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Genesis Two

a novel by **L. P. DAVIES**



GENESIS TWO

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GENESIS TWO

CHAPTER ONE

It was news at the time. Ephemeral news. The sort of thing that explodes one morning in the headlines, blazes for a day, splutters through the next two by reason of inspired unofficial postmortems, then fizzles out on the fourth to be forgotten by everyone except the friends and relatives of those concerned. And, as it turned out, there were very few of those—if any at all.

Kirdale. They called it a village. It wasn't even marked on our map. A handful of cold stone cottages—most of them empty—tucked away in a forgotten fold of the mountains.

Wednesday, the first day of May 1968.

It happened in the early hours of the morning. . . .



Kevin stopped to adjust the straps of his rucksack, resting an even more monstrous burden than mine on a convenient ledge of rock. The path was just about wide enough for me to sidle sideways past without going too close to the verge. Depths, no matter how gentle the slope leading down to them, are not one of my strong points. In the lead for the first time since setting out, I

rounded the next corner ahead of the organizer and self-appointed leader of our expedition of two. One vista was left behind, another took its place. More mountain peaks, more dank valleys, more sky. But these new mountains had a bleak, unfriendly look about them. And the sky, unlike the clear duck-egg blue we had left behind, was three-parts filled with a thunderous mass of leaden cloud. Mist rose from uninviting depths. A sudden breeze was cool on my face, its direction an unpleasant indication of which way the clouds and mists were moving. Leaning against the rock face, I eased some of the weight off my back and waited for Kevin to come round the corner.

He was still having trouble with his straps. "This blasted side keeps digging in. . . ." That was the side to which kettle, frying pan, stove and tent poles were attached. Struggling, he regarded the new outlook without apparent dismay. "Dirty weather in the offing."

"And, by the look of it, heading our way."

He checked the breeze. "You could be right." Joining me at the rock face, he slid his arms out of the straps, allowed the rucksack to slip down to the ground, took a map from the breast pocket of his scarlet shirt and knelt on bare knees to spread it open across a granite slab. He used a compass with a knowledgeable if somewhat self-conscious air.

At 22—three months my senior—he could give me an inch in height, rather more across the shoulders and a great deal more in the way of patience. A mutual girlfriend, an embryonic journalist with a flair for tabloid utterances, had once described him as being good-looking in a square-faced, black-haired, slightly supercilious wax-model way. According to the same forthright lady, my hair—"luxuriant brown with red highlights" was how she described it—was my sole redeeming feature. Without it, I would have been lost in the morass of mediocrity. As for the rest—my face could use a spot more color, my mouth might improve if I used it to smile more often, and I could do with putting on more weight.

Kevin had completed certain calculations. He pointed back over his shoulder with a great air of wisdom. "Wasdale lies over there, about seven miles as the crow flies." Which was reasonable enough. Wasdale had been our starting point some three hours ago. I nodded, and he

pointed ahead. "Ennerdale. About five miles."

"Also, presumably, as the crow flies," I said sourly. This way of spending a holiday so early in the year was not of my choosing, not at all to my taste. Spain had been my idea; the Lake District, Kevin's. His patient persistence had played a big part in the various resultant arguments, finally wearing me down.

Defeat had rankled when I had first tested the load I was expected to carry. It had rankled again a while back, when I had slipped and grazed my knee. It rankled again now, when I thought that if I had been allowed to have my way, instead of being stuck on the inhospitable side of a mountain on this Tuesday afternoon—smack in the middle of wildest Cumberland, miles from anywhere and with a storm on its way—we could have been lazing happily in the warm Spanish sunshine, sipping whatever it is people lazing in warm Spanish sunshine usually sip.

"No point in turning back," Kevin said equably, folding the map. "If it does come on to rain, we'll get wet either way. If it comes on heavy, we'll find some place to shelter. Caves . . . bound to be caves."

I helped him back on with his rucksack. "You started off by making a pack mule of me. Now you want to turn me into a bloody troglodyte."

He grinned happily. "Both are better than being stuck behind a shop counter with a tape measure in your hand, selling gents' natty suitings."

I worked for my father, a tailor. Kevin spent his working days behind a drawing board in the architect's office next door. Just at that moment, Manchester seemed to be at the other end of the world.

"Just give me half a chance," I retorted with feeling.

He bounced his pack at me. "Is my groundsheet easily getatable?"

It was tucked under the straps at one side. "Yes. Mine?"

He gave it a tug to show me where it was, then slapped me on the rump as if I were indeed a laden mule. "Right, Stuart. Let's be on our way again."

Downhill now—which was something to be thankful for, even if it was hell on the calf muscles. The path dropped down toward a valley with a stream running

along the bottom and a small lake at the far end. Mist drifted thinly over the cold-looking water of the lake, followed the course of the stream, coiled evilly and crept up the lower slopes of our mountain. The light faded, taking on a sickly orange glow. The sun vanished. Orange changed to purple and thunder growled distantly. And down came the first drops of rain, huge splashing spots—the kind we used to call cups and saucers when we were kids.

Without waiting to be asked, I tugged Kevin's groundsheet out of the straps and helped drape it over his shoulders, turning him into a humpbacked monstrosity. He did the same for me, then looked up at the sky to remark without any sign of concern that it might be just as well if we were to keep our eyes open for shelter of some kind.

The path played a dirty trick on us. Instead of carrying on down to the valley, where at least there were trees that would have afforded protection of a kind, it turned suddenly to the right and started to climb again.

It was getting darker. The rain was coming down steadily now. Lightning flared behind the cardboard cut-outs of distant peaks, thunder rumbled, and mist finally blotted out the scene below, leaving us suspended between stormy sky and white sea of mist. When the path narrowed—no longer wide enough to take us abreast—Kevin, as usual, went into the lead. And, being there, he was the one to spot the narrow cleft.

We had to leave the path to reach it—a cave, he called it—and we edged inside in the same moment that the heavens opened.

Long and narrow, there was just about enough room for us to turn round. But it was dry and that was all that mattered. We propped the rucksacks against the wall. Kevin, very much the seasoned campaigner, used a tent pole to prod a saucepan out into the rain and then drag it back again when it was brimming. I got the stove going and brewed tea in the kettle. We sat side by side on the folded groundsheets, leaned against the rucksacks and were reasonably comfortable. After a time the sky became lighter. The rain eased off and left in its place a damp, woolly mist.

“In the event of being caught in a mist in the moun-

tains," Kevin informed me, possibly quoting from some authoritative publication, "the thing to do is stay put. Don't panic. Just stay right where you are till it lifts."

"And if it doesn't lift?"

"It will," he said and leaned back, closing his eyes.

I think he must have dropped off there and then. With Kevin it was always hard to tell, his sleep possessing the same quality of untroubled calmness that graced most of his waking moments. An annoyingly placid man, never easily disturbed.

When I had smoked a cigarette, I closed my eyes, too. Accustomed to sleeping on my side, it took me a while to find a place in which to get rid of my elbow. When I awoke, I was lying on my back and Kevin was on his feet, bending over me, shaking my shoulders.

It was almost half past eight, he told me.

I growled something up at him, something about it being impossible for us to have slept all that time.

"See for yourself." It was dark in the cave—purple-dark. He flicked his lighter and held the flame close to his watch. A vivid lightning flash made his light unnecessary. A rolling crash of thunder drowned what he was saying. He tried again when the echoes had died away. "The mist doesn't seem as thick as it was. We'd better make a move, Stuart."

He sounded unconcerned enough, but his face, in the next flash, told a different story. He was frowning—and that was something unusual for him.

