warning him and his companions.

" It-- seems unwise to stay," Lilowen said.

" Yes." He scanned the hills, estimating the possibilities of a search in the direction from which Kinnaird had come. If the snow thickened visibility would be poor and his eyes clouded. " We can do no good here."

They began to hurry through the flakes which had begun to dance upon a chill, rising wind. At last Ashley recognised the spot where Martin had first met him. From there it would be largely guesswork.

Lilowen halted, pointing. "There are a lot of people beyond the trees- "

He stared through the drifting snow. It thinned momentarily again and he saw that she was not mistaken. Men, women and children, in compact file, carried bundles of every description. He recognised Rimaster, Doc Melvil, and several others, then the flakes drifted thickly again.

Lilowen looked uneasy. "What does it mean? "

He frowned. There seemed only one explanation-the villagers had down from some danger accompanying or following the appearance of the three objects over the caves. The danger must have been very real, to make them leave home and shelter so suddenly, in such weather.

"I fear they've had proof of the truth of my words," he said

He felt in no mood to meet the oncoming group. Some of its number might think he had betrayed the way to the caves, even if unknowingly.

He took Lilowen's hand. "They may not be friendly- but we can travel faster than they."

They hastened, and though he often looked back, no glimpse of the party came through the thickening snow. With an instinct developed from boyhood he maintained his direction, while bushes, trees and hill-sides began to disappear under a uniform white blanket.

"You are strong, daughter of Bate," he said once in admiration as the distance grew and they surmounted a steep rise.

"I have always lived in the forests "

With nightfall the snow ceased and a half moon showed the way. Though weary, Ashley felt it best not to stop. A higher hill was visible ahead and that should be their

objective. So still was the air that even their own voices seemed unnaturally loud.

His first survey from the hilltop brought disappointment. Fold upon fold of snow covered slopes stretched to the limit of seeing. Then, as he looked again, a clear spark of light showed away beneath them. It burned steadily, then went out.

"We will go that way," he decided

They descended in the ankle-deep snow. After a time the light showed again, then vanished. They corrected their direction and Ashley felt triumph and hope returning.

At last they reached a pole upon which a globe stood. Even as he gazed up at it it was illuminated, then extinguished. Footsteps came in the snow behind them and a man appeared from an opening between rocks. He paused.

"You are strangers! "

No enmity was in his voice. Ashley nodded. "We saw the light-"

"It is a signal so that the search party may not mistake their way They are out looking for an old man."

"Samul," Ashley interjected

"That is his name--"

"We found him- dead." He explained quickly. "You know a man called Martin Kinnaird?"

"I do." Comprehension was in the voice. "You are the pair he spoke of! You must go below. I must stay here to wait for the party. Give Kinnaird your news."

"We can only guess what it was like originally," Kinnaird said. "Three hundred years is a long time. Surface buildings were pushed flat. Time and nature has done the rest, up there. The casualties must have been terrific. Probably radioactive dust and famine killed those who escaped the actual attack."

Ashley was astonished. Steps had led down into the network of underground chambers and passages. Globes like that on the pole lit them and it was impossible to imagine they had been fashioned by nature.

"Other areas suffered worse treatment," Kinnaird said. "We've put together as much of the story as we can. When the first bomb was dropped governments were terrified and sent up everything they'd got. When the panic was over it was too late. A hundred

years of arming had made every nation an arsenal. Where blast and radiation didn't kill, radioactive dusts did."

"You mean- there were once many more people? "

"Undoubtedly." Bitter sadness was in Kinnaird's voice. "It doesn't take long for nature to cover things up, once man has gone. Trees and bushes, grass and rubbish, creep in. They have done so above. A city was there-once. Three hundred years ago. The old maps call this area Wales. It escaped lightly."

.Ashley repeated the word. It was a strange name. Yet his friend's words fitted well with the old legends of the village people. Old men related tales their grandfathers had told them-as a child, he himself had loved to listen. Fantasies of great buildings and many people; of vehicles that rushed across land and sea; of seeing people at a distance, and of a sudden cataclysm which had destroyed it all

"There were other deep shelters," Kinnaird said, and began to follow the passage. "Most were probably empty-- there was no time for the people to reach them. We believe the exits of some were stocked high with preserved food. Others were bare. It was civilised mankind's great act of suicide."

The walls of this place, as Kinnaird led him through it, were of the same stone-like material as those of the caves where the villagers had lived. Nearly all the rooms `were empty.

"All the food must have been eaten in the years following," Kinnaird remarked, "and everything which would burn used for fuel. That is probably why there are no doors, no furniture. Not even beds. When everything was gone, the people left." His tone was expressive. Thrown on their own resources, the survivors would not have found it easy. "Naturally we have no traces of them. Presumably this place was left empty for a long time. We found it nearly ten years ago, quite by chance;-"

"You are not-not like we villagers and hunters," Lilowen said her eyes upon him.

"No. Our fathers had lived in a shelter away to the south-west. We would have stayed there, but it was near a river and flooded when rain was heavy." He opened a door of tarnished metal. "Fortunately there was a small section of this shelter which no one ever entered- it was locked off, fireproof and reached by this way only."

Inside, Ashley marvelled at the things their ancestors had had and used. Many were of unknown purpose. Others were built up of many thin sheets covered with symbols, some of which he had seen the old people scratch in the dust, urging the children to remember them.

"It is little enough- too little-- upon which to build a new civilisation," Kinnaird said sadly.

Within twenty-four hours Ashley found that he had accepted a host of new facts. Never before had he imagined that mankind had passed through so terrible a night, such as could have eclipsed all human striving for ever. From Kinnaird's words he gathered a picture more terrible than any the old men had told. Graceful cities had trembled into dust and the wheels upon which civilisation ran were stilled. Diseases created by man for the destruction of his fellows had joined with famine and humanity was nearly ended. Deadly gases and dusts were carried upon the winds of the world and in distant lands the innocent died without knowing why. Black, dark, evil night of man, Ashley thought, humanity had fallen headlong into a dreadful pit of its own making.

Slowly out of the great shock there arose in his mind a new and powerful determination. Men must build again, not losing everything of the glorious past. For glory there had been-- the glory of worthwhile achievement; the nobility of human ideals at their best. At all costs things of such worth must be regained.

He went up out of the deep shelter, alone, and stood in the snow, ankle deep and untarnished under a leaden sky. It was easy to hope, but difficult to plan. One thing was clear. If danger existed from the things that had killed old Samul, then they must be overcome. In no circumstances must they jeopardise the pitiful remnant of mankind that survived.

Voices came over the snow, and he saw that the search party had at last returned. Word passed between them and the man who met them as they came closer. They were weary, cold- and manifestly the bringers of bad news.

"We found him- dead." The words drifted to Ashley and he wondered what they thought of the manner in which the old man had died. "Gill and Rudge went over the hill- and didn't come back--"

They were closer, the expressions on their faces clear, now. Tired puzzled- afraid.

"You searched?" he asked

They looked at him. "No. Not after we had looked over the hilltop. It grew dark. We waited that night and the next day- but neither came back- "

The fear was mixed with despair and intense fatigue. Heads bent, the tiny party filed away into the entrance. Ashley's gaze followed them from view. The haunted tone of those last words rang in his mind- Not after we had looked over the hilltop …. He compressed his lips, clenched his hands in the pockets of the strange but comfortable clothing Kinnaird had given him, and wondered why those two had not come back. Gill

and Rudge. Unknown to him, never seen, their disappearance suddenly seemed as the personal loss of irreplaceable friends. It was damnable.

He went down into the shelter and met Lucan Talbot, who had first greeted them under the guiding light. Talbot was slight, quite short, quiet, and perhaps twenty-five, Ashley judged. It was difficult to be sure- privation left its mark early on some.

"You've heard two of the party didn't come back?" Talbot asked

"I have!" Ashley felt the blood tingle in his cheeks. "You don't realise the value of what you have!" he declared. He made a sweeping gesture. "You're used to it all- take it for granted. I don't! I've come in from outside, where such things were not even imagined. Don't you see what it means?" He gripped Talbot's arm. "It's all a reminder of our past! And what men have been once, so can they be again. We must fight, plan, build."

Lucan Talbot's eyes held understanding. "I suppose it would strike you like that, coming in here for the first time. But it's not so easy to do--"

"I never supposed it would be easy," Ashley stated. "Mankind didn't strive in the past because it was easy, but because it was worthwhile ! "

"Perhaps," Talbot said quietly. "We've done a great deal- salvaged past knowledge, studied useful technical processes- and it's not been simple. There's been no one to show us- it's been re-discovery."

Ashley smiled. Talbot was right. Nevertheless, his own enthusiasm was not quenched.

"First, we need to know why Gill and Rudge didn't come back," he said. "If there's an actual threat, we need to know what it is. Only then can we hope to overcome it." He hesitated. "I can have several days food and outdoor clothing--?"

