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The Population Explosion conspiracy

THE REBELLEERS

JANE ROBERTS



STANDING ROOM ONLY WAS THE WORLD'S SLOGAN

In the 20th Century, a typical, quiet, small American city—in the 23rd Century a teeming, wildly overpopulated “contropolis” where millions of starved, half-crazed people swarmed through the streets in a purposeless search for food, for rest, or for death. Above the mad, carnival-like scene the loudspeakers blared out their command to work, until night brings quiet and the “streetcleaners” came to shovel up the bodies of the dying.

Into this nightmarish world of the future came Gary Fitch, a man who had not seen the outside world for fifteen years. He found himself faced with the almost impossible task of bringing order to a completely chaotic world, of restoring some remnant of civilization to a breed that had turned into animals. And in saving mankind, he had also to face a new scourge—the return of plague.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Gary Fitch

His knowledge of the past was the key to the future—if there was going to be one.

Janice

She didn't *look* like a girl who could kill.

Sloat Brail

He played both ends against the middle and was caught where they met.

Gunny Bragan

He wanted to save the world by saving himself.

Toby

He was leader of the rebellers until they rebelled against him.

Mayor Lyle

He represented the law, but the law was a joke.

THE REBELLERS

by
JANE ROBERTS

ACE BOOKS, INC.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York 36, N.Y.

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LISTEN! THE STARS!

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Printed in U.S.A.

ONE

GARY FITCH looked down at the city from his cell on the fifteenth floor of the Affiliated Art Gallery of the Northeast. The building was the highest in the area, and beneath Gary's vision the contropolis spread out over the mountains and valleys as far as he could see. Men had erected their shoddy apartment houses and three deckered trailers everywhere. Vermin-ridden huts cluttered the filthy banks of the Chemung River to the east, and shelters of all kinds rose from the hills instead of trees.

Mandy Brail, Fitch's cellmate, sat behind him on the old rusted cot. Mandy said anxiously, "Well, do you see the supply trucks?"

Fitch searched the scene again before answering. The grimy streets below were black with people, thick as insects on the face of the city. A twenty-five foot wall surrounded the gallery to protect the inmates from the populace, but from the upper stories you could see over it easily. The supply trucks were not in sight. The courtyard was vacant. Mandy said, "Don't you see the trucks? Maybe they got held up or something, that's all."

"Well, they can't send food up from the kitchens if the trucks don't bring any," Fitch said wearily. "I don't think they care about the artists one way or another any more, if you want the truth. Our food rations have been less and less. Maybe another plague has been killing the workers off. Maybe the chemical gardens went askew again. Maybe the govern-

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ment wants to starve us to death; there's always that possibility."

"Oh, they'll take care of us all right," Mandy said. "We're too important to the economy."

"What economy?" Fitch said impatiently. "Starvation isn't economy."

Mandy shrugged. "Griping doesn't help. Nobody's been satisfied for so long that it isn't funny. But what is, is. You can't argue about that."

They were both hungry. It was the supper hour, except that for the third straight day no supper came up the noisy dumbwaiters. They'd had a skimpy breakfast but that was all. Gary Fitch stood by the window, scowling. They were both thirsty too. There wasn't enough water to go around. There hadn't really been enough in years. The artists all had beards. More often than not, the beards had lice.

Fitch said, "I don't like the looks of the people either. For days now they've been more rambunctious than usual. If they get hungry enough they'll attack this place. You wait and see. They had a ring around it last night and the night before. Just because they've never bothered a gallery before doesn't mean that they won't. If they get hungry enough and think there's food here, they'll do anything."

Looking through the barred windows, Mandy said, "How can you tell what they're doing or thinking? They're too far away. From here they look like bugs. If they did attack us, and they won't, then the government would protect us."

Fitch was thirty years old. Mandy was twenty-seven. They'd been cellmates for fifteen years. The gallery life was the only life they knew. Fitch flung himself down on the cot and said, "I don't care what you say. I don't like it. We've been deprived of a decent diet for so long that we couldn't protect ourselves if we had to. We don't even think straight, if you ask me. We've been isolated in here for so long that we have no idea of what the Outside is like."

"They're probably hungrier out there than we are in here," Mandy said. He crossed the floor and sat down. The room like all the others in the gallery was small. Worn boards

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creaked, and moisture sometimes appeared on the floor. But on the walls old masterpieces hung so closely together that no wall space showed between. Old plaster and gilt framed paintings rose from the ceiling to the floor. No one except the artists who were imprisoned in the galleries throughout the continent had seen any of the ancient paintings now for three hundred years.

Some of the canvases were cracked, some peeling, and a few were still in amazingly good shape. Fitch said quarrelsome, "I still can't see how artists caused wars when they produced stuff like this. I mean, those paintings look empty and meaningless to us because they don't have any real message. They don't incite people to grow food or produce. They aren't essentially art because they aren't economically vital, but otherwise they do have a strange life of their own. I can't see the artists who painted them inciting the populace to war. There isn't any evidence of war in the canvases themselves."

"Yeah, well it wasn't only 'the artists,'" Mandy said self-righteously. "The writers and musicians did the same thing. They only thought of themselves. They dealt with ideas, and ideas caused wars."

"You've been reading the history books—the government ones," Fitch said. "You should read the other books in the writer's divisions on the lower floors."

"What for?" Mandy said. "The stuff in those books didn't really happen. It's all fiction. The writers now have a heck of a time rewriting those manuscripts to make them meaningful. Most of it is a lot of rubbish. Hardly anyone can read nowadays; that's where we have it over the writers. People always look. You know, I bet the government is right and the populace still hates the artists after all this time. If artists really caused wars, we're lucky they let us exist. It isn't a bad compromise. This way we work at our paintings and help the civilization at the same time."

"The *what?*" Fitch said. "Civilization? What civilization? The world is so full that you can't breathe. Nothing is cheaper than life is. Look at the people outside. They won't

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even work to produce their own food unless they're pushed into it. Otherwise they wouldn't need us to plaster every available corner with pictures of food and production. Artistic motivation, I'm sick of the phrase. Make people produce more food to feed more people so that they can produce more food! It's a vicious circle. Not only that, but it's impossible to feed everyone to begin with. Well, the plagues always come. Maybe the next one will end the cycle."

Mandy grinned tolerantly. "Centuries ago war was the problem. Now it's population. So what? If it isn't one thing, it's another. Maybe we should bring war back into existence?" He grinned. "No, it wouldn't work. The people would be too hungry to fight. Besides, we'd just end up trading national diseases. The rest of the world is supposed to be worse off than we are. That's your trouble, you don't know when you're well off. The United States is the most enlightened country in the world, and the best fed. I suppose that City 16 here was better in the past just because it was called Elmira?"

"But there used to be spaces between cities," Fitch said, "Not the contropolis, not a solid continental mess of people."

"How do you know?" Mandy said. "That's another trouble of yours. You believe everything you read, and you read too much of the wrong stuff."

Out in the hall a bell clanged. Fitch stood up, scowling. He was of medium height with dark brown hair and heavy brows. The other artists nicknamed him the Scowler, and sometimes they called him the Rebeller, because he was never satisfied with the way things were. He had an abrupt self-contained gait. Mandy was shorter, with blond clumps of wiry hair. Both men were thin like the other artists, with poor gray skin coloring.

They all spilled out of their cells into the hallway. Their faces were bland with perpetual apathy and pleasant enough stupor. They walked quietly and spoke softly. They had the look of contented and resigned prisoners. Fitch said loudly, "Talking instead of eating isn't my idea of the way to spend supper time." A few of the men shrugged. One of

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them said to Mandy, "Is he going to start up again?" and Mandy said, "Aw, he's all right, aren't you, Fitch?"

"Just tops," Fitch said glumly.

The routine in the gallery seemed eternal. The artists ate a skimpy breakfast, worked from seven in the morning until noon, ate lunch when lunch was available, exercised by shift in the courtyard below, worked again till six, ate dinner, and worked from seven until eight-thirty. The gallery housed writers, artists, and a few musicians. Sexes were segregated. Every two weeks the men and women were allowed to mix indiscriminately. Any children born were immediately put in outside government nurseries where they were brought up as workers, beginning in the fields or chemical gardens at the age of six.

The fifteenth floor art room was at the end of the dark mouldy corridor. The room was large, stuffed with easels. The artists worked shoulder to shoulder under the dim fluorescent lights, copying the paintings that lined the crumbly walls. Sometimes when the electricity went out, they used candles. Nevertheless, Fitch liked the room. He went over to his own place in the far corner, and picked up his brush. He was lucky. He worked by the windows on the outside wall. Some of them had fallen out and been boarded up, and all of them were covered with wire meshwork and iron bars, but he liked to stand there and look out when he could.

There were no guards in the upper stories. For one thing, there was no way to get out from there. The Art Warden and his staff were on the lower levels with the other administration offices and from the fifth floor down the halls were thick with guards. Otherwise he might have tried to escape before. He knew of a way out through the vaults, but guards were stationed there and the penalty for trying to escape was death.

Actually, most of the men didn't need the threat of punishment. As far as Fitch knew, no one ever tried to escape. They were all safe where they were. They had their painting and the necessities. The gallery was a way of life. Never-

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theless, Fitch saw one of the guards standing at the base of the wall outside, and as always he frowned. Prisoners were prisoners, he thought.

Even the old masterpieces on the walls seemed to mock him. They looked so secure, just having existed so many centuries. If they could talk, he thought, they could tell more about the past than he could. Sometimes he was afraid that Mandy and the others were right about him, and now he wondered about it again. The fact remained that they were all fairly contented with their lot, and he was not. He looked around at them. They worked calmly. They accepted the limitations of their environment, like all reasonable men, yet he couldn't help being repulsed by their apathy.

He knew that they were too weary and poorly nourished to question their situation, or the world at large. Their energy was depleted at the end of a day's work, but he'd been born with added stamina, haunted by excess energy that drove him to distraction. He never accepted. He always questioned.

Lately his concern had grown. The food rations had been cut. The periodic riots Outside had become more frequent and violent. At least he thought they had. No one else bothered to watch from their cell windows. No one could collaborate his observations. Sometimes he was afraid that he was so obsessed with the Outside that he imagined things, read significances and portents of danger where there were none. Now he rehashed the whole thing in his mind, trying to pinpoint his present growing fear.

He was sure that he was right about the food rations. For the shortage, he thought, there could be several explanations. Perhaps conditions outside had grown worse and there simply was not enough food available. The people's hunger could also explain the frantic rioting he'd thought he'd seen from the window. He was so far up and the wall below hid so much that it was difficult to be certain just what all the crowds meant. It was like trying to figure out ant formations.

It was also fact, he told himself, that hungry people

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would do anything to get food. They would attack the gallery if they even suspected that rations were hidden inside. Enough of them could easily overpower the guards. While there were plenty of guards to keep a man from escaping, for many years only a skeleton crew had been on duty, concentrated in the lower levels. Sometimes even many of these were taken off to quell the continuous riots that sprang up through the city.

Fitch's mouth went dry. His pulses beat faster. To be honest he had to admit that his fear was intermixed with excited anticipation. An attack might give him a chance to escape. It would mean put up or shut up, and he might have to make the decision quickly. When it came right down to it, would he have the guts? The gallery was the only home and the only security he knew. It was one thing to talk about freedom, and another to seek it when the effort might cost him his life.

For one thing, he thought, conditions outside might be worse than he imagined. All he knew was the little information that leaked through the grapevine. But his curiosity was insatiable. His vitality had driven him mad as a youngster, so that he'd read every book he could get his hands on. The other artists considered him a harmless crank, but his reading had made him question and his questions made him want out. He didn't *want* the people to attack the gallery, but his reasoning told him that they would. Now he wondered if he'd have the strength of his convictions if such a situation arose.

He glowered up at the old paintings. Most of them were rotting. Bits and pieces of eyes and trees and legs were gone. He was copying a street scene by someone called Utrillo. In the painting small neat houses marched along a clean street, and the street itself was lined with trees. Fitch had never seen a tree. There were none in the city as far as he could tell, and none on the mountains. Trees themselves were taboo in paintings anyhow, so he copied the painting, shoving the houses together and changing the street into a

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field that was filled with growing corn. He paused a moment, looking at the painting again with some irritation.

The other artists thought that the scenes depicted by the old masters were figments of the imagination, and certainly some of them seemed to have no actual relation to life. A few of them, for example, seemed meaningless, and even lacked any recognizable objects at all. These, however, translated the easiest. Fitch always blithely made the circles into blazing suns, and the odd squares into geometrical meadow lands.

But Utrillo was different. Van Gogh was different. While the imagination could be seen at work, Fitch believed without proof that the scenes shown had an actual basis in fact. He was certain that the world at one time had looked somewhat similar to the way Utrillo and Van Gogh painted it.

This conviction, together with his reading in the old books section, convinced him that at one time human families had lived in individual houses, at least somewhere on the earth. The allusion to such conditions were too widespread in both paintings and writings to be mere myth. He tried to imagine what it must have been like, and yet he had to admit that his theory had one serious basic flaw.

If Utrillo's paintings depicted actual scenes from life, if they were not imaginative pictorial fantasies, then the whole world would have had to be completely different than he knew it to be. If Utrillo's representation was valid, then it would mean that mankind had regressed to an astonishing, almost unbelievable degree. All the things that Fitch believed men capable of enjoying—dignity, solitude, integrity—would already have been experienced in the past. And that, he thought, was impossible. If men had ever possessed these benefits, they would never have given them up.

The arguments went over and over in his mind as he worked. At the same time, the sky outside grew completely dark. Torchlight glimmered down on the hillsides and the neon lights sparkled here and there. Eight-thirty came before he knew it. He filed out into the hall with the others after

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cleaning his brushes, and he and Mandy walked down to their cell.

They had no lights at all except in the art rooms. Fitch went over to the window again, nervously. The whole city seemed to buzz with fury. Torches moved erratically now. He said, "They're coming this way. You can see the movement of the torches, even if you can't make out the people."

"So what?" Mandy said. "They always riot over one thing or another. They surrounded this place last night and the night before, and nothing happened, did it? What about the guards? They aren't just going to stand there and do nothing in case of trouble."

"They might even join the people if they think there's food here. Who knows? Sometimes the guards are borrowed by other government agencies, too. And suppose the people do assault this place? The rest of you will just sit by and watch it happen. You're all that unconcerned."

Mandy said slowly, "Look, go to sleep, will you? This gallery's been here for three hundred years, since the end of the twentieth century. It's never been attacked in all that time. Why should it be bothered tonight or tomorrow?"

"I watch them out there," Fitch said. "You don't. Conditions are worse than they've ever been, for one thing. You're so used to being taken care of that you can't imagine that it might ever end, or that the status quo might change. You go on day by day, caught up in your own interests. I tell you, the people riot more often. They never used to come even close to this building. Now they do. Maybe we aren't as important to the government as we used to be. Maybe they can't afford to keep us. Maybe they lost control of the people, or maybe the whole social framework is crumbling. Look out there. Use your head, for crying out loud." He pointed to the window. Swarms of torches leapt across the muddy Chemung River in the distance and moved down toward the city proper. Fitch said soberly, "Those torches speak their own language. Those people are more frenzied than ever, and more desperate."

"You said the same thing last year," Mandy said, grinning.

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"I was right then too. Things were building up then and they still are," Fitch said.

"You'll be saying the same thing next year," Mandy said. He lay down on the cot and turned his head to the wall. Fitch went back to his vigil at the window. He kept telling himself that he could be wrong, but he didn't believe it. In the first place, he thought, the planet was overrun. There was no room for anything that was not human. There was no room for any human who did not work.

America was the last to succumb, and he wondered how much longer it would hold out. Africa, China, India, were lost. The people there were more like animals than men. He'd heard that years ago when the radios were still operating between countries. Now what the government knew it kept to itself. Some things he was sure of. The Constitution of the United States was still the law of the land. The individual states still existed, but he suspected that the structure would be unrecognizable to a man from say, the twentieth century.

For a moment he was lost in his thoughts. Then, suddenly, he looked out. Now whole groups of people became distinct as they moved closer, waving torches. Finally the wind carried up the tumultuous sounds of their yelling voices. Mandy got up. He kept saying, "They're just worse than last night, that's all," but his face was white.

The torches set up a red glow all about the wall. Still, it was almost impossible to scale the smooth high sides. Lights flashed on in the courtyard. Fitch couldn't see directly down, but he heard the guards rush out. A few seconds later they took up positions just inside the wall.

Fitch said, "I told you, they're short of guards. There aren't nearly enough of them out there. I bet they didn't expect anything like this any more than the artists did, and they weren't prepared."

He broke off. The heavy gates clanged open. A truck battered them down. He and Mandy watched with horrified fascination. From the window, the truck looked like a toy.

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Mandy whispered, "Why they must have stolen a government vehicle, though how they could—" Fitch only stared. The attackers spilled through the gates, waving clubs and torches.

TWO

AMAZED, Fitch and Mandy looked down. The guards just stood there. Finally a warning shot rang out. The speaker system boomed loudly in the courtyard. "There is no food here. Repeat. There is no food here. The gallery is government property. Go home. Repeat. There is no food here. The guards have orders to open fire if you come closer."

For an instant the crowd faltered. Then the loudspeaker sputtered. There were sounds of a struggle. A triumphant voice called out through the speaker, "We've got five guards down here as hostages. We want food and we're coming in to look for it. Nobody will get hurt if they do what we want, but we mean business. One move and these guards are dead."

Fitch waited to see what would happen. Within minutes the Art Warden said in a hoarse voice, "Guards, lay down your arms." The speaker sputtered and went dead. Fitch looked around the cell, realizing for the first time how incredible the attack really was. For all his reasoning, he hadn't really felt that it would happen. Emotionally he couldn't believe it. Whatever order he had known was being threatened. His support was being undermined; the monotonous ritual of his days destroyed.

Yet he made his decision quickly, and looked around the cell again, for the last time. Here he had spent his life. He knew all the details in each of the old paintings that lined the walls. He knew how the sunlight filtered into the room in the mornings. But from outside came the sound of screaming voices, and shouts rose up from deep inside the gallery. He rushed out into the hall.

The others still stood in their rooms, staring down into the yard below. They were too shocked to move. Fitch knew exactly where he was going. He didn't know if his

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idea would work, but at least he had a plan. Mandy, still looking backward, followed him in a daze. Fitch said sharply, "Come on, get in." He opened one of the dumbwaiters quickly, got inside and pulled Mandy in after him. As he closed the door he heard the others begin trailing out into the hallway.

"There's an old bomb shelter," Fitch muttered. He pulled the cord. With an alarmingly loud creak the dumbwaiter began to move slowly downward. Fitch didn't know if it would hold both of them or not but Mandy's face was deathly white, and Fitch was afraid that Mandy wouldn't make it alone. The dumbwaiter took a good ten minutes to go down the fifteen stories. At about the seventh floor, the halls grew noisy. Feet rushed up and down. Voices called out. Then, sickeningly, the dumbwaiter banged down in the huge cavernous kitchen beneath the building. Fitch put his hand over Mandy's mouth and held his own breath, listening before he opened the door. Actually Fitch wondered why he'd taken Mandy along, and he realized that he felt somewhat responsible for him. Mandy had followed him because he'd been too shocked to think for himself. Huddled there in the dumbwaiter, Fitch wondered if he should have come alone. He opened up the door cautiously.

As he'd feared, the attackers had headed for the kitchen and it was necessary for him to cross the huge room in order to reach the vaults, and escape. He watched through the slitted door opening. Someone yelled, "We'll burn the place down." The commotion was deafening. The crowd of people was concentrated at the further end of the room. Suddenly a voice screamed out, "Hey, bread. Here's some bread." The voices shifted. The crowd moved off to the pantries adjoining the kitchen. Fitch threw open the door all the way. The vaults had been opened. He and Mandy made a dash for them.

A shot rang out. Fitch remembered being surprised. Although he'd heard a shot earlier, guns were almost nonexistent as far as the general population was concerned. The next instant he realized that he'd been hit in the leg.

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The crowd came bursting in again. He lunged out at them, fell, and lost consciousness. When he came to, Mandy was gone. The kitchens were quiet.

The heavy iron oven doors were all thrown open, and the cupboards ransacked. In the distance Fitch heard yells and shouts as if the fight had moved to the upper levels. The guards had been locked up somewhere. He could hear them banging against the walls, and then there was a crash as if a door had been forced open. He got to his feet painfully, and looked around for Mandy.

The whole floor was deserted and in rambles. The attackers had searched everywhere for food and then apparently abandoned it, rushing upstairs instead. But Mandy had disappeared. He wasn't dead, Fitch realized, or he would have found the body. The shouting above grew louder. It sounded as if the guards had freed themselves. Quickly Fitch wobbled to the end of the vaults, searching for the air conditioner. It had been installed over a century ago just before the Chinese nation was destroyed by plague. The government thought that there might be war, and the whole basement of the gallery had been converted to a shelter. An old artist, now dead, told Fitch about it, and he'd found the antiquated air conditioner one day when he was on kitchen duty.

It was dark in the vaults. Old paintings fell as he brushed by them. He felt his way along, keeping an eye out for Mandy as he crept along. Then finally, his hands ran along the edges of the conditioner, and he paused. He found the rusty filter and pushed it out. A rush of cool air told him that the hole went through to the outside. He was afraid that for all his plans, the hole was smaller than he remembered, but by wiggling he made it, and tumbled out into the courtyard.

Everything was dark. The lights in the yard were out. Looking up, he saw that some of the electric circuits were off and some were on so that parts of the gallery glazed with lights and others were dark as pitch. He made it to his feet, wincing at the pain in his leg. The bullet had

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gone through his flesh. He leaned against the wall of the building to rest. Again he looked around for Mandy and called his name out softly in the darkness but no one answered.

He waited as long as he dared, trying to get his bearings. One floor of the gallery that had been dark suddenly sprang into light again. It looked as if the attackers were losing ground. In any case, Fitch knew that reinforcements would be coming soon. If he didn't hurry, the lights might flash on in the courtyard. Sweat broke out on his forehead.

He winced again. The gallery almost looked friendly. Its familiarity seemed overwhelming so that for a moment he felt that it was impossible for him to take the last steps to freedom. He was almost tempted to sneak back through the air conditioner, through the vaults, and back inside. He almost wished that he was back in his cell and he wondered if that was where Mandy had gone.

But all the while he moved forward. He went across the courtyard to the high wall, hugging it for support. The gate was open. The sight of it, crumpled, was more surprising than anything else. He couldn't see over the wall itself but he could already hear the city's tumult. He edged behind the truck that the attackers had used. It still stood there. The gate was right before him. At his first glimpse of the Outside, he backed in again, shocked. Then, holding his leg, he plunged through the gate for the final time. The city hit him like a slap in the face. He was tempted even then to return, but some angry determination held him back, and he hobbled out into what seemed a world of utter madness.

The city contropolis instantly sprang up about him, gripping him inexorably. It was like nothing he had ever seen or experienced before. He realized in a flash the difference between seeing the Outside from a distance, and being caught in it. He stood amazed at the stench, the thickening closeness of the people, the piercing screams. Contrasts, erratic and unbelievable, struck at him everywhere. Above the solid mess of populace, over the filthy sidewalks and gutter-beds and niches, the huge neon lights glimmered.

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Directly beneath them lay the exhausted, the drugged, the sleeping. They sprawled out in rags and shelters of cardboard or rotted dew-soaked paper.

Fitch stood transfixed. For an instant he was incapable of motion. He hadn't believed that conditions could be so bad. His wide, aloof eyes traveled in a horrified circle from the mistily illuminated slums on the mountain sides down to the dark shapes of the huts by the river. Tall flimsy apartment houses rose some ten stories high somewhere in the heart of the city, but directly in front of him lay a maelstrom of disease and filth. Flickering lights of all sorts glimmered as far as his eyes could see. There were fantastic faces, terrible contortions of bone and muscle, a nightmare assortment of sounds and shapes and colors.

He stumbled. Against his sandled foot something moved. The thing collected its hulk, rolled over protestingly. It was a man or woman, impossible to tell, swathed in some sort of gummy plastic. Fitch bent over the figure. He muttered, "Are you all right?" The thing just thrashed about for an instant, collected itself into a shivering bulk and retreated like some prehistoric monster in its shell of plastic and fear.

The small circle of isolation about Fitch closed. Fifteen or twenty scantily clad people came crashing down the street, pushing him aside not callously, but as if he was not there at all. The figure on the ground was trampled upon. Another crowd came, singing out in a sort of raving mad screech. Fitch moved back this time, pressing up against the dirty side of a building.

From somewhere an arm reached out and encircled him. A voice yelled, "Hey, dance. It's a dance. We're merry, dancing the night away, away, away—" The pitch of the voice was ear-splitting, shrill and high. The face thrust out to Fitch's was red and shiny and pock-marked. The eyes were brilliant and sick, and the mouth wore an insane grimace that instantly cautioned Fitch to watch his step.

He said, "Yeah, okay," and let himself be swept along with the rising fervor of the voices and the hot unhealthy ecstasy of the dancing feet. The group bumped into the

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side of a shop. The arm that gripped Fitch let go. Quickly, his heart pounding painfully, Fitch dropped down on the ground and wiggled over into a small pool of darkness. The man muttered, "Now where did he go? Where's that devil?" The sound of fumbings and a few curses came alarmingly close and then died away.

Fitch found that he wasn't alone in the shadows. He grabbed hold of what appeared to be a pile of rock or wood, but the whole thing tremored. A variety of hands and legs disentangled. A sickening odor rushed up as if he'd pried open the heart of some poisonous flower. Seeing the thing rouse, he backed off. For the next few minutes he was able to feel his way along the sides of the buildings that rose up close to the sidewalk. To his right lay the teeming walk itself with its chaotic continuous swarm of rushing, yelling people; the deep gutter piled with sleepers; and the wide road that was the scene of astounding activities, impossible at first to decipher.

Some people were dancing in heightened frenzy, forming ever-changing circles, cavorting in motions both obscene and sacramental. These screamed out wild chants and gibberish. Along the walks innumerable fist fights broke out, another beginning as one ended. Violences twinkled like stars, one after another. In one flash of streetlight, Fitch saw four naked children chasing a rickety dog through the groups of dancers. They carried sticks and threw stones, shouting all the while.

Fitch shook his head. His leg was throbbing so that he could hardly think. He knew he should get to a doctor if he could find one. It occurred to him that he might be in delirium and that the sights he saw were merely the figments of a fevered mind. He tried to pull himself together. Suddenly the buildings stopped. The street opened up into a large lighted square that looked like some crazy carnival ground. Groups of people slept right out on the sidewalks and the rest of the populace walked over them blithely as if they were merely bumps on the walk. Wild dances sprang up, blazed for five minutes, and suddenly died out again.

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The dancers fell down, exhausted, upon the other bodies and more dancers took their places.

Fitch had been aware of coherent voices, sharp with command and meaning, but they had been in the background. Now they were loud and clear. Loudspeakers blared from the tops of the buildings in the square. He was so dizzy that when he looked upward, he reeled, tripped, and fell down. Instantly people walked over him. He couldn't get up. As best he could he burrowed his head, shaking with sudden nausea to find his cheeks resting on someone else's lice-ridden neck. The loudspeakers blared out: "Produce, citizens. The first commandment is Produce. Work, work, work. Go, go, go. Work, work, work. Play if you want, but work you must."

Fitch groaned. His face itched. Some of the lice crawled up his arm, and he sprang to his feet with the impetus of desperation. His leg felt as if it were going to fall off. Painfully he dragged himself along, knowing that if he fell down again he was done for.

Wearily now, he looked around for a place to relax. A group not too far off caught his eye and he started over with exhausted determination. About three hundred people stood in a circle and he hoped to hide himself on the edges of the crowd. The people stood with their arms around each other, swaying back and forth, listening to someone who was beyond Fitch's vision. He got to the outskirts of the group. A man at the end of the line caught his hand almost automatically. They resumed their swaying. Fitch just let go gratefully, swaying back and forth with the others, leaning against the men on either side.

He was incapable of concentration. For what seemed centuries he just swayed back and forth, his eyes closed. All he was conscious of was the pain in his leg. Then the leg went numb. He looked around. It was still night, but a dull gray light tinged the sky above the buildings. His head fell backward. Time passed. He opened his eyes again. He was still swaying with the others. Looking around the square, he saw something familiar at last.

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Reproductions of paintings, some of his own work, glared down from the building sides and rooftops. They were illuminated with neon, the colors strangely brilliant and unreal. His copy of the Mona Lisa smiled down at him, the curved lips with their enigmatic secret made known, for the fields and meadows grew up about her face as he had painted them. Only now technology had worked miracles. The fields were actually waving, the brush strokes moving eerily up and down before the smile of benediction on the Mona Lisa's face, so that her eyes and cheeks were composed of the waving grain. He had painted her as the mother of food production, but the painting's mechanical life frightened him more than anything else he'd seen. The wheat, moving as it did, was like a million fingers pointing across the features of the face. The effect was sinister and threatening. All around the square other paintings were similarly activated. They glared down as the loudspeakers boomed out, "Work, work, work. Food, food, food. Go, go, go."