We packed, groping for things in the semidarkness. The graze on my knee was stiff and sore, my back felt like it had been kicked and extra pounds had been added to the weight of my rucksack.

It was raining outside, drizzling through a mist that felt cold and clammy but was only thick enough to reduce visibility to a dozen feet or so. At least, we would be able to watch where we were walking. Before, everywhere had been silent and still. Now the misty world was filled with the sound of gushing water.

I left it to Kevin to decide which direction to take. He stood on the edge of the path, looking from one side to the other. It wasn't often he asked for my opinion. He did now, even though I had the feeling he had already made up his mind.

"What do you think, Stuart?" And to help me, "I'm guessing that Ennerdale can't be more than four miles ahead now. The path's marked clearly enough on the map."

"The map's let us down before," I said, "or your interpretation of it. It's as broad as it's long. Ennerdale's the nearer, but we don't know the way. We could track back to Wasdale, but that's—what?"

"Eight or more." He nodded in its direction. "And the mist looks thicker that way."

"You're in charge," I told him.

"Coward." He showed his teeth in a grin. "You always did like shelving responsibility. All right—Ennerdale. I don't see that we have much choice."

And so we went on, in the direction in which we hoped Ennerdale lay.

Now, looking back, I don't know whether to be sorry or glad that the decision was his and not mine.

There were times when the mist thinned so that we were able to see quite a distance ahead, able to walk quickly. And there were those times when the clammy whiteness almost brought us to a halt. The depressing drizzle became a shower, then turned to heavy rain again. In parts, the path was awash with the water that gushed from crevices in the rock face. In one place we had to wade through quite a deep stream. The storm—by the direction of lightning flashes and thunderclaps—seemed to have its center on our right, behind the mountains along whose flanks we were making our way. The mist seemed to retain the blue-white glare of each flash, diffusing its brilliance, giving the eerie effect of a cloud artificially illuminated at its heart.

After a while, the path started to drop, widening at the same time so that we were able to walk side by side. And we walked in silence, neither of us in the mood for talking.

It began to get dark again. Not the dusk of evening, for all that sunset couldn't be far away. Not the slow fading of twilight, but a fast-dropping pall of sullen gray. The mist thickened. The rolling echoes of a thunderclap had a different quality from those that had gone before. A momentary lifting of the mist showed us that we were in the bottom of a ravine. A lightning blaze helped us

cross a rough stone bridge that spanned a torrent of frothing water. Then we were climbing again, the path steep and slippery.

As we climbed, the mist thinned. Kevin, a few paces ahead, stopped, looking about him, his hair skullcap-plastered to his head, water streaming off his ground-sheet. We were on the crest of a small promontory. Mist lay in the hollows all around.

He said, "We seem to have lost the path. I have the feeling we should have turned left after crossing that bridge."

Lightning flared. We both saw the building at the same time. It was about a quarter of a mile away, perched on the crest of another rise, the valley between filled with drifting, coiling whiteness. Small and flat-topped, the fractional glimpse suggested some sort of power substation rather than a dwelling. I said as much to Kevin when the thunder had died away.

"We can but take a look," he said.

We dropped down into the valley, groped blindly through mist and climbed the far slope. There was just enough light left for us to examine the building. Red-brick walls and flat concrete roof. Ugly and new-looking. No windows. The metal door was secured with a heavy lock. Painted in crude white letters on the door, DANGER. ENTRY FORBIDDEN TO ALL UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL.

"Could be a substation," Kevin said doubtfully. But no cables looped down to it. They were suspended high overhead. Another flash showed them to us—and the pylon that reared its metal skeleton against the sky some distance on the right.

We followed the overhead cables. Not because we felt they held out much hope of leading us somewhere, but simply because there was nothing else to follow. They took us down into another hollow and up again along the slopes of another mountain. We were clear of the mist now, with only the driving rain and the darkness to contend with. The cables—we were able to keep track of them in the lightning flashes—swung away above a slope that was too steep for us to climb. And then, ahead and below, I saw a single spark of light. I remember the surge of relief that came with the sight—the way I exclaimed aloud, grabbing Kevin's arm.

"Ennerdale," he said steadily, but not steadily enough to disguise a relief that must have been as great as mine. "All we've done is go the long way round."

We kept that light in sight. The moment the slope permitted, we changed direction, making straight toward it. The path dropped quickly. The light grew in intensity. I fancied, but wasn't sure, that I had spotted a second glimmer over to the right. I drew Kevin's attention to it, but when he looked, it had gone.

Quite suddenly, there was a different feel to the ground. There was grass under our feet at last—thin, sparse patches of wiry turf. And the ground itself was almost level. Lightning revealed the unmistakable shapes of a row of three small cottages. They were all in darkness. *Our* light, now the clear oblong of a window, came from a cottage that stood by itself some short distance away. To reach it meant forcing a way through waist-high plants and bushes between two of the darkened cottages. We emerged onto a road—a narrow, rough-surfaced affair, but still a civilized road. Another few paces and we were standing under a porch, Kevin knocking at a door.

He was puzzled. The light from the window showed me the way he frowned.

"I expected it to be a much bigger place than this," he said. "The man at Wasdale said we'd find quite a good hotel here. I can't see any sign of it. And those cottages"—he glanced back over his shoulder—"not a damned light anywhere. Anyone would think——"

He broke off as the door opened and an elderly man blinked openmouthed startlement at us—certainly more startlement than one might have expected. I left it to Kevin to do the talking.

"We're sorry to disturb you," he said, "but we are looking for the hotel. Could you direct us to it?"

"Hotel?" The man stared at our faces in turn. "There's nothing like that here. Nothing at all like that, not for miles." He hesitated, then stepped aside. "You'd best come inside while we find out where you're aiming for."

I would have accepted the invitation thankfully, unthinkingly. Through the window, I had caught a glimpse of an open grate and dancing flames. But Kevin didn't move.

"You're very kind," he said, "but as you can see, we're wet through. We'd only make a mess for you."

The old man smiled at that. "You'll do no harm." There were no carpets on the stone floor of the tiny hall. "Any wet you make'll soon mop up."

"Who is it, dad?" a woman's voice called.

"Two young men asking about a hotel!" he called back. "I've asked them in. By the looks of them, they could use a hot drink."

"It is kind of you," Kevin said. I followed him into a hall that was almost as narrow as our cave had been. "We seem to have spent most of our lives wandering about the mountains," he added. And, as the front door was closed behind us, shutting out the darkness, the cold and the rain, "We were told that there was at least one hotel in Ennerdale."

"Ennerdale?" our host echoed and motioned for us to take off the groundsheets. He handled one with reminiscent fingers. "We had these in the first war. Never much good. Used to drip on your legs. . . . And we had packs about the size of those, too. . . . That's right, just put them agin the wall. Ennerdale, you say? You're miles out of your way." Holding the dripping groundsheets at arm's length, he raised his voice. "Mother? Where shall I put the wet things?"

And to Kevin, "This is Kirdale you're in."

That was about half past nine on the Tuesday evening.

CHAPTER TWO

Tadman their name was. George and Mary Tadman. They seemed almost as grateful to us for giving them someone to entertain and talk with as we were for their hospitality—for the warmth of their bright little parlor, the coziness of the fire, the comfort of hot cocoa and cold meat sandwiches.

Surprisingly, for he didn't look to be that old, he was two years short of his 70th birthday. She was a year younger. They had come originally from Lincolnshire. "Used to have a smallish market garden, Mr. Sowden," he told Kevin. "Ten years we've been here in Kirdale." He sighed for some reason, staring into the flames, shaking his head. "Ten years. . . ."