"Certainly," a new voice said. Martin Kinnaird came up the steps. "I heard much of what you said, and agree with it all. But, as Lucan pointed out, it's not easy."

Ashley met the clear blue eyes and knew that he had a sure friend in Martin Kinnaird. Kinnaird's knowledge was immeasurably greater than his own. It was inevitable! Kinnaird had grown up with a back-ground of learning; was highly skilled in knowledge of minerals and mining. Yet Kinnaird had never looked down upon him, instead accepting him as an equal friend.

"I can try," Ashley said

Kinnaird nodded his head. "But not alone. Two heads are better than one, and two may live where one may die, when trouble comes. We'll go together."

Ashley felt a surge of warmth. "Soon- ?"

"As soon as preparations can be made."

Leaden skies overcast the landscapes with gloom so that the obscured horizon blended with the heavens. Night promised to come soon, starless and cold, and a thin wind made a faint moaning through the trees. Martin Kinnaird gazed through binoculars at something half a mile away down the side of the valley. At last he put the glasses away.

"It's impossible to say what it is "

To Ashely's unaided eyes the object that had halted them under the firs was a tiny, faint blue patch. Motionless, it glowed with its own light.

At his suggestion they went slowly down the hillside, keeping behind cover whenever possible. The blue object did not move. As the distance decreased Ashley began to feel a new unease. The dimly radiant patch was perhaps three paces in diameter, and covered by an absolutely spherical dome high as a man's chest. The blueness was not of the dome, but of things inside.

At last they stood behind the nearest bushes. After a long time Kinnaird pushed the glasses into his hands.

"What do you make of it?" His voice was husky

Through the strong lenses the scene leapt near. The dome was transparent, wavering. Scattered inside was a score of objects-- if objects they could be called-- which each glowed weakly blue. Ashley ran his tongue over his dry lips, studying them. Each was no larger than a man's fist, transparent and vibrant, yet definite in outline. The earth upon which they rested was pressed flat and hard. In some unfathomable way the whole reminded him of one thing only- a nest.

He gave the glasses back and went out from behind the bushes. There seemed no personal danger- and his curiosity would have been stronger than his fear.

The dome shimmered on the whole of its surface. When he was a single pace from it the pulsating blue objects suddenly awoke from their stillness and crowded away back into the dome, drifting, glowing, pressed compactly there as if afraid. He raised his staff and struck. The stout ash met nothing. Nor did it penetrate. Level with the dome's surface it ceased to exist, and he was left with a short piece of wood held foolishly in his hand.

He jumped back, and the faintly radiant objects spread out, resuming their positions. Ashley felt a tremble run through his limbs. If the young of beings unknown they indeed were, they were not unprotected. When he stepped towards the nest again the things it shielded did not retreat.

"It doesn't seem safe to stay in the open," Kinnaird's voice warned

They went back up the hillside, taking a path that would bring them to the slope from which they could overlook the crater. It was a long way, and as they trudged on in the increasing gloom Ashley wondered time and again of the significance of what they had found. The first impression that had leapt to his mind remained. A nest, strange alien, protecting the embryo beings which occupied it.

They rested for a few hours, sleeping fitfully, when the darkness made progress impossible. With complete stillness came again the remote whoop, whoop that went on and on, so strange and unearthly that for a long time Ashley sat with his chin on his knees and his eyes wide open, gazing into the blackness. With the first barely visible lightening of the sky, he rose. .Kinnaird stretched at his side.

"The more we find- the less I like it," he said. His tone told that he had slept little." We're so few- so helpless."

"You believe something unusual is here-the Sentinels, as old Samul called them?"

"Without doubt. And I'm afraid of what the outcome for us all may be."

They picked their way among trees seen as shadows against the whiteness. As it grew lighter snow began to fall again, thick and direct from a windless grey sky. Ashley decided that this time nothing should prevent him seeing over the hill. Yet they must not forget that soon they would be treading the way Gill and Rudge had taken, and that neither had returned.

It was wholly light when away behind sounded the whip and crack of branches thrust aside and a horse and rider came out from the belt of trees they were skirting. He reined in, his black stallion sweating and breathing twin plumes of moisture on the cold air. Ashley judged him tall, but he was stooped now over his horse's neck, and lean as a stick.

"Praises be," he said with feeling." 'Tis ten days since I saw a living man."

Ashley wondered at his age. His build was that of a man of thirty-five, yet his face lined as by the passage of fifty summers spent in the open. He wore no hat. A pack was on his back and two others across the rump of the horse.

"You've travelled far?" Kinnaird said

"I have- and scarcely expected to see a living man again! Nor I think did Pat me horse, judging by the speed he's made!" He stroked the horse's neck." Only them things like back there--" He jerked his head the way he had come." Pat wouldn't go near though I've never seen 'im afraid of anything afore." .

Ashley realised his meaning." You've seen the- the dome?

"Aye-and a score more. Dotted all about the country, they are." He bent low, reining the stallion about with one hand." What's more- I've seen one open."

"Open?" Kinnaird's tone had an odd ring.

"Aye- open. Nigh big to overflowing in it the things were." He snapped his fingers." Click, just like that, the dome thing was gone. We're off, Pat, I says. But swift as anything all the things in it rises straight up to the sky. In moments the lot was gone in the clouds, the whole shoal of 'em. And that's not all---"

The black stallion pawed the snow. He quietened it, looked back into the trees, and seemed to shrink even lower into the saddle. His face was that of a man who had slept little for many nights.

"Tell us all your know," Kinnaird suggested." You need rest- sleep We can help."

The horseman nodded."Folk call me Jan of the Downs. This is strange country to me. But when things like this happen, men need to be together. Worst of all was the object I saw two days ago, strange beyond description--"

"There was something else? "

"Aye- and big enough for Pat to enter, though terror wouldn't let him go near." Jan screwed up his face in an effort of self-expression." Strange beyond reason. There- yet not there; hurting my eyes to look. You've gazed in a stream an' tried to see your face? One moment maybe it's there- then 'tis all ripples making nonsense of trees and sky. Strange- aye, strange." He relapsed into moody silence with his chin sunk on his chest.

"You could shows us where this thing is?" Kinnaird asked

"Aye, simple enough." His eyes fixed upon them." Many a man can live without rest- but not without food, an' a man who's fleeing because he's afraid of solitude makes a poor hunter-"

He ate what they gave him, not dismounting, intent only on the food Every movement

suggested he often lived, ate and slept in the saddle When he had finished he wiped his mouth with the back of a hand.

"Aye, but an empty stomach makes a coward of a man," he declared

Kinnaird smiled faintly. "You're welcome to stay with us and live at our camp."

"That I will, and thanks," Jan said feelingly

"And this thing you saw?"

"I can show you. It's not so far. Pat and me have been a rare long way round, an' doubled back, too, when I thought I saw a camp fire this way."

"Perhaps that was the people from the caves," Ashley put in

"That I don't know. The snow came too thick and I lost it." He caressed the black stallion's neck."Want to go now?"

Ashley remembered his original plan, and his determination to see what manner of thing had taken up abode near the crater. He shook his head. This time, he was not to be turned aside.

"Later," he said

Jan seemed content."Aye, then I'll rest." He dismounted stiffly looping the rein over an arm.

Ashley turned his face again towards the hill slope beyond which was something seemingly more strange each day. This time there would be no turning back, he thought.

From the top of the hill the drumming whoop, whoop was audible, even though a light wind had arisen and was beginning to carry snow thinly along the wooded slopes. Ashley walked in cover, listening often, and a chill of inner origin could not be wholly dispelled from his limbs. The trees were thinner towards the skyline, the undergrowth more sparse, offering less concealment, yet an expanding view of the scene beyond.

No snow lay on the crater's lip, or within a long way of its edge. He had observed the same phenomenon elsewhere in earlier winters. Presumably there was a slight warmth, generated of some atomic process still active after three hundred years.

Inside the inner edge of the crater a yellow glow rose and fell, oscillating ceaselessly in an unchanging vertical line. He watched it in astonishment for a long time before he

realised that its rise and fall was simultaneous with the whoop, whoop that went on and on, and that the glow disappeared into the earth itself at the lower limit of its travel. Up, it was twice as high as the tallest tree, half lost in the obscured sky. Down, it was gone for the space of an inheld breath, and around the point of its disappearance lay a huge pile of turned-up earth.

A hand came upon his arm so unexpectedly that a shock ran through him.

"Is it- mining for minerals or ores?" Martin Kinnaird whispered

With its whooping twang the radiance rose and fell, and Ashley could imagine its progress deep down into the earth so that it was hidden for at least half of its vertical path. And the great mound circling the point of its disappearance seemed to be of fragments drawn up by it. It seemed possible that the glow, whatever it was, could indeed be fashioning a vast shaft or pit.

Near the foot of the mound was a golden dome so vast that it spanned half the crater. If beings there were, they were concealed beneath it and no further movement told of their activities.