The throbbing started up in Fitch's leg again. With a horrified shudder he looked down. He and all the others were weaving their crazy circle on the bodies of the exhausted who had fallen. A man's voice yelled out from the center of the circle, but he couldn't make out the words. He tried to disentangle himself, to break off. "Let me go," he muttered. He tried to yell but he was too weak to speak. No one paid any attention. The swaying was making him sick. His arms felt ready to fall out of their sockets.

Automatically the men on either side of him tightened their grip upon his hands. He looked into their faces and discovered to his amazement that everyone was feverish. The whole circle would clatter to the ground like puppets if any single link broke. He looked up again, hopelessly. Blazing on another building was a monstrous Van Gogh Wheat Field. The wheat shimmered angrily, moved constantly like a million raging fires. Again the brush strokes had been almost magically activated but the effect of violence was breath-

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taking. He felt as if he was being consumed by the flames. His head reeled. His hands and arms went slack. His feet left the ground. He blacked out. Unknowing, uncaring, the circle swept him round.

THREE

WHEN Fitch awakened he was on his back on the ground. It was daylight. A black heavy sky lay flat on top of all the buildings. He tried to move, but couldn't. A voice rang out, clear and loud and vehement. "One heaven apiece. All the room you want, brothers and sisters. Oh, what joy, what sweet joy. One whole heaven for every man. One whole heaven for every gal. All the sweet room in the whole universe just for you; for *you*, sister, for *you*, brother. Amen. Amen. Amen. Tell me your sins and I'll set you free. Confess and clean your soul."

Fitch tried to turn his head. Another softer voice said, "You're sick as a dog. Don't move."

He did try to move, though, to see who was speaking, but the pain shot through his leg again. Through mists of half-consciousness he heard the voice say, "Don't let anyone take you any place. I've got to go, but I'll be right back." And through it all that other voice thundered, pleading, commanding, wheedling, condemning, promising. "Throw out your sins. Take in grace like food from heaven, like bread from ovens, like wheat from fields."

Consciousness appeared and disappeared. A new colder air swept down the hair of his arm. His skin prickled. Someone poured a small trickle of water into his mouth. He choked and tried to turn his head away. Hands pushed his mouth closed so that he had to swallow. The water tasted like mud. His vision cleared. A girl knelt beside him. Her dress was of some material that had long ago lost any remnants of color or distinguishing features. It hung about her thin body and had been torn off just above her knees. Her cheekbones stuck out, and her chin. Her wide green eyes were unnaturally bright and feverish. She looked to be in

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her twenties. "You crawled in here last night," she said. "This is my dad's corner. You're lucky you aren't dead. I took care of you. You better beat it, though. He'll be done out there soon, and he'll be back."

Fitch nodded. It was difficult for him to think. She forced more water into his mouth. "Here, nibble this," she said. She stuck a few green leaves at his lips. The bitter taste shocked him awake, and he realized how hungry he was. She gave him more, kneeling there all the time, watching. Finally he succeeded in sitting up. They were in a dirty shelter made of old canvas and cardboard, somewhat protected from the wind that swept through the streets. "I'm Janice," she said. "My father is that man out there."

He turned around to look. Out in front of the shelter stood a tall bony man, yelling and waving his hands at a gathering of people who swayed about him. "You give up your food for that piece of heaven," he yelled. "I see you, hiding it away from my gaze. But God sees you hold out, and in hell you'll have no room at all, not even space to lift one evil finger. You won't have any bread, and no water, only dryness of the belly and the belly will shrivel like a nut." The people filed forward, throwing bits of loaf and crusts and other edibles into the buckets that the preacher had beside him, on the ground. Fitch said, "Your father? Was I in that circle last night?"

She nodded. "The crowd is better nighttimes. I help him. I speak in tongues when I have to. You better get out of here now though, if you can make it."

"Can you get me to a doctor?" he said.

Her face suddenly broke up into a frightened grimace. Her hands flew to her face. "A doctor? What for? Are you crazy?" She went on in a desperate whisper, "If you're that badly off, then wait a minute. And forget the doctor, will you? Just the thought of it gives me the shakes."

Before he could answer, she got to her feet, dropped to her knees again and crept toward the people in the circle. While Fitch watched, she knelt down behind swaying figures and waited. Her father threw his arms out in the air and

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danced an angry vicious step, turned, and pointed at a man in the first row. "You held out," he cried. "Hell for your kind."

"Hell for your kind," chanted the people. "No room forever and ever and ever. No place to lay your head."

Janice's father ran up to the man, shouting. Just at that moment when all attention was turned in the other direction, she crept up to the buckets and plunged her hands in. By the time her father was done condemning the offender, she was back with Fitch. In her hands she clutched a handful of pine needles. "There, it was the best I could find. Quick, eat them," she said.

He looked at her uncomprehendingly. "Well, chew them," she said impatiently. "You must be sicker than I thought. They're pine needles. I can't make pine tea because I haven't enough water left, but they're grand chewed." With this she grabbed some and shoved them into her mouth. Instantly she was all smiles. She sat back with a grin. "Gee, they're good," she said.

He sucked some, and sat up, leaning on his elbow. The shelter was in the rear of the city square. He saw that the place had cleared out considerably, and yet it was still swarming with masses of people, all of whom had one thing in common: they were completely undisciplined, fiendishly unfettered, seemingly bereft of all sense or reason. One man was doing somersaults on a flagpole that shot out from a building's ledge. The pole sagged under his weight. He shouted and waved down at the people below.

The loudspeakers still called out their message of diligence, productivity and ambition, but even these voices were shrill and sometimes jocular, and in any case no one paid them any attention. The paintings that lined the square still stood out against the buildings, only now they were unilluminated. The brush strokes wiggled grayly like small worms over the Mona Lisa's face.

Fitch said weakly, "Do they go on like this all the time?"

"Who?" she said; then, contemptuously, "Oh, the people. Them. Sure. Dad works, at least, which is more than they

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can say. Course, they have worked. After they work a while they get this way. Then they have to be turned loose. They go crazy sometimes. Or the doctor gets them," she said darkly. "They're stupid. They haven't any pride."

"You sure don't like doctors," he said.

She said coldly, "Only cowards go to doctors," and he smiled. "Do you stay here all the time?" he said, pointing to the ripped canvas that sagged above their heads.

"Sure," she said. "It's one of the best places in the city. For us, anyhow. We couldn't be safer, out here in the open. In twenty minutes or so my father will be done out there though, and it won't be very safe for you here. We have enough, but not enough to share. I always kick intruders out as a rule. I killed one once. You were muttering such nice crazy things when you were delirious that I let you stay. Where did you come from anyhow? Do you have a shack someplace or were the apartment houses raided again? You've been well fed too; I haven't seen a man in such good shape in ages, except for your leg. You're lucky it was a flesh wound. Maybe if you tell dad how you've been getting by, he'll help you get back where you belong. I never thought of that."

"You don't look as if you could kill anyone," he said. He was feeling better. He tried a smile. The girl had short black hair and wide curious eyes, and he thought that she'd be a knockout if she wasn't so thin. As it was, her high cheekbones made her face look longer than it was, and her chin jutted out to a point, making a triangle below her strong jawline.

"Listen, you do what you have to, kill or anything," she said accusingly. "I'm no coward. If I were, I wouldn't be alive."

The small burst of energy left him. Flies and bugs stuck to the canvas. A few wasps, big and fat, buzzed angrily by. He debated whether or not to tell her that he came from the gallery. If it was true that the people hated the artists, he knew that he'd just get into more trouble with nothing

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gained. He said instead, "I hear they raided the gallery last night."

"Yeah," she said, without interest. "Rumor always says that the artists have banquets every day. It's a lot of bunk I imagine. They probably tore the place down looking for food. They haven't any sense. If they found food at all, they just gorged themselves, got sick, and never saved a crumb. They're like that. The chemical gardens broke down, not that it makes any difference. I mean, who gets that stuff anyhow? Nobody but the government people and the mayor. The people get what they can scrounge. Look at that bunch listening to dad. They've worked in the fields for as long as they could, and do they look well fed? That's a laugh. When they can't work any longer they get thrown out here for relaxation. Relaxation!"

Her face turned ugly with bitterness. "I hate them," she said. "I'm glad we milk them. I should be grateful for the little bit of food that dad forces them to hand out, but I'm not. They haven't any sense."

"Good attitude," he said, forced to smile.

"So? They're idiots. Dad is a business man. He has a sense of purpose. We eat, and save what food we can for later. And we work regularly. Not those fools. They're like moths. They dash headlong into whatever they want for the moment." She was shaking angrily, her face all worked up. Tears streamed down her face, but they were tears of disgust and rage.

He said, "Where do you find a job around here?"

She looked at him as if he were crazy. "Jobs?" she said scornfully. "You *are* out of your head. You scrounge. That's the only job you'll find."

"But I saw shops," he said. "People must work in them." She stared at him suspiciously. "I suppose there used to be shopowners at one time, I don't know," she said. "Now someone takes over for a day or so until someone stronger comes along and runs him out. All night long they steal to get things to sell. If you even go into a shop, you come out

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with less than you went in with. Were you born yesterday or something?"

He noticed that she moved, slightly blocking the entrance way. "Listen," she said, "You better tell me where you came from. If I want, I just have to toss you out to the crowd and yell, and they'd be at you. Those are good clothes you have on, too. You're lucky I didn't take them for myself or my dad. Now start talking. I'm not fooling either."

He peeked out. The ground was filled with moving legs, all thin, all bony, all erratic and moving without apparent purpose. Listening to the girl, he'd almost forgotten the square. Now the rush of sights and sounds assaulted him again. Her face was white and determined. He knew that she was deadly serious.

"I'll tell you," he said, "But you won't believe me anyway."

Her lips tightened with menace. "Listen, if you're a spy, say so," she said coldly. "We don't know a thing, so you're wasting your time. If we knew where the Rebels had some decent food hidden, we wouldn't be struggling to get a few scraps from those idiots out there. And if you aren't a spy, then why are you so secretive? You're in no shape to rob me either, if that's what you have in mind."

"How do I know you can be trusted?" he said.

"You don't," she said sharply. "But if I don't trust you, I'm in a position to do something about it."

"Look out!" he shouted. A heavy rock came sailing through the air, thrown low, at the level of her head. He lurched over and pulled her further back to the recess of mouldy cardboard. The rock fell with a heavy thud in the doorway and rolled over.

"They throw stuff like that all the time," she said angrily. "I could be dead. Look at that thing." She scrambled to her feet and picked the rock up. Then she lugged it over to the corner. "We save them," she said more calmly. "They come in handy. And thanks."

She came over and took a look at his leg. "You're in great

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shape with that leg though," she said disgustedly. "Well, I suppose I owe you something."

"Don't put yourself out," he said, grinning. "Just tell me where I can find a doctor. Regardless of your opinion of the medical practices around here, I think a doctor could fix me up." She disappeared a moment behind him. He caught sight of the shadow of her arm raised above his head. He twisted around sharply, but the shadow and the arm descended. He fell over, dimly aware of close voices. The girl spoke with a man. They rolled him over.

When he came to, he lay with his eyes closed. He could hear the girl and the man moving about. Janice's father said, "Hasn't he come to yet?"

The girl looked at Fitch disgustedly, "Asking for a doctor again," she said. "That's what did it."

"Lots of them get that way," her father said. "He doesn't need a doctor yet." They both laughed roughly. "Watch him," he said. "I don't think he's going any place by the looks of him. His eyes are still closed. But you can't ever tell."

Through slitted lids Fitch saw the man step outside into the swirling mass of legs and bare feet and littered ground. The girl stretched out on a piece of rag. Fitch waited for what seemed centuries before deciding that she'd fallen asleep. Then, slowly, he began to move along on his belly toward the doorway. Twice he froze as she changed position. He made it outside and tried to stand up.

A change had come over the people in the square. They seemed to be going away in a sort of panic. The pale sun was heavy and sullen. Everyone who could was moving quickly. He wasn't followed, but the desperation of the crowd hurried him along. He wondered what they were running from. The people shoved and elbowed and began a mass exodus. For every eight or nine steps Fitch took, he lost three or four. Even the tattered looking children fled. Finally his leg gave out again. He fell down in a heap. With determination he kept his eyes open and tried to wiggle out of the way.

The view from the ground was terrifying. Everyone who

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could walk or crawl had disappeared. The street and sidewalk were filled with the wounded, the weak and the exhausted. Bodies clumped together like gray dead bushes. Those who could struggle still tried to move. Fitch attempted to inch further away from the center of the square but his leg pained and other people were in the way. At the same time a new sound caught his ears. The loudspeakers had been off for quite a while, he realized, and in their place rushed the noise of motors.

Moving slightly, he looked down toward the further end of the square. A battery of old trucks came driving down like a conquering army. They careened to a halt. Men alighted, with long heavy brooms and shovels. A frightened voice beside Fitch said, "The streetcleaners!" Fitch turned to see who spoke. The huddled figure beside him shuddered. The men with the shovels approached. They yelled out good-naturedly to one another. They were big men next to the other people Fitch had seen, and they appeared fairly healthy and well fed.

Some of the people were unable to move at all. These unfortunates the streetcleaners shoveled up into the trucks. Fitch noticed that those who showed signs of life were pushed roughly into certain trucks and those too weak to respond to the yells and shouts of the streetcleaners were thrown into another group of trucks. In no instance were the strugglers and the non-strugglers mixed in the same load. He tried to discover what sort of grotesque arrangements were being carried out. Should he show that he was alive or not? Instinctive response solved the question for him. When one of the streetcleaners nudged him with his shovel, Fitch yelled out and tried, ineffectively, to get to his feet.

"Come on, you vermin, move," the streetcleaner shouted lustily. "Still some life in you, huh? Off to the doctor," he yelled, laughing. He prodded Fitch again with the edge of the shovel. Fitch thought wearily that this was one devil of a way to get medical attention, but he did his best again to get on his feet—and failed. The man who had cried out

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earlier was suddenly picked up by another streetcleaner and tossed into a truck like so much rubbish.

The inhumanity of the scene was startling, yet the streetcleaners didn't act vicious, merely unconcerned, like men doing a routine job that was done day after day until it had lost all significance or until their senses had been dulled to its horrible aspects. The streetcleaner near Fitch yelled, "One for the Doc," grabbed Fitch under the arms and held him. Another man grabbed Fitch's legs. The first man grunted with Fitch's weight and started singing in a loud voice, "One, two, who's got a shoe? . . . Thanks a lot, You go to the Doc." Fitch fell with a thump into the truck. The motor started off, the truck rolled on and then stopped again.

Fitch looked about with horrified comprehension. Half of the trucks were loaded with the living, and the others were filled with the dead or near-dying. The ground of the square was wiped clean. A woman lay directly beneath Fitch. She moaned softly. He tried to move his head so that she could breathe. One man at the end of the truck got to his feet, yelled, flapped his hands, and fell down again. The streetcleaners started the truck once more and drove off yelling cheerful slogans. Pails and brooms and shovels clanged. They stopped again. A man came sailing through the air to fall on top of the pile. Fitch wiggled to avoid the last of the people thrown so unceremoniously aboard. He kept maneuvering himself so that he was at the truck's side. One of the streetcleaners saw him and laughed. "Hell, you need a rest. If I were you, I'd be glad for it," he said.

"Thanks," Fitch said.

"Aw, it ain't so bad. My own brother was there for two years. Ain't as bad as they say. You don't know a thing," the streetcleaner said companionably.

"About what?" Fitch said, but the man moved off. The trucks started up again, and drove off the square. Now suddenly everything came to life again. The loudspeakers blared, "Work, work, work, go, go, go. Weed those fields, grow that wheat, work, work, work and then sweet sleep." Shouted jingles and martial music were interspersed with

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commands and injunctions. The square itself seemed to breathe with relief as the last of the trucks moved off. People reappeared from everywhere. Already it teemed with those still strong enough to rush out. Once Fitch thought he saw the girl, but he wasn't sure. Hands clawed out beneath him. The pile of bodies moved constantly, shifting, like one massive organism in death throes. He was unconscious for part of the trip. Yells and shouts awakened him.

Those who could move were forced from the trucks. He staggered upright. They were in a huge garage. He was forced along with the others through a doorway and down a corridor where lines of benches stood against the walls. They were told to sit down. A woman was beside Fitch. Her eyes were enormous. "I'll never pass the test," she said. "I just know it." Her teeth were rotten and chattering.

"What test?" he said.

"They have this test. . . . If you aren't well enough to work any more, they put you to sleep." She paused. Her mouth came down like a trap and then opened again. "Forever," she said.

"The doctors do?"

"Euthanasia," she said. "That's it. That's the beginning and end to it. Years ago, I voted for it myself. It keeps people off the streets, keeps them from starving. If you don't work you can't eat. But when it comes your turn, you think twice, I guess. You think twice."

Quickly Fitch glanced up and down the corridor. He tried his leg cautiously. It felt stronger. People were disappearing from the benches down the line. Two attendants gripped each person firmly. They turned into a doorway and the door closed behind them. Fitch deduced his chances. There was an exit of some sort at the end of the corridor. He remembered the garage and knew he could find his way out from there. When the attendants took the next "patient" inside, Fitch stood up, wobbly but determined. He walked as quietly as possible in front of the benches toward the garage. No one spoke. Eyes watched him, but without curiosity, with a sort of dead helplessness and defeat.

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Then one man who looked barely alive suddenly yelled out with triumphant bitterness, "AAAAYAYA". He kept screaming until the guards reappeared, then he slumped over again, his vitality gone. Fitch broke into as much of a run as he could manage, but it was too late. They dragged him past the rows of impassive faces and opened a door.

The doctor was a small man in a wrinkled suit. He screwed his anxious face up into a mild grin and said, "Feeling energetic, huh?"

"Too energetic to be put to sleep, if that's what you mean," Fitch said. "Are you a doctor or aren't you?"

The room was cluttered and dirty. The attendant shoved Fitch down into a chair placed before the desk. The doctor said in a polite punctual voice, "A doctor's duty is to ease pain, not to prolong misery."

"I'm not miserable," Fitch said. "I have a flesh wound in my leg that I'd like taken care of. That's all. I thought that a doctor's duty was to preserve life."

"For what?" the doctor said. "Old fashioned ideas, boy." All the time he made notes on a pad. His gray eyes flicked over Fitch's face once. Then he said to the attendant, "Undertaker number seven." He rose, patted Fitch on the arm and said, "Nothing to worry about. Good boy. I like your spirit."

Fitch sprang up unsteadily. Behind him, the attendant slipped a rope around his shoulders and forced him to a door at the end of the room. Another "patient" was already sitting at the doctor's desk in Fitch's place. The attendant opened the door. Fitch glimpsed a large empty-looking room. From behind the door an arm shot out, and a needle slipped into the flesh just above his elbow.

His last thought was one of astonishment; that life could end so quickly and be treated so lightly. A sharp outrage against his own race rushed through him. Paralysis crept through his bones, filling him up with sleep. Tears of rage fell down his cheeks. Just before he fell unconscious he comforted himself with the thought that the race of man could not long survive.

FOUR

FITCH THOUGHT that he was dying, and yet he was aware of being moved, of riding, perhaps in another truck. A cold draft of air hit his ankles. A dank mustiness rose up. He heard the word, "Undertakers" distinctly, and his spine prickled and yet he still couldn't open his eyes. He dozed off again. When he came to, he was amazed to find himself still alive, yet they were taking him to the undertakers. He discounted the thought that they would bury living men, and yet, why the undertakers? His mind burst into frenzied activity, but he couldn't move his body.

Hands felt his body. He couldn't hear a thing but the fact that he was aware of the hands upon him told him that his senses were slowly beginning to return. His eyes opened. He was laying on a suspended board, and he'd been bound with rope. There were men lying on either side of him. The room was obviously underground, with walls of heavy stone to which beads of moisture clung. Boards stretched from one end of the room to the other, and the men were laid out on them, with arms touching. There were about fifty men that Fitch could see. His lips felt like wood but he said weakly, "Where the devil are we?"

For a moment no one answered. Whatever drug they had been given was wearing off at varying intervals. The man to whom Fitch addressed his question, looked over feebly. "Undertakers."

"But we aren't dead. Certainly they aren't going to bury us alive."

"What's that got to do with it? Shush." The man closed his eyes quickly and let his head slump back against the board. Fitch heard a door close somewhere. The man to whom he'd been speaking whispered, "Lay your head down."

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Another, closer, door opened. Footsteps came along briskly. Now and then they stopped. They quickened, swept past Fitch down to the other end of the room. Another door opened and closed.

"We have about ten minutes," the other man said. Fitch opened his eyes. Around him, other men were coming to. Fitch said, "Ten minutes for what?"

"I'd rather wake up here than dead," another man said.

The man beside Fitch said, "At least we won't be hungry."

"But what are they going to do?" Fitch said. One man said angrily, "A joker. Just what we need," but another voice said, "They put us to sleep for two years. This is my second time in. Then, back to work you go. It's like what they used to call a paid vacation. When they come with that needle, it's lights out, boy."

"They aren't going to put me to sleep," someone yelled. He thumped his body up and down. Someone else shouted, "Aw, shut up."

Another younger voice said, "Yeah, but you don't always come out of it. I knew someone who didn't."

The man beside Fitch laughed. "No such luck. They need able-bodied workers too much to let them die. They just do it to build you up. It's like a good night's sleep. Hell, I let them pick me up. I was too hungry to lift a finger. I just threw myself out in the street and stayed there. It's a lot better than waiting till you're half dead. Then it's sleep forever."

The young voice said, "Don't even talk about it."

Fitch silently tested his bonds. There was very little give to the rope. The man beside him said, "They freeze you, that's it. You don't even age. They shoot this stuff in your veins. You don't feel a thing."

The younger voice said suddenly, "My father was in the other truck. The other one. You know what that means, don't you? He wasn't strong enough to work any more. They won't give him another chance."

There was an embarrassed silence. Someone said, "Never

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mind, kid. He's better off. It's better than going into a Deathdance. Kinder."

"But he was in the other truck. He was in the other truck." The young voice kept on. Steadily, Fitch kept straining at his bonds. The man next to him said, "It won't work. You can't get untied." Fitch started to answer. The door at the end of the room opened. The men lifted their heads up as far as they could, watching. The undertaker came in with an attendant. He smiled reassuringly. "Now this won't hurt," he said. "There's nothing to worry about. A rest from the world's activities." As he spoke, he bent down over the first man and expertly stuck an hypodermic needle into his arm. The attendant ripped back the molding material of the sleeve, and swabbed the circle of flesh with disinfectant.

The man groaned, tried to wiggle out of reach, sighed and lay still. Goose pimples broke out on Fitch's skin. He was the tenth man down. The operation took only a moment or so. As the undertaker gave the injections he kept up the nervous professional chatter. "You're to be envied, really. Think of the others out there, still working day after day, night after night, always hungry. You'll be healthy and refreshed when you awaken."

"My father was in the other truck," the young voice yelled.

"Unfortunate. Unfortunate," the undertaker said. "But there isn't enough room or food for those too sick to work. It's all a matter of preservation. At least he didn't starve to death." At the same time, he made a motion to his attendant. They broke off the orderly succession of the injections and walked past Fitch down the line to the young man. The boy was yelling. His voice rose in a crescendo of fear and panic.

"You'll be all right," the undertaker said. Smoothly, the attendant swabbed the trembling arm. The injection took over. The voice quieted. Then the two men went back where they'd left off. They stood three men away from Fitch. He tried to move his legs, to see if he could possibly kick hard enough to protect himself when his turn came, but he

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couldn't raise his knees far enough. The other men were silent now.

Again Fitch experienced the sense of shock, that conditions in the outside world could be so bad, and that he hadn't known. All he could do was watch, fatalistically, as the undertaker came closer with his inane chatter, and his needle. The man beside Fitch said, "Well, here goes. I'm next. Sweet dreams."

Still Fitch couldn't believe it. His neck hurt from holding his head up so long. He was stiff with anger and tension. For the first time he noticed that they'd bandaged his leg. The undertaker stood in front of him. "They fixed your leg while you were unconscious. Don't give it a thought. It'll be as good as new."

The attendant came closer. Fitch braced himself. Suddenly the lights went out. The undertaker and the attendant stepped back. "Electricity's off again," the undertaker said. They walked away hurriedly. Fitch sank back, weak with relief. A door opened in the darkness. A voice said, "Which of you men is from the gallery?" Fitch yelled out, "Here." A set of double footsteps ran across the room. Two men rushed to Fitch's assistance. Hands cut his ropes. He sprang up. "What about the others?" he said.

"We can't use them. Hurry, this way." Some of the men booed. A few begged to be freed. Fitch hesitated, but the men who had freed him pushed him along. They turned a flashlight on briefly, so that Fitch got an idea of the layout of the room. The three of them ran through the door and out into a dark hallway. They froze as footsteps approached. One of the men flashed the light again.

The undertaker stood motionless, staring. Fitch flattened out against the wall, but the undertaker said, "Get him out of here." He took a key from his pocket, opened a door in the wall, and stood aside. "You're lucky, young fellow," he said to Fitch. "I couldn't have put it off another minute. You'll never know how close you came to getting that needle." Then he said to the others, "Hurry it up. You took

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your time, I'll say that." The men motioned Fitch to follow. As they went inside, the door locked again.

They paused to catch their breath. Fitch said, "Who the devil are you? What's going on?"

"No time now," one of the men said. "We lost enough time as it is, but we wanted them to get that leg of yours fixed up first."

"In the excitement, I forgot about it." With amazement, Fitch realized that his leg was much better. The thought came with a rush of strength; at least he could rely on himself physically again. They began walking down the corridor. This time no one spoke. The air grew colder and damp. They were going deeper and deeper into the earth. The hall took another turn. The men opened another door. Bursts of air rushed up refreshingly, but still everything was dark.

"Feel your way along. We can't use light, and be quiet," one of them said.

They were now in a long underground tunnel. It was impossible to stand up. Hard banked earth met Fitch's inquiring hands. The sides rose up steeply. There was only room enough in the path to put one foot before the other and they went along single file, heads bent, hands touching the banked earth for support.

Everything had been still. Without warning all sorts of sounds clattered overhead with sudden vehemence. The loudspeakers shouted their Go Go Go, work, work, work. Trucks rolled. There were shouts and screams, all alarmingly close after the secrecy and silence of the escape. Fitch realized that the tunnel was beneath the street. He expected the trucks to fall through from the sound they made. It took a good two or three minutes before the tunnel turned away, and then went deeper. He knew that they must be nearing the Chemung River.

Then the pathway widened. Dim light showed through. Fitch and the two men scrambled out on a bank of slimy mud. Fitch had trouble seeing, after the darkness of the tunnel, but the tumultuous sounds of voices made him suspect that they'd landed from the frying pan into the fire. "Hurry,

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jump," one of the men said. He did and fell down on to something hard and wet. His vision cleared. Groups of dirty men and women clustered nearby, on the river bank. They dangled all kinds of fishing gear into the water. Some of them were fighting among themselves.

The hard surface Fitch found beneath him was the bottom of an old rowing boat. One of his rescuers grabbed the oars and began digging them into the mud to get the boat off. Out of the corner of his eye, Fitch saw a third man scurry away, as if he'd just arrived with the boat. At the same time a woman suddenly noticed them. She shouted out to the others. They stopped fighting, looked up and came rushing over.

The man with the oars lifted them menacingly. From the boat the other man pulled up a heavy wooden club. The group slowed their approach but the woman shouted, "There's only three of them and six of us." She was in the lead. Behind her a man said, "Where did that boat come from? It wasn't here a minute ago."

"Beat it," said the man with the oars. He stood hip deep in the water now. Fitch could feel the boat begin to lift. The woman threw a rock but it planked down harmlessly in the river. The man with the club yelled to Fitch, "Throw the food to them. There's some in the bottom of the boat." Quickly Fitch looked down, found a crumbled mess of greenish leaves, and threw the slimy greens by handfuls toward the people. The woman stopped yelling for a moment. Then she shouted, "Dandelions," and caught them up from the water. She tasted them quickly. The man behind her grabbed them away from her, and Fitch threw in the last bunch.

The boat cleared the river bottom. They were out a good twenty feet. By the time the people finished fighting over the dandelion greens, the boat was already disappearing down the river. Fitch looked back. The man he'd seen sneaking away from the boat had returned. He stood yelling at the group of people, and pointing in the other direction. Some-

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thing about the man's motions caught Fitch's eye. He was sure that he'd seen him before.

In the meantime the boat sloshed down the river. Now and then it hit bottom. They had to get out and push it along. It was rough going because the water was full of debris. The stench was sickening. Filthy huts rose up on either side of the river. Now Fitch could see them clearly—junk and pieces of board all piled together haphazardly—looking more like rubbish heaps than shelters. The land to the left was fairly level, but the hills began on the right, dotted with numberless dug-out caves and crevices, pock-marked with clumps of people and shanties and debris.

The tallest of the two men was rowing. The other searched the terrain anxiously. Neither of them seemed ready to talk so Fitch took the time to look them over. Besides, he felt his strength returning and decided to rest while he could. Also he wanted to learn the lay of the land. He was filled with curiosity and some regret. His cell at the gallery attained the glow of a lost Eden as the status of the outside world impressed itself upon him.