We were swathed in blankets, Kevin and I, our clothes steaming away in the kitchen.

We had undressed in a tiny, low-ceilinged bedroom completely devoid of furniture. "I'll make up beds on the floor," Mrs. Tadman had told us. "You'll be all right here. There's the spare mattress." And when we had protested, only halfheartedly, purely out of politeness, "Of course you must spend the night here. You've got to have somewhere, now, haven't you?"

"Lucky you spotted our place," her husband had remarked from the door. "On a night like this you could just as easily have gone right by without seeing a light anywhere. There's only this and two other cottages what's got folk living in them. The rest's all empty now. The Emerys, they couldn't have taken you in, anyway. Three of them and only two bedrooms. Mrs. Dorran and Mr. Fox"—meeting his wife's gaze, he had grinned—"reckon you'd have had no welcome it you'd gone knocking on their door."

"Dad!" she had exclaimed reprovingly.

He was unabashed. "Village goings-on," he had informed us, nodding and winking and making his meaning very clear.

Their only son had been killed in the war.

"He'd be just about your age now," said Mrs. Tadman wistfully. She was small and plump, quick—despite her years—in all her movements, a bustling personality with a round face and almost mannish white hair that was parted on one side and allowed to hang loosely over her ears. A pair of dark-rimmed spectacles that seemed too large even for her plump face were set high on the bridge of her nose. Hers was the sort of face that one might come across a hundred times a day.

Her husband's features, thin and angular, were more distinctive. His glasses, used only for reading, were elegant rimless, gold-sided affairs, completely out of context with the face they decorated. Partly bald, the hair that still remained was richly brown, no trace at all of grayness. Bushy and permanently arched eyebrows supported a lined forehead. Set on those lines, like notes of music, were three brown moles. When he smiled, deep lines extended from the corners of his nose, encircled his mouth and almost met across his tapered chin.

They insisted that we take the two chairs nearest to the fire. Rain splattered against the window. The storm rumbled on.

"I've known them keep on for days," Mr. Tadman said uneasily. "It's like as if the mountains hang on to them." A particularly vivid flash brought him out of his chair and across to the window, there to peer anxiously outside.

"Dad's inclined to fret when it's like this," Mrs. Tad-

man told us. "It's that stuff they've got out there."

"Kept it down here in the village itself at first," he enlarged, still brooding on the night, "in one of the empty cottages. Still some of it there—I had a look through the window only this morning. Only three boxes left now, but them three's more than enough to make a mess if anything happens. When they first put it there, the major, he got onto them about it. Pestered till they said they'd do something about it. Well, he was right; there was quite a few of us living here then."

"He's not really a major," Mrs. Tadman said placidly, busy with her knitting, gray-woolen legs comfortably crossed. "He likes to be called that, though. Plain Mr. Emery by rights."

Half-asleep, I was perfectly content to do nothing but sit there and let the conversation flow over me without putting in any word of my own. Kevin, wide awake, was curious.

"What sort of stuff, Mr. Tadman?" he wanted to know.

"Explosives," the old man replied succinctly and padded back to his chair, carpet slippers flip-flopping across the rag rug that covered most of the floor. I wondered if they had made that rug themselves, how long it had taken them.

"Explosives," he repeated, seating himself. "I don't know what sort. Dynamite, most likely. In wooden boxes. There's still three of them in the cottage at the far end of the village. The rest they put in the place they built on the side of the mountain."

At which point, I managed to rouse myself, feeling it was only polite that I take part in the conversation. "I think we must have passed it on our way here," I said. "A small brick place with a flat roof."

He nodded. "That'll be it, Mr. Ince. Smack under the power lines. It only wants one of them lines to be struck or one of the pylons. . . ." He sucked in his lips. "The major, he got onto them about that as well. The whole mountain to choose from, he said, and they have to pick a damned stupid place like that. But they had an answer for him that time. They told him they knew what they was doing, that the building had been sited where it was so's it could be used by the electric people afterward. Some sort of relay station, I think they said it was going

to be. And once the valley had been flooded, the pylons was to be removed so the cables could be rerouted."

"Flooded?" Kevin wondered, drawing his blanket closer about him.

The old man smiled a little. "It's real funny talking to someone who doesn't know what's been going on here in Kirdale. It's all we've thought and talked about for ages. The whole of this valley is going to be turned into a reservoir. Up yonder"—he gestured vaguely over his shoulder—"they've built a dam, an ugly, great thing. The explosive's for blasting away the side of the mountain. Won't be long now, either. Three more weeks—that's all we've got left. Then one fine morning they'll send lorries to cart us away."

"You'd think," I said, "that with all the natural lakes in these parts, there'd be no need to make an artificial one."

"That was the major's argument when we first heard tell of their plans. They sent men down to explain to us why it had to be here. A hell of a rigmarole it was—all about watersheds and the lie of the land. The major sort of organized the villagers into a group, and we tried to fight back. But we didn't stand an earthly. There weren't enough of us, for one thing. And there were no farms, no cultivated land going to be wasted. Just a couple of dozen old cottages. When they saw it was hopeless, the folk started to pack up and leave. Now there's only seven of us left. The major—he'll stick it out to the end. He and his son and daughter will be the last to go. Mr. Fox and Mrs. Dorran——"

"They're leaving on Saturday, dad," Mrs. Tadman interrupted. "Claire was over telling me about them this morning."

"I reckoned they'd be the next. That'll leave only the five of us. Me and mother—we'll stick it out right to the end, along with the major. When you get to our age, every day counts. We've liked it here. Quiet . . . at our time of life, you like things quiet. We've got a place to go to." The old man looked down at his threadbare slippers. "A flat in Carlisle. They found it for us. Nice enough. But right in the middle of the town, different from here. Nothing to look out at from your windows. Nothing green. We've always been used to the country."

Mrs. Tadman's needles ceased their clicking. "I'd best go and turn those wet things," she said and looked at the clock. It was a quarter to ten. "And then I'll see about getting a bed made up."

"Mother doesn't say much," Mr. Tadman said when she had gone. "She never was one for complaining. Just goes along, taking everything as it comes. But she doesn't like the idea of leaving any more than I do." He leaned sideways, grunting, to take a pipe and a well-worn pouch from the windowsill. Opening the pouch, he inspected its contents, then replaced it and the pipe on the sill.

"Two fills left," he said. "I'd best save them for tomorrow." He turned to look at the window. "If this lot keeps up, there'll be no going in to Ennerdale tomorrow to do the shopping. . . . Longish step to the bus stop," he added and came laboriously to his feet. "I'll go and see if mother needs any help."

"Nice people," I said to Kevin when we were alone.

He nodded. "As nice as they come." And with a savagery—quiet as it was—that was unusual for him, "It's a hell of a thing for them to have to lose their home."

"It's not going to be easy persuading them to take something for all they've done for us."

"Offer money to folk like these and they'd only be offended." He pushed himself up out of his chair. On the narrow mantelpiece was the framed photograph of a young man in army uniform. Holding his blanket with one hand, Kevin picked up the picture with the other. "First their son, now their home. What else can they lose?"

"These things happen," I said inadequately.

"So they do." He replaced the picture, careful to set it down on the precise spot it had occupied before. "Wars have to be fought. People must have water to drink. God bless us, one and all."

Someone knocked at the front door.

"Visitors?" he wondered. "At this time of night and on such a night?"

"Maybe someone else who has lost his way."

"I'll answer it, mother," came Mr. Tadman's voice. "It sounded like Claire's knock."

Kevin sat down and drew the blanket over his bare

knees. "And if it is Claire," he said, "let's hope he doesn't bring her in here." He grinned. "We're hardly dressed for receiving company."