As he stared the snow thinned for a few moments and he saw that the whole rim of the forest beyond the crater had been cleared. Half projecting from the trees was a long, blue-silver object cylindrical in form with a conical end. Its stern was lost in the trees, through which it seemed to have crashed with a force that had split the thickest trunks like green twigs.

"That was- hidden before," Kinnaird whispered.

Snow came on the wind and the scene was obscured. For a few moments the glowing orb could be seen rising and falling in its great trajectory, then even that was lost to sight. Only the distant whoop, whoop told of its unceasing activity.

Ashley moved stiffly and withdrew among the bushes. After this, he could believe all Jan had told them, even to the large, strange object they had not yet investigated.

As he walked beside the horse Ashley wondered what the activity in the crater portended. He half expected a drove of some strange shapes to rise up in pursuit of the humans who had come so near, but no sound or movement disturbed the sky. Later, perhaps, such sallies would begin, when the camp under the golden dome was consolidated. Plodding in the snow, he wondered what hope there could be of prevailing against beings who controlled such unknown scientific might. His mind dwelt on possibilities of defence and attack, and all seemed futile. At the most they numbered a hundred souls, including the villagers from the caves.

At length he saw that Jan was leading them towards the wall of rubble he and Lilowen had traversed on foot. The horse stepped warily and the waters at their flank were high.

"Probably a dam, once," Kinnaird remarked as they went slowly across the ridge. "Possibly suffered a near miss- enough to shake up the whole construction, yet not enough to destroy it."

Ashley gazed down the side remote from the artificial lake. Cracked, covered with glass, it was nevertheless singularly even.

"Aye, I've seen it's like afore," Jan stated as he let his horse pick its own way to solid ground. "When the snow melts it'll be running over, most likely."

Ashley eyed the expanse of water, stretching up the valley to the limit of visibility. He remembered the double curve in the valley below the dam, and the crater they had left so much lower down ....

"If this wall could be destroyed, the water would flood the crater," he said abruptly. Excitement rose within him at the thought. This perhaps, was a way the humans could achieve victory ....

Kinnaird halted and looked back, turning. "You're right!" His face was animated. "The water would rush down the valley-- would certainly flood the crater and dome! Yet could we do it?"

He walked quickly back to the edge of the dam, examining it. He moved earth and rubbish with a foot, bent, stared over the edge into the valley below, and rose.

"Possibly we could," he said with growing conviction. "It looks to me as if the dam was concrete, and badly cracked throughout by shock- probably when the water was low. Probably the water only rose slowly over a long period, as plants blocked the cracks. I'd say that there's little more than the grass and rubbish holding it together now! " He estimated it with his eyes. "Working together, twenty men might breach the top. The water would do the rest- the pressure must be enormous."

"Aye, that's as may be," Jan said. "But I've been ten days the saddle-"

"I was forgetting." Kinnaird's voice was invigorated as by inner hope. "Show us what you saw. We can look into this after. Perhaps we could get together explosives---"

Ashley did not question him. He wondered, instead, where the villagers from the caves had settled. In the valley, for shelter? They would have to be found and warned.

Jan of the Downs halted and pointed to a ridge they were approaching. "It's over there," he said. "I'll come no further- Pat's had scares enough."

"You'll wait? " Kinnaird asked

"Aye. Then I'll be glad of the chance to rest and sleep.

Leaving him, they went up the rising ground and over the ridge. No second glance was necessary to discover the object that had frightened both Jan and his horse. Tall as a man, and several paces in circumference, it stood in a little hollow down the hillside.

Ashley's thoughts flashed to the huge dome and glowing sphere that shot deep into the earth and high into the heavens. The object in the hollow was undoubtedly created by the same beings -the Sentinels, as he now thought of them. Base and top were circular, light grey and separated by six slender pillars of the same appearance. Above the whole, not visibly connected to it, was a quivering disc of green light.

"You stay here- I'll look closer," Ashley said jerkily

He plodded down through the snow. As Jan had said, there was something odd in the way the thing looked. No part of it seemed solid, top, bottom and separating pillars being shadowy, like the reflection of reality alone. The eyes strove to focus. and could not. Uneasy, he walked round it. Superficially, there was nothing to cause terror- no sound, no vibration or movement. There seemed no reason why a man should not step in one side, cross the circular base, and emerge between the columns on the other. Even the shimmering disc above the contraption was only just so bright and noticeable as to attract attention, without being so vivid as to frighten the most timid bird or creature of the hills.

At one side his nostrils seemed to detect the odour of fragrant herbs. Even as he watched an abrupt, quick movement came between the pillars, and a flurry of brown as a rabbit shot from inside the contraption and raced for cover. Its unexpected appearance was as a reply to his curiosity and to the idea that had been growing as he walked round the hollow. If safe for a rabbit, should a man hesitate?

He stepped from the snow to the base of the contraption, and in through the pillars.

The world seemed to spin, collapsing and expanding about his ears. There was a sense of weightedness and rapid motion, as through universal greyness without beginning or end. Then all outer sensation ceased. Terror rang like a gong in his mind, but there awareness ended. No hearing, no seeing, no bodily sensation of either pain or comfort. Only his mind remained alive and conscious within itself, abruptly- deprived of all connection with his physical senses.

Images not of his own creating began to appear in his mind, strange, formless, arising uncalled and slipping away of their own, like dreams. They beat upon his awareness, and always seemed to be questioning- inarticulate, incomprehensible, yet demanding, and finding. Round and round the figments wove, until his consciousness retreated from them and their probing enquiry. Time passed, but could not be judged. The interrogation seemed to have lasted aeons, the watching to have been directed against his mind for ever.

Then abruptly it ceased and he slowly became aware of his body- could hear his own breathing, and the thud of his heart, and feel his eyelids open. His gaze met darkness. But it was the simple darkness caused by lack of light, not the total deprivation of sight which had left not even blackness. He moved, and could feel the tension in his limbs and muscles- struggled to sit up, and heard the breath hiss between his teeth.

Some force held his legs together and his arms at his sides. He could not rise, nor see if he was bound from shoulders to feet, or secured by other means.

The hours crept on. Hunger came, grew almost unendurable, then ceased. Thirst began, slowly increasing. Cramps racked his limbs from their enforced motionlessness. Once he slept, and tried to decide, on waking, how long his captivity had endured. The period of questioning was uncertain; also the number of hours lost in sleep. But the periods of waking awareness had been long. They totalled many hours-- perhaps forty-eight; perhaps more. Certainly not less.

Hope itself was beginning to fade when abruptly the world seemed to collapse and expand, spinning about his ears. He felt as if moving without weight through an endless greyness, then light snapped on and he found himself standing between the wavery grey pillars and about to step from the platform to the ground. He completed the step automatically, and found himself ankle-deep in snow, with a fresh wind upon his face. Away up the slope Kinnaird waved, and he went that way, all else momentarily fading before the relief of freedom.

"Find anything" Kinnaird asked.

Ashley stared at him. There was no unusual concern in the voice no astonishment at his return after so long an absence.

"I thought you foolish to go so near," Kinnaird said, his eyes still upon the object in the hollow. "I almost shouted to warn you not to go inside. But when you walked straight in and out this side, I didn't call--"

"In and out-?" Ashley whispered

"Yes. I couldn't see you inside, but you came out at once." Kinnaird turned his gaze

from the contraption for the first time. He frowned, grew astonished. "You look done in!"

Ashley licked his lips. "How long since I left you here? "

The astonishment and concern on the other's open face grew. "How long? Perhaps twenty minutes-half an hour at the most. You went down, looked round the thing, whatever it is, walked through, then came back - -"

Half an hour, Ashley thought. He was back on the hill with Kinnaird. Jan would be waiting over the hill, not restless yet because only half an hour had passed. Yet the nightmare had been real. The counted breaths, the hunger .... He had made no error.

"Has something happened?" Kinnaird asked

Ashley's knees gave. Hunger, stress, release, combined. Fainting he did not feel the other's arms go round him.

Heavy rain beat upon them as they emerged from the deep shelter, and the snow had already gone except in the deepest ridges of the hills. During the three days since returning with his friend and Jan the horseman, Ashley had often pondered on the nightmare investigation he had endured. Martin Kinnaird had heard him out patiently, expressing no disbelief though his eyes were puzzled.

"If it's as you say, then they have scientific devices we haven't dreamed of," he decided pensively. "You only appeared to be inside the contraption a few moments. If hours- or days- passed for you, then they have some means of changing the usual temporal continuity of events. With a less intelligent victim, the whole thing might be dismissed as a dream. Perhaps they-- kept you longer than usual, undecided what to do."

He said no more and Ashley could not help him. There remained the feeling that his brain had been searched. Without the long period of inert captivity following, he might have come to disbelieve that the interrogation was a mere fantasy of his mind. But there had been conscious memory, too- and hunger. In the fact of those facts, there could be no denial, just as there could as yet be no explanation.

He bent his head against the rain. "Think we can breach the dam wall?"