People were everywhere. The river was crowded with all kinds of homemade crafts. Everyone was fishing but no one ever seemed to catch a fish. The water was so muddy that it was like a thick foul smelling pudding. A few blocks away a sign showed up above the roofs of low huts: "Fresh cat paws. Barter." People sat along the river banks, sticking their scabby legs in.

No one seemed to be following them, yet the shorter of the two men kept up his constant vigil, staring intently with long worried looks at the shore as they passed. The other rowed quickly, hitting at the water as if it were an enemy to be beaten to death. The people in the other boats kept bailing out. All of the crafts seemed to have holes. Now and then the man who rowed scooped up water from one side of the boat and threw it out the other side, apparently so that their boat would look as inefficient as all the others.

It was late afternoon. Fitch was so used to the silence of the men and the steady motion of the boat that when one

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of the men spoke quickly and the boat turned toward the shore, he was instantly on guard. "Just follow us," the taller man said. They went in with the boat until it hit bottom, and then just left it there. This part of the bank was comparatively empty of people, although the rubbish-heap huts were crowded as closely together as before. They trudged up through the mud.

"Watch out for rats," one of the men said. A pile of river dirt and wood was right in front of them and they made for it. Fitch noticed that they no longer seemed worried about pursuit. As they neared the debris, Fitch saw a cleverly designed entrance. They all scurried inside through a clutter of rubbish about four feet square, then ducked down and squeezed behind some more boards. It was so dark inside that Fitch kept one hand on the man in front of him for guidance. Then suddenly he felt rather than saw a cleared space. The next moment a light glimmered. He was in a small clean room, and one of the men had lit a candle.

A ramshackle table and a few chairs sat in the center of a dirt floor. There were no windows. The walls were composed of mud, but they glowed with an eerie light in the half-darkness. The tall man sat down. The shorter one busied himself in the far corner, with his back turned. A trickling sound bubbled nearby. The man emerged with a basin of water, and soap. They all washed in the same water, then the taller man took out a pill from a small box and gave it to Fitch. "Take it. You'll need it. Your shot will take a day or so to take effect and this will hold you over."

Fitch hesitated. The shorter man said irritably, "You want to get the plague? You will, if you don't take that pill."

Fitch took it. The men relaxed. The taller one said, "This place never looked so good." Then, to Fitch, "Make yourself comfortable. We'll tell you who we are." The shorter man started grinning, "Here's something first," he said. He went over to the corner and came back with a loaf of hard bread and some dry milk powder that he mixed with water. They ate slowly. With food in his stomach, Fitch was beginning to feel more like himself. The taller man said, "I'm Sloat

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Brail. This is Gunny Bragan. We had one hell of a time trailing you. Of course, you realize that you couldn't have made stupider moves if you'd tried."

"You mean looking for a doctor?" Fitch said. "It seemed reasonable enough at the time."

"If you'd stayed with the man and girl, we could have saved you a lot of trouble," Sloat said. Fitch realized that he liked the man. Sloat was over six feet, a giant compared to most, with deep set eyes and a small face that was almost chinless. His movements were very deliberate. It was he who had been the rower of the boat. The other man, Gunny, Fitch liked less. He had quick energetic eyes and black hair. There seemed to be an excitement in his face all the while. Nevertheless he did nothing that Fitch could take exception to.

Fitch said, "The girl hit me over the head."

"For your own good. She thought you were crazy when you insisted upon wanting a doctor," Sloat said.

"How do you know?"

Sloat just shrugged and smiled.

"I keep thinking of that injection; you certainly just got to me in time," Fitch said. "What did you help me for? How did you know I was from the gallery to begin with?" He said, with a laugh, "A few little things like that, I'd like ironed out."

But even as he spoke, he realized that he was still on edge. He decided that he'd had enough; he'd reacted to circumstances but he hadn't acted. He was through being pushed around. If he didn't like the answers that Sloat gave him, then he'd make a few decisions of his own. But he also knew that his ignorance about the outside world was still appalling. He said, "Suppose you start at the beginning."

FIVE

THERE WAS a brief silence. Sloat Brail cleared his throat. He said, "Well, first of all, we know you're from the gallery but we don't know your name."

"Gary Fitch."

"Okay. I'll tell you as much as I can before we have to leave. We're going to start out again when darkness sets in and tonight the trip will be dangerous. First, we belong to a group called the Rebellers. I don't know if you've heard of us or not. We've often wondered what news, if any, seeps into the galleries. We discovered that the gallery was going to be raided. The people don't realize it yet, but the bubonic plague has broken out again and it's spreading rapidly. Workers have fallen sick. Food is scarcer than ever. Soon the government will be grabbing everyone they can to replace the dead in the chemical gardens. Anyway, one of our men saw you escape. We have spies to cover any events we might be interested in and we've wanted to get a hold of some of the artists for a long time. We think that you have some information that is of vital importance to us."

He paused, watching Fitch's face, and then continued. "I'll fill in the details later, but we lost you temporarily. You complicated things no end by getting picked up by the streetcleaners, and then made things worse by trying to escape from the doctors. Then they kept their eyes on you. Otherwise we could have gotten you out fairly easily. So we had to resort to using one of our agents; the undertaker. We don't pull things like that too often either. We can't afford the risks. One of our men had to take your place and be put out of commission for two years, in case you're interested. Anyhow, this way the government gave you your

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shots and fixed your leg, so we didn't have to bother with that. Maybe we came out even after all."

"Why did you want someone from the gallery?" Fitch said. "Obviously I'm like a babe in the woods as far as my knowledge of current affairs is concerned."

Sloat grinned. "It's your knowledge of the past that we're concerned with. Manuscripts and all kinds of important information has been withheld from the public for so many generations that we're held back ourselves. We have to know what was tried in order to see where the race failed. We're in a very peculiar position. At one time the Rebels had a positive plan of action. We still know what we're rebelling against, but we have no idea of what sort of civilization we want to put in place of what we have now. This is getting involved though. It can wait."

He said soberly, "Our journey will present some hazards tonight, I'll tell you ahead of time. The government would like to get its hands on us. We've committed the only real recognizable crime, deprived the country of our capacity for productivity, taken the best specimens of men we could find, built them up, and used them for our own purposes. Incidentally, if you join us it will be voluntary."

"If I want to walk out of here now, then I'm free to do so?" Fitch said.

"You can *now*," Gunny said emphatically. He broke in, talking with that nervous excitability that Fitch had noticed earlier. "You have to meet Toby. He'll fill you in. Then if you want to join up, we'll show you the setup. After that, you're ours. You have to make up your mind before you see our facilities. We want to know what you can give us too, you know."

"That's for Toby to decide. Not us," Sloat said quickly.

Gunny said quarrelsomely, "It's true though, Fitch. We've taken a lot of chances for you. I hope it's worth it. Remember that kid that kept yelling that his father was *mercié*?"

"*Mercié*?"

"The kid that kept saying his father was killed? The one who got the needle instead of you, really? At least he got

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it out of turn and that gave us a few minutes to get to you. He was a friend of mine. He wasn't too enthusiastic either, being used like that."

Sloat broke in somewhat irritably. "He needed the rest. He was overworked and sick himself. Sometimes we use the government facilities, Fitch, when it's convenient. It gives our men a period of recuperation and puts them out of circulation when they come under suspicion. They never think of looking for spies in their own undertaking parlors. Two years later the man is awakened, sent out to the work gardens, and then we get him back again. That's how it will work with the boy. At the same time we also used him, in this instance, for a double purpose. The attendant isn't ours. Only the undertaker." He leaned back, grinning. "Quite a bit to take in at once, isn't it?"

"You should have remained anonymous," Gunny said. "We knew you were wounded. We thought we could pick you up easily, but you had that insane determination to see a doctor. That's what we couldn't understand. Why?"

"Doctors used to heal people," Fitch said, "not put them out of their misery. I told you I knew more about the past than the present."

"It doesn't make sense," Gunny said. "How could they try to heal the sick, and what would the point of it be? Who would feed all those who couldn't work? You'd end up making slaves of the rest of the population."

"We can go into all that later," Sloat said. "It's time to get out of here. We still have the rest of the city to go through. Fitch, you do what we do. If you don't understand whatever we're doing, do it anyway. We're going to mix with the crowd and traverse the northeast part of the city. And if that isn't bad enough, there's an area of chemical gardens and work fields that we have to pass."

He said with a shrug, "No one pays much attention to the people in the city proper anyhow. They're the incompetents, the sick, the insane. Sooner or later they get picked up and either straightened out or disposed of in one way or another. But further out are the workers' shacks and gardens and these

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are really patrolled. As a rule no one can get in or out. We have two men out there but the rest is up to us."

"How come this place is so safe?" Fitch said, and Gunny said, "You want to know?" He grinned meaningfully. "Remember I warned you about rats when we came in? This was plague area not long ago. No one comes near it now. See how these walls glow? We've invented a substance that repels rats and kills infection. Right now rats aren't used for food even though they're plentiful, but if we can disinfect the rats first, then we'll add to our supply of available protein."

Fitch didn't answer. He looked over at Sloat but the other man's back was turned. They gathered their things together. Gunny said, "So what do you think of that? Rat stew?"

"I've got my reservations," Fitch said soberly. "Survival is survival and all, but I'm not sure I left the gallery for the dubious privilege of eating rats. Somehow I'd rather combat present conditions in the Outside, rather than make adjustments to them. Sometimes adjustments only lead to further degradation."

Sloat said, "We have to stay alive to do anything, you know. It's the prime concern. You have to eat."

"The people I saw in the streets last night were alive but they weren't much like men," Fitch said slowly. "Maybe beyond a certain point, survival is meaningless. You change, or the race changes. Perhaps if you don't survive as reasoning human beings, you don't really survive at all."

"Oh, Toby will like you," Gunny said with a leer.

But Sloat blew the candle out. They crept through the heap of debris. Outside the river was dark, and a cold wind blew down from the mountains. Torches glimmered here and there, and they'd walked only a half mile when they began to meet crowds of people again. Neon lights blinked outside tumbledown shops. Nervousness prickled at Fitch's spine. Ahead was a square, smaller than the one he'd been in the night before, but otherwise identical.

Already Fitch heard the loudspeakers. Paintings moved

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with that curious lifelike grotesqueness on the sides of the crumbling buildings. Sloat and Gunny attached themselves to the edges of each group of people that they passed, copying their facial expressions and motions. Fitch cautiously followed their example. Suddenly a low chant caught him up with hypnotic rhythm. To the right of him about ten men and women were dancing and chanting at once, weaving back and forth.

As Fitch watched, the tempo quickened. People stopped and then, almost unwillingly, joined in. In seconds the latecomers were twisting and turning with the same frenzied expression, the same uninhibited exultation. For a moment Fitch forgot everything else, watching. Their abandon was contagious. Their wasted bodies were hung with rags that moved eerily in the wind. The momentum picked up again. They danced faster and faster in separate jerky movements, yelling and chanting all the while.

A blow hit Fitch on the back of the neck. He shook his head in confusion. A sense of loss flooded through him. Gunny said, "Another smart move like that, and you'll have had it." In some amazement Fitch looked about. He'd been walking toward the dancers who were spinning now almost quicker than his eyes could follow.

Sloat's long face smiled with some sad toleration. "We took it for granted that you were still with us; then we looked around and discovered you were gone. You were ready to join the Deathdancers, in case you're interested. Guess we forgot what it would be like, seeing them for the first time."

"The what? I was . . . watching. At least that's all I thought I was doing," Fitch said. Yet he knew instantly that Sloat was correct. He'd almost been drawn in. "Death-dancers?" he said.

Sloat grabbed his arm. They joined the edges of another group of people who jostled along quarreling and yelling. "It's some kind of psychopathic disease; they dance themselves to death," Gunny said. "It's just another hazard to look out for."

"Frightening when you experience it for the first time

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though," Sloat said. Fitch couldn't help but throw him a look of gratitude, but the whole thing was like a nightmare. He felt as if he hadn't budged from the square he'd been in the night before. Try as he could he couldn't escape from the tumultuous sounds and the pressing bodies. It was an effort to think, to pull apart from the noise long enough to compose coherent thoughts.

Suddenly he and Sloat and Gunny all fell forward. Fitch tried to get up but other people were piled on top of him. Finally he got free. The group of men they'd joined had tripped and fallen altogether like tenpins. Those behind had fallen on top. Gunny swore. The people began quarreling as to who had tripped first. Automatically Sloat also adopted an angry threatening glance. At the same time he said pleasantly enough, "Turn to the right, we're almost out of here."

"Yeah, just don't listen to any more death chants," Gunny said. Just then, a hand came out of the crowd and poked Sloat in the head. Sloat knocked down the man that hit him. The veins stuck out in Sloat's forehead. He looked ready to kill. Fitch stood ready to defend himself in case Sloat turned on him, and Sloat's face cleared for a brief second. "Pretty authentic, huh?" he said, but angrily.

Gunny said, "Protective coloration. You'll get used to it."

At the same time they found a chance to tag on to a group of revelers and Gunny's face broke out instantly into an expression of almost idiotic amiability. In like fashion they crossed the areas of greatest tumult until the crowds began to thin out. Gunny said companionably, "Don't let it get you down," and Fitch bristled at the tone of superiority in his voice and didn't answer.

Ahead of them it was dark. Fitch still felt a sense of loss. For a moment as he'd listened to the Deathdancers, a warm sense of belonging had risen in him, a sense of fulfillment that had vanished the instant that Gunny touched his arm. Now, walking along on the hard dirt road, he watched the huddled shacks that rose in the darkness. He listened to Gunny's voice. He saw the land stretch out, out-

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lined against the night sky. He looked out disconsolately at the indistinguishable heaps and old buildings in the distance, and at the odd high structures that loomed ahead. It seemed to him that everything was Gunny's fault, the poverty and the misery and the dreariness of the landscape. Gunny had prevented him from joining the dancers. He hated Gunny's face. Squinting at it sideways in the darkness, he felt that he could sense Gunny's treachery.

Man's destiny lay with the dancers, it was clear to him. Into his mind flashed the memory of their exultation, the abandon of their gestures. He threw Gunny down on the ground and leapt on top of him. Sloat Brail pulled him off Gunny, and started slapping his face. "I've got to kill him. Don't you see that?" Fitch said.

"Shut up," Sloat said, not unkindly. He ripped a piece of dirty cloth off the bottom of his shabby trousers and tied Fitch's mouth. Then he shoved him into a sitting position on the ground. "We've got to get out of here," he said quickly. "Anyone hears a rumpus and we're liable to have a mob on our hands. Now listen—"

Gunny stood nearby, watching cautiously. Sloat said, "I told you that the Deathdance is a psychopathic development, contagious as the devil. You always get a reaction. We were waiting for yours. This hatred of Gunny was it. Do you feel any better? We can't wait around all night."

Fitch nodded. The hatred for Gunny died down as quickly as it had arisen. His mind began to function again. Now, however, he was filled with distaste for a civilization in which the individual was so prone and in which he must be so diligent just to preserve his sanity. Sloat removed the gag. Fitch said, "I'm sorry, Gunny." There was a new severity in his voice and a new resolution. Gunny nodded.

The shacks gave way to what looked like open country. Then Fitch looked up. The structures that Fitch had glimpsed earlier now rose upward all over, blocking out the sky entirely. In the darkness it was hard to see them clearly, yet he sensed their magnitude and extension.

"It's all food," Sloat said. "Grown in layers. Mostly chemi-

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cal production, twenty stories high around here for miles. As ground space gets cut down they have to build higher. The whole continent is littered with these things. You'd think that there would be enough food to feed the world, but it doesn't work that way. You can't depend on the people themselves. They have to be watched every minute or they won't even work the machines. When they can, they go on food binges and gorge themselves to death, for one thing."

"What about water?" Fitch said.

"There's never enough. Even the ocean levels are down. The few rivers left never reach their rightful destination because the water is used before it ever gets to the ocean. Now, listen, this is what we're going to do. In a quarter of a mile we'll come to the food ramps. The ground will be useless as far as traveling is concerned. We'd be caught in a minute."

"But it looks deserted," Fitch said.

Gunny said with a short laugh, "Look again."

Fitch let his eyes travel over the landscape to the left. Then he realized that what he'd taken for flat monotonous hills were instead long rectangular structures, reaching continuously as far as he could see.

"Workers' communes," Gunny said. "They house the food growers, and believe me, they're well guarded."

"We wouldn't have a chance," Sloat said. "I told you that we had two men out here. One is the night guard at the head of the first ramp. You won't be able to see him, but he can see us. Now the ramps rise up like bridges. We're going to climb the first girder and crawl along just on top of the ramp itself and just below the surface of the level above. There's only a space of about three feet between, so we can't go upright. We have to crawl on our hands and knees. If we fall, nothing can save us. There's a drop of thirty feet beneath."

SIX

THE THREE MEN climbed along slowly, gripping the girders. When they were all the way on top, Fitch looked down. The ground was dark beneath. Above stretched the ramp itself and the enclosed chemical gardens. Only the under-surface was visible, blocking out everything else. The girders were cold. A wind whipped up, coming over the flat land of the valley from the mountains. None of the men spoke. Guards were stationed on the ground at regular intervals. Now and then the sound of their voices rose upward on the wind.

Fitch's hands and knees were sore. He and the others crawled along on all fours so that their silhouettes wouldn't be seen from below. It took an hour to traverse the girders. When they got to the other end, Sloat motioned to Fitch. "Gunny and I will each go down a different girder," he said. "You stay with me. A guard will be stationed at both points and we'll have to jump them simultaneously. Ready?"

Fitch nodded. Going down was far more difficult than going up had been. There was the constant danger of slipping. Directly beneath, a guard stood about three feet away, looking toward the dark landscape. Across from Fitch and Sloat, Gunny slid down as silently as an animal. For a moment the three men were motionless. Then Sloat gave the signal to attack. Together they leaped the last few feet to the ground. The guard closest to Fitch swung around with surprise, but Sloat came up from behind and knocked him out with an expert tap at the back of the neck. Gunny was having trouble, however. The sound of a scuffle was dangerously loud. Fitch and Sloat ran over just as the other guard yelled out and then slumped to the ground. Fitch,

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Gunny and Sloat dashed in a zigzag line across the level land toward a group of short squat buildings.

A vehicle was waiting and they jumped in. Shouts rose from the clearing behind them. A shot rang out. The vehicle took off quickly. Amazed, Fitch found himself riding just above the ground, skimming along about five feet in the air. Lights flashed on, but the vehicle sped on just ahead of the circle of illumination. "We'll be all right now," Gunny said with obvious satisfaction. "We'd never have made it though if Toby hadn't arranged to have this A-cop waiting. That damn guard really moved fast, and I'm pretty quick myself."

"That's true, you are," Sloat said. "All in all, we're lucky." He spoke in a quiet dry voice. Fitch looked sideways at him and realized for the first time that Sloat didn't like Gunny at all.

"Hell, we made it, didn't we?" Gunny said.

"You're right, we can't operate at maximum efficiency all the time, I guess," Sloat said. This time he hid his antagonism so well that Fitch wondered if he'd imagined it.

"What do you call this plane or car or whatever it is?" Sloat said. "It's the craziest looking contraption I ever saw, like a hollowed out plate with a cab on top."

"Aerocopter, A-cop, for short," Gunny said with a grin. "When we're over flat land like now, it rises on a cushion of air and hovers above the earth. It's noisy though, as you've probably noticed and it won't rise very far. You'll see; when we get to the hills, we'll use it like a copter, hidden wings drop out and we can get some altitude. Works like a regular little car, too; rolls along the ground. Country used to be full of these things. Sloat managed to steal this one from Elmira Borough officials. Damn near made him a hero with Toby."

"Elmira Borough?"

"Call it City 16 if you want," Gunny said. "The old name still sticks though."

"How come the chemical gardens were dark? I thought you said that they worked there night and day?"

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"They do," Sloat said. "Those structures are old, built during the American-Chinese war scare. Russia and the United States were allies, only the war never came off. The population explosion killed China off first. Anyhow, the chemical gardens were camouflaged so that no light shows through. From the air the damn things look like mountains, or they did. When they were built, the hills around here were loaded with trees, so they covered the roof of the gardens with artificial foliage. Only thing is, now the real mountains are bare and the artificial ones stick out like a sore thumb."

"I thought you didn't have any knowledge of the past?"

"We have records since the Rebels began, but none earlier," Gunny said. "We think that the world was entirely different then, but we aren't sure. To tell the truth, I couldn't care less. Whatever people have, they deserve. That's how I look at it."

Sloat grimaced and started to speak, then changed his mind. Gunny said, "It may not look like it at night, but those hills above are crowded as the devil." Fitch couldn't see much in the darkness but he sensed the long twisting narrow ledges that rose up from the old gutted road.

"Huts and caves clutter the whole damn mountain top," Gunny said. "The land isn't any good for anything either. It's loaded with rocks. The People Haters live there. They eat grubs and God knows what else. Now and then the local Borough subdivision cleans them out but the place fills right up again."

"People Haters?" Fitch said. "That's a new one."

"Traitors," Gunny said angrily. "Can't stand the sight of their own species."

"You're a fine one to talk," Fitch said.

"I mean it," Gunny said. "We tried to get them to join the Rebels. Toby gave a swell talk to them one night and they damn near shoved him off the side of the mountain. They even hate themselves. They go there to get away from the rest of mankind, and the place is as crowded as anywhere else. Now and then it all bubbles up, though,

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hate or something. They had a Deathdance that's famous. Five hundred danced themselves to death in one night."

"Nice commentary, isn't it?" Sloat said.

"Great. By the way, how come the roads are so empty?"

Gunny chuckled. "Thieves and looters run wild at night. Anyone with any sense at all digs in someplace and stays there till daybreak. Only the chemical gardens separate the various subdivisions of the contropolis, you know, and right here we're in the small wasteland between."

"Another thing," Fitch said. "My roommate at the gallery tried to escape with me. After I blacked out I never saw him again and we've been in such a rush that I haven't had time to ask you about him."

"Maybe he got picked up by the gallery guards themselves," Sloat said. "Reinforcements came almost immediately and the attackers were repelled. Can't blame the people, though. They were hungry. The borough's trying to keep it quiet but another bout of the plague is on its way. The chemical gardens are already beginning to suffer from lack of workers."

For a moment they stopped talking. The A-cop sped along but now the land was growing mountainous and Sloat changed the control over to copter, and the vehicle rose higher. "The hills are getting steeper," Fitch said. "Are we still heading North?"

The A-cop was two-seated, with a plastic hood. Fitch sat in front with Sloat. A sudden movement from the back made Fitch turn, but it was too late. Gunny slipped a blindfold over his head and laughed with that nervous excitability.

"Sorry," Sloat said. "From now on our trip has to be secret. It won't be long though."

For a while the A-cop went ahead, but then it turned. Fitch was certain that they'd reversed their direction completely, and were backtracking to some extent. Then suddenly the A-cop came directly but slowly down. Sloat and Gunny helped Fitch out, but they wouldn't remove the blindfold. The air was strangely warm for late October, but cold air rushed up from somewhere below.

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"We're going to have a long damn Indian Summer," Gunny grumbled. "Great plague weather."

Sloat agreed grimly. Fitch was quiet, trying to get his bearings. The ground was damp and he smelled moisture, but as far as he knew the Chemung River was miles to the East. Something was moved aside. He presumed it was a rock. Sloat stood aside while Gunny guided Fitch inside. Then the doorway, if it was a doorway, closed. Though the dampness was worse than ever now, the shafts of cold air were stationary, as if they were in some kind of refrigerated compartment. They walked along in single file, then changed direction, turning sharply to the left.

Once Fitch put his hand out and recoiled. The close walls were slimy with mud. Behind him Gunny saw Fitch's motion and snickered. They went down some steps. Then the ground became uniform and even. At the bottom of the stairs, Sloat removed Fitch's blindfold.

They stood in a long, narrow, dimly lit corridor that stretched as far as Fitch could see. The stone walls were stratified. They leaned over at the top to form a peak as if, once perpendicular, they had been shoved together by some cataclysm. Doorways opened off the hallway. Sloat bowed with mock deference and opened the first door. "Your room for the night," Gunny said with a sudden friendly leer. "Get a good night's sleep, you'll need it. In the morning you'll get a batch of blood tests, and then you'll meet Toby."

Fitch looked around the room, hardly believing his eyes. Still smiling, Sloat said, "Not bad, huh?" He closed the door quickly. A key turned in the lock. Fitch shrugged and went all the way inside. The room amazed him. He'd never seen a place so luxuriously furnished. Rugs lined the rock floor. There were two upholstered chairs. Dim lights glimmered from the ceiling. The rock walls were a pale green and to the end of the room stood a large bed, complete with pillows and blankets. Next to the bed a table held a pitcher of milk and a platter of crackers. A shelf and wall mirror were behind the door, and the shelf was equipped with shaving supplies. There was even a basin of water.

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The bed captured Fitch's interest immediately. He'd always slept on a narrow cot at the gallery and the bed looked wide enough to sleep ten. He whistled to himself. If Mandy could only see him now! Except for the few noises he made, the room was very quiet. He presumed that it was soundproof. The warmth made him drowsy, and yet all the while he remained alert and uneasy. Why was he being put up in such luxury? He'd taken it for granted that the whole establishment was similarly decked out, but now he reminded himself that for all he knew this could be the only such room in the place.

He was hungry and thirsty, but too suspicious to try the milk and crackers. Suppose that they were drugged? He still viewed the bed with enthusiastic delight, but it looked so inviting that he fought off the desire to lay down. He did take off his clothes and put on a long woolen robe that had been laid out for him. The garment was coarse and heavily woven but it was the most beautiful cloth that he'd seen in years.

Feeling like a fool, he prowled around the room, trying to find something wrong. He went over and picked up a pillow from the bed, punched at it automatically, and tossed it down. Then he picked it up again carefully. It looked ordinary, yet his fingers discovered uneven small lumps, like wires, far within. Without ripping the pillow apart, he couldn't tell what was inside, and he didn't want his inspection to be apparent.

Beside him was the table with the crackers and milk. He picked some of the crackers up, staring at them critically. He was hungry enough to eat the plate. Then a vague scrawl on one of the crackers caught his eye. He spilled the plateful out on the table. The crackers were brown, uneven in texture, covered with a sickly grayish frosting. A few letters were scrawled in the frosting of about seven crackers. The whole message read: "Food safe. Bed no." The lettering was almost illegible, but it was there. He started to laugh. Eat the evidence, he said to himself; pretty tricky. He stuffed the crackers down, wondering who could

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have sent the warning? And what could be wrong with the bed? He went back to re-examine the suspicious pillow.

But just feeling the pillow gave him no clue. He frowned. Suppose the bed and the pillows were harmless unless someone was laying on the bed? He looked around for something heavy enough to simulate a man's weight and saw the two chairs. Quickly he piled both of them on the bed, laying one up against the pillow where his own head would lay if he was sleeping there. Then he stood aside and waited.

He was prepared for anything but what happened. A very slight noise rose up. It grew louder. He braced himself. A comforting lullaby gradually drifted to his ears. For an instant he was too surprised to move. Then he approached the bed and stood with his ear pressed close to the pillow. The sound of soft lulling violins was so pleasant that he paused. Then, quickly, he jumped back. The music was far different from the mad chanting of the Deathdancers, and yet it was even more insidious. It was . . . tempting. He backed away still further.

Yet curiosity got the best of him. What was the point of the whole thing? His sense of humor intruded. It was ludicrous, he thought, this lulling of a grown man to sleep. Cautiously he approached the bed again. The music was deeper in tone now, but still muted. It would be quite clear though to a man sleeping in the bed. Quick images flashed into his mind; long forgotten memories of being held in his mother's arms; subconscious longings for dependence and . . . submission; a humiliating variety of infantile suggestions. He sprang away again, this time only by exerting the full strength of his will. His forehead was wet with perspiration. Suddenly the music faded away. A voice began to speak softly, but with restrained confidence.

But this time Fitch sprang forward impatiently. He was angry and he wanted to know what the Rebels' game was. The voice said clearly, "The Rebels are the hope of mankind . . . your hope. The Rebels are the hope of mankind . . . your hope. The Rebels—" He ran to the

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bed and threw the chair on the floor. Relieved of the weight on the bed, the mechanism that activated the pillow shut off, and the room was quiet.

Fitch frowned. Conditions Outside had appalled him. Certainly the people needed some hope and some help, but if the Rebels had any such intentions, then why the propaganda and trickery? Perhaps he was now in a prison of a different sort than the gallery. Yet suddenly the challenge exhilarated him. He prowled about the room. His competent eyes, used to judging line and color, now turned to every detail about him.

Then it occurred to him that pretended innocence might be to his advantage. One chair was still on the bed where he had put it. He lifted the other one back on the pillow. If there was any way of telling whether or not the bed was occupied, then the weight of the chairs would keep the mechanism going all night. To all appearances, it would look as if his indoctrination was complete.

In the meantime he decided to take advantage of the lull to get some rest. He finished the crackers, drank the milk, and went to sleep on the carpeted floor far enough away from the bed so that the sounds from the pillow were not audible. When he awakened he had no idea of time. The room had no windows, and though he thought that it was early morning, he couldn't be sure.