It was Claire and Mr. Tadman did bring her in to see us. But he had a reason.

"Father's only just thought to tell me," a woman's voice said breathlessly from outside our door. A quiet, low-pitched voice. A nice voice. "A while back, he thought he saw two men coming along the middle path. It struck me they might be tramps looking for shelter. I thought I'd better come and see if you and Mary were all right."

Mr. Tadman started to laugh. He was still laughing when he opened the door to usher in the visitor.

"Here are your two tramps, lass." He was enjoying himself hugely. "I doubt whether they'd thank you for calling them that. Mr. Sowden and Mr.—" He had remembered my name earlier; now he had forgotten it.

"Ince," I supplied.

Kevin collected the folds of his blanket, drew himself up and raised one hand, palm outward, in the approved American Indian fashion. "How," he said gravely.

Mr. Tadman threw back his head to laugh again. The girl flushed uncomfortably.

If my hair was my one redeeming feature, Claire Emery's voice was hers. There was color to it, music and expression. If her face had gone halfway to matching it, she would have been attractive. As it was, she was neither one thing nor the other—neither ugly nor pretty. In her late 20s, I put her. A thin girl, shy—as we were to discover—and certainly downtrodden by a domineering father. She had straight brown hair and colorless features. A little attention to her appearance, a little makeup, might have gone a long way in edging her from neutrality toward prettiness.

The raincoat draped over Mr. Tadman's arm explained the dryness of her plain gray linen frock. She clutched with nervous fingers the gray silk scarf which must have been used to keep her hair dry. Looking at us, she found nothing to say.

"They lost their way," Mr. Tadman explained. "They thought this was Ennerdale."

"If we hadn't stumbled upon this oasis," Kevin said dramatically, perhaps trying in his own way to put her at

ease, "we would certainly have perished miserably in the wilderness."

She didn't smile. "So long as everything's all right, then——"

When she tried to edge toward the door, Mr. Tadman effectively blocked her way.

"Sit you down for a while, Claire," he invited. "Mary's making up a bed in the spare room. She'll be down in a few minutes. She'd never forgive you if you left without having a word." He guided her to a chair. She sat down on the very edge, knees tight together, hands clasped in her gray lap. Her skirt wasn't all that long; her legs were nicely slim.

Kevin had had his try at putting her at ease. I made my little effort, using a different line. "Mr. Tadman's been telling us about what's been going on in Kirdale. It's a damned shame. We're truly very sorry."

Standing behind her, one hand on her shoulder, Mr. Tadman nodded slow and silent approval of my gambit.

"We don't like having to leave," Miss Emery told her hands.

"How long have you lived here?" Kevin asked her.

"Nearly ten years."

Gray was the very last color she ought to wear, I thought. Blue, now. . . .

"A long time," I said. "Where will you go?"

She looked up. Yes—blue. That would be her color. To match her eyes and bring them to life.

"I'm not sure," she replied. "Father hasn't said yet. Leeds, I suppose . . . that's where we came from. I don't know."

The interchange seemed on the point of flagging and dying.

"We both come from Manchester," I told her. "Kevin"—I deliberately used his first name and promoted him for the occasion from trainee status—"he's an architect. I'm learning to be a tailor."

"That's nice," she said and looked at the clock. "Oh! I didn't know it was that time." On her feet, she said hurriedly to Mr. Tadman, "I'll have to go. Father will be waiting for his supper."

"Right you are, lass." Smiling, he draped the coat over her thin shoulders.

At the door, she turned to us, saying in the small, polite voice of a child taking leave of its hostess after a party, "It's been very nice meeting you."

Mr. Tadman closed the door behind them.

"The makings," Kevin observed, low-voiced and judicious, to the fire. "Potential. Could be made passable. Needs someone to help her get rid of her shyness." He smiled faintly. "I wouldn't mind having a try."

I hoped his voice hadn't traveled as far as the hall. Certainly, voices came to us clearly enough from there.

"Hasn't it been a shocking day?" That was Miss Emery. "It looks as if it might be passing over at last."

And Mr. Tadman's reply: "It's still raining, Claire. You'd better put that scarf over your head. No, it's not as bad as it was, but we've not seen the back of it yet. I'll be surprised if we don't have another storm in the night."

There was the sound of the front door being closed. Mr. Tadman's voice was raised, calling, "It was Claire, Mary. She had to go."

He came to join us again.

"I asked her in," he said, "to give her a chance of talking to someone fresh for a change. Try to bring her out of herself." He smiled. "I hope you didn't mind."

"She seems very nice," Kevin said.

"Aye, she's a good lass. She's done a lot for Mary and me. One thing—having to leave Kirdale and go back to Leeds could be the making of her. There's nothing I'd like better than to hear of her getting a job in an office along with other girls."

"Her trouble," Kevin said, "being her father. At least, it sounds that way."

"The major's that sort of man," Mr. Tadman said flatly. "No malice in him. Always ready to give a helping hand. Too ready, maybe. Depends what way you look at it. Likes to be the boss—especially where his own family's concerned. Donald—that's Claire's brother—he sometimes tries to stand up for himself."

"Whatever made them come to this out-of-the-way place?" I asked.

"Something to do with a business that didn't work out. We don't know the ins and outs of it—only the bits that Claire has told us. You don't like to ask questions. . . .

The major always did have big ideas. He started up some kind of company. Went all right for a time; then something happened and it just collapsed. And he's not the sort of man to go on living in a place where everyone knows what's happened. We don't know why he picked on Kirdale to hide himself. Maybe it was the first empty cottage he came across. They live now on what was left. Donald helps out a bit—drawing, you know . . . pictures for magazines. He doesn't make much out of it."

"Victorian setup," Kevin observed. "The Barretts of Wimpole Street, as large as life. I thought that sort of thing went out with bustles."

The old man was inclined to be on the defensive. "Don't get the wrong idea about the major. He's all right so long as you fit in with his ways. He did his level best for all of us, trying to get them to change their minds about flooding the valley. It wasn't his fault it didn't come off." He went over to the door to call, "Can you manage all right, mother?"

She was already on her way back downstairs.

"You should be comfortable," she told us, bustling to poke the dying fire. "There was no curtain to the window; so I've pinned up a cloth over it. Just to make it private-like."

Kevin started, "We don't know how to thank you both for everything you've done——"

She would have none of it, was almost indignant at our gratitude. "Anyone would have done the same."

Take in two total strangers out of the night? Feed them and find them a bed? I doubted it very much. But to them it seemed the most natural thing in the world.

We talked for a while—the stirred fire dying again—before going upstairs. Mrs. Tadman fretted about the light in our room. She had managed to find a bulb, but there was no shade. "I know there's one somewhere. I just couldn't lay my hands on it. . . ."

Two sets of pajamas were laid out. I wondered if they were her husband's or if they had once belonged to her son and had been kept all through the years. The sheets were turned back, ready. There was even a hot-water bottle.

Kevin did something I wouldn't have believed him capable of, something I would have given a lot to have

thought of first. Putting his hands on Mrs. Tadman's shoulders, he bent to kiss her gently on the cheek.

Outside, the storm still grumbled. Rain still splattered against the window. We went to bed at half past 11.

It happened at 19 minutes past two in the morning. We know that that was the time—the exact time—because that was when the power failure was recorded at the local power station, the information subsequently being given to the press.

CHAPTER THREE

A crash that seemed to set the whole place vibrating brought us awake. For a few moments, still sleep-dazed, I fancied the noise had been the blast of an explosion. Then lightning blazed, vivid even through the thick cloth over the window. Another deafening thunderclap rocked the cottage.