"I hope so. This rain and thaw should help. "

They wound over the hills, making what speed they could, Lucan Talbot and the others following, bearing tools and muffled against the rain. Ashley wished that the villagers had been found. Though they would by now be far away there remained at the back of his mind a lurking fear that they had camped in the valley. Yet for two days everyone

to be spared had searched it, and others had watched for smoke from every hilltop. Almost the whole valley was densely wooded throughout its winding length and if the villagers were there they made no sign. Even now Lilowen and some of the women were still searching against the hour when the pent waters would leap between the hills.

Often he halted on high ground, scanning the panorama below. Beyond the curtain of rain tree-tops covered all the slopes. Many people could be concealed by them. Of the women there was no sign, but each knew she must reach the safety of the hills by dawn.

The party rested, ate, and went on. The lake above the barrier was high and brown, swollen by the rain and melted snow from the extensive vales beyond. Water already trickled over its top, streaming down among the grass and bushes that held the broken wall together.

Roped one to another, the men began to work on the centre of the dam, weakening it methodically. At each end of the structure others watched, ready to signal instantly if any general collapse began. Rain hissed and danced on the upheld waters and pelted upon heads and shoulders. During the night they camped in darkness on the rim of the valley above the lake. Once, very high, something zoomed in the swift trajectory across the night sky, unseen above the rain and cloud. Ashley said nothing, but wondered if his companions heard it. It could mean that the Sentinels had other camps. If so, to what purpose was this attempt to flood the valley?

With dawn, two of the women appeared from the slopes below the dam, soaked, tired, and shaking their heads. Later, others came, each with the same story. No sign of the wandering cave tribe was to be found- no trail left by their passing, no spark of fire in the night, or sound. Ashley let his glance rove over the depths of the valley, lost in distant mists, and wondered whether the search, long as it had been, was conclusive. The area of the valley must have totalled many square miles. All his old companions were skilled at hunting and hiding. Afraid, they might move without trace, and lie concealed, trusting no one.

Lilowen did not return and he began to grow uneasy as the sky became fully light. The roped gang upon the barrier had now broken up into small parties and men were being lowered down the precipitous face of the dam, digging away the soil, grass and bushes at many points.

"They're going to put in explosives," Kinnaird said. "Some of it is homemade, but it should do the trick."

Ashley scarcely listened. Away down the valley, from which his eyes had seldom strayed, was a rise, and upon it a figure, minute with distance, had appeared, waving.

His grasp went upon his friend's arm.

"Lilowen, daughter of Bate- "

Martin Kinnaird wrinkled up his eyes. "I haven't the keen distant sight you have, Ashley."

"Under the clump of trees." He pointed. Her gestures were complex, seeming to indicate that they come to her, yet that something away behind her in the valley was what she wished them to see.

"She should be up out of the valley by now!" Kinnaird said abruptly. "Once the explosive is touched off, the rest will be a matter of minutes only-"

Ashley turned for the side of the valley. "Wait! I am going down!"

Even as he ran Kinnaird's voice drifted after him. "Bring her up! We can't wait. We may be discovered. Every minute dangerous--"

His words were lost in the sound of the rain and the swish of the sodden branches as Ashley plunged down the side of the valley. As he ran he hoped that the sense of direction given by a lifetime in the open would not desert him.

The trees were tall, the ground sodden. The rain and melted snow had long since concealed any tracks which might have existed. It seemed a long time before the way began to rise slightly towards the spot where Lilowen had been standing. There was no sign of her, no reply when he called.

From the rise he looked back. The dam was far away and above. the men like tiny puppets jerking and crawling on the faces of the barrier. Kinnaird was watching through binoculars, and gestured urgently with one hand.

Ashley called again, and there was a reply, distant but repeated more loudly. Lilowen came from amid the trees.. her wet garments clinging to her, her hair devoid of covering. Agitation trembled on her face.

"Your people are in the valley-- "

"Where?" Dismayed, he thought of the dam, and Kinnaird's words

"A long way back. They had hidden in old caverns, afraid to make fire by night or go out by day." Her bright eyes were intently upon him and she seemed to be taking strength from his presence. "It was to be a refuge until they felt it safe to go on."

He held her arm. "The caverns are high on the valley side ? "

"No!" Her golden, wet hair curled round her shoulders at the vigour of her denial. "They are low down- near the course of the water that finds its way over the dam."

The breath hissed between his lips. "You warned them? "

"I tried." Her tone was piteous. "They didn't seem to understand, or think it urgent-"

"But everyone was to be out of the valley by dawn! "

"I know." She nodded mutely.

"Then we must hurry! "

He turned to wave to Kinnaird, and halted, the very beat of his heart pausing. Above the dam hung a luminous object, poised on hazy beams of violet light. Large, resembling the three seen over the caves where he had lived, it was momentarily stationary, as if beings within it observed the men below, judging of their activity. Kinnaird still stood like a carved figure at the end of the dam, but his companions on it were swarming up their ropes, running along the barrier top, and scattering upon the sides of the valley. It was dangerous to wait, Kinnaird had said ....

Then flashes dotted themselves across the face of the dam and plumes of white smoke sprouted and rose. The wall cracked, began to fail. Brown water shot through. Even as the explosions reached his ears Ashley saw a huge section of the dam topple forward, impelled by a solid mass of water that leapt in a turmoil against the crumbling rampart. Beyond, seen with nightmare clarity, the nearest edge of the lake was visible, abruptly sloping down like a smooth brown hillside--the first fearful movement of the vast miles of water beyond.

Ashley grasped Lilowen's hand and ran. As he went he thought half consciously that Kinnaird had done the right thing. If it had been a choice of this moment or never-then the dam should go. With the Sentinels' craft already overhead, any delay could have caused failure.

A whispering began behind them, very distant, growing slowly into a murmur so ponderous that the earth shook beneath their fleeing feet. Mixed with the murmurings there grew the sound of snapping trees and a rushing as of a great wind.

"Your people! " Lilowen gasped as she ran

He doubted if anything could be done now. If they had remained in the caverns, it was the end.

Gasping, stumbling, he thought of the vast body of water above the dam. Miles in extent, it would inundate the valley below. Run as they would, they were too slow- could not hope to gain any point high enough to escape the flood ....

The rushing grew to a roar, gurgling and hammering as continuous thunder. Great trees snapped and cracked. Behind, mounting high above them, came the great wall of water, carrying on its crest a murderous flotsam of branches, bushes and rubbish. In the instant of turning Ashley's arms locked round Lilowen, and her arms came round him as her cry of terror was lost in the roaring water. An unendurable force smote him, compressing, agonising, lifting his feet as feathers from the earth. Brown fury lashed round him and though his muscles creaked his arms were dragged open and left empty, beating wildly amid the debris of the flood.

When overhanging bushes at last came into his grasp, Ashley did not know how long he had fought the buffeting waters. He dragged himself to solid ground, turned round and sat up, breathing heavily.

All the lower reaches of the valley were flooded so deeply that no treetop showed. Higher, where the water had risen with less violence, branches stood above the swirling brown, swaying and dipping with the pressure of the current. Masses of twigs and rubbish floated past on the surface, mixed with the uprooted trunks of smaller trees, spinning and twisting from his very feet to the distant hillsides across the valley.

He rose unsteadily and sought higher ground. Unexpectedly, the water was still slowly rising, creeping over the spot where he had rested. Reaching a hillock, he was compelled to pause again. Dumbly he wondered if a mere girl could have lived in the swell of released waters, and whether all his old companions had perished where they lay concealed.

After a long time he began to pick his way along the slopes a little above the water line, often pausing to scan the flood, and as often finding no sign of man or woman, dead or living. The current had carried him down the valley beyond sight of the remains of the dam. Nothing showed what its destroyers were doing, or if the object poised on hazy violet beams had gone away.

As he went on he felt increased astonishment at the height the water had maintained. Nor was its level subsiding, but rather seeming to rise slowly while at the same time its velocity decreased.

He began to wonder whether he would ever see Lilowen again, the slender, agile girl who had risked danger to warn the cave dwellers. Shivering, fatigued by the struggle, he made slow progress. At last it grew too dark to see across the water and he sat down, hungry and cold, to wait for dawn.

With the first glimmer of daylight he rose stiffly and went on. For the first time a new fact struck him- he was on the wrong side of the flooded valley. Only from the opposite range of hills could Kinnaird's camp be reached. In his present exhaustion he could never swim across to those remote slopes, he was sure. Only if the water went down, shortening the distance, could the attempt be made.

He judged it near noon when the hills flanking the crater came into view. Nowhere along the waters edge had he found sign that anyone but himself had survived the deluge. Numbed, tired, he struggled on. The slopes rose, flattened out, and he found himself looking down upon the crater from an unaccustomed angle. Simultaneously, the very core of his being seemed to creep with astonishment and terror and he froze, staring below.