He sprang up, removed both chairs from the bed and messed up the bedding in what he hoped was a natural manner. Then, grinning to himself, he began to wash his face and hands in the basin of water. He had just finished when a key turned in the door. Quickly he stepped behind it, alert and ready. The doorknob moved quietly.

SEVEN

THE DOOR opened noiselessly, widened, and then held where it was. Fitch stood behind it by the wash basin, ready to defend himself if necessary. He heard a step, then another. Sloat's head appeared. It turned slightly. Fitch saw the chinless face looking with surprise at the empty bed. Grinning, he said, "Looking for somebody, Sloat?" and Sloat swung around.

"I came in to see if you were up yet."

"Awfully quiet about it, weren't you?" Fitch said. He thought that Sloat gave him a quick scrutinizing glance, but he couldn't be sure because the other man hid his feelings so well. If Sloat was his ally, he wasn't letting on. He looked as if he hadn't slept all night. Fitch thought of mentioning the fact but decided against it.

"Toby is waiting to see you," Sloat said quietly.

"In this?" Fitch said. He laughed, pointing to the woolen robe that hung from his shoulders to the floor.

"I have one on. They're standard garb around here."

Fitch shrugged. Sloat said, "You'll find that your meeting with Toby will be a most memorable occasion. He's a very unusual man." He spoke in his usual dry manner but again Fitch felt as if Sloat wanted to say more but changed his mind. Instead Sloat merely smiled and they went out the door.

Out in the hall Sloat said, "You'll have a checkup first, and some shots. So many diseases are going around that half of them don't even have names yet, and we can't take any chances. Incidentally, your room was as sanitary as we could manage. Even the sheets on your bed were treated with special disinfectants that were soaked up by your pores as you slept."

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"Good idea," Fitch said. His body hadn't touched the sheets. He looked sideways at Sloat to see exactly how much Sloat knew, but Sloat's face was impassive.

"Toby wanted you to know that we'd taken steps to ensure your health," Sloat said, and this time there was a definite hint of irony in his voice.

"I appreciate it," Fitch said, and grinned. They paused in front of one of the many doors that lined the corridor. "The doctor is in here. I'll wait for you," Sloat said. He pushed the door partially open. Fitch shoved it open all the way and looked around the room before entering. It had no windows. A chair, a desk, and some cabinets were the only furniture. A doctor stood with his back turned. Even without seeing the man's face, Fitch recognized him. It was the same doctor who had treated him earlier. Alarm prickled along his spine, but he allowed no surprise or dismay to show on his face. For one thing he was more confident than he had been earlier. For another, there were no 'attendants' this time. He and the doctor were alone. Without turning, the doctor said, "Name?"

"Fitch. Gary Fitch."

"Ah yes," the doctor said. He wrote the name down in a record book, then looked over to Fitch. Their eyes met. The doctor showed no signs of recognition, and Fitch said nothing. Nevertheless he was certain that the doctor remembered their last encounter. "Now young man, for some antibiotic shots," he said. Though his voice was even it carried tones of vague unease. Fitch wanted to laugh. Now the tide had turned. The doctor was afraid that he'd fight as he had earlier, and that he'd refuse the shots. And Fitch was a much bigger man than he was.

Nevertheless, though he felt safe enough, Fitch knew that he was taking a chance but he was certain that nothing would happen to him until he'd seen Toby, and he needed whatever medical protections the Rebels could give. All professional smiles now that Fitch was so compliant, the doctor also gave him a quick examination. The whole thing was over in fifteen minutes. At the door, Fitch said, "What,

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no undertakers?" and had the satisfaction of seeing the doctor's eyes flash with something like fear.

Out in the hall, Sloat was still waiting. "You don't trust me very much, Fitch, do you?" he said.

"Should I? Listen, I haven't any reason to trust anyone."

"I know you've seen that doctor before." The usual stoicism of Sloat's chinless features gave way to a half smile. "Doctors. The medical colleges such as they are, give diplomas that don't mean anything for a fat fee," Sloat went on. "No wonder the people are so afraid of the medical profession. This man is really good, though, and he keeps his mouth shut as long as we pay him well."

"Is he a Rebeller?"

"Who knows?" Sloat said, and smiled.

Fitch paused to look around the corridor. It was damp and poorly lit. For the first time, the woolen robe he wore made sense; it was warm. "Where do you keep all your men, by the way? They certainly aren't in evidence?"

"I'm to take you on a tour when your interview with Toby is over," Sloat said. "Then you'll see the layout." As he spoke, Sloat turned swiftly, pressing with his back against the rocky wall. A portion slid open, giving access to a small hidden vestibule. They went inside. As they did so, the back wall of the room slid away, letting them into a large study. "Toby will be here in a few minutes," Sloat said. "Good luck." He turned and went out. Fitch made no move to stop him. The walls slid closed.

The room contained a huge desk. Carpeting covered the floor. The place seemed deserted, but Fitch felt that he was being observed. Full length mirrors lined the walls. There was a chair in front of the desk. He sat down calmly, hiding his impatience. The door through which he'd entered was the only one he could see in the room. The wall slid back and it opened. He turned slightly to get a good look at the man who entered.

He'd always been methodical in studying details. Now he gave the leader of the Rebels a quick but complete visual examination, but without giving any indication of

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doing so. Would the man be an enemy or a friend or perhaps, both? Toby walked swiftly across the room. He was almost as tall as Sloat but stockier, with jet black hair and small glinting eyes. He moved with amazing energy, came forward and smiled so infectiously that Fitch found himself grinning back.

"I'm Toby. At last we meet," he said.

"So it seems."

Toby sat down at the desk. Fitch sat where he was, resisting the natural inclination to move his own chair closer. He was shorter than Toby, but more compact. Toby arranged his own woolen robe about him. Watching him, Fitch knew he had at least one advantage over the other man. He didn't give a damn about appearances, but Toby obviously did. With a flash of intuition he knew more: he was capable of great self-reliance if the need arose, but Toby's mobile features showed a certain dependence upon props. The mirrors and the huge desk, for example. Fitch thought of all these things quickly and he remained cautious. He sensed some of Toby's weaknesses, but he still had to learn where the power lay.

He already had some idea. Toby's friendly manner was more contagious than he wanted to admit. He knew he liked the man though they'd hardly spoken yet. "You're holding back on me," Toby said with a smile. The remark was obviously meant to take Fitch back.

"Am I?"

"Something's on your mind. You're fighting me, and I've hardly opened my mouth."

"You expect instant loyalty without any basis for trust?"

"We saved your life." Toby's expressive face smiled ruefully. "Perhaps nowadays an explanation is even expected for that."

"It seems so," Fitch said. He didn't say so, but Toby's voice was oddly familiar. Fitch kept trying to place it as Toby spoke, but he failed. He said, "I'd like to know more about the Rebels for one thing. I'd like to know what I'm doing here, to get to the point."

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Toby shrugged with quick self-depreciation. "I'm at a loss, dealing with an artist. I haven't known any before. Ask me any questions you want though. I assure you that my intentions are of the best."

Fitch made up his mind suddenly to give Toby the benefit of a doubt. But he wouldn't go any further than that. "All right," he said. "There's an explanation due and I'm interested to hear what you have to say about it. For instance, what about pillows wired for sound, and indoctrination carried on while a man is sleeping? That doesn't sound like good intentions to me." He said angrily, "There's something menacing in all this. I dislike pretense. I don't like games."

A broad smile spread over Toby's compelling features. He laughed outright. "I should have known you wouldn't fall for that, but then it wasn't intended for a man of your calibre."

"Never mind the flattery," Fitch said. "I'm not going to be used, I'll tell you that. My knowledge of the Outside might be limited, but I'm learning fast, and I'm nobody's fool."

"Did someone warn you about the bed? How did you discover it?"

But Fitch decided that honesty had gone far enough. "No one warned me," he said. "It didn't take a suspicious man too long to feel the wires in that pillow."

"All right, I don't blame you." Toby dropped the smile. He said earnestly, "The *Rebellers* *are* the hope of mankind, if mankind has any hope at all. My little trick is only my way of dissolving prejudices that might blind an outsider before he'd even heard our side." Toby paused and went on. "As you know, the Northeast section of the contropolis is divided into twenty subdivisions or Boroughs. Well, the local Elmira Borough uses us as a convenient scapegoat. When there's a food shortage due to their own poor planning, then the *Rebellers* have stolen from the chemical gardens, or we've sabotaged them or some such. So now and then I use their methods to protect us. If one of their officials gets in here

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by mistake, the indoctrination prevents him from taking action until we find him out." Toby's eyes darkened. "I don't like to use those tactics, but they're justified."

"We'll let that go for the present," Fitch said. "Now what about the Rebels?"

"You're persistent, I'll say that," Toby said. "We have about four hundred men here, a small number, considering. However, our percentage of scientists and doctors is high. Conditions outside are hardly conducive to their kind of work, and we attract them. Without them we could hardly exist."

"Okay. What's the purpose of the group?"

Toby spread his hands, smiling. "You want to know it all, now?"

"Now."

"All right. Our purpose is implicit in our name. We're rebelling against life as it is for the masses of people. We believe that man can be a creature of dignity, integrity, and creativity. Filth, starvation, crowded quarters lead to man's degeneration as a biological species, and indeed, will result in his extinction." Toby's voice rose, expanded. Fitch could no longer doubt Toby's convictions. It was impossible, listening to him, not to realize that the man meant every word he said. Toby stood up, pacing the room.

"Man is a part of nature, not apart from it. He must live according to nature's laws or vanish. Any species that overbreeds consumes its environment and is in turn consumed. Quantity leads to a loss of quality." Toby stared at Fitch defiantly.

"Okay. Go on."

"At one time, the race depended upon quantity for survival," Toby said. "Now it is destroying itself. We believe that man's unique characteristics, imagination, psychic understanding, sympathy, and so forth are being undermined. Even if the race survives physically, it won't be the same race. We won't be bright enough to recognize our fall from grace, either; that's the hell of it. Tests show that though our mental capacity is as great as ever, our use of it has slumped to an astonishing degree."

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"Granted all that's true," Fitch said. "What about the national government? Can't it do anything at all?"

"The government," Toby said disdainfully. "What is it? A shell remains. The rest is gone. Instead of doing anything constructive, it uses its dying energies to preserve the status quo. The framework is there but it hangs suspended like a dead spider. Touch it and it crumbles. Elections are still held but no one votes. The people are too damned busy just trying to stay alive. The officials elect themselves back in office." He lowered his voice. "I'll tell you one thing. Because of diet deficiencies and the horror of daily life, seven out of ten people are psychopaths. This includes those in government. There isn't any place to turn." He stopped speaking. His face was white and drawn.

"Then how do you justify the relative luxury of this place?" Fitch said quietly.

"You still don't understand, do you?" Toby said. "In order to be effective, the Rebels must be strong. We have decent diets. We create conditions under which we can function to the best of our capacities. We must have solitude, for example. Without these conditions we'd be as poorly equipped as the masses to deal with the problem. When the time comes to act, we have to be ready."

"In the meantime, what are you doing to solve the problem? How are you helping?"

For a moment Toby was silent. He continued to pace the room. His face, stern and impassive now, was reflected in the many mirrors. The effect, of Toby's manner and mood, was powerful. Fitch grinned to himself. Granted Toby meant what he said, he was also very conscious of the value of every move he made.

Fitch said again, quietly, "I asked you, how does all this help?"

"We exist," Toby said.

"You exist? That's all? How does that help anything? You exist!"

"We exist as whole men, as human beings with self-respect and integrity," Toby said. "We exist as a pool from which

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the race can continue to expand its energies and grow. We exist as a contrast to men as they are today. We exist as a hope and a promise."

Fitch just stared at him.

"You don't know how important that is," Toby said. "Listen, even our origins are lost. For three generations men have been living underground here, right here. How many might be doing the same thing, if any, in other places? Who knows? Our ignorance about the past is appalling. That's why we need men like you who have some knowledge of the past. Those galleries have been closed to the public for centuries. The government has no right to withhold knowledge from the people."

"And would you give it to them?" Fitch said.

For the first time he caught Toby off guard. Toby said, "I'd keep it until the people could use and understand it. In the meantime the Rebels would use it to enlarge our capabilities." He broke off, and continued in a harsh whisper. "I tell you, without it our hands are tied."

It was Fitch's turn to pause. He said slowly, "Suppose you discovered that though your aims were good, your methods were wrong?"

Toby stared at him. He said without hesitation, "Then we'd change our methods."

"I might remind you of that some day," Fitch said.

The interview was over. "There'll be a general meeting tonight," Toby said. "I'm afraid we have another plague problem. Sloat will take you on a tour of this place now."

"Aren't you taking a chance? How do you know I won't try to escape?"

Toby stood in front of Fitch, almost gangly now in his robe. At the desk he'd given the impression of power. Now even his frame seemed to shrink. He shook Fitch's hand with an oddly vulnerable, almost defenseless gesture and smiled. "We take some chances," he said. "But not too many."

The wall slid aside for Fitch. He went out. No one was in sight in the hall, and Fitch found himself trying to remember again where he'd heard Toby's voice before. Other things

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bothered him. How much of the man was genuine, and how much was calculated acting? A man so contradictory was someone to watch out for. He didn't know if he trusted the leader of the Rebels or not. But he liked him.

Suddenly as Fitch stood in the hall, a shaft of cold air hit his legs as if a door had opened. The next moment the lights went out. Sounds of a scuffle arose. A defiant voice yelled, "Fitch!" It was Mandy Brail, Fitch's roommate at the gallery, Fitch was sure. He plunged down the hall toward the voice. Then the lights came back on. The hallway was empty. Fitch paused. Then Mandy yelled out again, only this time from a different direction. "Mandy," Fitch shouted. He felt another shaft of cold air. "Mandy," he yelled again. Desperately he began feeling the wall with his hands, looking for some sort of opening.

EIGHT

THE WALL remained immovable. Fitch looked up and down the hall. To the left the corridor stretched empty and silent. Then from the right he heard footsteps, and saw Sloat running quietly toward him. As soon as he came within range, Sloat whispered, "Don't ask any questions. I'll explain later."

"You explain now. Where's Mandy? I heard his voice and he was shouting my name. Where is he? What the devil is he doing here?"

"Later," Sloat said desperately.

"Listen, I feel responsible for him and I want to know what's going on now. I'm sick of these damn tricks and I'm sick of whatever game you're playing. If you expect me to trust you then take me to Mandy."

"If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't even know he was here in the first place," Sloat said irritably. "If you want to see him, then let me take you on a tour of this place as if nothing happened. I give you my word. Your friend is all right. He wasn't suppose to yell to begin with, just call your name so you'd recognize his voice. He almost got all of us in trouble."

Fitch looked intently into Sloat's face. "I'll play along for a while, but don't stretch it out too far."

They went down the corridor. In a slightly louder than normal voice, Sloat said, "Our facilities aren't as extensive as we'd like, of course, but you'll see the whole setup for yourself." Then suddenly he whispered, "Mikes every fifty feet or so along the wall . . . discovered it by accident." Then in a normal voice he continued, "Now brace yourself for a surprise."

They turned into a narrow passageway off the main hall. Sloat opened a door. The room into which they walked was

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flooded with lights, and Fitch stepped back, astounded. Chemical gardens reached as far as he could see. Plastic domes rose dully, transparent, equipped with lights that shone down on all sorts of living plants.

"Yeasts and molds are in another division," Sloat said. "Actually these rooms are kept in darkness a good deal of the time though. Darkness is actually more important than light. The florigen, a hormone, makes plants grow, and it won't develop in the leaves if there's too much light."

Despite himself, Fitch was intrigued. He felt as if he was in another world. "What on earth are those things?" he said.

Sloat grinned. "Carrots and potatoes. Antisteroids prevent their flowering, increasing the edible portions. And those over there are cauliflower and artichoke. In their case we use steroid sprays to increase the edible parts and increase the flowering."

In a low voice Fitch said, "All right, I've played along. Now where's Mandy?"

"I'm glad you asked," Sloat said loudly. "This whole thing is a natural gorge. It stretches for a good fifteen miles. Luckily old bomb shelters connect with it—"

"I can make you take me to him," Fitch said.

"As soon as I can, I'll get you there," Sloat whispered. "Ten minutes at the most." He went on lecturing. "This gorge used to be filled with water centuries ago. We think that there was a natural waterfall at the mouth, but the water must have been damned up or used long before we came on the scene. There's a small lake, though, at the far end. We siphon water off from underneath. A few underground springs run through the rocks or I don't know what we'd do."

Impatience was driving Fitch crazy. He didn't know if he trusted Sloat or not, but Sloat seemed to be his only lead to Mandy. At the same time he knew that what Sloat was telling him could be important. Someday he might wish that he'd listened more closely, so he tried to concentrate on the information despite his concern for Mandy.

"You have no idea how important diet is," Sloat said.

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"Thinking itself is a process that depends upon the burning of sugar. The B vitamins are essential to the combustion of carbohydrates in the body. Inositol, glutamic acid, vitamin E, niacin. Without these essentials you get personality degeneration. It's impossible for the central nervous system to operate without certain specific chemicals."

Fitch started to interrupt, but then the enormous significance of Sloat's words sank in. "You mean that dietary deficiencies are partially to blame for the people's low mentality and erratic behavior? That seems sort of far-fetched."

"Far-fetched or not, that's what I mean. Our scientists are certain that the body begins to deteriorate as soon as it is deprived of nutrients. Mental confusion follows with astonishing rapidity. Persecution feelings are next. Fears are exaggerated. Nervousness and insomnia develop. The personality becomes completely disoriented. Magnify this condition by the millions that are half starved and you'll see what I mean." As Sloat finished speaking, he motioned urgently to Fitch, and whispered, "Move when I do, and quickly."

Then with maddening calmness he went on. "We have drying rooms, of course. We use that process often since the finished product takes up little bulk." He nodded to Fitch, and moved rapidly across the room to a ledge at the other side. Huge blocks of rock rose up above them in gray uneven sheets. The ledge upon which they walked took a short turn to the left, only about four feet wide, before straightening out again. "Now," Sloat said. As they made the turn, he lunged against one of the rocks and it swung aside. Fitch pressed close behind. The door shut so quietly and quickly that it would have struck him if he hadn't sensed the movement and sprung aside.

They stood in complete darkness. The passageway was so narrow that they had to walk single file. The dirt floor slanted downward. "We're under the chemical gardens now," Sloat said. There was an unmistakable note of triumph in his voice. Suddenly the passageway came to an end. Sloat

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felt around in the darkness, found a door, and opened it. The room was dimly lit, a complete arsenal. Guns lined the walls but Fitch hardly noticed. Mandy Brail stood grinning at him.

Until Fitch actually saw Mandy in front of him he didn't realize how worried he'd been. "I thought you were being murdered, the way you yelled," Fitch said. "How the dickens did you get here? I didn't know what happened to you."

"Listen, we haven't time now," Sloat said. "Toby took your friend prisoner, Fitch. I wanted you to know."

Fitch looked inquiringly at Mandy. "That's right," Mandy said. "They were supposed to get you too, but in the confusion you got away so Toby sent Sloat and Gunny after you."

Sloat interrupted. "You'd better get back, Mandy. Toby isn't to know you've been down here. My man will let you back in."

Mandy stayed long enough to grin over at Fitch. "Don't scowl like that," he said. "You were always such a scowler. See you later," and he was gone.

"I give up," Fitch said to Sloat. "Then you aren't a Rebel after all?"

"It's complicated," Sloat admitted. "I'm Nutrition's Expert for the Elmira Borough subdivision of the Contropolis. Toby doesn't know that, needless to say. The national government has requested that each Borough investigate any fugitive groups, to discover how many man hours are being diverted for antisocial purposes. Mayor Lyle chose me. However in many respects I'm sympathetic with the aims of the Rebels, along with a small group of other officials, and as such I'm under fire from Lyle."

"Are the Rebels nation-wide?"

"I doubt it. There are groups scattered underground though. A new plague is on its way and we're afraid that it might be the master plague we've all been dreading. I think the national government wants to rout out all these groups and use them as workers in case of an emergency." Sloat frowned. "The trouble is, the government itself isn't very

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efficient and in case of real trouble, I'm afraid it would be helpless."

"And did you send me a message warning me not to sleep in my bed last night?"

"No. This indoctrination idea is new. Toby only told me about it today, so I couldn't have warned you if I wanted to."

Fitch started to laugh. "No wonder you did such a good job showing me the chemical gardens."

"As a matter of fact one of my official duties for the Borough involves that very thing."

For a moment both men were silent. Sloat's sobriety, Fitch realized, would be handy in his position as an official. He didn't know how courageous Sloat would be, but he was conscientious. Even his chinless features had a certain dignity. Fitch said, "Aren't you in the middle then, between the Rebels and the Borough government?"

"Unfortunately yes. Toby wants to take over the galleries eventually. Only at the galleries do you find another group of people isolated from the world at large, and fairly healthy by our current standards. These men would add to Toby's manpower, but their loss to the Borough would weaken the social framework. Without the constant propaganda put out by the artists, the people just wouldn't work. The masses are so exhausted that they have to be pushed to fight for their own survival."

Fitch started to interrupt, but Sloat said, "Wait, I'm almost finished. You see Toby figures that with the artists added to his own forces, he'd really have a solid core from which to rebuild the energies of the race."

"Well, then where's your point of disagreement with him?" Fitch said. "That's more or less what you told me in the chemical gardens."

"Method," Sloat said. "I believe that you have to go slowly and work from the inside out, that is, use the government framework that we already have." He broke off. Sounds rose from the passageway outside.

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Sloat grabbed a rifle from the wall. "I think it's just one of my messengers; you can't be sure though," he said.

The door moved slightly. A few papers slid through beneath. Sloat picked them up and read through them rapidly. His long triangular face whitened.

"These are the latest death figures. Twenty from plague in the Binghamton Borough Subdivision. That may not sound like much to you, but I don't like it a bit. That damned plague has a way of jumping all over the place and the Binghamton Borough is just too damn close."

"But you said that plagues were common," Fitch said. "We never had too many deaths at the gallery from that cause."

"Listen, you were isolated and fairly well fed to begin with," Sloat said. "You have no idea what it's like. From all reports, this time the plague will really be a monster. In the past it has come in successively stronger waves. So many die that it's impossible to get workers to process food or do anything else. A plague and a famine could wipe out what's left of the race, and that's official. You'd think our very numbers would ensure the survival of some, but the sheer quantity of people is one of the main causes."

"There's something I don't understand," Fitch said. "If you know all this, then why the devil hasn't the government passed birth control laws? If the federal government couldn't, then why not the state or Borough subdivisions? You've outlined the problem beautifully but to tell the truth, neither you or Toby seem to have done a damn thing to help matters."

"A few men who agree with me tried to get such a bill passed in the Elmira Borough but the people wouldn't vote for it." Sloat spread his hands in a gesture of futility. "The national government isn't for birth control legislation, and the state and borough officials aren't either. The trouble is that we have such a huge population that we keep needing more people to support those we already have because those are incapable of sustained effort in any direction at all."

"In other words," Fitch said angrily, "things are just

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going from bad to worse. It sounds as if the reasonable men are too timid to act and those with enough guts to act, insist on being unreasonable."

"Well, now, the officials have a hard time themselves," Sloat said. "They live better than the majority, but not much. Shortages reach even to Washington. If something isn't done, the country will be in chaos."

"The country damn near *is* in chaos now," Fitch said. "And by the way, you knew Mandy was here all the while then?"

Sloat nodded. "Toby takes frequent absences from here. On those trips he incites people to raid the galleries. Then under cover of a riot, he and his men capture a few artists. That's how they got Mandy. They didn't suspect that anyone would be trying to escape on their own. Then someone got hold of a gun; they didn't plan that either. Your initiative impressed Toby no end, and I imagine he has a prominent place for you in his scheme of things."

"I don't know if I like that or not," Fitch began.

Someone banged on the door. Sloat grabbed a rifle and opened it. Mandy came rushing in, breathless. "Thought I'd never find the right passage. . . . Your guard sent me, Sloat. Two of the Rebels came down with the plague. Toby isolated them right away, but he's ordered all exits closed. All contacts with the outside will be shut off."

Mandy stopped to get his breath. "Boy, what I wouldn't give to be back at the gallery now," he said with a grin.

"I know what you mean," Fitch said. The presence of Mandy was a relief to him. He knew he could count on him in an emergency, and he was already wondering how they could get out of the place.

Sloat looked more worried than Fitch had ever seen him. "I don't like it a bit. Now all information will come in through Toby's channels," he said. "You can't tell me he'll cut himself off completely. The men must have picked up the plague in the borough, and we'll be closed up with it."

Sloat paused. "Thanks, Mandy, you'd better go back."

"Why can't he stay here?" Fitch said.

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"Too risky. I know where he is. You can find him whenever you need him," Sloat said. Mandy left. Sloat shook his head. "I'm worried about tonight's meeting now, too. Toby might decide to take advantage of the plague to attack the gallery, and I'd have to fight him. Another thing, they'll need me at the Borough. I'm afraid that a showdown is in the offing and I'm not sure that I'm ready for it." He turned toward Fitch quickly. "If it comes, whose side will you be on?"

NINE

AN HOUR LATER, Fitch stood in the rear of a crowded auditorium as Toby spoke to the Rebels. The lights were dimmed. Only one spotlight shone on Toby's mobile features. Over three hundred men stood shoulder to shoulder, their eyes on Toby's face.

Fitch whispered to Sloat, "Where did they all come from, out of the walls?"

Sloat smiled. "You didn't get the whole tour, you know. It was supposed to include the mens' quarters. Don't feel cheated though, I'll show you the rest later. Shush."

Toby stood quietly until the room was still. Again Fitch was impressed by his use of dramatic effect. He was superb in front of an audience. Now he turned his head slowly, his gaze encompassing the whole auditorium so that he seemed to look clearly and knowingly into each man's face. His voice was strong and powerful. At the same time the meeting had the electric atmosphere of an important confidential conversation held with only one other person in a small room. He raised his hands and then, magnetically, his voice rang out.

"I've asked you to assemble here for an important announcement. Conditions on the Outside are changing swiftly, drastically. I've come to a decision with which I know you will all approve." He had their immediate interest. The men strained to listen. Sloat whispered, "I wish he'd hurry up. He's got something vital on his mind."

"However, let me outline our previous position before continuing," Toby said. Sighs rose up from the audience. There were a few hoots. Sloat said, "They know what's coming. He always digresses to keep up the suspense." Fitch looked around, but the men closest to him all wore good-

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natured expressions of exasperation without any real bitterness at being put off. Toby outlined the Rebels' general policies. Small scuffings were intermixed with quick whispers of anticipation. Fitch himself grew more impatient every minute.

Then suddenly the noises ceased. Heads snapped to attention. Toby had said something important, but in such a low voice that everyone grew hushed. Then Fitch made out Toby's import as he continued. "The master plague that we've feared is on its way." At his words, the audience sucked in its breath. Toby's voice filled the room. "The bubonic plague in all its most dreadful aspects is gathering to do its worst. And why? Because of stupidity and incompetence. For centuries man has known that filth is a breeder of disease, but when people breed like animals, they live like animals. Indeed, animals have more dignity."

The room was ominously still. "All of you have had experience with the plague," Toby said. "You've lost parents and loved ones. My heart goes out to those on the Outside for whom there is such little hope." Toby's voice suddenly dropped. He spread out his hands and said sharply, "However, we must think of long range goals. It is my contention that if a large body of strong healthy men do not exist as a pool of hope for the race, then the race has no chance to survive. If twenty million starved neurotics manage to live through the plague, does this mean that humanity survives?"

He paused, throwing the question at them and waiting until they formed their own answer. Then he shouted, "No, it does not! What is humanity, a physical form only? I say it is more. It is intellect and reason and dignity. It is these qualities that must survive, not the mere number of twisted sickly bodies. Therefore I have decided upon this plan in the face of a plague emergency."

Again Toby paused. Fitch leaned forward anxiously. Many of the other men did also. Yet a man behind Fitch chuckled appreciatively at Toby's strategy, and Fitch felt a sudden respect for the individual members of the audience.

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In the presence of an expert speaker, they retained some objectivity. Indeed a few seemed to anticipate Toby's next remark. When he said, "We're going to hole in and save ourselves in order to save the race," there were murmurs of both approval and disapproval.

His next statement, however, electrified all of them. Sloat swore. "Damn it, I knew he had something like that in mind." What Toby said was, "Let the plague take them! Let it do what no human agency seems able to do, wipe out the excess population so that man can breathe again."

Tumult broke out all over the place. Fitch was shocked himself at Toby's decision. Leaning forward, he caught sight of Gunny Bragan. He hadn't seen the man since parting with him and Sloat the night before. Gunny was one of those who applauded Toby's statement.

Toby called for silence. Those who agreed with him quieted almost instantly. The dissenters kept booing. He waited until the room was still again. "To those of you who disagree, I have this to say. Getting ourselves infected isn't going to accomplish anything. If we can trust our own scientists, then this plague could be the final straw. The people have no physical or mental defenses at all. But we can help by staying healthy ourselves so that we can be ready when the time comes."

They thought that he was finished. A few men in the very back of the room began to move. But Toby had another surprise. "One more thing," he said. Heads snapped toward him again. "Our sense of responsibility does demand that we save those worth saving, those who have something to offer, and those who at least have a chance. When circumstances seem favorable, we'll take certain risks, go into the Elmira Borough and bring the artists and writers from the gallery. I have a plan that can be carried out when the time arises."