Kevin's muffled voice came querulously from the darkness at my side, asking, "What the hell's going on?"

I was almost myself again. "Odin's chariot working overtime." Or should it have been Thor? I couldn't remember. Odin sounded right, anyway.

Lightning flared and thunder crashed out in almost the same instant. The storm must have been directly overhead. Sliding my legs from between the sheets, I pushed myself stiffly to my feet and padded unsteadily over to the window. Kevin's voice pursued me sleepily, wanting to know what I thought I was doing.

The window was so low that I had to stoop to raise one corner of the makeshift curtain. It wasn't raining; the glass was dry. But outside, it was pitch black. I might have been gazing into the emptiness of space from which all the stars had been removed. Until another flash—a

vicious, multitailed fork of lightning—lit the scene, making of it a cardboard cutout of some nightmare lunar landscape. One of my hands was resting on the cold glass. I felt it shudder to the clap of sound.

“For Christ’s sake,” grumbled Kevin from behind me, “it’s bad enough without you prowling about the place.”

Letting the cloth drop back, I turned to grope toward the bed. Everywhere was silent now, the storm seeming to be holding its breath. There was the flick of Kevin’s lighter. He held the flame to his watch as he had in the cave. “Just gone quarter past two.” He held up the light to help me find my way. The small flame burned steadily, without a tremor.

I slid back between the sheets. He closed the lighter.

“The old man was right when he said the storm would come back in the night,” I told the darkness.

“Country lore.” I felt Kevin turn to look toward the window. “It’s quiet enough now.”

“Collecting itself for the next onslaught.”

“You know something?” By the sound of his movements, he was pushing himself into a sitting position.

“What?”

“If we’d gone to Spain, we’d have missed the majestic grandeur of a Cumberland storm.”

“I could have forgiven myself,” I rejoined acidly.

“And you’d have missed meeting the Tadmans and the pallid Claire.”

“I’d also have missed getting soaked to the skin,” I said.

And then the world shuddered.

The bed moved.

It wasn’t imagination. I distinctly felt the movement. Sideways, it seemed, and down. And with it, that empty, sickening feeling you get when an elevator starts or stops with a jerk. It seemed to go on for an age. It must have lasted only a small fraction of a second.

And Kevin had felt it, too. “What the hell was that?” he asked loudly.

If the bed had moved, I reasoned, then so had the room. So had the whole cottage. And so must have the land on which it stood.

There was only the one possible explanation. “An earth tremor,” I said unsteadily.

No lightning flashes now, no echoing blasts of thunder. Everywhere was silent and still.

"An earthquake?" Kevin's voice rose incredulously. "In England? Not on your life."

"They aren't unknown. Tremors—not earthquakes."

This time, he was the one to climb to his feet. He used the lighter to guide him to the window. Sitting, arms clasped tightly about my knees, trying to persuade myself that I was in no way scared, I watched him draw the cloth aside.

"Nothing," he reported. "Black as ink out there." And, "At least, it's stopped raining."

Footsteps sounded on the landing. There was a light tap on the door. Kevin went to open it.

Mr. Tadman wore an overcoat over what was certainly an ankle-length nightshirt. His face glowed eerily over the lighted candle he held, eyes huge and black with shadows.

"You're all right?" He peered anxiously over the smoky flame.

"Just about," Kevin told him. "What on earth happened?"

"A landslide, I reckon. Mother said I ought to come and see if you was both all right. The electric's gone." He flicked the switch to prove his point. "Lines must be down. Mother said best bring you a candle." He fished a second one from his pocket, lighted it from the first and handed it to Kevin. "Just in case you have to go along the landing, like."

"I very nearly had to a few minutes back," Kevin said drily. "Does that sort of thing often happen in these parts?"

"There was a slide five, six years back. Over in the next valley. That was at night, too, and we felt it here. But it was nowhere as bad as this."

There was a sense of relief in the knowledge that someone else—someone who had had a similar experience before—had employed the word *bad* in describing tonight's effort. It was going to be a very long time before I would be able to forget that terrifying moment of instability—the terrible feeling of insecurity when, for a brief moment of time, the very earth had moved. I touched my forehead and my fingers came away greasy

with the sweat of reaction.

"We'll find out all about it come morning," said Mr. Tadman placidly. "Likely the same place as last time. Well, good night to you both again."

Kevin, returning to bed, turned himself—perhaps to demonstrate how unperturbed he was—into the ancient butler of an ancient house, showing a guest the way along a cobwebbed passage, candle held high, footsteps faltering, voice cracked and quavering. "This way to the Blue Room, sir. . . ." And, lowering himself to the mattress, eyeing the candle, "How am I supposed to cope with this? Will it stand up by itself?" He balanced it carefully on the bare boards. "Just about." Then, "Is it my imagination, Stuart, or has it suddenly gone warmer?"

It wasn't his imagination. My damp forehead wasn't entirely the outcome of fear reaction. The night was indeed much warmer. Almost sultry.

"It feels like August," Kevin said. "I don't know about you, but I could do with having the window open."

On his feet again, he went over to the window, there to unfasten the cloth and let it drop to the floor. For a moment or two, he struggled with the catch. Then the small window creaked open.

Hands resting on the sill, he leaned out. The air was so still and heavy that the candle flame might have been a solid thing.

"Stuart," he said suddenly, "come here."

Something in his tone brought a twinge of coldness to the base of my spine, brought me quickly to my feet and over to stand at his side. But there was nothing to be seen—nothing but that same hollow, black emptiness of space. Certainly it was even warmer outside than it was in the room, but that wasn't what had tinged his voice with urgency.

"Can you smell anything?"

I could, now he asked. A faint but unmistakable smell—unidentifiable for a while, but familiar enough for all that. I tried to remember where I had come across it before. A pungent odor, not quite that of smoke, but of smoke and something else. Then it came.

"Bonfire night," I said. "November the fifth. Fireworks."

"Burning sulfur," Kevin said, and that was even nearer the mark. "What do you make of it?"

"Perhaps something struck by lightning. . . ." I was suddenly sleepy again. And my head, for some reason, was inclined to swim. "Let's get back to bed. We'll find out all about it in the morning." I went to lie on top of the sheets. It was far too warm to think of getting between them.

Kevin had found something else to puzzle him. "Odd how the storm seems to have passed over. I mean, it must have been right on top of us. Instead of sort of dying away, it just finished abruptly. Thunderstorms don't usually end that way."

"It'll come back." I wasn't interested in the behavior of thunderstorms. "Let's get some sleep in while everywhere's quiet."

I fancy I must have fallen asleep again while he was still at the window. I have no recollection of him returning to bed. The next thing I knew, it was daylight and I was blinking up at Mr. Tadman. Wearing a flannel shirt, no collar, sleeves rolled to brown elbows, he stood, tray in hand, at my side.

"I thought you must still be asleep." Grunting, he stooped to deposit the tray on the floor. Two cups of tea and, of all things to start off the day, a plate of chocolate biscuits.

Kevin sat up, hair ruffled, looking about him with bleary eyes, taking a few moments to establish his whereabouts.

"Mother thought you'd be glad of a cup of tea," said Mr. Tadman. "Just as well she's made a habit of always filling the kettle at night. There's no water this morning."

"The landslide?" I hazarded.

"I reckon the mains must be damaged. We didn't know the water was off at first. The taps ran dry just after me and mother had washed. Mother was all for going across to the Emerys to see if they could let us have a drop for you to wash and shave. I wouldn't let her; it's foggy out there—you can barely see your hand in front of your face. I said I'd go myself as soon as you was up and about."