The strange dome was intact, and no water was in the crater. A little higher up the valley an almost invisible green radiance played, and the flood stood piled there in a vertical wall, dammed in its path.

Dimly he realised that this was the meaning of the reduced current and high level. Unable to escape, the waters were backing slowly up the valley, finding a new level in an extending lake that halted like a precipice.

Limbs quivering, he withdrew under a tree and tried to discern what held the water back. Except for the faint green light, there was nothing. Many times taller than the tallest tree, the cliff of water hung there. Below, protected by forces unknown, the unearthly construction that Kinnaird and he had first seen was unharmed, untouched by the flood as was the whole valley beyond the invisible barrier.

After a long time he turned away and withdrew among the trees. To try so much, and lose so much- and gain so little. It was unnerving. Stumbling, he bit his lips and swore against the enemy that had come unbidden to an Earth already eclipsed in night and disaster. Such beings as the Sentinels apparently had no use for men, or respect for the way in which mankind had fought its way up to civilisation. Instead, the very downfall of men seemed to offer a chance they could take so that they might make Earth their own, Ashley thought. With such means as the green radiance could they protect themselves, making useless man's greatest efforts. He wondered whether this new development would awaken the Sentinels to punitive efforts against humanity. The flood showed men were ready to fight- and those who struck the first blow must expect to be hit back. The thought was alarming. With it in his mind he lay down and slept.

As he slumbered he dreamt that men who move swiftly and silently in the night lifted him and bore him rapidly back along beside the water. The dream seemed to last a long time, blending with fantasies of his tired and sluggish mind. Sometimes he

stirred, but his great inner fatigue was too great and full awareness did not come.

When he awoke it was light. Memories came back slowly. Stiff he rubbed his limbs, sitting up and shaking the stupor from his head.

His surroundings were not those in which he had lain down to sleep. Across the valley, clear in the morning light, was the remote end of the crumbled dam, its centre now toppled from sight under the waters. Twenty paces from him down the slope was its near rim, terminating against the hillside. Where its top had been torn away a dark hole gaped in the rock, uncovered by the dislodged masonry and left high above the surface of the lake, whose level had dropped to flood the valley below. Up out of the hole, walking hand in hand in single file, came six men.

He sat up, the numbness of sleep gone. Men- yet not men. Naked white like things born in the dark, they moved with eyes closed, speaking briefly in voices having an odd, high pitched tone. They came towards him unerringly, and he jumped to his feet backing away. At the movement the six halted, faces directed towards him.

"You are awake," the leader said.

Ashley's fear began to subside, leaving only shock and astonishment. The six were thin, slight and stunted. Oddly childlike, they faced him and his unease turned to pity. Never had he seen such weaklings, so bony, narrow-chested and sorry. He licked his lips.

"I am awake."

They turned their faces away from his, up at the sky, round at the trees. Horrified, he saw that their eyes never opened; nor did their lids flicker.

"It is- strange," one said.

The voice lacked all bass resonance and had a curious sibilance as of someone accustomed to whisper. Only with difficulty could Ashley follow the words. His gaze dashed to the hole.

"You have- been down there-"

Their leader faced him. "We- we do not know what has happened. Often we came to the inner stream to fish, as our fathers taught us. But there was a great noise, and shaking, and the waters went down--"

He moaned. Ashley felt compassion near to tears. "You- can not see," he whispered.

One of them faced him. "What is see?"

The leader's pale features trembled. "There was a legend of seeing, which my grandfather told me. A legend about coming down out of light, to hide . . ."

"Go on," Ashley breathed

"I do not remember much. It was that his father had told him that once was light and seeing, and that we must always try to find light and seeing again. I thought it but one of the tales the old folk tell when fishing has been good and they have eaten well. The tales were so many. Of strange food all ready for eating in boxes. Of light in our world too, until the thing that made it ceased. Of trying to find light- of forgetting what light was-"

Spasms ran across his face. Still holding his companion's hand, he turned his face up to the sky.

"I had never believed. But here is a strangeness- and openness and something here, too"-he put his hand too his eyes. "A pain, and feeling in my head-"

One of the others pulled his hand. "Let us go back. It is not well out here. The air moves about us, and there are many sounds."

Ashley stepped forward slowly, his thought still chaotic. "You carried me here ?"

"Yes," the leader said. "We followed the water, searching for fish as our fathers had taught us. We found you. Then we were afraid, and a feeling began to come in our heads-" Again his hand went to his closed eyes. "It is not well."

Suddenly they turned. Hand in hand, in single file, they disappeared back into the cavern. Trembling, Ashley watched them go. Three hundred years . . . Generation after generation living in the dark, fishing those sections of the vast shelter which the lake had flooded. Forgetting the world above . . . Ten generations in the dark, he thought. Babies would never open their eyes- men and women would live and die, whispering and groping their way about the corridors of the deep shelter.

Something caught in his throat. Unashamed, he felt tears stream down his face. The night of humanity indeed. Thus had man done unto man.

Under the dawn sky the waters were still now, extending in unruffled grey to the remote line of hills. Judging the distance for the twentieth time, Ashley knew he could not swim it. Exposure, hunger, fatigue all had reduced his strength.

He rose stiffly and went on, again continuing his search along the miles of the lake

rim. Below the crater extended the radio-active stream no creature dared approach or ford. Higher up the valley, above the ruined dam, lay the vast reservoir filling the basin of the valley for many miles. Must he therefore take to the water, hoping his strength would last . . .?

Ahead, beyond a precipitous drop, voices sounded among the trees. His attention quickened. They were surely voices he knew, not the weak twitter of the dark dwellers.

He reached the top of the headlong slope. Twenty feet below, at the foot of the sheer drop, men were coming from under the trees. He recognised Doc Melvil, with his grey hair all awry, and some of the council of seven. Bernard Rimaster came after them, walking with something of his usual arrogance. They halted, realising that the earth slope could not be scaled.

Ashley stood on its edge and waved. "Follow along from the water it is not far-"

Their faces turned up towards him and they halted. Their expressions of surprise became something that changed Ashley's inner joy into cold unease. _

"It is the son of the trader," one said

The tone made anxiety substitute Ashley's unease. It had held no gladness, no welcome.

Rimaster stared up at him and shook his fist. His wide face was dark with passion.

"You led those they call Sentinels to our caves! When we found new shelter you caused the valley to be flooded !"

Ashley's tongue momentarily clung to his lips. No face below was friendly. Even Melvil's was doubtful. A lawmaker brandished his staff.

"Some of our women were drowned! We too, would be dead if the girl Lilowen had not warned us so that we set watch--"

Others were coming from the trees and suddenly a cry began, "Kill him! Kill the son of the trader!"

Ashley's tongue unfroze. "The Sentinels found the hill caves them selves-"

No one was listening. They shook their fists, their voices drowning his words. One was pulling out a sling. Ashley recognised him as a man who could bring down a running deer at thirty paces, and withdrew quickly from the rift. No man living could scale the

slippery red earth. But away from the waterside its height decreased rapidly. Scarcely a hundred paces away the slope was such that they could all surmount it. Already the voices of the most fleet were fading that way.

Ashley turned and ran, stumbling sometimes, bitter disappointment replacing all other emotion. It would be a long way to the edge of the mined dam. Even there he would find no safety, and the lake lay among hills he had never traversed.

Shouts told that his pursuers had scaled the barrier behind and away to his right and he tried to increase his pace. Tough and fleet, normally he would have been confident. But weariness had slowed his muscles, while anger lent speed to those following.

He emerged upon open ground and saw far ahead the curving headland where the dam had been. Fifty paces from where he was, stood trees. He reached them just as the first of his pursuers gained the open grassy slope. The space between hunted and hunters had decreased. A cry came after him.

"There he goes ! Kill him ! "

He ran swiftly, panting, seeking always the easiest way among the trees. As he ran he knew that he could not escape by speed alone. Bushes and undergrowth now hid the others, but the sound of their progress was near.

The trees thinned and he saw that he was upon the edge of the lake where the dam had been. Beyond, the going was more difficult. The voices behind were louder. He flung a glance around, and at the leaden waters. Here it was that the six blind cave-dwellers had stood, hand in hand, withdrawing afterwards, to the only world they understood. His eyes sought the cavern entrance, failed, then discovered it. Hidden among the shelving rubble left by the collapse, it might go unseen by men who did not suspect its existence.

He scrambled for the opening and slid through it even as the voices came loud and clear behind among the trees. Inside, he froze, afraid that any movement might dislodge the loose stones.

The opening into the daylight was scarcely larger than a man. At his back was rock, cold and slippery as if from long immersion. Foot-steps came on the earth above, and pebbles clattered across the opening. Then the steps went and the voices receded.

He studied the cavern, his eyes growing accustomed to the dimness. The shaft in which he stood might have been fashioned by the same designer as the entrances to the hill caves in which he had lived, he thought. Ankle-deep mud, still wet, showed the reservoir waters had filled it for an age.