Fitch looked over at Gunny Bragan. Gunny's face was livid. It was obvious that he disapproved strenuously of saving anyone or of involving the Rebels in any way. Fitch scowled angrily. All this talk about who was worth

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saving and who wasn't! He thought of the streetcleaners tossing the bodies of the sick and exhausted into the trucks with such jovial and heartless unconcern. Wasn't Toby speaking of doing the same thing in a different way? Was this the world he'd dreamed of in his days at the gallery?

Gunny yelled out objections. "Quiet," Toby shouted. "It's a compromise. We save some, those who have a chance of surviving. There isn't any need to risk our necks to save the whole Elmira subdivision. Where do you draw the line? Should we try and save the entire contropolis of the north-east? The country? You see how impossible that line of reasoning is. Save a few and be certain of that, and let the rest go." His voice rose in sudden anger. "The masses haven't anything to offer the race and you all know it! Face the facts. Try to save everyone and you won't save anyone at all, including yourselves. The masses are the destroyers. The masses, by their indiscriminate breeding habits, have brought all of us to this pass."

Even those who agreed with Toby flinched. The lights went dim. The men began to leave, arguing with each other and shoving to get out. Just as Fitch turned, a man pushed a note into Sloat's hand. Sloat read it quickly and said, "We're to meet Toby in his office right away."

"We?"

Sloat said grimly, "I told you that he'd have plans for you. Let's go see what they are."

Toby was waiting at his desk. "Well, let's hear your objections, Sloat, and get them over with," he said as soon as they entered. He smiled genially, but his small eyes were bright and alert. Fitch was instantly on guard, realizing that Toby anticipated opposition and was even now preparing to deal with it.

Sloat's deliberate face showed no signs of strain as he began to speak, and Fitch wondered if Sloat sensed Toby's mood as he did. Toby looked like a man ready to spring. The showdown was approaching, Fitch thought, and now he knew which side he was on. The more he saw of life out-

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side the gallery, the more it sickened him, only now he had a plan of his own.

"I agree that it would be an impossible task to try and help the masses of the population," Sloat said. "I wish we could. There's a horrible aspect to just sitting by and letting them die, regardless of circumstances. However the constant propaganda supplied by the artists is the only weapon the authorities will have to maintain order, and to keep the people working. I don't believe that we have the right . . . to take that weapon away from them."

"And you'd feel impelled to inform those authorities of my plan, wouldn't you, Sloat?" Toby spoke softly, but at the same time he leapt forward. "I've known of your double affiliation for some time now. It served my purposes in the past, and it's going to serve them now."

Sloat's face was white. Toby smiled again, and leaned nonchalantly against his desk, obviously enjoying himself. Fitch had to admire Sloat. The chinless face never moved a muscle. Even though the game was up, Sloat merely said, "All right, Toby, where do we go from here?"

"I'll tell you where," Toby said. "You're going to use your official position to get us into the gallery when the time is right. When the city fathers, if that's what you call them, take off in panic, we're going to load those artists into Borough trucks and bring them here." He paused until his words sank in. Then he said with a delighted laugh, "My plan is terrific. We'll use trucks marked with the pox sign. Who'll bother those? Nobody."

The whole interview so far had been between Toby and Sloat. Now Fitch realized where he fit in. Seeing the expression on his face, Toby said to him, "That's right, Fitch. You're the one who is going to give us the layout of the gallery and convince the artists to go along peacefully."

The door opened. Gunny Bragan came in. Picking up the threads of conversation he said, "I think we should just raid the galleries and take whatever supplies we need. Why take on more mouths to feed?"

Toby ignored him. Gunny glowered at all of them and sat

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down. "And Sloat," Toby said. "If you're about to protest your ability to get this thing done smoothly, then we can always capture a few of your friends on the assumption that three officials are more effective than one."

"What about the possibility of picking up the plague the minute you step outside?" Fitch said.

A flicker of surprise showed in Toby's face. Fitch knew he'd been waiting for him to object to the whole plan, but if that were the case Toby didn't let on. He said, "We'll all be inoculated. Most of us are now. If a new strain develops, of course our chances won't be as good as they are now. By the way, Fitch, this place is closed up as tight as a clam. Don't try anything. No one goes in or out of here until we're ready to attack. I'm not risking anything at all till then."

"How long have you known about me?" Sloat said suddenly.

"First I discovered that you were an official of the Borough subdivision. Gunny brought the next little piece of information, that you were also spying for the national government."

This time Sloat was visibly shaken. Fitch felt sorry for him. He'd obviously hoped that his affiliation with the government itself was still secret. Behind Toby, Gunny laughed out loud. Fitch glanced over at him with dislike.

"That's all for now," Toby said. "I'll see you both later. And Fitch, another thing. Your friend, Mandy. I know you've seen him. He's doing fine." Toby smiled ironically and the wall slid closed.

"Come on, my room," Fitch said to Sloat. His brain was whirling. So Toby knew about Mandy too! Damn him, he thought. As soon as they got in out of the hall, Fitch said, "Listen, before I tell you what I have in mind, I need a few answers. And hurry up about it. I doubt that Toby will leave us alone for long."

Sloat seemed to have aged five years. "What do you want to know?" he said wearily.

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"Toby seems to think that the authorities won't even try to inoculate the people. Is that true?"

Sloat managed a sad smile. "Innoculations? Hardly. The people are scared to death of doctors. They'd rather take their chances with the plague. Doctors mean mercy killing to them. Besides, as soon as food gets scarce they'll scramble to get what they can, and the devil take the hindmost. To talk of mass inoculations would cause a panic at the least, and some pretty nasty riots."

"I can hardly believe it," Fitch said explosively. "Why the hell don't they begin a crash education program so that the people know what inoculations are? Disassociate doctors from the mercy program? The artists themselves could plug the program with posters and so forth."

"You haven't been Outside long enough to understand all the complications."

"I've been Outside long enough to know that no one gives a hoot for anything except their own skins. Those paintings I copied all those years taught me more than I realized. I know how much the people have lost. I have a point of contrast between the way things were once, and the way they are now. I'll tell you one thing, I have a vision from those paintings of the way life *can* be, and I'm going to fight for it!"

"You've lost me," Sloat said. "For crying out loud what do you think you can do? Where do you begin?" He paused, then swung around. His deliberate manner left him. A touch of consternation made his chinless face look sullen and secretive. "Whose side are you on?" he said coldly.

"My side. The people's side. I'm sick of you and Toby both and all this talk about the poor ignorant masses. It's a hell of a lot easier to blab about it then try to change it, isn't it?"

"Are you going to work with Toby? If you are, I'm disappointed in you," Sloat said.

"You're breaking my heart," Fitch said sarcastically. "As a matter of fact, no. For the present I'm with you and the officials, but only for now, and only because it suits my

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purposes. You see, I don't really believe that the officials will abandon the people as Toby seems to think. We're getting out of here, though. We're going to inform your friends and lead an attack against this place. The Rebels are going to help the people whether they want to or not."

A soft laugh made both men turn. Sloat had locked the door, but now it flew open. Toby stood there with Gunny beside him. A revolver glinted in Toby's hand. "I have my own key, you know," Toby said pleasantly. "You aren't going anywhere at all. Gunny, close and lock that door. Sloat and Fitch and I are going to have a little talk." Gunny locked the door and stood in front of it with a gun in his hand.

TEN

A FLICKER of amusement crossed Toby's broad face. He turned toward Sloat with mock deference. Sloat towered above him physically, but in vitality and determination there was no comparison between them. Fitch watched angrily, waiting for a chance to make a move. Gunny had him covered and Toby was waving his gun tantalizingly in front of Sloat. Fitch scowled. If he jumped one of the men, would Sloat take care of the other one? One thing gave him hope. He didn't actually know Sloat too well. Toby expended himself, showed all his cards, while Sloat's reserve at least hinted at latent strength. If only he could get Sloat mad enough to use it!

"I knew if I left you two alone a while, I'd find out what the score was," Toby said. "Fitch and I have the guts to come to some kind of a decision, Sloat, even if the decisions put us on different sides of the fence. But you're a perfect example of official ineptitude. The funny part is, you're the best they have to offer."

"This is rule by reason? A gun?" Fitch said.

"I told you that sometimes I have to use methods I dislike."

"You're enjoying yourself if you ask me."

"More than you are, that's for sure," Gunny said, with a laugh. He paced up and down, smirking, all energy and aggressiveness.

"Men like Gunny don't use reason," Fitch said.

"No, but they act. They aren't scared to make a move," Toby snapped. "And don't try anything, Fitch. I'd hate to shoot but I would if it were necessary. You're just looking for a chance to jump me, I know that. But do you think that

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Sloat would back you up? Look at him, go ahead. Take a good look."

Sloat stared back at them, dignified and impassive. The insult didn't seem to mar his deliberateness at all, but Fitch knew suddenly that if he was going to move, he'd have to do it alone. Sloat was too damned conscientious and too slow. If he waited for him, he might wait till hell froze over.

Quickly, Fitch lunged for Toby. He caught him by surprise and knocked the gun from his hand, but he'd forgotten how quickly Gunny could move. With that nervous agility Gunny dived at him and threw him down. Toby picked the gun up, and covered Sloat. Then he said, "You're cocky, I'll say that. Okay. Gunny, let him up."

Gunny had his gun only inches from Fitch's face. For a moment Fitch thought that Gunny was going to let him have it just for kicks, but Gunny sprang to his feet. "Hell, I could have had you easy," he said with a leer.

"All right, Gunny, you know where to take Sloat," Toby said. "Sorry to put you under lock and key, Sloat, but you're pretty important to us, in your official capacity, that is." He made no attempt to hide his disgust for the other man. Then he turned to Fitch with a grin. "I've got an excellent idea for diversion. You can teach me to paint while we wait the plague out."

"You expect me to give you painting lessons while people die by the millions?"

"All the Rebels are working on constructive projects to avoid panic and boredom. No one will be allowed in or out of this place, and it's bound to get on peoples' nerves, so I'm keeping everyone busy. Incidentally, don't get any ideas on your own. I still have this gun, you know."

Gunny took Sloat outside. Fitch braced himself, hoping to jump Toby while they were alone, but Gunny turned Sloat over to someone else and returned immediately. From then on Toby and Gunny were with him constantly. If one left the room, someone else took his place. Fitch watched for another chance to escape. At first he refused to give Toby his painting lessons but then he gave in, hoping that he

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could turn Toby's attention away long enough to make a move.

Toby threw himself into the lessons. Fitch said, "How the devil can you paint when you know what's going on outside?"

"My painting doesn't increase the plague deaths, does it?" Toby said with maddening logic. "I always concentrate on whatever's at hand. You may as well enjoy yourself too. I won't tell anyone."

Despite himself, Fitch grinned. The man was incorrigible. "Where did you get the art supplies?" he said.

"Stole them from the gallery," Toby said calmly.

Fitch laughed. During the last day, he'd at least partially won Toby's confidence. Though the leader of the Rebels remained alert and suspicious, Fitch discovered a bone of contention between him and Gunny and he tried to use it to good advantage. Still he didn't dare be too obvious, but finally a chance arose.

It began innocently enough. He and Toby were talking about Sloat while Gunny listened glumly. Toby said, "Sloat and a small group of officials are sympathetic with our goals. If they'd followed their own convictions, they could have done something. They even got appropriations for scientists to work on some birth control pills, but the experimentation fell through just when they were ready to do some testing. Sloat and his bunch were scared off by the rest of the officials. So they send Sloat here to spy on me, to see what we're doing when they're too damn yellow to follow through on anything on their own."

Gunny broke in angrily. "I don't know why we just don't raid the whole area and reinforce our own supplies. Why take a chance on a plan that depends on Sloat anyhow? We don't need the artists to begin with."

At first Toby ignored Gunny, to Fitch's disappointment. Instead he said, "You should understand, Fitch, even if Gunny doesn't." He put down his paint brush. One of them always kept Fitch covered, and Toby automatically took the gun to give Gunny a rest. "I have this vision," Toby

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said. "I see the world sloughing off in filthy layers, and the future pulsating, waiting for new form. Being an artist, you should understand my impatience with the shoddy. I've done things I'm not proud of, but I'm not apologizing for them either."

"Why tell me?"

"I want you to know that it's easy for Sloat and his little bunch to point a finger at me, but they never did more than to preserve the status quo, and then cry because nothing ever changed." Toby's bright eyes narrowed. "I'll tell you one thing," he said. "I'll ride into that plague-ridden borough myself and steal those artists from right under the noses of those officials. When the contropolis is filled with the dead, I'll burn it down and start anew. Justice is justice. Let the plague do the dirty work."

A knock came at the door. One of the Rebels handed Toby a piece of paper. He read it, growing excited. "This is the daily death report. Seventy-three in the Elmira Borough alone. It's worse in the Binghamton Borough. Two hundred and three there. Before too long things will be confused enough so that we can move in."

"For crying out loud, you're supposed to think so much of the race, then how can you sit by at a time like this?" Fitch exploded. The death report shook him to the bone. "Do something to help."

Gunny's face turned livid. "You stay out of this."

"Fitch isn't going to change my mind about anything, Gunny. Calm down," Toby said. "We just happen to see eye to eye about a few things."

"Yeah? Well, I don't like your seeing eye to eye about anything." Gunny grumbled suspiciously and glowered at Fitch. Fitch's heart was pounding. If he could only drive a wedge between Toby and Gunny! He grinned at Toby and said, "I don't know what you want a pipsqueak like him in the Rebels for anyhow."

As he hoped Gunny made a lunge for him, but he was ready this time. He wrenched the gun from Gunny's hand. Toby sprang toward them and Fitch pushed Gunny in front

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of him as a buffer. Gunny swore his head off, but Fitch had his arm around the man's throat and he dragged the protesting Gunny toward the door.

"You let out a yell, and I'll let Gunny have it," he said.

Toby stared at him. "You would too, wouldn't you?"

"You're damned right, I would." He wrenched the door open, threw Gunny to the floor and rushed down the hall. He knew that all hell would break out. Gunny appeared at the door. He took a couple of shots at Fitch, but Fitch flattened out against the wall. Then he ducked into a side corridor. A few minutes later Gunny went rushing past. Footsteps echoed as other Rebels came to Toby's call. Fitch tried to figure out what he should do next. He regretted not taking Gunny hostage, yet he feared that Gunny would be too hard to handle. Quickly he doubled back, looking this time not for his room but for Toby's study. Who would think of looking for him there?

His memory for details stood him in good stead. Frantically he searched the wall for the slight indentation that sparked the opening mechanism. He found it almost at once. The wall slid open. He stepped into the small vestibule and automatically the door slid back down. The first part of his plan was successful, but the next steps were the most important. He had to find Sloat and Mandy. They had to find their way out of the Rebels' headquarters without being caught first. He leaned against the wall to get his breath. Then he touched the portion of rock that opened the next door to Toby's inner office. A voice said, "For crying out loud," and he spun around with the gun ready.

It was a girl. He recognized her at once. It was Janice, the girl who had sheltered him the night of his escape from the gallery. She was as startled as he was. "You! What are you doing here?" Then she frowned and said irritably. "Well, are you going to shoot me or help me? I want to get out of here."

He said with a grin, "I'm not sure. I guess we'd better get out before Toby's goons find us. For that matter, what are you doing here?"

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"Oh, I'll tell you later, but I'm not going to do anything to hurt Toby."

"Who asked you to? Do you know the way out of this place? I want to get to two friends first, though. Sloat and Mandy. Do you know where Toby keeps prisoners?"

"Yeah." She puckered her brows. "You have to take me with you. I'll explain later."

Steps pounded outside the hall. They halted. Fitch held his breath. Toby's voice said clearly, sharply, "Don't bother trying in my office. He wouldn't hide in there." The steps faded.

Janice said, "He doesn't want them to find me. Boy, you were lucky. . . . Oh, stop leering. It isn't what you think."

They waited a moment longer. Janice seemed lost in deliberation. Then she said, "O.K. let's get going. Thank God you have a gun. If I had one, I'd have been out of this place long ago." They went through the vestibule, pausing. "I don't hear anything," she said. Fitch pressed against the wall. The door sprang open. They ran down the hall. Janice motioned to him quickly and he followed her down a rock stairway. "The prisoners are kept down here," she whispered. "Hurry up."

They crept along as quietly as possible. Lights shone at the foot of the stairs from beneath a wooden door. "Shush, there's a guard just beyond the jog in the wall. You'll have to jump him, but don't make any noise because there's another stationed just inside," she said. She watched him anxiously, and her eyes were so worried and big that he grinned. Then he sprang forward. The guard yelled out once before Fitch could gag him. He gave him an uppercut, then another, and the guard slumped to the floor. The door was thrown open from the other side, but Fitch was waiting. He caught the guard by surprise, grabbed him around the neck and threw him down. Janice took his keys even while Fitch wrestled with him. For a moment the fight hung in balance. Fitch didn't want to use his gun unless he had to, but as the guard struggled to his feet, Fitch hit him on the back of

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his neck with the gun, and he and Janice rushed into the next room.

There were seven cells but all were empty except two. In those, Sloat and Mandy rattled the bars. "I don't know if I should let you out or not," Fitch said.

"This isn't any time for jokes," Janice said. "Hurry up, will you?"

"She's . . . uh, a friend of Toby's," Sloat said quickly.

"Without her, I wouldn't be this far," Fitch said. "Janice, how do we get out of here now?"

She started to answer, then gasped. "I just felt a rush of cold air against my legs. Someone opened the door at the head of the stairs. They must have checked Toby's office and discovered that I was gone. Follow me. They'll be on our trail in a minute."

Fitch opened the cells. They all ran through the room and out a door at the end, with Janice in the lead. The corridor outside was damp and slippery with dirt floors. They ran as quickly and quietly as they could, while the sound of their pursuers came closer. "We'll never make it," Janice said. "Wait." Before Fitch could stop her, she rushed past him, back through the corridor to the door and locked it. "I don't know if this will help or not. They'll have to go back and get that other set of keys," she said.

"If not, we've lost a few precious minutes," Sloat said, but Fitch nodded. It was worth the chance. The passage-way had turned into a tunnel. Rocks hung dangerously loose from the walls. From behind them came angry shouts. The Rebels had discovered the locked door. "I hope to hell they don't have extra keys on them," Mandy said.

Suddenly the tunnel took an upward turn. Cold air blew in from open crevices. "Now watch it," Sloat said. "There's bound to be guards along here someplace." The words were no sooner out of his mouth than the rocky walls disappeared and the tunnel reached the outside. It was dark. They stood on a mountain ledge looking directly at three guards who squatted there. For a second no one moved, then all hell broke out. They were evenly matched, but the guards had

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been waiting for them, and Fitch's group were already tired from running. The guards rushed them. Janice tripped one of them. Sloat knocked the man up against the rocks. Janice yelled, "They're coming from the other end. They've got the door open!"

The ledge was narrow and slippery. Fitch knocked one of the guards out. Mandy got another one. Sloat was still fighting with the third and Fitch and Mandy rushed to his assistance. All by herself, Janice was giving the fourth man a run for his money, but Fitch had to come to her help. Shouts rose from the tunnel. Janice started running down the ledge. One of the guards already struggled to his feet.

"We've got to make it to the trucks," Sloat yelled.

Fitch and Mandy followed him. Just then, Toby's men emerged from the tunnel. Shots rang out.

Janice and Sloat clambered down the final ledge, with Fitch and Mandy behind them. "Why aren't they following us now?" Sloat said, and Fitch realized that their pursuers had halted. He hurried even faster to take advantage of the lull.

"I don't like it. Why the devil did they stop?" Sloat muttered, and Fitch looked back. The Rebels were arguing among themselves. The word "plague" rang out. Fear was the wall that held them back. They were afraid to go too far outside. But then Toby yelled, "Go after them, you idiots." A few of the braver men rushed forward. Then they all followed. As if to make up for their hesitation, they seemed to have extra strength and agility. The whole band spilled down the ledges.

Suddenly lights splashed on. The trucks were only a few feet away, but now the veil of darkness was gone. "Hurry, or we won't make it," Fitch yelled. Now he and Sloat were in the lead. Shots rang out. They made a dash for it and ran with all their might toward the trucks.

ELEVEN

TOBY'S MEN plunged forward, but their moment of hesitation had been costly. Fitch and Sloat reached one of the trucks. Mandy and Janice followed. Sloat started the motor. The truck moved ahead with a burst of speed. Toby's men aimed for the tires, but the truck sped toward the exit, a narrow opening in the rocks that led out to the mountain road. Sloat cursed. "The damn entrance has a rock in front of it. You and Mandy jump out, Fitch, and move it while I slow down."

Behind them, other trucks started up. Fitch and Mandy leaped out and pushed aside the rock just in time. They jumped back in the truck and Sloat drove through. Now the shots came closer. For a moment the truck careened. Fitch thought that one of the tires had been hit, but Sloat had just taken a turn too quickly. Fitch looked back. Toby's men had stopped at the exit.

"Toby won't follow us now. He won't take the chance of exposing anyone to the plague until he's ready to attack the gallery," Sloat said. "We made it."

Fitch turned to Janice. She sat straight up, staring out the windshield to the dark mountain road. "I knew damn well that Toby's voice was familiar. He masqueraded as your father in the square, didn't he? Sloat told me he took frequent absences from the Rebels' headquarters. He acts as a sort of preacher and that's how he picks up information and even incites small riots when it suits his purposes."

She didn't answer. Sloat said, "You mean you really met Toby earlier? Janice was the girl you told me about, and Toby was her father? Impossible."

"Impossible?" Janice said. "Listen, Toby's smart, and don't forget it. His disguise was terrific. I met him years ago after

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my parents died. He's ten years older than I am, and he's looked after me ever since. I'm not going to do anything to harm him either. I just can't stand that damn underground place of his. He took me there to protect me from the plague."

"If you're so loyal to Toby, how come you warned me about the bed?" Fitch said. "It was you, wasn't it? It had to be. I should have seen a woman's hand in that, writing a message in the frosting of a cracker."

"You saved my life once," she said defensively. "You pushed me out of the way that night when someone threw a heavy rock. It would have got me right in the head. Besides, I felt guilty because I knew who you were all the while. Toby was only going to take you to his headquarters but you had to go off looking for a doctor, of all the stupid things."

"You'll never live that doctor bit down," Sloat said.

Fitch grinned. He was exhausted, but alert. As they sped along he tried to perfect the plan that had been growing in his mind. Sloat said, "When we get to the Borough, where do we head?"

"The main building where the mayor is. We're going right into the lion's den."

Sloat lifted his eyebrows, but said nothing. Mandy said, "Hey, no kidding?" and Janice said scornfully, "It won't do you any good. They'll never let you in."

Already they were in a populated area. Sometimes the truck was more of a liability than a help. As usual, crowds filled the nighttime streets, milling about in erratic swirls of motion. The people refused to make way for the truck until Sloat pressed down on the gas and threatened to run them down. They pushed their way through the throngs that filled the square. The loudspeakers blared, "Work, work, work, go, go, go." The paintings glared down with their grotesque neon mobility.

Fitch shivered. "If anyone told me that I'd be coming back here out of my own free will, I would have said that they were nuts."

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"It's incredible," Mandy said. His face was white, and Fitch started laughing. This was Mandy's first experience with the Borough. He'd been taken directly to the Rebels' headquarters from the gallery. Nevertheless he sat close to Janice, as if to protect her. Now and then she glared at him out of the corner of her eye.

"There it is," Sloat said, pointing. Although it was late at night, the Borough Building was ablaze with lights. It rose in the distance like a huge quavering finger, twenty stories above the chaos of the square. Sloat broke off, and swore. The place was so noisy that many people never even heard the truck, and he had to stop and blow his horn and race the motor until the crowd scattered out of the way.

Fitch said ruefully, "Now I see why the A-cop is such an advantage. You can skim above the ground and over this mess."

"The trucks were easier to get at," Sloat said.

"Hey, what happened? Look, the crowd's thinned out!" Janice cried.

Suddenly a whole portion of the square was vacant. The loudspeakers blared, the paintings glimmered, but the people seemed to vanish into the air. The empty area was about a block wide. To either side of it, the crowds went about as usual.

"What the devil—" Fitch started, but Mandy interrupted him. "Look over there," he shouted.

Sloat slowed down. A body lay flat on the sidewalk where it had fallen, a chunk of dry bread beside its hand on the ground. The corpse looked dark and covered with shadow, although the square was well lit. "Don't get out," Sloat said sharply. "I can tell its the plague without getting closer. Look at the purple color of the skin. That isn't shadow. If you turned him over, you'd see that his lips were blue."

As they stared, horrified, a woman sprang from the side of a building and ran toward the body. "Plague! Don't touch him," Sloat yelled at her. But as they watched she turned a bitter desperate face toward them, swung around with a quick gesture and grabbed the dried bread from

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the ground beside the body. The whole thing took only a second, and then she disappeared.

"She'll get it, sure as the devil. She's probably infected already," Sloat said. "I told you, Fitch. They'll take any chance just to get something to eat."

"So would you, if you were that hungry," Janice retorted. But her face was white. Her black hair seemed to emphasize her pallor. "You never think it's going to get you," she said wildly. "When it does down for a while, you fool yourself into thinking that it won't ever come back. Then some night, like now, you see another blackened corpse."

"Toby had you inoculated, didn't he?" Fitch said.

"Oh, sure, I'm inoculated," she said. The square was crowded again, but she kept looking back. "I've always been afraid of the plague, that's all. I lived right here in the square, you know, not in some official apartment like Sloat here." She shot him an angry look and said, "I wasn't going to stay locked up underground, though. I hate it down there. You never feel as if you can get enough air."

Mandy made an indistinguishable noise with his tongue, and put his arm around her. She snorted, "I suppose you're going to protect me from the ugly world? That's a laugh. Boy, are you a babe in the woods." He blushed but she grinned at him and let him leave his arm where it was.

If anything, the square grew noisier. The slow halting drive got on their nerves. Fitch was particularly impatient. He kept watching the Borough Building. It seemed that they'd never reach it. His plan was daring. He wasn't even sure if he could carry it through but he knew that he had to try. "Do you think that you can get us in to see the mayor, Sloat?" he said.

"Who knows. I'll do my best. You're taking a chance, you know. You and Mandy could end up back at the gallery, though I doubt it. The officials have got enough to worry about."

"Look out," Mandy shouted.

A government truck came racing through the streets. It was painted black with white crossbones. Screaming, the people

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scattered. It was a plague truck. As it plunged by, it forced Sloat off the street toward a crowd coming in the other direction. "Whew, that was close," Sloat said. "At least they're picking up the bodies of the plague victims. That's something."

They approached another square. "Work, work, work," blared the speakers. A man about three feet away suddenly dropped to the ground, whether from exhaustion or disease, Fitch couldn't tell. He'd just happened to be looking that way when the man fell. It was a less terrible incident than others he had witnessed, and yet it burned into his consciousness. He said angrily, "Can't we go faster? This damned place is worse than I remembered it, if that's possible."

Sloat just looked at him wearily. Finally they approached the Borough Building and pulled up in front. Every light was on inside. Curious crowds stood outside. "That's odd," Sloat said. "Usually nobody hangs around here. Well, follow me and we'll see what happens." A guard stood on either side of the entrance. Sloat showed his identification card, and said, "These people are with me," and to their surprise, the guard motioned them through. The lobby was deserted. An elevator stood open, without an attendant, and they went in. "I don't like it," Sloat said. "Usually the security is tighter around here. Something isn't right at all. The place is too damned quiet."

"This elevator sure beats the gallery dumbwaiters," Mandy said. "Remember that crazy trip from our floor down to the kitchen when the attack was on?"

"I'll say," Fitch said. The elevator stopped. They walked out into a corridor. Again all the lights were on but the hallways were vacant. Sloat's chinless face acquired a worried frown. Open doors lined the corridors and dusty desks stood before the draped windows. Finally voices rose from a large room at the end of the corridor. "Must be a general meeting," Sloat said. He sounded relieved and his face cleared. He and Fitch walked ahead, with Mandy and Janice behind them. Janice kept looking about, obviously impressed with the comparatively luxurious surroundings. Sud-

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denly a group of men came from an open door in the distance. They walked toward Fitch and Sloat without taking any notice of them at all. Sloat called out to one of them, "Hey, Bob, it's Sloat. What's going on? Discussing plague measures?"

"Don't be a fool," the man said briefly, and walked on.

"He's a member of the City Council too," Sloat said.

"City Council?" Janice said bitterly. "Who's fooling who? I've lived in this damned Borough all my life and never seen one of them. What do they do, hide in here?"

The door at the end of the hall was open. They went in. A man stood with his back to them.

"Mayor?" Sloat said. When the man didn't turn, Sloat said, "Mayor Lyle?" He and Fitch crossed the room.

"What is it now?" the mayor said tonelessly.

"We want to talk to you about the plague emergency," Fitch said.

"So talk. It's more than anyone else will do," the mayor said. He was short and tight-lipped and wiry. He turned, gave a short strange laugh and sat down at his desk.