It was foggy. Now I could see tendrils drifting in through the open window. The sulfurous smell was still

there—not as strong as it had been earlier, but still noticeable enough. And it was hot—really hot and clammy. The pajama jacket was sticking to my back.

“That smell,” Kevin said. “What on earth is it?”

“Can’t make it out.” Mr. Tadman went over to the window to close it. “Something burning, I reckon. Smoldering. You can smell it worse outside. And it’s hot out there, too. I’ve never known weather like this for early May. We don’t usually get it this hot, not even in August. And I’ve never known it to be foggy like it is. Mists—aye—we get plenty of them. But this is a regular pea-souper.”

I handed one of the cups to Kevin. He shuddered and shook his head at the plate of biscuits. “Is this the first time the water’s ever been cut off?” he asked.

The old man nodded. “The first time since we’ve been living here.” He smiled with little humor. “And if I know anything, nothing’ll be done now about getting it back again. We’ll have to manage the best we can till we finally leave.”

“But how *will* you manage?” I wanted to know.

“Same as they used to before water was laid on. There’s a stream”—Mr. Tadman wasn’t used to being in this bedroom; he had to think a moment before pointing to the left—“at the bottom of the village. Good, clear water. We’ll be all right.”

“Back to nature,” Kevin said over the rim of his cup. “What about the electric?”

“Still off. Likely it’ll be back on later in the day. They shouldn’t have much trouble finding where it’s been cut. I reckon one of the pylons got struck.” Mr. Tadman moved toward the door. “I’ll go and see about getting you some water.”

He had gone before I had pulled myself together sufficiently to be able to protest that we would do that for him, that we had imposed upon him too much already. I did, in fact, struggle to my feet, prepared to chase after him. But Kevin gripped my ankle, tried to say something and choked over a too hastily swallowed mouthful of tea.

“Let him go,” he said when he had recovered from a fit of coughing. “If I know anything, he’s more concerned about talking to the major than getting water.

The old boy's dead worried, Stuart. Even though he did his best not to let it show. And you can't blame him. No water, no electric. And if the fog's as bad as he says, then obviously not much chance of getting to Ennerdale for supplies. If he's run out of tobacco, then you can bet your life they're also low on food. Talk about being cut off from civilization . . . hell, we might just as well be marooned on a desert island."

Drinking the hot tea, welcome as it was, had caused sweat to bead my chest. I used my handkerchief to dab myself dry. Bending, I experienced the swimming sensation again—almost a feeling of light-headedness.

There was a timid tap on the door. I went to open it. Mrs. Tadman had a pile of things to give me: our shirts, underclothes, shorts—all neatly pressed.

"They should be aired enough, Mr. Ince. I ironed them last night and left them in front of the fire."

When I started in to thank her, she topped my words with a flow of her own, hoping that we had slept well enough, that the storm hadn't disturbed us too much. "What with having mountains all round, thunder always seems to sound worse than it really is. . . ."

Perhaps, like her husband, she was worried. If she was, it didn't show. Or perhaps it would take more than a rough night and the loss of water and electricity to disturb the placid tenor of her existence.

We dressed quickly. I left off my vest and didn't bother about buttoning a shirt that was damp the moment I put it on. We padded down the stairs in stocking feet. Our shoes, cleaned and polished, were waiting in the hall. Dishes clattered behind the closed kitchen door.

Kevin looked up from fastening his shoes to say softly, "Hell—we can't very well eat any more of their food, Stuart."

"How do we go about telling them that?"

He didn't have time to find an answer. The front door must have been left on the latch. Mr. Tadman—an enamel jug in one hand, a large kettle in the other—pushed it open with his knee. He went by us without saying a word, without even seeming to see us. When he returned, empty-handed, he closed the kitchen door carefully behind him and motioned for us to follow him into the parlor. There was no attempt now to disguise

his concern—his growing concern.

“It don’t make sense.” He rubbed his chin worriedly. “Like us, the Emerys had used up all the water in their tank before they found out no more was coming through. I managed to find my way down to the stream. But it weren’t there. Gone. Just the empty bed, with pools here and there. I’ve never seen it like that before. And after all that rain we had. . . .”

“Perhaps the slide blocked the source,” Kevin suggested.

“Water’d still have seeped in. The mountains must be full of it after yesterday. It don’t make sense. That”—he nodded in the direction of the kitchen—“I got that water from one of the empty cottages. I told mother to boil it. I said as how it had come from the stream. No point in fretting her till I have to.”

“Have you talked with the major?” Kevin asked.

“A freak storm, he says. He don’t know about the stream yet. I didn’t go back to tell him.”

Something else was worrying him.

“Claire—she’s got a radio. One of those transistor things. It’s working all right, but nothing’s coming through. Only crackling and buzzing. She was trying to get the news.”

“Mountains interfering with reception,” I suggested.

“They do with the telly,” Mr. Tadman said. “That’s why none of us have sets. But radio—that always comes through all right. Always something, even if it isn’t always that clear.”

Kevin asked bluntly, “How are you fixed for food?”

“Not too badly. We usually carries a bit in hand. We’re not too badly off for paraffin, neither. Mother raked out an old oil cooker we used to take on picnics. If you’re fretting about us running short, there’s no need to. The fog’s bound to lift before the day’s out. Then, if there’s anything we need urgent, Claire will be only too pleased to slip into Ennerdale on her bicycle.”

The old man smiled.

“In any case, even if you did have some idea of moving on before you have a bite to eat, you couldn’t—not while it’s like this. You’d be lost before you’d gone a dozen yards.”

“Wherever we’ve gone,” I started awkwardly, “we’ve

always made a point of paying our way. Even when we've bedded down with relatives." I looked at Kevin, but he was by the window, studying the fog outside.

"If it's paying us you're thinking about," said Mr. Tadman equably, "then that's something you'll have to take up with mother when the time comes." He smiled—a real smile this time. "But I can tell you now what she'll say."



"I think it's about time we ventured outside to see for ourselves what's going on," Kevin said.

Mrs. Tadman had put aside preparations for breakfast until the water had boiled and then cooled sufficiently for us to wash and shave. The meal over, she had refused help with the washing up.

We left them there in their tiny dollhouse kitchen—she busy at the yellowstone sink, he settling in a basket chair, making a long, slow ceremony of filling and lighting his pipe.

Closing the front door, we stood for a while looking about us. The heat was almost that of the tropics. Turning my head sharply, I felt again the small swimming sensation. The fog wasn't as thick as it had seemed when viewed from the window. Perhaps it was already starting to thin. Certainly, in front and a little to the right, we could make out the vague ghostlike shape of another cottage. "The Emerys'?" Kevin wondered.

There was still the faint pungency of burning sulfur. But with it now, almost hiding it, was a new smell—a rich, cloying odor to which I was able to put a name of sorts, even though that name was completely out of context in this remote, bleak Cumberland valley.

Kevin lifted his nose to the air.

"Remind you of a greenhouse?" I asked.

"I couldn't place it at first. Yes, that's it. A hothouse. Or a conservatory." He sniffed again. "Or even a jungle. Or what I suppose a jungle must smell like. So what the blazes is it doing here? Where's it coming from?"

It was coming from all around. Whichever way we turned, that warm, sickly scent seemed as strong. And drawing it in, I became aware yet again of the same light-headed sensation I had first experienced during the

night. Not an altogether unpleasant sensation. For, passing, in its wake it left a curious sense of well-being, much the same feeling one sometimes experiences on a clear, frosty winter morning. Or at the seaside, when one first draws in air that is clean and rich. Rich. . . .

I asked, "Do you notice anything unusual about the air, Kevin?"