Voices sounded again above, approaching. They were returning to search, he thought. Catching no sight of him beyond, they suspected he hid. With a last look at the rectangle of daylight, he turned and began to make his way deeper into the hillside.

The light faded very slowly, glimmering on the dark walls. Indistinct impressions in the mud showed the six had indeed come this way. Once he halted, thinking he heard a man's voice at the tunnel entrance. It was not repeated.

His feet sucked in the mud and in many places water dripped monotonously from higher levels. So dim became the light that he halted, one hand on the slimy wall. He sensed that a larger chamber opened out ahead. Judging from the caves in which he had lived, other tunnels would lead from it, terminating in a ring of inter-connecting rooms. Each had been built to shelter many people, Martin Kinnaird had said. Ashley had marvelled. Yet had admitted too, that all the caverns were uniform, as if made by men.

Bends in the tunnel behind prevented any glimpse of the outside world, but walls, roof and floor showed with dim, reflected radiance. The logical thing was to wait, he thought. When night came it should be safe to leave.

He rested his back against the wall, listening to the drip of moisture from above. The air was damp and still. Each falling spot of water caused its own echoes. During generations a people always living in such corridors would learn not to shout. He shivered. The whispery, chirping voices of the dark dwellers repelled him. Sub-human. Pitiable.

At length he squatted on the muddy floor, arms locked round his legs and his chin on his knees. Hunger was returning, and the chill of his surroundings increased at his stillness. Cramped and sad, he slipped into a half-consciousness near the sleep of utter fatigue.

Awareness returned slowly, and with it the knowledge that a voice had been calling for a long time, then had ceased. A frightened voice -a woman's, that like a half-remembered dream reminded him of Lilowen.

He rose, muscles hurting. The dim reflected light had faded. Night was near.

He risked a shout. No answer came, only echoes vibrating like many receding voices down the passages. After they had ceased another sound came. Reply or call he knew not. Nor the direction. Weak, distant, echoing, reminding him more strongly of the girl torn from his arms by the flood.

He set his back to the fading daylight and began to feel his way on into the deeper ways of the labyrinth. Soon all light was gone. His eyes encountered only blackness,

but the way rose so that mud no longer dragged his feet.

How long he walked it was impossible to tell. At first he strove to maintain a clear idea of direction. Later, he knew the task impossible. Walking with one hand against the wall, the other outstretched, he sensed that he had passed many chambers and openings. Often he halted to call and listen. For along time no reply came, then Lilowen's voice sounded again, unmistakable.

Her calls grew louder, carrying a new note of hope. The echoes became less confusing. At last he knew her to be near . . . her voice came out of the dark ahead, trembling with gladness. Then he had touched her, was holding her in his arms. Her fingers passed over his face. She began to cry, shaking. He stroked her hair, damp yet silken.

"Do not cry, daughter of Bate-- "

She was still. "It is from gladness "

"I thought you drowned."

"I found a floating tree-" He felt her shudder at the memory. "Men who walk with closed eyes brought me here."

"They meant well- they have no other home."

She stood at his side, holding his fingers. "We must not stay here. Listen."

He did. Somewhere far away was a low moaning, rising and falling, growing and fading, yet always a little louder than before. As of a hundred wailing voices, the sound put cold fingers to Ashley's spine. -

"The dark dwellers" he breathed.

"Yes. One told me they are dying. The old water-passages which they have fished are dry. They scatter bait there, as their fathers and grandfathers taught them, but there is nothing. They have no food-"

He did not answer. The level of the reservoir had fallen. Now that the dam was gone it could never rise to fill the lower tunnels of the labyrinth.

"Their fear may turn to anger against us," Lilowen murmured.

He knew her words true. He remembered the pale, lined faces of the six. Their naked bodies, closed eyes, wasted limbs and chirping voices. Here, the spark of humanity had burned low. They could not under-stand the world above, or comprehend why the

age-old waters had drained from their fishing grounds. There was only anger and a deep fear, heard now in the wailing lament that grew and grew. He pictured them moving swiftly through the passages they knew so well, hand in hand, sightless yet never knowing what vision was. The inner thrill of danger and warning could not be suppressed.

He turned abruptly and began to retrace the way he had come. Behind followed Lilowen's steps and breathing, very close, but she did not speak. Nor did he voice his uppermost thought- he did not know the way out.

The next hour was of nightmare terror. All sense of direction itself seemed to go. Always his eyes sought for some hint of light, and found none. The ceaseless moaning came very near, and then grew more distant. He shivered, wondering what strange mental agony drove the dark dwellers tirelessly through the passages of their world. A search for waters to fish . . .? An aimless flight attuned to their hand in hand progress in the dark . . . Or were they combing all the tunnels systematically, expecting thus to catch any stranger ?

He hurried, pitying them with all his being. Their darkness was of the spirit, also. Their enduring midnight was without hope- could end only in the kindness of death.

"We are lost," Lilowen said at last.

He did not deny it. The passages seemed without end. Yet the way to freedom was near, if chance would but direct their steps that way.

He had given up hope when his feet began to drag in mud. So slight that it could have been fantasy, a clearer air smelling of growing things seemed to breathe against his face. He took Lilowen'e hand, steadying her while she stumbled, and drove his aching muscles on. The air was more pure ... quite suddenly a distant, immeasurable dim oblong of light showed, easing the complete blackness that had so long oppressed his eyes. He tugged his companion's arm. She started, and he knew she had been walking with closed eyes. Thus easily did habits begin . . . Tears glistened on her cheeks when they emerged by the side of the half drained lake. Stars shone, blessed and clear. A half moon was low above the trees on the hilltop.

"Let us rest until dawn," she whispered.

They found a spot higher up the hills. Ashley broke a stick and sat with it under one hand. Away below the shadows around the rocks were deep and still. Beyond, the water lay like glass. He did not sleep.

Ashley stood with the weak morning sun at his back and watched the antics of the Sentinels on the edge of the crater. For a long time the realisation of one fact had

been growing in his mind- men, in their conflict against each other, had reduced mankind to insignificance. Humanity, through its own folly, could not combat these newcomers. Therefore men must seek truce or understanding with them.

Individual Sentinels were hard to distinguish. Sometimes there was a glimpse as of reflections on water momentarily still. Then it was gone. Their movements seemed as a coming and going through the stuff of moments of now which Ashley could count out in heart-beats. Seen, the Sentinals were dimly recognisable as adult forms of the transparent, vibrant eggs found in the nest dome. The eyes hurt to watch them. Sight of them was as if through fitfully changing prisms, while the crater edge stood solid and finite beneath.

They came across the trees and he felt their minds searching for him. Violin strings twanged in his mind. A humming as of the seeking passage of swift wasps sounded again and again in his head. His nerves drew taut. With all his will he resisted against the desire to run, striving for tranquillity and contact.

He closed his eyes against the movements that earthly vision could not comprehend. With half his mind he wondered if he had risked too much. Old Samul had died. Gill and Rudge had vanished. He could only trust their deaths had arisen in error- had arisen because the newcomers to Earth had not then known the fragility of flesh and blood.

Suddenly a stillness came around him. Sun and wind were gone. No earth beneath his feet, no hillside . . . A tingling began over body and limbs, but instantly ceased. Then the stillness went also, replaced by a feeling of rapid movement.

He opened his eyes. The flooded valley and hills were half a mile below. His feet were upon a smooth, transparent door below which shone violent beams, vanishing downwards. Instinctively he knew that he was in one of the vessels such as had hovered over the hill caves. It was gaining height, so that the scene fell away below. The whisper of air about its hull told of its velocity, increasing too.

The valley slid behind. New hills appeared, and were lost. Time after time the barren pits were seen, some great, some small. In three hundred years nature had crept back to hide in shame the wounds of man's making. In places the craters were thick, so that their rims over-lapped in confusion. Once, away to his right, he glimpsed an area many miles in extent, churned up into ridge upon ridge still uncovered by trees or bush. Near was a vast expanse of dead earth, as if some dreadful chemical had fallen there.

Seas glinted below, then came wide lands equally pitted, sometimes hidden by mile upon mile of forest. At last Ashley closed his eyes, emotion overpowered him.

"All your planet is thus," a voice said in his mind.

He opened his eyes, searching the narrow compartment. Nothing met his gaze, but to his left the scene was hazy and flickering, as if some refractive object stood between himself and the glass-like wall.

"It was done by your kind," the voice said.

The sun began to slip backwards in the sky. Night came. Then day and night again, repeated with quickening speed. Soon there was only a continuous semi-light, and a broad band like sunshine across the sky, wavering from solstice to solstice. In the semi-light the trees below shrank. Bushes and verdure melted away. The craters grew sharper in outline. The naked areas around them increased. Abruptly craters and bare earth were gone. Noble cities pointed at the sky. . Roads stretched ribbon-like through cultivated lands. Simultaneously the sun halted in the heavens and began to drift once again from east to west. Night came. With it hordes of craft filled the skies.