"We have a plan to fight the plague," Fitch said soberly. "We understand that over 170 died here today."

"One hundred and eighty seven, exact count," the mayor said. "Not all of them directly within my borough, however. By tomorrow the total will be much higher. Now what's this plan of yours, and if you'll forgive my curiosity, Sloat, what's the meaning of those nightshirts you're all wearing?"

"Rebellers' robes," Sloat said. "These two were prisoners of the Rebellers. They always wear them there. Damned warm."

"Sorry that I don't see any improvement," Mayor Lyle said dryly. "Now what about this plan?"

"I vouch for Fitch," Sloat began. "He's an artist—"

"I don't care who he is or who vouches for him," the mayor exploded. "I haven't slept for a week. The Borough is in a hell of a fix. I've been thinking of nothing but the plague 'till I'm out of my mind, so if you've got any ideas,

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let's hear them. If it's any consolation I'd listen to an idiot if he had any suggestions to make."

Fitch came forward and began to speak firmly and quickly. This was the man he had to convince. So much hung in the balance, that he didn't dare think of failure. Sloat watched him inquisitively and Janice strolled around the room, stopping only when Fitch's words startled her into immobility.

"I propose that you turn the affiliated gallery into a huge hospital," Fitch said. "Innocate the artists against the plague and mobilize them to help fight it. We could throw up a barrier around as large an area as we could, to keep looters and stragglers out. Sloat tells me that old bomb shelters honeycomb the Borough. Disinfect them, clean them up, and evacuate as many people down there as possible. You have a paint that repels rats. Spread it all over. Get the state government or the national government to declare this an emergency area. I'm willing to lead an attack against the Rebels to force them to add their supplies to yours. Innocate everyone."

"I suppose you're going to stay around to supervise?" Mayor Lyle said shortly.

"I intend to."

"Most refreshing," the mayor said. "However there are a few things you should know. Sloat must have told you that it's an impossibility to even attempt mass inoculation? The people would take their chances with the plague before they'd trust the doctors."

"We'll get the people inoculated," Fitch said grimly.

"That was number one," the mayor said. "Two, we've more than enough to handle now without trying to attack the Rebels. That bunch, I'd like to do away with every damn one of them." His small face drew into a tight knot. "Sorry," he said. "But they've been the bane of my existence ever since I took office. They'll sit on their asses while the Borough rots, I've no doubt. But I haven't the time to worry about them. And as far as emergency areas are concerned, the whole country is an emergency area and has been for decades. The national government is merely a convention, it

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has no actuality any longer. It's the same with state governments. The Contropolis is the only actuality and the Contropolis is made up of a tangled mess of boroughs with no one to turn to. They're run locally, if that's what you can call it, because no one can handle the problems involved. So that takes care of that."

Fitch said angrily, "With your attitude, you're beaten before you start. I tell you, the Rebels have supplies. They also have good doctors and scientists. We'd have a core of fairly healthy, strong, inoculated people to fight this thing. With the Rebels and the artists together, we'd have a chance."

"We'd have a chance *if* our attack on the Rebels was successful, *if* we could clean out the old bomb shelters, *if* we could throw up a barrier to keep infected people and looters out, *if* we weren't all dead first!" Mayor Lyle stood up. "Look out this window," he said. "In my borough alone we have seventy thousand people. And my borough isn't a geographic entity. You just take seventy thousand people and rope them off from millions and say, 'Now this is one borough'. They're half starved, erratic; they breed as fast as conditions will allow. No natural defenses. Warnings from the national government have come through that the plague is nationwide. Do you know what this means?"

He spun around. "I'll tell you. It means that your plans are useless, no matter how good they are. This plague has unholy strength. It's raging unchecked. We've had a warm Fall, no cold weather to hold it back. We haven't enough vaccine on hand to inoculate the people even if they'd stand for it, and they won't. My city officials are making plans, all right. They're planning to leave, and I might just join them." He stopped speaking abruptly, and stared at Fitch with a touch of defiance.

"But why?" Fitch yelled. "This is your borough! Don't you care what happens to the people at all? And where can you go to begin with? You've been inoculated, haven't you?"

"I have, but I don't trust inoculations either, if you

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want the truth. Every time we get one virus licked, the plague develops a new one. And don't suggest that I haven't a sense of responsibility, either. There isn't any hope for the masses, and it's stupid to suggest that there is. If my officials save themselves, then we can rebuild, if there's anything left to work with. Getting myself killed isn't going to help the people, and it sure as hell isn't going to help my wife and kids. If you want to be a hero, go ahead. You have my blessing." He paused and smiled ironically at Sloat. "Incidentally, all your idealistic friends have already gone, Sloat. They were the first ones to leave."

"The leader of the Rebels told me that you'd leave the people flat," Fitch said. "I didn't believe him. It never occurred to me that the whole damn borough government would just walk out."

"The people haven't any chance regardless," the mayor shouted. "The sooner you get that through your head, the better off you'll be. For that matter, how come this great interest and concern?" He paused and said more kindly, "If you come to your senses and decide to leave, I'll arrange transportation for you."

Everyone in the room was silent. Sloat turned wearily toward the window. He'd obviously given up. Mandy looked bewildered. Janice glowered at the mayor and the mayor watched Fitch inquiringly. Fitch walked up and down impatiently. He was more upset with the mayor's plan to leave the borough than he wanted to let on. "I'm staying," he said angrily. "I've been mad enough to do something since I got out of the gallery, if you want to know. The Rebels captured Mandy, but I escaped—funny word to use, looking back—but I thought that things would be better, not worse, on the outside. I didn't do anything to better conditions at the gallery, but this time for my own self-respect I'm going to do all I can. You wait and see, one way or another I'll force the Rebels to help."

Mandy gulped and said hesitantly, "I'd appreciate it if you'd get Janice out, though, Mayor Lyle. Hell, I'm staying

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with Fitch. He's such a scowler, he needs someone to keep him on an even keel."

"What do you think I am, a coward like he is?" Janice cried, pointing at the mayor. "I've lived in this filthy borough all my life and I'm not budging."

But the mayor was watching Sloat sardonically. Sloat said quietly, "I'll stay too, Mayor. You know, even the leader of the Rebels didn't have much use for us, and I'm beginning to think that he was right. We didn't actually do much, did we? I guess it's time that I stopped talking about the state of affairs and tried to do something about them."

"Something all of you should know," the mayor said. "Only the chemical gardens separate one borough from another. Now I'm sure you're aware of that, but according to reports the Binghamton Borough is in worse shape than we are. When the plague jumps that small barrier, watch out! Something else. Chaos will rule when this thing is over. I intend to be around to help rebuild it, and I can't do it if I'm dead."

"Some excuse," Janice scoffed.

"Listen, any nut that wants to can be made a borough deputy at this point." He smiled ironically. "You can even use the official apartments in this building. I doubt my men will be needing them much longer. Incidentally, the people haven't been informed of the plague. They know about it anyway and official recognition will only add to the confusion. My men will evacuate in orderly fashion to, uh, avoid riots. The people might not understand a mass exodus. It's only fair to warn you that you have no agency and no one to depend on. You're on your own. However, I'll give you a list of anyone I know who intends to stay on—and who might help of course."

As he finished speaking, a buzzer rang. Fitch looked around suspiciously, but the mayor said, "Jumpy, aren't you? Look at my watch. See how it glows? The buzzer warns me that someone wants me on the televisior. I can use

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the midget one on the dial, but since I'm here and the console is available, we'll use that one instead."

He touched a button on his desk and the televisior on the other side of the room lit up. The image of a young man appeared. He said in a shaky voice, "Sir, a bunch of stragglers are coming down from the Binghamton Borough, trying to keep ahead of the plague. They're armed. I know you gave orders to keep them out, but—" He broke off. The youthful face contorted. He yelled. The group in the mayor's office stared horrified. Janice turned her face away, and Mandy tried to steady her.

Another face stared out from the screen now. Pox marks, like huge black bubbles, stood up from the man's emaciated cheeks. He screamed at them, "They kicked us out of our borough. We've got to have food. We have to eat like anyone else. Do you hear me? We're coming through!"

In the background the boy's voice screamed, "All right, go ahead. I won't try to stop you. Only don't touch me, don't give me the plague. Don't come any closer! No. No."

The man grinned triumphantly, then switched the set off at his end. The picture disappeared. "It's begun," the mayor said. "God help us all."

TWELVE

REGARDLESS OF his disillusionment and anger, Fitch slept well that night. Yet for a long while he looked out the window of the borough building, down at the contropolis below. The enormity of his task staggered him, but the vision of the old gallery paintings egged him on. Fact or imagination, the scenes in them gave him an idea to work with, and a goal. He'd been unable to act during his years in the gallery. He'd been incapable of acting during his first encounter with the Outside. But now he was ready.

The mayor had given them all new clothes, and in the morning Lyle met with Fitch and his group in his office. "I'm putting an A-cop at your disposal," he said. "You'll need it. I suggest that you keep out of the most crowded areas of the borough, however. God knows how the people will act. They're liable to riot at the sight of an official vehicle, so many have been seen leaving the area." He stood behind his desk, smiling faintly. "I wish you luck, believe it or not. Nevertheless you'll have to excuse me if I fail to see how you can succeed in a project that professionals consider absolutely impossible."

"I thought you'd be gone by daybreak," Janice said tartly.

"I'm beyond insults, young lady," Lyle said, nodding at her. "It's more mature to run in some cases than to be foolhardy or headstrong. You live longer that way. You can fight again at some future date."

"Did you tell the Art Warden to expect us?" Fitch said.

"I did. He'll see you, but that's all I can promise."

"Maybe they won't let us out again," Mandy said, with a grin. "In fact, if we play our cards right maybe we can have our safe little room back." Janice glowered at him.

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As they left the office, the mayor stopped Sloat. "Uh, good luck," he said. "I hope you get through this all right. We haven't always seen eye to eye—"

"It's too late for regrets," Sloat said quietly. "We had the opportunity to do something, and we didn't. You'll have to take care of your own conscience, Mayor. This is my way."

Sloat was quiet in the elevator. Fitch said, "You're still thinking about what Toby said, aren't you? That's water over the dam now."

"Is it? He was right," Sloat said soberly. "So were you. We philosophized and sat on our asses."

"Better late than never," Janice said cheerfully. "I'll tell you one thing, though. I have a lot of respect for you guys. I'm not complaining, but life in the borough is pretty rough. No one ever tried to help the people before, as far as I know. The only thing, don't expect me to hurt Toby in any way. I won't. He's doing what he thinks is right too, you know."

They were outside. "Head for the heart of the Borough," Fitch said. "To hell with safety. I want to see how bad things are and you can't do that by skirting the main sections."

What they saw horrified all of them except Janice. She couldn't resist a dig at Sloat. "What are you white-faced about?" she said. "You've been on the Outside all your life, or was your Outside different than mine?"

"I deserve that," he said quietly. "During previous plagues I was never in the middle of it. None of us were. We just holed up in our apartments until it was over."

"Yeah, I know," she said. "Boy, when I compare those official apartments with the holes I lived in." She shrugged. "Oh, I'll lay off," she said. "Hey, look down there."

A small booth was set up in the square beneath them. Crude lettering read: No Pox. "Their own clumsy attempt at immunization," Sloat said. "We've come across it before. Survivors of a plague attack open up old sores and infect anyone who'll pay for the dubious privilege. Since the first person is still alive, they figure that the 'patient' will come down with a mild dose that will give him immunity from

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a more lethal attack. I suppose it's a way of killing suspense."

"Lots of times it kills the patient," Janice said.

"Hold on," Fitch said. They hovered in the A-cop about twelve feet in the air between the buildings and above the tattered cloth immunization booth. An old woman in front of the booth yelled out in a cackle, "No pox, no pox, beat the pox." In competition the loudspeakers blared "Work, work, work, go, go, go." Then suddenly the loudspeakers grew silent. The old woman sprang up in alarm, grabbed the cloths and sticks that held up the booth, and motioned to someone inside. A man rushed out and came to her assistance. Fitch looked for signs of the pox on him and saw none. Then, however, the man reached out to grab a pole, and his arm showed clearly, flung out toward the rickety framework of the booth. The arm was littered with pustules and scabbed sores.

The crowd surrounding the booth disappeared. "The streetcleaners are coming. No wonder the people took off," Janice cried. And in the distance Fitch saw the streetcleaners' trucks thundering through the streets. He felt sick, remembering his own experience. The ground was littered with the weak and exhausted who had fallen beneath the crowds. Fitch said angrily, "There's a book at the gallery that describes The Middle Ages, a time when all learning and decency was forgotten. I used to think that it was fiction. Well, we have it beaten by far." He paused to regain his self-control and said quietly, "Sloat, I just want to know one thing; will those people be inoculated?"

Sloat shook his head. "Probably not. The doctors will figure that most of them will die of malnutrition anyhow. Why waste good vaccine? That's how they'll look at it."

Fitch couldn't take his eyes off the scene below. "I'm going to force Toby to help us, if it's the last thing I do," he said. "With his powers of persuasion, maybe he could convince the people to accept inoculations. Well, we may as well head for the gallery and get it over with. Play along with me, no matter what I say. I might have to try a bluff."

They approached the gallery, using the A-cop like a car

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now. Despite himself, Fitch looked up at the huge wall with something like nostalgia. His life at the gallery seemed like a dream. The guards saw the official car, and motioned them through.

"Easier to get in than it was to get out," Mandy said, trying to joke. Fitch grinned; the scenes of the square had been too much for Mandy. His face was white and he looked sick. Janice looked at him protectively.

They entered the front hallway and were instantly directed to the art warden's office on the first floor. Fitch had seen the man only about ten times in his long stay at the gallery, but he recognized him at once. Warden Graham looked stockier close up than he had at a distance. His hair was thin and he wore glasses. "Well," he said jovially, "Gary Fitch and Mandy Brail; the prodigals return."

"Did the mayor tell you why?" Fitch said.

"No, he only suggested that I see you. Also he gave orders that you weren't to be detained here."

"There goes our last chance to hide," Mandy said.

"Boy, this is some layout." Janice looked around the well-appointed office with obvious appreciation. "I always wondered what the gallery was like. Everyone outside does, I guess. I thought that artists were war mongers. What do you do, hide your arsenal?"

The warden smiled at her condescendingly.

"I'll come right to the point," Fitch said. "We have the authority to do what we can to protect the populace during the crisis. We want to inoculate the artists here and use them to help fight the plague. They'll be helpful in many ways, as part of a barricade for example, to keep scavengers out of the borough, and help prevent riots. Also, we want to set up the gallery facilities as a hospital."

The warden's face registered disbelief, shock, and scandalized refusal. His smile vanished. He stood up quickly. "No. Absolutely not. I've never heard anything so ridiculous in all my life. I'm against the whole thing. That's all."

"Why?"

"Why? You were here in the gallery for some twenty

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years. I looked up your record when the mayor said you were coming. You know very well that our plague rate was much lower than it was outside. Isolation is the answer. Now you want me to open up my doors and directly involve the artists in a project that could have dire consequences! And using the artists as an armed force—what do they know about guns?"

"But the people think artists know how to use guns all right," Janice said.

"Sloat will train the men," Fitch said quietly.

"And how on earth do you presume to get the artists back in here after they'd had a taste of freedom?" the art warden thundered.

Mandy said with a laugh, "One look at the Outside, and they'll plead to come home."

But Fitch paused soberly. He wanted everyone in the room to hear what he had to say, even though the boldness of his plan amazed him. He said, "We don't get them back here. That's part of it."

Warden Graham's face blanched. "Why, you're out of your mind," he said. Even Sloat stared at Fitch with astonishment. But now that he'd spoken, Fitch was convinced that he was right. He said firmly, "When this is over, we're going to share our knowledge with the people. They're going to see all those books and all those paintings and find out for themselves how much they've already lost and what they stand to gain."

Sloat said, frowning, "I never thought that you seriously considered—"

"You can back out anytime," Fitch said coldly. "And that goes for all of you."

"I'm not backing out," Sloat said.

"This gallery is my responsibility," Warden Graham said loudly. His large round eyes snapped angrily behind his glasses. "I'm not opening it to the public now or ever. I'll close the place up and starve first."

"You might just do that," Fitch said calmly. "You can't hold out for long. If you accept food from outside, how

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can you be sure that it isn't handed in by infected hands? You'd have to deal with the black market because you won't get any borough food supplies. I'll tell you that now, because I'll be in control of all borough supplies."

"You and who else?" The warden said triumphantly. "You must think that I'm a fool. You come here with these preposterous demands, and no way at all to back them up. You're lucky that I just didn't kick you out to begin with."

Fitch paused. He knew that he had to bluff, and he hoped he could carry the bluff through. Without the artists on his side, his plan would be completely useless. He lied quickly, smoothly, and desperately. "The Rebels have joined us. The city officials will abandon the borough, as you've probably surmised. The police will follow suit. The few who do stay, will be with us. We'll raid the gallery and get what we want in any case. Only if you hold out too long, we may not have enough vaccine left to inoculate all your men."

The warden's mouth gaped open. Mandy turned white. Fitch stared at Graham coldly. But would the bluff work? And if it did, it was imperative that he force the Rebels to join him before Graham discovered that he'd been taken.

"I'm going to call the mayor and call your bluff," the warden said nervously.

Fitch said, "Call him. Find out for yourself."

Mandy gulped painfully. Sloat looked at Fitch with a worried frown. The warden said with a touch of spite, "If you'd rather I didn't, of course—"

"Call him," Fitch said with more confidence than he felt. The warden shrugged and went over to a console that stood by his desk. "I can see that those things come in handy," Fitch said.

"Quite handy," the warden said smugly. "All government offices have them. At one time the whole world was visible from any place on it, provided a set was available, of course. Unfortunately, scientific advancement has suffered setbacks. Satellites above the earth make the televisions possible, but they were put up in orbit centuries ago and we don't have the facilities to repair them. Luckily, for the most part,

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they're almost indestructible. Now, let's see what the mayor has to say, shall we?" He grinned meaningfully.

Fitch didn't move a muscle, he was so afraid of giving himself away. "This is my way of taking care of my conscience," Sloat had told Mayor Lyle. Now he was giving the mayor the same chance, but would he take it, Fitch wondered. Was it possible that he had the mayor pegged wrong?

"Mayor Lyle?" the warden said. The mayor's worried face appeared on the screen. Warden Graham said angrily, "Are the Rebellers joining forces with this group that you sent here? I know that the idea is ridiculous, but that's their story and I wanted to check on the far-fetched chance that there might be something to it."

Mandy turned his head. Sloat and Fitch eyed each other wordlessly. Fitch touched the back of a chair to steady himself. Suddenly he wondered what had ever given him the idea that the mayor would go along with his bluff. Lyle knew damn well that the Rebellers were an uncommitted element so far.

The mayor began to speak. Sick with suspense, Fitch looked up to listen.

THIRTEEN

IT WAS APPARENT that Mayor Lyle could see the group surrounding the Art Warden. For a split second his eyes met Sloat's. Then he said, "The Rebellers will join forces with Fitch, yes. I can offer no help as far as police defenses are concerned. If I leave my post, I can hardly expect those beneath me to keep theirs. I suggest that you follow Fitch's proposals. The borough hasn't much of a chance. But any chance that it does have, lies in his hands. He's uh, very persistent." The mayor paused briefly, then he said, "Sloat, this is my way. I'm sure you understand."

Fitch was so weak with relief that he could hardly speak. Warden Graham was so angry with the mayor that he stared at Fitch with his round dark owl eyes and demanded, "How could he do a thing like that? It's bad enough that he's leaving the city himself, but to turn the place over—I'll go along with you obviously, but only because I have no choice. I can't understand how he could do such a thing."

But Fitch didn't dare take time to relish his victory. Now that he'd convinced Graham that the Rebellers were with him, it was all the more important that he convince the Rebellers themselves, before Graham saw through the ruse. He stood up impatiently. "Sloat, can I count on you to get the vaccine here? You know where everything is stored. Ask the mayor anything you need to know. If I'm not back by the time you have the artists innoculated, then start them on rifles. And give them an orientation class. Remember how stupid I was about the Outside, so tell them all you can and don't take anything for granted. It'll be quite a transition for them. Janice, you go back to the mayor's office. Listen in to all the reports. Mandy and I have a job to do.

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And Janice, pay particular attention to the Binghamton Borough reports. I want to know the minute that the plague starts leaping down this way."

Janice nodded. She started to speak, then changed her mind. Something in her face made Fitch draw her aside. "You know where I'm going, don't you?"

She nodded solemnly.

"Do you know of an easier way to get there?"

She paused, then looked directly into his face. "No," she said.

The warden was just recovering from his shock. He sprang up. "I still think that this whole thing is ridiculous," he said. Fitch grinned at him, and shrugged. "Keep your eye on our boy," he said to Sloat. The warden yelled after him, but Fitch and Mandy went out the door.

Once they were outside, Fitch's composure almost deserted him. With the immediate crisis over, he felt the full impact of the chance he'd taken. "Boy, that was close," he said.

Mandy stood grinning at him. "You're telling me. I was almost sick. Only to tell the truth, I feel worse now. How are you going to force Toby to join us? Suppose he's given orders to his men to attack us if we go back? You never know what the devil he's going to do. And if the Rebels refuse, it won't take Graham long to discover that the whole thing was a bluff either."

The mayor had given them all guns, insisting in his dry way that they also be issued legal permits. Now Fitch touched his pistol and said, "Well, at least we're armed, that's something. We'll have to play it by ear. I'll tell you one thing, though; without Toby's men we'll never make it. We haven't much time either. If the plague moves quicker than we do, we're sunk. Getting the Rebels on our side is just the beginning."

It was near noon. The autumn sun was amazingly warm. Fitch and Mandy skimmed along in the A-cop. Fitch took it as high as it would go. The northeast section of the borough spread out beneath them, a sprawling mass of slums and

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shanties. People cluttered the muddy river, fighting for the few fish that still survived in the contaminated waters. A wind blew down from the mountains, whipping the canvas shanty tops of filthy shelters, and sending some sailing down the hillsides.

"Do you think the mayor might change his mind and stay?" Mandy said.

"You can't tell. He hasn't left yet, but the whole plague mess is going to be pretty bad, worse than we expected, I think. Otherwise he wouldn't have turned things over to us at all. When this is over he probably figures on taking the credit if the borough's saved, and blaming us if it isn't."

"And even if we get by Toby, what about Gunny?" Mandy said. "I think that he's got some ideas of his own. Besides, I don't like the idea of leaving Janice alone in the metropolis."

Despite himself, Fitch laughed. "She's a pretty smart gal. She'll do all right. I only hope that we do as well." They were passing the chemical gardens, using copter controls. For the first time Fitch got a good look at the workers' huts. They were nearly as small as the gallery cells, with one small window apiece, and they lay twenty to a row in long dark rectangular patterns on the gray bare land.

Here and there broken cement lumps stuck up like floating islands. "What are those?" Mandy said.

"Old roads. About a hundred or so years ago, the general populace had private cars and the country was covered with roads, from one end to another!"

"Aw, you're nuts," Mandy said, grinning.

"I told you that when we were still at the gallery. You forget all the stuff I read in those books, but you never believed that any of it was true, remember?"

They were flying along, hugging the side of the mountain. Something caught Fitch's eye. He took the A-cop higher. "Hey, look at that. The People Haters are setting up their own barricade. They're going to defend their mountain against—" He broke off. Ahead of them a rock plunged down. He tried to swerve, but it was too late. He did

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manage to turn enough so that the rock fell somewhat to the left. With a loud crunch, one of the small sturdy adjustable wings of the A-cop was broken off. The rock fell right through the wing, plunging them down with it. Mandy let out a yell. The rocky mountain was horrifyingly close. Each crack and crevice stood out clear and distinct. For a split second Fitch was too startled to make any decision at all, then quickly he pushed the button that turned the vehicle back to a hovering position. The A-cop jerked, still in the air. It kept on falling, then suddenly pulled up even to the ground, with the rocky path only four feet away. Two more rocks plunged down, whooshing past, but now the A-cop was clear, and he changed to car controls.

"Whew! People Haters, they're not kidding," Mandy said, when he got his breath.

Fitch frowned, trying to ascertain the damages. He was having trouble steering. "Never mind, we might have to get our hands on them too," he said. "Damn, now I can't get any speed out of this thing."

The Binghamton Borough began off in the distance to the east. The chemical gardens and workers' huts were visible to Fitch and Mandy now from the height of the mountain ledge. Smoke rose in the air. Some of the huts were in flames. A group of figures were running away from the borough, toward the Elmira subdivision. "Great," Fitch said. "Probably half of those people down there are looters, and we can't do a thing about it right now. When the plague comes down with them, we'll really have trouble on our hands. They won't come straggling down when that happens, they'll come in droves."

Again he broke off. They'd turned a sharp corner. The mountain ledge was narrow. To the left it dropped off to the valley below. Seven people suddenly appeared up the road ahead. "If this thing was working right, I could just move off the ledge. Now I don't dare," Fitch said. "We either have to go ahead or turn back."

The figures came closer. "Are they armed?" Mandy said. "Can't tell. Let's take the chance. If we don't make it to

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the Rebels in daylight, we'll run into even more trouble. You game?"

Mandy nodded weakly. The group were clearly visible now. There were six men and one woman. The woman huddled in a mess of dirty cloth, her face almost completely covered. Fitch drove over to the edge of the ledge, using the A-cop as a car. He kept his hand on his pistol, just in case, but the group seemed peaceful enough until they came closer. Then he saw the expressions on their faces. They came alongside. The men were all skinny and dirty. The man closest to the A-cop said, "We want that machine of yours. Do you give it to us, or do we fight? It's six against two."

The woman stayed in the background. Fitch said, "We're armed. We can hold our own."

"Hear that?" the man said. They all started laughing. Something in their merriment sent chills up Fitch's spine. He looked around quickly. The A-cop was surrounded. The edge of the old road fell off steeply.

"We got us a secret weapon," the man said with a leer.

"I said, we'll hold our own."

"Against this?" Swiftly the woman came closer. She ripped aside the cloths that covered her head and shoulders. Her face was riddled with new pox pustules. Ugly boils blistered on her scrawny arms. "How about a kiss, gents?" She smirked and thrust her face at them. The man shoved her aside roughly. "What do you think of that?" he said to Fitch.

"We're all infected, every damned one of us. This beauty here is my sister, and you know what we're doing? We're going to the Florida Borough for the winter, that's what. We're going to see the southland before we die, mister. We're having a last fling, and we're going in comfort."

The woman reached out as if to touch Mandy's face. She cried angrily, "I was pretty once." Mandy ducked back in terror and she laughed. Then her cackles changed to sobs. "I was going to have a kid," she screamed. Fitch stared, caught between compassion and horror. The woman's eyes glimmered with despair above the puffy cheeks, but Fitch

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knew that she would do what she threatened. The man said, "Okay. Do we get the copter or does Bertha here give you both a nice big kiss?"

Fitch tried to stall. "How do I know that you'll leave us alone if I do give you the copter?" he said. Already though, he had an idea. He and Mandy were inoculated but there were different kids of plague virus and he didn't dare take a chance. Quickly he touched a button. The A-cop started up. It spun madly, thrusting the woman away. She fell sobbing against the hill. The copter went up to four feet. Fitch couldn't get it to go higher. He used the remaining wing like a weapon, swinging the A-cop around in a small circle. The men rushed at it. Fitch swore. He tried to get some speed out of the vehicle, but it kept bumping along, going up a little distance, then banging back along the ground. The mountain ledge was crooked. The men caught up to them. Fitch forced the A-cop back to four feet once more. "The path straightens out further down," Mandy yelled. "If we can make the next quarter of a mile—"

Fitch looked back. The men were breathless but still determined. "Last curve," Mandy shouted, "Watch out!" Almost too late Fitch saw the towering mountain side right in front of them. He swerved frantically. The A-cop straightened out. The ledge was suddenly wider. The men behind disappeared in the distance. Fitch kept going as fast as he could.

"Hey, if you keep on in this direction, we'll be right back where we started, in the Elmira subdivision," Mandy said.

"Any other suggestions?" Fitch said. "The A-cop is in rotten shape, I can't think of anything else to do. It'll be night soon and if we run into any trouble, I'm not sure that we can handle it. Besides I just caught sight of some more groups coming down from the Binghamton Borough. They looked armed, and they're probably plague carriers. We'll have to go back and set up some kind of barricade to keep them out. But we'll start for Toby's again at daybreak. I only hope we have enough time."

For a while neither of them spoke. Fitch was more de-

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jected than he wanted to let on. "We should just take another copter and get the devil out of here," he said angrily, "Just save ourselves. That's all everyone else is doing. We don't owe anything to anybody, that's for sure."

Mandy didn't answer. Fitch glowered out at the dreary landscape. They came out of the mountains, down into the valley below. Sunset suddenly sent long deep shadows across the valley. The low huts and shanties stuck up in the distance like strange stubby mushrooms, violet in the sun. "Hey, smell that? Something sweet, like . . . like flowers," Mandy said, in amazement.

Fitch's face was white. "It's the smell of the plague. Sloat told me. The people believe that when the air smells like flowers, then the plague blooms. It's the flower of death."