"I was just going to ask you the same. It's all right when you breathe normally. But if you draw it in deeply——"

"It wasn't like this last night; otherwise, we'd surely have noticed. What do you make of it?"

"I don't know. Maybe some sort of aftermath of the storm. Electricity, perhaps. I don't know much about that sort of thing. I thought at first it might be because the air is thin, with us being fairly high up here. But that can't be it. If anything, it seems the other way round."

"Thicker," I said. "Richer."

"It's different, anyway," he said and lapsed into silence.

The storm that had ended so abruptly and the tremor that had seemed to move the cottage were both things I had been curious about. Curious and nothing more. There was nothing unusual in that lightning was responsible for the power failure, a landslide for the dislocation of the water supply. At a pinch, one could find rational explanations for the dramatic rise in temperature, for the fog, for the sulfurous and jungle odors, for the new richness of the air. But put all those things together, and to the sum total add the stream. . . .

I think my uneasiness must have started with Mr. Tadman telling us about a stream that had suddenly and unaccountably run dry. I knew something of the ways of streams. There had been one in the garden of the house where I had been born. It had been part of my daily life. I knew its mood from one year's end to the next. Streams dry up when the water source is dammed. But they do not dry up, dam or not, when the ground for miles around is saturated with rain. There is always at least a trickle.

Something was wrong. I knew—*knew*—that something unusual had happened. What, I didn't know. I couldn't even start to guess. Something to do with the weather.

. . . That was the only explanation, vague as it was, that came to mind. Some freak aftermath of a freak storm.

Whatever the cause, here were the effects. We were experiencing something abnormal, and I was frightened. But too ashamed of my fears to confess them to Kevin—Kevin, who stood there, features telling nothing, gazing calmly about him.

I said, "Let's go take a look at that stream."

But he had something else in mind. He was more interested in tracking down the hothouse scent to its source. He pointed. "I fancy it's stronger in that direction." The opposite direction to that in which I felt the stream must lie. At the bottom of the village, Mr. Tadman had said, Kevin's direction called for a gentle climb.

The Emery cottage dissolved into the mist. So did the one where we had spent the night. We were only able to walk slowly. For perhaps a minute, there was nothing to be seen at all—no vague shapes, no sounds apart from the padding of our feet. Then another cottage loomed up on the right—empty, windows shuttered, television aerial sagging drunkenly from the slate roof. Alongside, the ghost shape of another—this one with a gaping hole in the roof. Then another, this time on the left. Another, back on the right again. And this last one was obviously occupied. The shutters were thrown back, there were curtains to the windows and the front door was open.

As we came abreast, a man emerged from the door. A tall, broad-shouldered individual. I tried to recall the other two names Mr. Tadman had mentioned. "Mr. Fox?" Kevin said under his breath while I was still racking my brains.

We would have passed by, ignoring him. But, "Donald?" he called and started toward us. So we had to stop.

He wore a dark-colored shirt, cuffs unbuttoned, sleeves flapping untidily. Darkish trousers were held in place by a belt with a large metal buckle. Gypsy swarthy— that was my first impression of his face. Coarse features made it difficult to guess at his age. He could have been anything between 30 and 40. His hair was very thick and very black. Thick brows all but met across the bridge of his large nose. Thick, black-rimmed spectacles added their quota to the overall impression of duskiness.

A few paces away—suddenly discovering that neither of us was Donald, that we were both strangers—he came to an abrupt halt, staring at us through narrowed eyes with something I felt certain was much more than ordinary curiosity.

“And who the devil are you?” he demanded harshly.

“Wayfarers,” Kevin replied easily, “on holiday. We lost our way in the mountains yesterday and some of your neighbors were kind enough to put us up for the night. Mr. and Mrs. Tadman.”

Mr. Fox—it could be no one else—came a step closer, head thrust forward. “Holidays? At this time of year?”

“A question,” Kevin told him, with only a small hint of stiffness in his tone, “of taking them when we are told to take them.”

Mr. Fox subjected us to a close scrutiny, an examination that started at our feet and progressed slowly back up to our faces. He relaxed—visibly relaxed.

“And where have you come from?” he asked, voice only rough now.

“Manchester,” I told him.

Apparently satisfied that we were harmless, he turned to gaze about him at the fog. “Did you bring this muck with you?” he asked with disgust.

“It descended during the night,” I said.

“It can bloody well descend back up again. I’ve got to go to Ennerdale this morning. . . . With the Tadmans, you said. Is their electric off, too?”

“And the water,” Kevin said.

Mr. Fox didn’t seem all that concerned. My impression was that he had slept all through last night, had arisen only minutes ago and was only just getting round to realizing that things weren’t as they should be.

He tugged at the neck of his shirt. “Christ, it’s hot.”

I fancied Kevin had been looking up at one of the bedroom windows. I followed his gaze but found nothing unusual. I let my eyes move higher, to the roof, and found nothing there worth looking at. But for some reason, sight of that bare, unornamented gray roof brought something to nibble at the back of my mind. Something that I couldn’t put a name to.

Kevin said, “We were just taking a stroll for something to do. Something to help pass the time until the fog

lifts and we can go on our way again." And with faint sarcasm, echoing Claire's last night's politeness, "It's been nice meeting you."

Mr. Fox grunted. We moved on. The cottage and one of its occupants melted into the orange grayness. Kevin had news of the other occupant. "Didn't you see her, Stuart?"

"No." I was still trying to puzzle out the something that was bugging my mind.

"At one of the bedroom windows. Mrs. Dorran it would be. I thought you must have seen her." He grinned. "Pity. You missed something. Luscious—that's the word. If a little past her best and somewhat overripe. But I may be doing the lady an injustice. I saw her through the mist and then only for a moment. Raven locks, eyes that even under those conditions were of the come-hither variety and—from that portion of her anatomy visible above the window ledge—certainly full-blown. Just the job, if you go in for that sort of thing. And our Mr. Fox, judging by his appearance, is the type who would."

"Not a very pleasant type," I said. "And rather more curious about a couple of innocent strangers than one might have expected."

"That's how it struck me. He thought we might be two other people—people he didn't particularly want to see. Or has my imagination been running away with me?"

In front of me, not all that far away, something drifted out of the fog, was visible for a moment, then was lost in the grayness again. Kevin, watching my face, waiting for my reply, didn't see it—and so was inclined to be startled when I came to a sudden halt.

A pace ahead, he stopped, too, turning and asking, "What's the matter, Stuart?"

"It's gone now." I pointed to where it had been. "It——" I broke off. "You're going to laugh."

"Don't bank on it. I'm not in a laughing mood."

"It was bright green. About a foot across, so far as I could tell. Floating in the air, about the level of our heads, moving quite quickly. It looked for all the world like a miniature parachute. Or a balloon. At least, there was something hanging underneath. A toy green balloon complete with basket. Don't ask me if there were any

little green men in it, and don't try to tell me it was only my imagination."

"I won't." He stared into the fog ahead. "A green balloon."

"Or a parachute."

"Some kind of toy." He turned to look at me.

"It could have been."

"But you don't think it was. Neither do I. Even if there were any kids in the village—and there aren't, according to the Tadmans—they wouldn't be out playing in this. There's——"

He paused, perhaps reluctant to be the first to admit in so many words that something out of the ordinary was going on.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"I don't like it at all."

"If you want the truth, I'm not far off being downright frightened. I keep telling myself that all this is just the result of some freakish weather conditions. Myself isn't very well convinced. There are too bloody many unnatural things. This fog, the heat, the smells, the way that storm ended last night, the earth tremor——"

"The stream that dried up."