Rockets streaked upon their brief trajectory, dying in pools of vivid fire. Buildings tumbled. Fitful light showed vehicles and people streaming from the cities. Still the craft came. Beneath them grew and grew a cataclysm of destruction and fire. Vast clouds of glowing powders rained from projectiles too high to see. The vehicles and people upon the roads grew still. At last Ashley could endure it no longer and pressed his palms to his eyes. When he removed them the wavering band was again in the sky. It slowed its motion. The greyness became flickering night and day. The days lengthened, and the sun halted in a wintry sky. Below were the forests he knew. A great trembling came upon his limbs.

From the heart of the ship the Sentinels watched the human they had taken, puzzled yet marvelling. At first they had supposed no intelligent life existed in the planet they had reached. Their traps had caught only simple creatures whose minds were empty of all but lowly, inarticulate knowledge. Then a larger creature had come. In his mind was strange knowledge. Regretfully the Sentinels realised they had already destroyed others of his kind. It had been an unavoidable error. Mankind had not been recognised as an intelligent life-form.

They strove to quieten the single human's fear, and reviewed the knowledge gained when once before he had lain their captive. In his mind was hope, fear, determination, and doubt. They saw that he could be noble; was brave and wished good for others. They saw that he had come to them, this second time, hoping for understanding instead of conflict.

They scanned back over the time-stuff of the past, again watching his approach over the hills. Afraid, he had not faltered. Deep in the vibration of molecules forming their being, they felt a new respect for him.

Now, with all their power, they tried to convey to him a suggestion and a plea. They had mined the surface of his planet without finding what they sought. They had spread, searched, tried again and again- and failed. Doubly difficult was the information they strove to convey because no thought-pattern for it existed in the human's mind. Their own term for the material they sought was incomprehensible to him. His mind was empty of oral or visual thought-patterns of it, giving no basis upon which they could build symbols he would understand.

Using techniques they had evoked in remote galaxies, they took him into the past. There, such shock and terror had seized his mind that their mental contact was momentarily broken. Back over the flooded valley, they prepared to set him down. Their wordless call went again to him- We are far from home. Help us, earthman.

Ashley stood on the sparse grass and watched the vessel float aloft on its hazy beams. The voices in his mind seemed to remain, whispering. Help us, help us . . .

He set his back to the crater and began to plod along the hills. Without knowing the means employed, he understood that the Sentinels could weave backwards along the very warp of time. But to do so expended energy. When the energy was gone they snapped back like the middle of a taut string. But it was not that they had wished to tell him. Instead there was a complex picture of man's destruction, its cause, mining, and great ships that still had incalculable light-years of space to traverse.

The hills by the crater sank from view behind. He hoped Lilowen had followed his advice, hiding opposite the broken dam. For the moment he felt he could think no more upon the new information and questions in his mind. He wanted rest, and the aid of Kinnaird and his companions.

Complete exhaustion was very near when Lilowen came from the trees, obviously searching him. She held his hands.

"Your friends are making a bridge across the waters. Soon it will be finished."

He nodded, moving as if in a dream. Sleep must come first- rest... food ... It was comforting to know that both sides of the valley were again connected, he thought heavily.

Martin Kinnaird stood on the lake shore with his back to the gently bobbing bridge and drew his brows low over his clear blue eyes. His strongly lined face was pensive, his hands in pockets at his hips.

"You got the idea it was something to do with our past ?"

Ashley nodded. "With the destruction of three hundred years ago They didn't take me

back in mere idleness."

"It wasreal?"

"Definitely." Ashley considered slowly. Less tired, no longer, hungry, he nevertheless experienced difficulty in putting his thoughts into words. "The same must have happened, briefly, when I entered the contraption in the hollow. They examined me, then returned me to the moment of entering, to make it seem to anyone outside that no examination had taken place--"

"I did find it difficult to believe you." Kinnaird admitted.

"They are tied to the present, though more loosely than we. They took me back to see the great explosions, I think. I felt they wanted to know where on this planet they could End the substances causing those explosions--"

He halted. It was impossible to put into words. Yet to his astonishment a gleam of understanding had appeared in Kinnaird's eyes. Excitement gleamed on his face.

"They want fissionable minerals, Ashley! They told you of mining without success ?"

"I felt so- in many places, with equipment like that we saw."

"Then it fits !" Kinnaird declared. "They want fissionable materials, or ores. They've failed to find any, and I'm not surprised. Our ancestors used most of them. That was why the great blow-up was so tremendous. For a hundred years every nation armed like mad."

Ashley understood. "The planet is so big they could never find the old mines."

They camped some distance away in the hills, but Ashley could find little rest. Memories of the dark dwellers would return again and again. How pitiable and hopeless their lives, he thought. Better that they had never lived.

Kinnaird's words hung in his mind. Man, in his dreadful midnight of self-destruction, had almost exhausted all supplies of what the Sentinels sought. Yet they believed mankind could still help them. It was puzzling. They had taken him into the past, shown him the populous Earth, and seemed to pose a question in his brain...

He walked the camp, morose and restless. When darkness came he could not sleep. Instead, endlessly, his mind dwelt upon the past. Out of the chaos and welter of conflicting thoughts a dim idea began to dawn.

Too formless to be called a plan, too vague to be clothed in words, the idea gained

strength while he sat, chin on knees, waiting for the first light of the east. At last he rose, his lips compressed and brows drawn down. He could try.

Morning came, bleak; misty and chill. He sought out Kinnaird amid the rough shelters they had erected. The lake was hidden beyond shadowy trees from which moisture dripped.

"Once you showed me some of the things that have been saved," he said.

Kinnaird rose from filling his pack."Behind the locked steel door ?"

"Yes. Records. References. Books, as you call them. "

The other drew tight a strap. "There was quite a lot of stuff. We've been through it all pretty thoroughly. The place was probably a deep shelter strongroom of some kind--"

"I know," Ashley said, "That's why I'm wondering if there was any thing which would help."

Kinnaird ceased his preparations and turned keen eyes on him, "Help what ?"

"Show where the best mining areas were."

Understanding began to come into the keen eyes. "For fissionable ore material- ?"

"Of course ."

Doubt replaced the understanding. "But the mines were probably worked out."

Ashley shook his head. "On the contrary. They were at their best- a hundred years before the blow-up."

Kinnaird's comprehension suddenly illuminated his whole face. " The Sentinels could go back to that age and take what they wanted ! "

"Yes," Ashley agreed, "If they knew where to look. I believe that's what they tried to tell me. It's clear they haven't been successful in finding radioactive ore in sufficient quantity. If any sources remain, the general activity from the craters probably upsets any detector equipment they have. If they searched before the blow-up there would be difficulties- they haven't sufficient energy available to keep them in the past for long periods. But if we could tell them exactly where to look-"

He ended expressively and Kinnaird pursed his lips in concentration. " There may have been something in the strongroom."

"I want you to go back with me and search." For the second time in his life Ashley wished with all his might that he could read. The first time had been when Kinnaird took down one of the things of many leaves which he called books. "It's a very long way- "

"But worth trying were it twenty times as far!" Kinnaird put in. " We'll go alone- travel fast and light."

The miles seemed doubly long and a sharp wind had arisen, following them over the hills. At noon the sky was grey and low, and darkness came soon, forcing them to halt. Sleet came on the wind the whole night, and Ashley rose, shivering, at the first dim light of dawn.

Later, he noticed that Kinnaird limped. The other smiled, the smile half a grimace and obviously hiding pain.

"Had an accident years ago- slipped when we were working on the dam and twisted the same leg-"

Their pace was reduced and a white line of suffering was round his compressed lips when at last they reached the entrance and descended out of the biting wind. They rested, ate, and Kinnaird began to search. Ashley watched him, unable to help. The characters on the book spines meant nothing; each page within might have been the same. He marvelled that his companion did not need to give even the most cursory glance to many volumes.

At last Kinnaird opened a slender book upon the table, and unfolded out of it a large sheet marked in many colours. His finger traced a line of characters.

"Mineral sources in Europe, latter part of 20th Century," he read. He referred to an index and began pointing at red dots, "Here are the Carpathians- you can't mistake them, that's the Danube and Black Sea." He indicated the outline. "Most other sources are scattered-"

"The Sentinels could go straight there." Ashley studied the map keenly. A thousand miles or more made no difference, he thought, remembering his experience in the vessel. "It's turned out better than I dared hope."

Kinnaird's face had become grey. "You want to go back to them soon ?"

"At once."

There was silence and Ashley read the truth in his friend's eyes There was a limit to

endurance- and Kinnaird had reached it.

He took the book gently. "I'll go alone. I don't need to read this now you've shown me."

When he left the shelter entrance the wind was strong in his face swirling with sleet that cut like tiny knives. He drew his cellar high grasped his staff, and set himself against the gale.