The sun disappeared. An almost indescribable beauty touched the land with a soft lucid twilight. "I'm going to paint this scene when this is all over," Fitch said with sudden fury. "Look, the light is terrific. And down there people are dying like flies. I've never been so damned outraged. We're going to stay and see this thing through, and all hell will break out before I'm finished, I'll tell you that."

They skimmed along now just above the ground. The trip back seemed eternal. Smoke rose in foul smelling columns as people cooked whatever stray pigeons they managed to catch. Cats were another specialty. As they passed one group of hovels, Fitch stared down with disbelief. A woman thrust a dead rat into a pot of boiling water. Mandy yelled down, "Don't. You'll get the plague." The woman shook her fists at them. A child behind her aimed a rock at the copter.

They approached the most populated areas. People chased the A-cop. "Dirty cowards," they screamed, seeing the official insignia. Fitch couldn't get the machine high enough to ensure safety. Finally in desperation he kept yelling, "Plague, Look out, Plague," every time a group of people came close. They scattered, yelling taunts.

It was dark by the time they reached the borough building. Neon lights still blazed here and there through

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the squares, and the loudspeakers blared. Janice waited for them anxiously. She looked scared to death.

"You all right?" Mandy said.

"I'm all right, but worried stiff. Sloat doesn't feel well. I made him lay down. He worked like blazes all day. The artists are inoculated. Thank heavens, the warden played along, but he's already suspicious, and asking where your Rebels are. Reports are coming in from the rest of the country, though, and they're enough to give anyone the shakes. The rumors are even worse."

"You're sure that you're okay?" Mandy said again.

"I said I was, didn't I?" She shoved back a lock of black hair and managed to smile. The mayor had given her some of his wife's clothing. Despite the worried frown on her face she looked terrific, her figure not nearly as skimpy as it had appeared in the baggy rags she'd worn before.

Mandy whistled. "Boy, you look great. I'll say that," he said, and she grinned at him before the sobriety returned to her eyes again.

"The death rates are really rising," she said to Fitch. "They think it's nearly four hundred in the Binghamton Borough just today. Over a hundred stragglers have come in from there since morning. Florida is losing thousands. I can't imagine it. California is hard hit, and even the New York conropolis. One of the New York boroughs, Schenectady, lost eight hundred just yesterday. People are talking about the end of the world. The vaccines don't seem to be helping too much, and the scientists don't know why." She was near collapse. She turned to Fitch pathetically.

"I used to tell myself that you could always go somewhere else if you really had to, but it isn't true, is it? What good will it do for the mayor to leave? Where will he go to? Do you really think that the plague could wipe the race out? That's what the reports keep saying. The rest of the world is dead, for practical purposes. I mean, only stray bands of people survived the last famine they had in China and Europe and Africa. It's been awful, just sitting here today, listening to these reports."

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"All we can do is hope for the best," Fitch said. "I don't like those reports any more than you do. I kept thinking that we could get some kind of help from the federal government, no matter what the mayor said. Now, I guess that's out."

They stared at each other. "You mean, we really are alone in this?" Mandy said. "There isn't anyone at all we can turn to? The governments are helpless . . . completely?"

Fitch nodded. "Maybe in the back of our minds, we knew it would happen all along."

"I haven't told you the worst," Janice said. "About an hour ago, the southern parts of the country suddenly stopped all communications. They just went dead."

"I hate to say 'I told you so'." The Mayor stood in the doorway. "You didn't really know what you were up against. I'm afraid I have some local news that won't help your frame of mind." He came in, smiling sardonically. "I have information that the supervisors of the chemical gardens intend to leave. You'd better get some men out there right away if you want to hold the place. Otherwise the people will loot it clean. Also, those temperature and light controls have to be kept at precise limits or everything will spoil. You don't want the place contaminated, either."

"You could stay yourself and set an example for the supervisors and everyone else," Fitch said coldly. "Did you ever think of that?"

"I've thought of it," Mayor Lyle said dryly. "I'm giving you all the help I can, however."

"All the help you can!" Fitch exploded. "As long as you save your own skin. I'm fed up to here. With you and with the Rebels too. If they don't join us of their own free will then I'll attack with artist forces. They'll be the first to go."

"Really?" Mayor Lyle said.

"All right, so it would be difficult, but we could do it," Fitch said angrily. "You've been inoculated, haven't you?"

"I have."

"Then why the devil don't you stay? Let the people know that you're sticking with them."

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"You're fighting a lost cause. Suppose you manage to save the whole borough, which is most unlikely. From all reports, the rest of the country is going under. And let me ask you a serious question. Do you really think that the masses of the people are worth saving?"

"Of all the damned filthy things to say," Janice shouted.

"I'm leaving now," the mayor said. "I only came in to let you know about the supervisors."

"Where the hell do you think you can go?" Fitch yelled. "The plague is all over the country."

Lyle smiled. "For your information I have a rather terrific copter hidden away that can hover motionless in the air for miraculous periods of time. It's uh, well stocked with supplies. Granted, the earth is plague-ridden, but the plague hasn't taken to the skies yet, now, has it?"

Fitch took out the gun that Lyle, himself, had given him. At the same time he motioned to Mandy to cover the mayor from the rear. "You aren't going anywhere," he said. "You're going to ride through the squares every day so that the people will know that you haven't abandoned them."

"I'll do no such thing," Lyle said calmly.

"Take his gun," Fitch said. Mandy disarmed Lyle, who watched the procedure disdainfully.

"That's what I call a real man, that mayor," Janice said.

Lyle looked at Fitch with something like compassion. He said, "Look, for one thing, I'm not the figurehead you want. The people have no use for me, or for any official. I don't know why I should bother to explain this to you, but somewhere along the line we fell down on the job. It was just too much of a job to keep society stable, without trying to stem the tide of ignorance. And then we didn't dare try. We were defeated by sheer numbers. We needed more people to feed those we already had, so we didn't dare press for birth control. Maybe you can succeed where we failed. I'd just impede your progress. I don't know if you can win the people's trust or if anyone can, but they don't trust me."

Fitch put the gun away. "You can go. You're right, you'd be a liability, but it's a hell of a commentary," he said.

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Mandy stepped back. The mayor left the room. Mandy and Janice watched from the window. The mayor's lonely form emerged and was lost in the crowds below. Then his A-cop started up. The crowd yelled and took up the chase. Stones flew through the air but the copter rose, safe, and vanished from sight.

"Well, that's it," Fitch said. "No need worrying about all we have to do. We'll just do one thing at a time. Mandy, you see how Sloat is. Call the warden. I want as many men as we need stationed at the northern end of the chemical gardens. Try and force the supervisors to stay. If they won't, then Sloat can instruct some of the artists on how to run the place. I've got to get hold of the Rebels tonight, no matter what. I don't dare wait until morning now." He broke off. Commotion rose from the streets below. Another official car was taking off, and the people were racing after it and yelling.

Fitch watched for a second, then he said, "That gives me another idea. In an hour I want all the airports closed, and all the available A-cops and planes seized. We're going to need them. Also all trucks. I want this borough closed up tight. Right now by hook or crook I've got to get the Rebels to help."

Janice had been watching Fitch intently. She said, "It's awfully important that you contact Toby as soon as possible, isn't it?"

"It sure is. As soon as the people are sure that all the officials are gone, they'll really riot. All holds will be off and we've got to set up some kind of an organization first."

She paused. "I . . . I know of a secret entrance to Toby's place, right from the heart of the borough," she said.

"You what? And you didn't tell me? Do you know how much time we would have saved?"

"I couldn't help it. Toby was good to me for years. It was the one secret I promised myself that I'd never tell, no matter what. Only you have to promise me that you won't harm him."

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"Harm him?" Fitch yelled. "He's got four hundred men behind him."

Janice avoided the accusation in his eyes and said, "Well, quit squawking and I'll take you." She walked to the door defiantly, but there were tears in her eyes.

Outside the people were thick as bushes, clumped all over. Fitch and Janice pushed over to the closest square. The atmosphere seemed ominous. Fitch looked around to see what had gone wrong, and realized that the loudspeakers weren't blaring. The men who worked them must have left their posts. The silence was a giveaway. Fitch frowned angrily as he and Janice hurried along. "All hell will break loose soon, you wait and see," he muttered.

He followed her to the base of an old building. A broken door hung open on its hinges. She led him inside to a dirt basement and scrambled down on her hands and knees.

"Don't use a light yet," she said. She rumaged around on the floor. Something clanged. "Old floor drain," she said, "Sewer hole. Come on." They went through. He reached up and replaced the cover. "You can use a light now," she said, and he took out his flashlight.

The beams of the flashlight showed a clammy sewer, with a few inches of dirty water in the bottom. There was a small ledge above it, and they walked along cautiously. Fitch recoiled instinctively at the filth and darkness. The sides of the sewer glowed dimly, however, with an eerie light. This puzzled him for a moment; then he remembered with relief the rat-repelling paint that was so helpful to the Rebels. He started to say, "Anyway, we don't have to worry about rats," and just at that moment they entered the opening of a long wide pipe. They crawled in, and Janice started screaming. The pipe was filled with rats.

FOURTEEN

FITCH PULLED his gun out and took aim. The rats scrambled about, startled by Janice's scream. Fitch was just about to fire, however, when she grabbed his arm. "Don't shoot! They'll attack for sure. Just yell. Make as much noise as you can, but leave that exit clear." She shook with fear. Fitch's skin crawled. The rats reared up, their nails scratching the metal floor.

Fitch and Janice jumped to either side of the pipe and started screaming. The rats hesitated, then they rushed with a horrible shuffling sound across the width of the back of the pipe by the rear door. "Yell louder," Janice shouted. The rats turned and headed directly for them. Then in a flash they scampered between Fitch and Janice out the open end of the pipe to the sewer.

One rat brushed Fitch's leg. He caught a quick glimpse of a naked scaly tail and a body covered with short grayish fur. It was over that quickly. Janice pressed a button. A door slid down, closing the sewer off. They stood in a sealed portion of the pipe, with the door at the end clear.

"Whew! That was close," Fitch said. "You probably saved our lives. Those things are really plague carriers."

"Part of my education. Our shouts set up an echo chamber in there. The rats didn't know where the screams were coming from. Don't ever try it without leaving an exit open for them though, or they'll attack in a minute."

The experience upset both of them so that they leaned weakly against the doorway. "I can't help it," Janice said. "They scare the devil out of me."

"I can't understand it, though," Fitch said. "Toby had the whole place covered with his rat repellent. You could see the glow. That's why I was taken by surprise when I saw

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the rats. Actually it's the lice that live on the rats, not the rats themselves, that carry the plague. But that doesn't help any. When the rats die, the infected lice jump on anything alive that happens to come along."

Janice shivered. "Great. The rats have probably developed an immunity to the paint. That's all we need." She paused and said, "Well, we're just about there. I hate to go in. I've already betrayed Toby's trust, telling you about this entrance."

"I was planning to use that rat repellent in the borough," Fitch said wearily. Then Janice's words came through to him. "You mean, we're there already? How could we be?"

She nodded shame-faced. "The long route is to conceal the fact that most of the Rebels headquarters are directly under the borough itself."

Fitch had his gun ready. "You won't use that unless you have to, will you?" she said anxiously.

"Not unless I have to. I hope I won't need it."

She touched another button. The iron door ahead slid open. Fitch stared in amazement. They stood in an enclosure, looking through glass walls directly into Toby's office. Toby himself paced the floor, his narrow eyes squinting around the room angrily.

"We're behind the mirrors," Janice whispered. "He can hide in here and watch anyone in his office."

"I knew damn well that I was being observed while I waited in there the first time," Fitch said. "Glad to turn the tables."

Toby stood by his desk. He made a quick motion. Before Fitch could get his bearing, the portion of the glass in front of them slid away. They stood face to face with Toby. "There's a little extra device that I never told you about, Janice," Toby said coldly. "Whenever anyone is in that little room, I know about it."

"Fitch had to see you! It's important. I had to tell him!" she said quickly.

"You had to." He frowned contemptuously.

"She has more concern for the human race than you seem to have," Fitch said.

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"I can have ten men in here in a minute," Toby said.

"Call them if you're going to. If not, listen to what I have to say."

"I doubt I'll be interested, but go ahead and hurry up," Toby said.

"Will you be reasonable?"

"I'm reasonable. You aren't," Toby said. "You're a fool for coming here to begin with. I could have killed you while you were behind that mirror and you wouldn't have known what hit you."

"But you didn't. I take calculated risks too," Fitch said. "Now listen, we need you and your men. The borough government is rotten to the core. You were right; the officials ran out."

"What did you expect? Let the dead bury their dead," Toby said.

The door burst open. Gunny rushed into the room, his gun in his hand. "I thought I heard voices. How the hell did they get in here?" he yelled.

"Put the gun down," Toby said. "I have one of my own if I'd wanted to use it."

"Well, I want to use mine," Gunny said. "What do they want?" He glowered over at Toby. Fitch took advantage of the move to whip out his own gun. "Now what?" he said. "It's an impasse. Sit down and listen. I may as well talk to you both."

"I don't have to put up with this. I owe you one, Fitch," Gunny said. Nevertheless he put his gun away and sat down.

"Okay," Fitch said. "This is how things stand. The artists have been inoculated. They're under my control through a bit of luck and a good bluff. Sloat is taking care of that part. The whole damn country is hard hit with plague. We need your help." Fitch paused and said soberly, "If you don't help us on your own, I have the men to attack you, and I will. Is that what you want? The artists number over a thousand."

"We'll meet you any day," Gunny said. "Boy, am I sorry we ever did you a good turn. We'll fight you to the last man if that's what you want."

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"Shut up," Toby said. "Hear Fitch out. It won't do him any good, but let him finish."

"What are the Rebels rebelling against?" Fitch said desperately. "The filthy conditions, the ignorance, disease? Then do something. If the Rebels mean anything at all, they have to take positive action, not hide in the sand while the world goes to pot. There's a vacuum now. If we don't fill it, some psychopath like Gunny will. Is that what you want?"

"You can go to hell," Gunny said.

Fitch ignored him and went on. "I tell you, Sloat and I are in control right now. But deaths are mounting. The people will riot. We need more men. If you'll join with us, we'll have it made. When this is over, we'll be in a position to pass legislation. If you think that I intend to let the city fathers come crawling back, you have another thought coming. We're going to run this borough. We'll take over any other boroughs that we can, too, but that's in the future. You'll see strict birth control laws passed so quickly that your head will swim. This is your chance. It's now or never. Do you want in or don't you?"

Toby stared at him. Fitch paused, overwhelmed by the implications of his own words. The plan had come fully only as he spoke, so that he was as surprised by his boldness as anyone else. Or had the plan really been in the back of his mind all along? Had it urged him on ever since his return to the city? He didn't know.

"You didn't talk like that earlier," Toby said slowly. "For the first time, you're coming through to me."

"I hadn't thought that far ahead before," Fitch said. "But we have to follow through, or all our work will be in vain. It's not just a matter of saving some of the people from the plague. It's a matter of education. It's a matter of shutting off the valves of population before this plague or another one does it for us. I'll tell you one thing, though. If all measures fail then a handful of men will find things pretty miserable on this planet all alone. Suddenly survival would taste like ashes."

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"Are you paying attention to all that bull?" Gunny said.

But Toby didn't answer. He was watching Fitch's face. Fitch said, "Once I asked you what you'd do if you discovered that your methods were wrong."

"I said that I'd change them."

"Will you?" Fitch said.

Janice had been listening intently. Now she cried angrily, "Toby, you helped me! I was one of the so-called masses. And where do you think your parents came from? The only difference is that we were helped by someone else. At least we were given a chance."

But now Toby turned toward her coldly. "Why should we help the masses when they won't help themselves?"

"Maybe they will, if you give them the chance," Fitch said.

The room was quiet. Gunny stared at all of them malevolently. Fitch said frantically, "Listen, Toby, we're all rebels. But we have to join together now."

Toby's head snapped up. He took several quick strides across the room.

"We're opening the galleries with all their information to the people," Fitch said.

Toby stopped dead. "You're opening the galleries? Funny, I always dreamed of doing that myself. With all my plans, I almost missed out, didn't I? You're opening the galleries! I'm afraid I'm resentful because you did it, while I talked about it." He grinned ruefully and said, "And I yelled at Sloat for just talking without taking action."

"Why, you're on his side," Gunny yelled. "Well, we're throwing this to the men. They have a right to have their say. I'll tell you one thing, plenty of them go along with me. You're a bunch of idiots. We've stayed safe because we stayed underground! What we should do is loot the borough clean, reinforce our own supplies and let the damn world rot. It's never done anything for us, that's for sure."

"Gunny, Fitch is right," Toby said. "Actually, I've been thinking along those lines for a while myself. We'll all have a better chance if we pool our resources. Even animals co-

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operate against a common danger. I have to admit that what made me make up my mind was Fitch's determination not to let the officials return to power."

"Hell, I'm thinking of your best interests," Gunny shouted. "If you think that going outside into the plague-ridden mess is the thing to do, then all I can say is that you've lost your mind! You've been influenced by Fitch too much. You've been partial to him ever since the two of you met."

"All right," Toby said. "Call for a general meeting right now."

"What?" Fitch said. "I thought it was settled."

"The men have to be behind it too," Toby said. "I won't force them against their will. It wouldn't work that way in any case. They have to be convinced, as I was."

"Now you're talking sense," Gunny said.

"I warn you, we'll attack if we have to," Fitch said. "We have to get your help, no matter what your men say."

"I've got to give them a chance to decide for themselves," Toby said. "At least Gunny is right about that. Gunny, call them to the auditorium."

The meeting lasted for over an hour. The men were nervous and worried. Toby insisted on only one thing, that Gunny speak first, and Gunny jumped quickly up to the platform. "We've always isolated ourselves," he yelled. "And we've survived. Now Toby wants to involve us in the affairs of the outside world, and I object. I want to follow the original plan, dig in here and let the contropolis go to the devil. I'm for looting to add to our supplies. Toby even wants to evacuate some of the people and bring them down here. What do you think of that?" He stared down at the men angrily. They started shouting. In the uproar it was difficult to tell whose side they were on.

Toby took Gunny's place on the platform. As worried as Fitch was about the outcome, he was amazed again at Toby's composure and magnetism. He didn't speak a word until the whole room was silent. Then he began softly. "We didn't have a chance to form the world we were born into. Now we have the opportunity to make a new one. Fitch

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has already mobilized the artists. Borough officials have fled. The national government is powerless. I've always said that when the time was right, we'd move. This is the time. Fitch had more guts than I had. He made this chance for us. We put up or shut up. Follow Gunny's ideas and we'll end up a disorganized band of looters. Is this what you want?"

The men listened soberly. Many of them were professional men of one kind or another. Toby waited until his last remark brought a glimmer of distaste to many of their faces. "If we don't take this chance, then we have no right to protest what we're unwilling to fight against. If we move now, we take over the borough completely. With Fitch's men, we'll have enough force to maintain control."

Gunny rushed up to the platform. He shouted, "Ask him how he knows for sure that Fitch has mobilized the artists. He only has Fitch's word for that. Go ahead, ask him."

Protests arose. Some of the men jumped to their feet. Others watched Toby inquisitively. Toby said, "I have Fitch's word, and I believe him. He also promises that if we refuse to join him, he'll feel committed to attack us with those same forces." He said crisply, "He'll do it. And if we don't join of our own free will, then we'll deserve it. I've thought this over for a long time, actually. Fitch only put my own ideas into words so that I had to face them. Now, make your decision. You have all the facts."

Suddenly commotion broke out at the back of the room. A small band of men pushed their way toward the platform. Someone yelled, "The People Haters are attacking!"

Someone else screamed, "They've got our guards as hostages." The men leapt to their feet.

Gunny rushed from the platform, "Come on, after them!" Shouts filled the room. "No, wait, they only want to talk," a man yelled from the rear.

A shot rang out, from the platform. Every head turned in Toby's direction. He held a smoking gun in his hand. "Quiet. Whoever knows anything about this, step forward. The rest, listen."

The band of men went up to the platform. The leader

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said quickly, "The People Haters came up quietly in the dark. They jumped us. They've got four other guards as hostages. We were freed to bring you a message. They only want to talk with Toby."

"Bring their spokesman here then, and hurry," Toby said. "Let's see what they have on their mind."

The Rebels muttered among themselves. Fitch sprang up to the platform as the guards left. "You aren't safe down here any more," he said. "The plague has even scared the People Haters. Word travels. Anyone who knows you have food down here will be after it. We have to join forces. You have to save others in order to save yourselves now."

"He's right," one of the men called. The cry went up. Gunny was furious. Fitch said to him, "I'm warning you, you can't hold out alone. This is just one example."

"If you're Rebels, then rebel" Fitch shouted. Beside him, Toby grinned. But then everyone swung around. A group of men strode in. "The People Haters!" Nervously, the Rebels made way. The People Haters crowded together in a tight band.

"What do you want?" Toby said coldly.

"The damned plague forced us off our hill," the spokesman said. "We want to be inoculated. We know you've got the stuff to do it."

"Why not go to the Elmira Borough? They're inoculating there," Fitch said.

"We ain't going to no doctors," the man yelled. "Hell, we'd take our chances with the plague first."

Some of the Rebels laughed. Tension eased. The People Haters were in plain sight of everyone. Fitch smiled; at close range the People Haters were a band of hungry, frightened men. Toby said suddenly, "We'll inoculate you."

"No tricks," the spokesman said suspiciously. "We can do plenty of damage if you try anything. If we're not back in fifteen minutes, your guards will be killed."

But Fitch had an idea. He said to the People Haters, "You want food and inoculations and shelter?" They looked at him as if he was crazy and huddled together, arguing

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among themselves. Then the spokesman snapped, "In return for what? You must want something." Fitch knew he had it made. He yelled out to the Rebels.

"Listen, let the People Haters join us. We need everyone we can get. Band together and we double our chances of success. It might be an uneasy alliance, but we can make it work. What do you say?"

"All in favor, yell out," Toby shouted. He stood with his arms flung out dramatically, the People Haters staring up at him. There was a brief dead silence, then someone yelled, "I'm for it!" The shout was taken up. The room exploded. As Fitch hoped, the tension and fear of the plague was suddenly released in the overwhelming decision to do something and fight back. The People Haters stood bewildered in the uproar, but they were obviously amazed.

"I don't get it," Gunny said. "The People Haters are usually savage."

"Look at them," Fitch whispered. "They haven't eaten in a good three days. They're scared to death. They were driven here in desperation, and that's why they'll join us."

The whole place resounded with shouts. Then suddenly someone yelled, "The guards!" Toby whitened. If the spokesman for the People Haters didn't get back in time, the Rebels' guards would be killed! In the confusion, the original threat had been forgotten.

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THE POSSIBILITY of such a tragedy suddenly occurred to everyone at once. Threats and counter threats rose up. Those at the rear of the room rushed out into the hall. Toby yelled for silence, but the auditorium emptied in seconds. Gunny shouted louder than anyone else. The men crowded and shoved their way down past the lower cells to the tunnel. Then they came to a halt. Fitch and Toby followed. They couldn't tell whether the guards had been found dead or alive.

The other end of the tunnel was thick with People Haters. Their spokesman ran toward them. "We've made a deal," he shouted frantically. "It's all right. Don't harm the guards!" There was a scuffle as the guards were set free.

Toby and Fitch grinned with relief. Gunny said, "Damned People Haters," but Fitch just laughed. "You wanted action," he said to Gunny. "Well, you're going to get it. It's your job to organize that bunch into some kind of order. And I mean order. I want the Rebels in units of twenty men each. Mix the People Haters in with those groups, so that we can all keep our eyes on them."

"We'll get them inoculated right away too," Toby said. "We don't want any trouble of that sort before we even get started."

That night the people in the main square of the Elmira Borough Subdivision of the contropolis of the Northeast were treated to the strangest sight they'd ever seen. Up from manholes came over six hundred men, dressed in heavy woolen robes. They were shouting their heads off. They emerged into the heart of the borough, marched in military line past the crowds, and continued to the main borough building, followed by the curious masses.

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The people were so intimidated by the Rebels' orderly formations, that they never made a move. Except for the singing and shouting, the Rebels were orderly, and determination showed in all their faces. Two of them, Fitch and Toby, disappeared into the borough building. A minute later Toby's rich voice suddenly rang throughout all the squares in the borough through the reactivated loudspeakers. The immediate effect, after the loudspeakers' silence, was electrifying. Cries of amazement went up all over. From everywhere the people rushed to hear what was going on.

"This is your new government," Toby said. His voice was deliberate, yet triumphant and authoritative. "Your own officials deserted you! The artists and the Rebels and even the People Haters have joined forces to help you and to help themselves. Together we can lick the plague, but only if everyone does his part. We aren't here to do the job for you. I, personally, refuse to do that. We're here to help you do the job for yourselves. First, the population will be divided into work units. Those who refuse to work will be denied food from the chemical gardens. However, food will be distributed every day from the squares for all those who join in fighting the plague. Innoculations will begin at once. Official doctors left with the others. You do not have to fear the doctors who will inoculate you. They are members of the Rebels. Repeat. You have nothing to fear from inoculations, or from our doctors. Innoculations are compulsory. Those who refuse, will not be fed. This rule is for your own protection. We are in control. You are not abandoned."

Toby's voice was at its most dramatic and convincing. Nevertheless, rioting broke out at the mention of mass inoculations. All night long the new forces were busy enforcing this point alone. In some places, whole crowds were inoculated at gunpoint. The Rebels had been penned up for so long that their energy was tremendous, but there was no letting up. In the morning Fitch held an emergency meeting in the mayor's old office.

He was intent and worried. "The streetcleaners just reported the daily plague deaths. Four hundred and eighty-

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seven yesterday. The inoculations are being carried out, but now there's something else. The streetcleaners refuse to pick the bodies up. Their spokesman is waiting outside." Fitch motioned to Mandy, who opened the door. A tall large man came in nervously.

"So you want to quit, huh?" Fitch said coldly.

The man came forward. Toby and Gunny stared at him. "I'm Ben Miller. We got our wives and kids to think of. Picking up them plague victims is dangerous."

"You've been inoculated?" Toby said crisply.

"Yeah." Ben Miller wet his lips and forced himself to continue despite the contempt in Toby's face. "Hell, we didn't even have to tell you. We could have just quit. We felt that we owed it to you, that's all," he said. "We'll do any other job that you want done."

The door opened. Janice came in quickly. "There's a huge riot at the chemical gardens," she said breathlessly. "Sloat just called. The crowd is getting dangerous. Our men don't want to shoot unless they have to."

"Are the rest of the streetcleaners outside?" Fitch said to Miller. The man nodded. "Okay, let's go," Fitch said. He and Gunny and Miller rushed out of the room, leaving Toby in charge. Gunny and Fitch split up in different trucks. Inside, Ben Miller said, "Sorry about the streetcleaners. I'm sorrier that I was the one elected to give you the news."

"Forget it," Fitch said abruptly. The ride through the plague-ridden squares sickened him. As the truck speeded past the filthy huts, the old outrage swept through him, leaving him almost weak. The truck was marked with the pox sign to insure quick passage, and the people scattered before it in all directions. Though the streetcleaners had been off duty only four hours, already new clumps of corpses lay by broken gutters. In one place Fitch counted twenty bodies stacked up against the side of a building. Flies were thick on one outstretched purple arm.

Ben Miller said, "Pretty nasty, huh? It's better when they're stacked that way, though. Easier to pick 'em up."

"Can't you go faster?" Fitch shouted over the sound of

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the truck to the driver. He and Miller rode up front. The back was loaded with other streetcleaners. The truck turned over toward the river. The muddy water was crowded with makeshift houseboats and rafts. Whole families tried to cheat the plague by taking to the water.

Miller said, "Those damn houseboats are death traps. My sister-in-law took her kids and went to live in one. Trouble is, the rats like them too. She died. The kids too. I warned her, but she wouldn't listen. Christ, I warned her." He glowered at the water.

"We're going to blast every raft and boat out of there," Fitch said. "It's the worst place to be." Fitch was tired of hearing Miller's running monologue. Already he was trying to figure out the best way to quell the riot at the chemical gardens, and Miller was a constant distraction. He looked over at the man guiltily, somewhat ashamed of his impatience. Miller was a big man with a pock-marked face. Seeing Fitch's half-smile, he said earnestly, "You know, I got an idea. You've probably thought of it before, but if you buried them plague victims between the two boroughs, Elmira and Binghamton, wouldn't that act as a barricade? People would be more afraid of plague victims than of death, wouldn't they?"

Miller's meaning hit Fitch instantly. "Why, you've got it," he said excitedly. "That would free some of our men too—" He broke off. The truck left the river road and turned sharply to the west. Already the sound of shouts and fighting filled the air. The chemical gardens stood up like some gigantic long insect, its metal body held up by the ramps and its girders dangling down to the ground like spindly legs.

In some places the rioters shimmied up the girders, but so far most of the crowd was still concentrated on the ground beneath. The truck screeched to a halt. The streetcleaners sprang out. Instantly the people turned on them, but the streetcleaners had been chosen primarily for their size and strength, and they held their own. Fist fights broke out all over the place. Fitch scrutinized the rioters. They were

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thin and scrawny and half exhausted but they fought with determined desperation.