The hills seemed unending. Darkness came quickly, and he walked until he feared direction might be lost, then camped on a slope where thin bushes gave little protection. The long hours of night crept by. Shivering and stiff, he rose at the first light and plodded on, eyes searching for a familiar configuration in the hills.

The way was long and his fatigue was mounting. He ate from his pack, rested, marched again, and decided that he could not reach the lake by nightfall. Sheltering trees tempted him, and he slept beneath them. With dawn, he again set his face towards the lake. Individuals, himself included, had ceased to matter.

As he walked he wondered if he would find the Sentinels again and make them understand. Understand they must-for their own sake and the sake of all mankind.

The camp had been broken, everyone was gone. He wondered if they had followed Kinnaird, taking some other path so that he had not met them.

The fragile bridge bobbed when he set foot on it, ripples spreading across the lake. Its far end was lost in a belt of low mist, grey and chill. He assured himself that the book was still in his pocket, and walked carefully on the bundles of reeds and brush. A grave and urgent responsibility had become his- a duty greater than personal danger.

A figure began to show in the mist ahead, approaching. As the distance decreased he loomed bigger. Strong, with height to match; dark, with a wide face. He strode rapidly, gaze bent on the floating causeway.

Ashley halted. The other realised his presence and stopped too. Across ten paces their eyes met.

"So you had hidden, son of a trader!"

Ashley bitterly regretted his own folly. Arising at dawn he had left his staff where it lay- but the other was not thus unarmed. A short, hard laugh, killed of echoes by the mist, showed the fact was realised.

"Let me pass !" Ashley commanded.

Rimaster laughed again. With heavy steps that set the bridge bobbing he approached. The triumph in his eyes was clear.

"Let me pass !" Ashley grated."Afterwards we will fight how when and where you choose !"

Rimaster chuckled." This is as I choose."

The tone showed talk was useless. Impossible to convince Rimaster that even the most bitter personal conflict could become unimportant.

"Very well," Ashley said. "Throw away your stick."

As answer Rimaster lunged and the staff took him in the stomach. Under their combined weight, the mats and bundles tilted, sinking. Slow from fatigue, Ashley found himself sprawled in the water. Above him Rimaster raised the staff murderously. It descended, swishing. Ashley jerked, saving his head. The staff rose again. Feet apart, Rimaster hesitated, planning his blow. Ashley knew that this time he would not miss.

Then a man came running along the bridge, bobbing it wildly. His arms lapped round Rimaster and both went into the water with a splash. Gasping, Ashley scrambled to the jerking reeds. A grey head appeared. He grasped a shoulder and found himself face to face with Doc Melvil

"Couldn't let him strike you down like that, Traderson..."

He helped Melvil to the bridge. Rimaster was floundering at its edge. Ashley caught his arms, jerked him half out of the water, and smote him on the jaw. The concussion to his knuckles gave him sharp pleasure. With a second jerk he landed Rimaster flat on his back on the half submerged bridge.

"Watch him until he comes round, Doc," he said.

He stepped back and the brushwood rose. From beyond the inert form Melvil waved.

"I'd like to have done the same."

Ashley grinned crookedly, turned, and set on across the bridge. He felt in no mood for scraps. They wasted time.

The distant bank emerged slowly from the mist. To his relief the slopes beyond were empty of figures. Apparently Rimaster had come to the bridge alone.

Mist hung thick and white among the trees and on the slopes and Ashley walked in enveloping silence. He felt confident that the Sentinels had watched him and would know of his coming.

He had only traversed the first hills when the sound as of rapidly passing wasps began. Disjointed forms came and went, oscillating from dimension to dimension. He halted letting them encircle him. Many quickly plucked violin strings were in his ears again, pinging in rapid vibration. Then with searing directness contact was gained. Wordless thought symbols flashed into his brain.

"You have returned to help us ? "

"Yes," he thought. "I understand what you need and can show you where to mine. I have a map- a drawing of the land, sea and rivers."

Turmoil incomprehensible to his mind arose, then the awareness contacting him came through again.

"We can go now ."

He was whisked through greyness. The greyness faded, leaving a vessel in which he rode silently and swiftly above the hills. The lake slid away behind, and he opened the book and unfolded the map. A vision not as of earthly eyes seemed to be watching, and he traced the course, showing the dots where the mineral deposits lay. The movement of the terrain below gained speed. A narrow strip of sea passed, then the hills, plains and rivers of a large land-mass. Everywhere was the same desolation as he had first seen.

At length motion ceased and ahead loomed high mountains, peaks high in a cloud-decked sky.

"This is the area," a voice said in his mind.

Minutes passed, then the voice came again. "We have not yet travelled back in time. Great energy is used to maintain the ship in the past. We are not robbers, nor do we wish to take too plentifully of minerals not our own. When we return to the past ages and mine there, what we take will be lost to you and your fellows for ever, as if it had never been. From that age the future of your world will be changed. It will be a new future- different because of what we have taken--"

"Take all fissionable ores!" Ashley thought, interrupting."Take all ! I ask it as reward for what I have done."

He wondered if they would agree. This was what he had planned and mentioned to no

one . . .

There was a long delay. "We will," the voice said at last. More delay, then: "We are prepared to return to the past and mine. You Wish to remain in this present with your companions ?"

"I do."

"Then we will return you to them."

A humming began and faded. Darkness came and passed. He opened his eyes and found himself standing on the rain-soaked slope above the valley. Just visible below was a camp and he recognised Lilowen, even that moment searching the hills with her gaze for him.

Like a solitary bee a voice shot through his brain. "Go to them. An alternative future must arise from the moment we change your past, giving new trends of development to your planet from that moment. We will protect you with a time cyst-"

He ran for the camp. Martin Kinnaird was limping towards it, helped by a friend. Doc Melvil was awaiting him, with Lucan Talbot and others Ashley recognised. As he gained them a man on a black horse came trotting over the adjacent slope and into the camp.

At the same moment a vibrant dome came out of the misty sky, descending to cut off sight and sound of the hills.. Cutting them off from the stream of time itself, Ashley guessed. The stallion reared and Jan slid to the earth, holding the rein. Inside the dome an even half-light illuminated their faces.

An alternative future from this point, with no vast mineral resources in the Carpathians, Ashley thought. It had taken two equally-armed great nations to initiate the global war which had thrown mankind back into a darker age than any from which he had struggled ! If one side had never armed . . .?

He did not know what period elapsed inside the time cyst, or what centuries were re-traced and re-enacted outside.

Helpless they stood in the dimness. Outside would be a new world --that which arose where there was no atomic minerals in the Car- pathians. Take it all, he had said. From a remark Kinnaird had made, he thought a great nation bordering the Carpathians had been partly instrumental in starting the global war. Now, that nation would, instead, lack atomic materials- might, indeed talk peace instead of rattling the sabre with the others. . .

Suddenly, with a faint twanging which rose above audibility, the dome was lost in evanescent, confused whirlings of power and sky and earth returned to view. Ashley turned his gaze down into the valley.

The sun was higher in a clear winter sky and where the rough floating bridge had been stood a high dam, white as marble. Electric cables stretched from the dam down into the valley, where no trees stood. Instead was a neat city, shining between the slopes. Roads wound like creamy tape up the hills; vehicles sped along them, and through the streets of the city.

There had been no global war, Ashley thought.

On a hilltop twenty paces from where they stood, a tall obelisk surmounted by a disc pointed at the sky. Wondering, he walked slowly towards it. Its base bore a plate, covered with many words.

Kinnaird came up behind him, and began to read

In memory of those beings from space who came in l975, whose impenetrable Dome stands for ever on this hillside, who worked good among us for many years and came from regions unknown . . .

Ashley looked down the hillside. The dome- the time cyst- was gone. Already its absence after generations had been noted, and people were coming up the hill road. For a moment he bowed his head in thanks to the Sentinels, and in wonder at their sciences, then taking Lilowen's hand he stepped forward to meet the newcomers.

Within their vast, dwindling ships the Sentinels let their perceptions drift back to scan the planet they had left, their minds searching up and down the centuries. Great and beautiful cities stood on every shore and river, or dotted peaceful plains and cultivated valleys. It was well, they thought.

Near one spot, where they had first landed, they noted that the time cyst had just dissolved. From inside, humans stepped out, looking round in astonishment because mere moments had flown. Outside, other humans gazed in amazement at the vacant hillside, where for hundreds of years a great, glimmering dome had rested.

Momentarily the Sentinels let contact reach a man who was walking down towards the crowds. In the momentary contact they expressed thanks, wordless yet sincere.

Then they turned their attention again to the years ahead, and to the control of the great atomically powered time and space engines. Ahead were vast realms of space where rest might yet be found. Earth was not theirs and they would not stay.

The planet shrank, dwindled, and was gone. Its sun became a receding pin point. Uncountable other pin points shrank round it. The galaxy became a hazy disc, a spot-a weak, dim, infinitely remote and tiny speck among all the vastness of worlds. Silently the Sentinels turned their attention ahead, flowing through the centuries.