One group on the fringes had apparently forgotten what they'd gathered for. Abandoning all reason, they danced with erratic motions, yelling and shouting all by themselves. The beginnings of the Deathdance! Fitch motioned to the guards to break that group up first, for the people's own protection. Even as he stood there, the crowd became more violent, as if lagging energies had suddenly been recharged. Rocks and stones flew through the air. Fitch gave the guards the signal to fire warning shots above the rioters, but this only enraged them further.

Again Fitch took stock of the situation. Already more people had arrived, attracted by the commotion. An old woman set up a booth selling cat paws. A man rushed through the crowd shouting, "I've got the plague. I'm going to get you!" He laughed and chased after his frightened victims. But the hard core of rioters were growing angrier every minute. More of them were headed toward the girders, and the entrance to the chemical gardens themselves.

Quickly Fitch thought of a plan. He started up the girder steps which had been guarded, with three extra guards beside him. He stood on a ramp about twenty feet above the crowd, and then ordered the guards to open up the door into the chemical gardens. "Open the door?" the guard said, astonished. "You're nuts."

"Open it, and hurry up," Fitch snapped.

Only minutes later, someone shouted, "Hey, the door's open!" Heads turned upward. The cry was taken up. "The door's open!" Soon Fitch had everyone's attention. The guard turned on the speakers so that Fitch's voice reached to the very ends of the crowd. "If you want food, you'd better listen to what I have to say," he yelled down to them.

"Don't listen. It's a trick. Look there," a man shouted. The people turned their attention from Fitch and looked around nervously. Sloat had ordered another unit of men from the gallery. They had just arrived and were taking strategic positions. "Ambush," someone cried.

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"Listen to me," Fitch shouted. "I'm going to hold the chemical gardens, and that's that. This is your food supply. You're entitled to eat. Listen to these directions. I'll tell you where to line up for food!"

Heads switched toward him again. "How many of you missed the food distribution in the squares this morning?" he yelled. "Those that missed, speak up."

The crowd was indecisive and sullen. Then a man called out defiantly, "I missed. What are you going to do about it?" Mumbles arose, then people started shouting again. The crowd erupted into an angry chant. "We want food. We want food."

"Then you'll get it, but not by rioting."

They turned to one another. They were equally divided between those who wanted to listen, and those who wanted to fight. If they really got out of hand they could wreck the place, and Fitch knew it. He called, "Get in an orderly line. You'll all be given a few ounces of food and some milk. Anyone who tries to take more than his share will be stopped by force."

Now their attention was undivided. "Food is scarce," Fitch yelled. "It'll be scarcer if we don't get additional volunteers to help in the gardens. You can join up in here. Now line up. Anyone who's hungry can get food here from now on, by asking. But from now on, rioters will be shot. You've been warned."

Muttering and crowding, the people lined up. The guards yanked troublemakers into a separate line and watched them closely, but the people were still suspicious and looking for a sign of trickery. Fitch knew that he had to hold their attention and focus their energy until their distrust abated. The guards herded them along.

Once inside, the people quieted. The antiseptic cleanliness of the place awed them completely. The machines intimidated them to such a degree that they even lowered their voices with a sort of frightened reverence. One man yelled suddenly, "Death machines. Mercy deaths. I told you it was a trick." The crowd trembled, rose to the edge of panic,

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looked for exits. Like one tremendous hunted animal they cried out in a single roar. As quickly as he could, Fitch held a paper cup out in front of the machine at which the man pointed so fearfully.

Milk splashed out, filling the cup. Hysterical laughs and relieved giggles sprang from the amazed faces. "This is a milk machine," Fitch said. "That's milk in there. Look. Pea pods, cabbage leaves and other left-over vegetable material go in here. Vitamins and fats and carbohydrates are added in this section. The whole thing is mashed and treated, and presto—milk!" They looked at him as if he were a magician. He searched Sloat's face out of the crowd, and grinned. Sloat had given him the information, but they'd never dreamed that it would quell a riot!

Now the people rushed and pushed to put their cups beneath the spout. Miraculously the atmosphere had a party air. There were embarrassed smiles all around. Fitch yelled, "Now suppose some of you volunteer to work in here?" and a volley of raised hands went up.

"Them vats all filled with milk?" a woman shouted.

Fitch nodded. "Milk used to come from cows, but soon the land couldn't support them."

"Cows. Everybody knows there ain't no cows. It's a fairy story we tell kids." The woman laughed good-naturedly.

"No. This is important," Fitch said. "Cows did exist. The gallery will be open to the public when we don't need it as a hospital any more. You can go there and see pictures of cows."

The people grinned. They didn't know whether to believe him or not. As they passed the milk vats, they were handed two vitamin cookies apiece. In his pleased surprise to see the people so friendly, Fitch let himself go. He said, "When this is over, we'll run the borough ourselves. We'll pass birth control legislation so that the people alive will get enough to eat. Maybe the land could even support animals again as well."

The mistake was almost fatal. As if by magic he was confronted again by an unknown and frightening quantity.

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The people instantly reverted into a mob. This time even the streetcleaners joined their sympathies with the people. The two groups united against him. Fitch saw his error instantly and tried to set it right. The guards stiffened. Sloat made his way through the crowd to Fitch's side.

A woman yelled shrilly, "He wants to turn us over to the docs!"

From her cry Fitch got his clue. It wasn't birth control that the people feared; it was the medical profession. "Sugar cubes," he yelled quickly. "No doctors. Anyone could give them out. Suppose you could just eat a sugar cube and it would prevent you from becoming pregnant?"

Shouts of derision greeted him. Sloat, who knew more about it than Fitch did, tried to explain. "Listen," he called out. "We can actually immunize women against pregnancy now, just as we can immunize you against plague. The vaccine is really spermatozoa, and they produce antibodies in the body. The vaccine knocks out invading spermatozoa making you immune to pregnancy. We've experimented with them, and you could just take them in a sugar cube. But we're not certain of the long-range effects yet. We need more time to experiment. We do know that the vaccine will make it impossible for you to get pregnant for at least ten years!"

Sloat's face was white. His voice was strained. He was used to speaking to officials who had some education, and it was difficult for him to use language that the almost illiterate masses could understand. The people shouted him down. A group of men formed a tight unit and yelled threats.

Fitch shouted frantically, "You thought that the milk vats were dangerous, didn't you? Were they? I said that I'd give you food, and I did. Why won't you believe us now? We told you earlier that the borough doctors left with the officials."

There were murmurs of agreement and disagreement. Again the crowd was divided. Fitch said, "What happens to your children now? They go hungry because there isn't enough food."

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"They starve and die," a woman yelled. "I don't care. They do. Everyone knows it." She thrust a red defiant face up and yelled, "I drowned two babies of mine in the river and I know ten others that have done the same. I ain't scared to say so."

The rest of the women argued and yelled among themselves. Some called out, "We want sugar cubes, we want sugar cubes," but they chanted mournfully, as if they were crying for the moon. Now, however, the majority of people kept their eyes on the vitamin cookies as if afraid the supply would run out. The immediate danger was over.

Already another problem was waiting to be solved. Fitch had to recruit workers to replace the streetcleaners or the borough would be a raging nest of infection within another few hours. The crowd was under control. He turned to leave. A shame-faced Ben Miller blocked his way. "I'll volunteer to do some of the dirty work again," he said.

Fitch looked up in surprise. "I thought you quit."

"I changed my mind. Nobody ever gave out free food before."

"Okay. Let's get going, and thanks," Fitch said. Just then Sloat came over. "Guess who turned up as volunteers to replace the streetcleaners?" he said. "The People Haters."

They stared at each other. Fitch said, "Okay. Let's not question their motives. We need that work done."

Sloat hesitated. "I want to help them."

"You what? I need you here."

"I've taught some of the men how to run this place. I'm only needed to supervise once in a while," Sloat said stubbornly.

"Why, hell, you're too valuable."

"I want to do it." There was a strange note to Sloat's voice. Fitch said, "Are you all right?"

"Just tired. No worse than anyone else."

"We'll talk about it later," Fitch said. "Come on back to the borough building with me. There are some reports I'd like to see."

They drove back through the borough. In some places,

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the People Haters were already on the job. Sloat and Fitch stopped once to watch. Almost despite themselves, they found the scene horribly fascinating, a commentary on the results of ignorance and apathy.

"I hate to think what antagonisms the People Haters are releasing in this business," Fitch said. "I suppose it's logical; they're taking the job over, but I don't have to like it—or them!"

They were staring at the same pile of corpses that Fitch had noticed earlier. A group of People Haters were tugging at another collection of bodies and piling them into the trucks. Suddenly Sloat swore under his breath, sprang out of the truck and dashed over.

"What's wrong?" Fitch shouted, running after him.

Sloat's face was livid. His sudden rage seemed all the more incomprehensible and explosive because he was usually so quiet. He swung at the nearest People Hater and sent him crashing to the ground. The man stood up, staggering. "You filthy pig," Sloat shouted. "Look there, Fitch." He ran to the truck, pointing. Fitch looked in at the bloated pile of purplish bodies and almost vomited. Then he jumped back involuntarily. A body at the top of the pile moved. A woman had been thrown in, still alive. She opened her lips and tried to speak. Despite pallor and obvious exhaustion, she showed no marks of the plague.

"I saw that one throw her in," Sloat shouted. "She was conscious too. She opened her eyes and cried out—I saw her lips move—and he heaved her into the truck with the dead to be buried. Alive! No wonder the People Haters wanted this job!"

"I didn't hear no one say nothin'," the man said sullenly. "I didn't hear nothin." The others congregated about. Sloat glowered at them. "Damn filthy business," he said. The commotion aroused the woman. She sobbed out, "I yelled. He laughed and picked me up and threw me in here. I fainted, I guess." She tried to sit up, saw the dead bodies and grew hysterical. "I'm not dead," she screamed. "Get me out of here."

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Some of Sloat's composure returned. "We see that you aren't dead," he said dryly, but he and Fitch carried her to their own truck, and then Fitch went back to where the People Haters waited.

"From now on, some of the Rebels will be assigned to each of your groups again," he said coldly. "Anyone found throwing live bodies in with dead ones will be severely treated." He watched them for a moment distastefully. "If you can't follow orders, you'll be put out of the borough and you can go back to your damn mountaintop and rot for all I care."

"I never saw anything like them," he said, back in the truck, but Sloat seemed to retire into himself, and he didn't answer. They stopped at the gallery and carried the woman into the administration hall, now an entry ward. Warden Graham came bustling over. "You!" he said to Fitch. "You're the source of all my trouble. What have you got here, another one?" He glanced at the woman briefly and motioned to an artist-orderly who took her away on a stretcher. "This place is a disgrace," Graham said. "We haven't nearly enough beds. If the gallery is supposed to be a hospital, it could at least be a good one."

He broke off, frowning and squinting his owl eyes at one of his aides who came down the hall. "You," he yelled, "get that man on the second ward out of bed. What does he think this is, a holiday?" He pursed his lips in old maid fashion. "Fitch just brought in another patient. That's one thing we've got plenty of, I'll say that."

Suddenly Fitch found the whole affair ludicrous, the warden most of all. He burst out laughing.

"I fail to see anything funny," the warden said, but he was such a bundle of nervous energy, such a determined organizer even in the midst of chaos, that he only made Fitch laugh louder. Sloat looked at Fitch with instant alarm. He ran over to him just in time. Fitch toppled over and would have fallen on the floor if Sloat hadn't caught him. The last thing Fitch heard was Graham's shrill command. "Give us a hand here." Then everything went black.

SIXTEEN

WHEN FITCH came to he was lying on a cot in his old room at the gallery. The dilapidated paintings still hung on the wall. He looked at the cracked Utrillo as if it were an old friend. Then he frowned angrily; the neat streets with their clean little houses—would the world ever know the likes of them again? By turning he could see out the barred window. The hills looked bare and still as they used to, but now he knew about the starving masses who squatted in the caves and on the ledges. Now he knew what lay outside the window and the wall. He almost wished for his old ignorance.

He'd toppled over, Graham had told him, from sheer exhaustion. They kept him in bed for two days, but now the heavy sedation they'd given him wore off. He sat up. Out in the hall he heard Janice say impatiently, "I've got to see him!" He sprang out of bed and opened the door just to hear Warden Graham say, "Later maybe, not now. He isn't going to be any use to anyone unless he gets rested."

"I'm rested already," Fitch said. He motioned Janice inside and closed the door. "All right, what's wrong?" he said, "I can tell by your face that something big is up."

"We're so relieved that you're okay. We were afraid that you had the plague!"

He searched her face. "Lay it on the line. What's wrong?" As he spoke he looked out the window, automatically checking the weather. It still looked warm. "Won't it ever get cold?" he muttered. "A frost would help kill the infection."

Janice took a deep breath. "We're going out of our minds but we didn't want to bother you unless we had to. Also, old Graham was like a mother hen; he wouldn't let anyone near you at all. There's a new strain of virus. Worst of all,

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Toby's scientists think that inoculation against the original plague increases susceptibility to the second."

Fitch stared at her. "Great, and all our men were inoculated."

Janice paused. "There's something funny about this new virus though. I don't think the men have to worry. It attacks women mostly, and mostly pregnant women. The latest death rates made us suspicious. Deaths leaped from 550 to 900 in two days, and most of the victims were pregnant women who'd already been inoculated. The scientists are working on a new vaccine but at the rate of mortality they haven't got much time."

Fitch still had his clothes on. There was no such thing as hospital garb. "Come on," he said. "I'll go right with you and see what I can find out."

Graham caught sight of them on the first floor. "You aren't well enough to go out," he yelled, and ran up, looking outraged. Fitch threw him a quick grin and kept on going. Janice had an A-cop waiting.

Fitch shook his head. Although cold weather should have arrived nearly a month ago, he'd been right. It was almost as warm as summer. Smoke lay heavy in the air. Corpses were stacked in the soft gauzy shadows of November twilight.

"Cruise around a bit. I want to see what progress they've made since I've been in bed," Fitch said. Janice started to protest, but he said irritably, "I'm all right now, I feel fine."

"Mandy was right about you," she said. "You sure can scowl. God, what a look." He grinned at her and they taxied above the borough. "Mandy's men are burning all the houseboats and rafts," she explained.

Fitch looked down. The people stood by the river, yelling and shaking their fists, while a unit of artists held them back. On the water, black puffs of smoke and orange tongues of flame rose as the numerous crafts were destroyed, and with them all the rats they housed.

"You can't blame the people in a way," Janice said. "Those filthy old things were the only homes they had." A soft wind

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suddenly blew down from the mountains, and she and Fitch both shivered; that sweet odor rose again with its portent of death!

They turned toward the borough building. All through the area, fires were raging as infected shanties and huts fell down before the determined Rebels. Groups of men hunted through the debris, shooting the rats who had escaped the flames. "What a sight. It's unbelievable," Fitch said. "Just think, all this should have been done years ago, not just here but through the whole damn contropolis." Breaking off, he said, "Is there something else you haven't told me? You're awfully quiet."

"Why no, heavens, what else could go wrong?" Her face turned white. She hurried along in front of him, running up the steps to the borough building. Upstairs, Toby was reading reports. "Oh, so you've had enough of the rest cure?" he said, tauntingly, but he couldn't hide his relief at seeing Fitch on his feet again. Fitch grinned. When Toby stood up, there were tears in his eyes.

"Janice told me about the new virus," Fitch said. "Anything new?"

"Not along those lines," Toby said, "But come on into the communications room." They went across the hall where two ham televisor operators had set up their equipment. "Anything yet?" Toby said.

The men were both artists. Fitch recognized them only vaguely. "Not a thing. I don't like it," one of them said. "The whole world has gone dead. You can make your own deductions."

Toby frowned. "We'll be back in later to check, but if anything comes in the meantime, let us know at once."

Back in the mayor's office, Fitch said, "I just don't believe it. You mean that no communications have been received at all? It's damned near impossible."

"Is it?" Toby said. His old assurance seemed gone.

"How long since you've had no signals at all?"

"Thirty hours."

"There's nothing wrong with our equipment?"

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"Not a chance," Toby said. "Our last message was from some ham in a gallery, believe it or not, out in the Middle West Contropolis somewhere. It was pretty awful. The people slaughtered the officials there, broke into the chemical gardens and went on a week's food binge. That took care of the food supply. They gorged themselves, even while they were dying of the plague. On top of that, I think they had an influenza epidemic from the sounds of it, though the artist didn't know what the devil it was. He was going to keep in touch. That was the last we heard or saw of him."

"What about other groups similar to the Rebels?" Fitch said. "I thought you told me that there were lots of them scattered underground through the contropolis."

Toby shrugged wearily. "We used to pick up information implying that other groups existed. Maybe they tried to hole up as we thought of doing. If so, the rats or the plague or their fellow men probably killed them off."

Fitch paused. He said slowly, "Are you trying to tell me that those of us alive in this borough are the only survivors on the whole damn planet?"

"I'm saying that we're the only ones sending out communications, or able to. That's all I'm saying. But if you want my personal opinion, then I think we're the only ones alive except perhaps for a few isolated groups or individuals. It's strange, I used to imagine the Rebels being the only survivors on the earth. I used to think that it would serve the race right to be destroyed. Now I feel lousy. To tell the truth, I'm scared to death."

Janice came in. "If the women here die, that's it. You both know that, don't you?"

"We'll stop inoculations immediately, if they cause susceptibility to the new virus. I can't think of anything else," Fitch said.

Shouts rose from outside. Toby said anxiously, "Fitch, why don't you check the ham televisions again? Maybe something's come through."

"What's going on outside?" Fitch said.

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"The streetcleaners, or rather, People Haters, with the daily death reports."

"Then I'll wait and hear what they are first."

"Oh, and Mandy wanted you for something at the gallery, Fitch," Janice said.

Her face gave her away. "What the devil are you trying to hide from me?" he said. He went to the window and opened it. "Why aren't they sending a spokesman upstairs?" he said. No one answered him.

He looked out. About thirty men in Rebels' robes stood beneath the window. Crude pox marks in white paint blazed out of the early darkness from the woolen robes. The figures were hooded. The significance of the pox marked garments hit Fitch suddenly, and he looked closer. A voice called up, "Four hundred deaths of the old type, and about five hundred and twenty of the new as far as we could determine, mostly women."

The voice was horribly familiar. For a moment Fitch felt dizzy. He called down, "Identify yourself." He never forgot the answer. "Sloat," the voice said.

The group turned and started to leave. "Wait," Fitch yelled. "Sloat, come back." One of the hooded figures turned around for a moment, and then disappeared with the others. Fitch spun around angrily. "What's the meaning of this? Do all those men have the plague? What's Sloat doing with them?"

"He has the plague," Toby said softly. "We tried to keep it from you, but I suppose you had to know sometime." Toby stared at Fitch intently, his broad mobile features wearing a look of unusual firmness. "You can't do anything about it; no one can. Try not to think of it if you can. We lied to you, hoping we could get you out of the way till Sloat and the others left. Actually the People Haters had to be called off the job. They went wild, heaving dead and alive alike into the death trucks. They were too psychopathic to hold up, I guess. We scattered them up among our other forces. No one volunteered for streetcleaners' duty, and we were about to force some men to—"

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Fitch interrupted. "I knew damn well that Sloat was acting funny the other day. He asked to be put on the street-cleaners' job then and I thought he was nuts."

"He wasn't sure, but he suspected that he was coming down with the plague," Toby said. "Then he organized other plague victims to help. They've been doing a good job. For one thing . . . they're more gentle than other men would be."

"Yeah, because they know damn well that they'll end up the same way," Fitch yelled. Then he said, "Sorry, I guess the whole thing just took me by surprise."

"That oaf, Mandy, made me promise not to tell you," Janice said.

"Incidentally, 'that oaf, Mandy' and Janice are getting along quite well," Toby said. Janice blushed. Toby said, "You don't have to feel embarrassed. I had my chance and I lost it. Besides I'm ten years older than you are; I haven't forgotten that." There was a brusque note to his voice.

"Hey, we made contact!" One of the television operators rushed into the room. "Some guy in the California borough. There's a hundred of them out there, and they think they'll be able to pull through. We both went crazy, we were so glad to make contact. Boy, some place out there, there's a hundred other people! That's something."

"Something. A whole hundred," Fitch said bitterly.

The news did revive the Rebels, but the glow didn't last for long. On November eighth, the death rate hit 1,850. The borough's population was less than a quarter of what it had been the previous July. The Rebels worked night and day. Women dropped dead without a sound. The new virus gave no warning. Only one or two pustules appeared, and only a few hours before the end. Women huddled together, afraid to sleep with their husbands, in mortal fear of becoming pregnant.

The Rebels grew used to Sloat's tall lean figure moving with the other victims, his chinless face wan and tired. Every night he yelled up the death reports and every night Fitch called down to him and he never answered. Once however,

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Fitch yelled, "Why don't you let yourself be treated? There might be a chance! Why are you doing things this way?"

Toby stood beside Fitch. His face was contorted as he looked down at Sloat's upturned head.

"I never did much before all this started," Sloat said. "For millions, there was no chance and I was partially to blame. This is my way, that's all."

Toby shouted, "Did anything I said to you make you do this?"

"No."

They tried to keep him talking, but he went away with the others. Toby said harshly, "Remember the night we all had the argument, and I told him he was ineffective, worse than useless? That's been on his mind."

"Don't blame yourself," Fitch said. "He's trying to do penance for the mayor and all his friends who ran out, I suppose." But Fitch himself could hardly stand to speak about Sloat any more.

Toby said, "I suppose you're right," but from then on he never went to the window when Sloat yelled up the death reports.

Gunny worked with Mandy at the gallery. Now and then on quick visits to the borough building he liked to make cracks about people who loved to suffer, meaning Sloat, but whenever Toby appeared even Gunny changed the subject. Every night Fitch held his breath as the now familiar forms of the plague victims stood beneath the window. He knew that one night, Sloat would not be with them.

Fitch and Toby camped in the mayor's office. Toby's scientists worked night and day to isolate the new virus. Fitch supervised the systematic razing of the worst plague areas. Twice a day Toby's voice spoke to the people over the speaker system. Out of sudden spite, Fitch had the old activated paintings with their mechanized grotesqueness removed from the squares. But the scenes that greeted his eyes constantly were appalling.

A scattering of reports from vagrant groups in other parts of the country dribbled in, giving him some hope that the

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national situation was not quite as dire as they'd thought. But still, pathetically few survived. Stragglers had almost stopped coming through. Whether the barricades of plague victims that were lined in trenches on all sides of the borough accounted for the sudden scarcity of crazed wanderers, or whether people had lost all ability and strength to travel, Fitch didn't know.

In the borough itself, they tried as best they could to take care of the sick, but many died for the lack of sufficient medical supplies. Many of the people were still so frightened of doctors that they courted death rather than report symptoms. Fitch was always appalled when he discovered such cases, because usually recovery at such late date was impossible.

He was helping the demolition units one day, when he jumped back in alarm. Just as he was about to give the signal to blow up another group of old buildings, he caught sight of a movement inside a doorway. He yelled to the men to hold off, and rushed in. A whole family had holed down inside. There were two corpses, a man and a woman too far gone to save, and three frightened children. He pulled them all out, cursing the parents' stupidity. No matter how often the people were warned, some of them dug in, refused to give up their dead, and died with them. Just as he pulled the last child clear, Toby's voice rang out from the speakers.

Again Fitch had to marvel at the man. As weary as he knew Toby to be, his voice boomed out, magnetic and forceful. Even the demolition units stopped a minute, gaining strength and confidence. Toby alternately cajoled, demanded, and sympathized. A small crowd gathered. Fitch didn't know where they came from. When he thought the population was accounted for, more seemed to spring up from nowhere. The people stood with dirty upraised faces, frightened and worried, but not alone.

Fitch watched for a moment, then went back to the borough building. Janice said wearily, "What we need is plastic suits or something."

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"Swell," Toby said. "Plastic suits like space suits because we've dirtied up our atmosphere so badly that we can't live in it anymore."

Fitch stood in the doorway. "But you're right," he said. "We can use what plastic is stored in the borough. I know they use it at the chemical gardens, and we'll detail some men to work in the plastics plant. Someone must know how to run the place."

Suddenly Fitch stiffened. Loud footsteps rushed through the halls. Warning shots were fired by the guards, but a crowd dashed angrily up the corridor. Fitch and Toby just stared. The mob was composed of women, armed with whatever they had picked up, rocks and stones and chunks of wood and glass. A young woman shouted, "Don't ask them. Tell them!"

"God help them if it's a bluff," someone else yelled.

"If what is a bluff?" Fitch said coldly.

The women filed into the room. The apparent leader of the group spun around angrily and said to them, "Shut up. How can I say anything if you don't keep quiet?" Toby and Fitch just looked at each other.

The leader was a short woman, thin and hunched, but determined. She said to Fitch, "You told a bunch of us in the chemical gardens that you had sugar cubes here that'd keep a woman from getting pregnant. Well, the plague is killing pregnant women like flies. How come you ain't given us them sugar cubes?"

The women screamed their approval of her speech. She said, "We're afraid to sleep with our men, but we can't stay away from them forever. We want to know why you ain't distributed them cubes. We mean business. We'll do anything to get them!"

Toby took over. He raised his hands. "Those 'sugar cubes' are still in the experimentation stage. We don't know anything about their long-range effects. They've been tried in the past for a brief time, maybe two hundred years ago; then the whole thing was dropped, apparently. We can't take the chance."

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"We'll take the chance," someone yelled.

"We sure know the effects of the plague. What could be worse than that?" the leader of the women shouted.

"But they aren't safe!" Fitch said desperately.

"I suppose the plague is?" the woman said angrily.

Janice said suddenly, "You know, maybe they're right. No vaccines reach the virus yet, but pregnancy seems to touch it off. If we stopped the women from getting pregnant to begin with—"

The women in back couldn't hear. "What's she saying?" they muttered.

The leader yelled, "If you'd shut up, you could hear," but those in back grew more and more restive. "What's the matter? Won't they listen?" someone yelled. "This will fix them," a voice shouted. A rock flew through the room, then another. Janice yelled out and fell to the floor. Toby ran to her side. The women in front grew frightened.

"Shut up, you stupid idiots," Toby shouted. He sprang toward them. "This girl is worth ten of you. The pox on all of you, if she's seriously hurt."

He yelled out with such passion that the women instantly quieted. Some pushed closer to see what had happened. When they saw that Janice was unconscious, they backed away. The rock had hit her just above the eye, on the right temple. Blood welled from the wound. Fitch wiped it away.

Toby yelled out, "All right, you'll get your damned sugar cubes. Take your chances. It'll serve you right." He was like a crazy man. Fitch tried to talk to him, but to no avail.

Toby scribbled out some instructions on a piece of paper and handed them to the nearest woman. "Give these to a guard. He'll know what to do. We'll dispense your cubes downstairs." The women were overjoyed, but cautious and restrained. They filed out of the room with frightened glances at Toby. Some tried to apologize for Janice's wound. One of the guards had already gone for a doctor.

"How the devil did you know where the sterility cubes were? Or were you bluffing?" Fitch said.

"Hell, the Rebels stole supplies from the borough to

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carry on their own experiments," Toby said angrily. "I don't care what effect they'll have on those idiotic women either."

"That isn't a very nice thing to say!" Janice opened her eyes. "I blanked out, huh? Why, I really got it; I'm bleeding!" She stood up unsteadily, but she was all right.

On her own insistence, she was the first one to try the controversial sterility cubes. Toby objected, but this time she was more stubborn than he was. Seven hundred women took cubes that day. Within the next forty-eight hours, a thousand more took them. The death rate hit a peak—2,000—the following day, and then, almost miraculously, it retreated.

Fitch and Toby were alert and uneasy. "For God's sake," Toby said, "No one knows what the effects could be."

"Well, the new virus hits pregnant women. Now no women are getting pregnant; that takes care of the immediate crisis anyhow," Fitch said. "It's a hell of a commentary, though. Before you couldn't get them to consider birth control. Now they're crying for it. Ironical, isn't it? Maybe that's what nature wanted or intended all along."

Janice shrugged, "Well, the cubes haven't had any effect on me. I feel fine."

"You had no right to set an example like that," Toby said sternly. "You aren't married; you wouldn't be getting pregnant anyhow."

"When this over, I might. Who knows?"

"Mandy?" Toby said.

"Or somebody I've known a lot longer." She grinned and looked away. Suddenly she shouted, "Hey, look! I don't believe it." They ran to the window. Indian summer was over. The first hint of winter was really on its way. The hoped-for snowflakes drifted lazily down. "That's a sure sign that winter's here," Janice yelled happily.

As they stood there watching, the streetcleaners approached the building. "Death rate's way down," a voice called up. "Only two hundred and thirty today."

"Thanks," Fitch said. He turned away from the window. "It wasn't Sloat," he said. "This time, it wasn't Sloat." His

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eyes blurred. "We might have a chance now to rebuild it all with what we have left. We might have learned that we can exist only as a part of nature, not apart from nature. We might make a go of it," he said. "But if we come through, Sloat won't be here to see it. He won't even know."

"I think we *have* made it," Janice said. "And I think that Sloat knew we would."

"What? We've managed to save a very small portion of the population," Fitch said bitterly. "We've made a few gains, what's that?"

"A beginning," Toby said.