"A list as long as your arm. Unnatural, the whole bloody lot." He looked up at where the sky ought to be. "If only this blasted stuff would clear. . . ."

It seemed a lifetime since we had crouched together in the cave. An eternity ago, and a different existence.

"Could it be artificial?" I wondered.

"A sort of smoke screen. I know what you mean. The same notion had occurred to me. But if that is the case——"

"It means someone must be generating it. Or something."

"We're mad, of course," Kevin said. "Stark, raving mad. But just for the devil of it—that tremor last night was the crump of something heavy coming down. When it came down, the thing—whatever it is—cut both the power cables and the water main. Whoever came in it brought their own brand of weather with them. They didn't like our storm; so they cut it off. In exchange, they gave us fog and a touch of the tropics. How does all that sound?"

"And the stream?"

"You keep harping on that. All right. So the ship landed on the source, drying it up."

"Go the whole hog," I said. "Why not call it a flying saucer?"

"Because that's what I'm thinking? I didn't say that."

"This is real life," I said. "We're not at the cinema. This is you and I on holiday in the Lake District."

"That's rich." He set his hands on his hips. "You're the one who started this off by saying the fog might be artificial."

"It was only an idea," I said lamely.

"And you were the one who saw the green balloon." He grinned at my expression. "All right, Stuart, I believe you; others might not. Let's go see if we can track down this smell. At least, that's real enough."

And so we started walking again. Kevin drifted toward the other side of the road. Intent on what might lie ahead, he almost stepped on the thing that lay in the gutter. He did catch it with his foot. The unexpected metallic clatter brought us both to a halt again.

"What the——" He looked down at it. "Only an old television aerial, probably blown down from one of the roofs."

And then I knew what it was that had been scratching all this while at the back of my mind.

"Whatever that thing is," I told him, "it can't be a television aerial. Mr. Tadman told us that no one here has a set." I turned to point. "There's another of them back there, up on the roof of one of the empty cottages."

CHAPTER FOUR

We crouched on our heels over the contrivance, like children over a gutter game of marbles.

Now we could see that the antenna was attached to a metal box. If, indeed, it was an antenna. Certainly, it gave that impression—a thin tube of silvery metal, about two feet long, with three smaller strips of varying sizes attached to the top like spars on a mast. The box, made of the same metal, was badly dented and scratched, as if it had been dropped from a height, but not a great height, for the metal gave the impression of being very soft. It was about the shape and size of a small attaché case—perhaps a foot square, but only a few inches wide. Set in the side that faced us was a narrow grille. Below the grille was a knob that could have been some kind of control. Lying lengthwise across the top was a cylinder of the same silvery metal, with a circular aperture at one end in which was sunk something that looked very much like a lens.

I had seen nothing quite like it before. If it hadn't been for Kevin's earlier mention of an alien ship, I would have guessed at a portable radio set and been happy enough with my guess.

Kevin saw it in much the same light. "A transmitter?" he wondered. "That's an aerial, no doubt about that. What's this gadget for?" His hand lifted to the knob.

"Don't touch it!" I cried involuntarily and then was immediately ashamed of my reluctance. "We don't know that it is a radio," I offered in explanation.

"Whatever it is, it's well and truly smashed. Whatever's behind this——" He ran one finger along the hollow of a deep dent. "Tied up in knots." He tried to move the knob.

"No, doesn't seem to do anything. This grille must be some kind of speaker. I don't know what to make of this lens affair on the side." He glanced sideways at me, peering through the antenna crosspieces. "And you say there's another just like it?"

"They've been dropped from something." That was one thing I felt very positive about. "The way this one's damaged and the other ended up on a roof."

"A reasonable assumption." He rubbed the side of his nose. "What price my alien spaceship now?" Picking up the contraption, he came upright. "It's light. . . ." He balanced it on the palm of one hand in demonstration. "Very light. No weight at all."

I voiced an idea that had come into my mind a few moments before. "Do you think they might be the cause of all this mist?"

"Some sort of smoke generator?" He turned the box over so that the grille faced toward me, the crooked antenna resting on his shoulder. "The fog goes around and around and comes out here. Could be. Let's go see if that other one is in any better shape."

"Are you going to take that with you?"

"Just to be on the safe side. You could be mistaken about the other one." He grinned. "Afraid of it snapping back at me, Stuart?"

I didn't bother to reply. We retraced our steps along the silent road. The fog seemed to have thinned somewhat. The cottages, when they loomed up, were more clearly visible. It was still very warm. The air still had the feeling of richness.

"Which roof?" Kevin asked.

"The next cottage to where we met Mr. Fox."

The door of Fox's cottage was still open, but there

was no sign of him. Nor—I looked hopefully at the upper windows—of his lady friend.

When we reached the next cottage, there was no need for me to point out the antenna. Now that the fog had lifted a little, we could both see how this second metal box had lodged against the guttering, its antenna—undamaged, so far as we could tell—projecting over the edge.

Placing the first box on the ground, Kevin stood, hands on hips again, assessing the situation.

A drainpipe led down from gutter to ground. He tested it, nodded, motioned to me. I cupped my hands to form a stirrup. We made a clumsy business of it, but we managed. I stepped back to watch him haul himself up to the roof, to edge gingerly along, leaning inward toward the slates.

And then another green balloon came drifting in front of me, not more than a yard away—so close that I could see it was more a parachute than a balloon, so close that I could distinctly make out a kind of pattern on the upper green part, could see a small red glow at the point where grayish cords met underneath. The thing drifted quickly by, turning, seeming to be losing height. I turned to follow it.

I could easily have reached out to catch it in midair, but I preferred to wait until it touched down. And when it finally did sink to earth, the upper part didn't collapse, as I had expected, but remained upright, swaying a little. I dropped to my knees alongside.

The parachute canopy could be nothing else but a cluster of six leaves joined together at their tips. What I had at first taken to be cords were actually the gray stems of the leaves gathered together underneath. Where they met, they entwined to form a kind of container. And in this tiny bird's-nest basket, something glowed redly, giving off a thin, wavering trail of smoke.

So intent was I upon the thing that I must have listened to the voice for quite a while before coming to realize I could hear someone talking. It came from behind me, from the direction in which I had left Kevin. But it wasn't his voice. It droned tonelessly, hollow and metallic, not loud enough for me to catch what it was saying, but loud enough for me to know it was unlike

any other voice I had ever heard before.

It stopped as I came quickly to my feet. And then another voice—unmistakably Kevin's this time—called urgently, "Stuart! Where the blazes are you?"

I hurried back as fast as the fog would allow. He was balanced on the guttering, back to the sloping roof, the box held in front of him with both hands.

"Where the hell did you get to?" It was one of the rare occasions on which I had seen him come close to losing his temper. Without waiting for my reply, he bent his knees, carefully lowering the box, ordering, "Grab this when I let go. For God's sake, be careful. Catch it by the sides. Don't touch the antenna or the knob on the front."

I went to stand underneath, hands ready.

"Who was that talking, Kevin?"

"You'll find out."

He let the box fall and I caught it neatly by the sides and held it while he scrambled back down the drainpipe.

"Sorry about leaving you like that," I apologized as he straightened, dusting flakes of rust from his hands. "I went chasing after another of those green parachutes. It landed just over there. . . ."

He couldn't have cared less. He had discovered something of much greater interest. Taking the box from me, he set it carefully on the ground alongside the first—a duplicate of it, save that this second one showed no signs of damage.

He crouched over it, hand outstretched. "So you heard someone talking. So get a load of this." He gripped the antenna.

And a voice—the same robot, metallic voice I had heard before—came from the grille, startling me so that I stepped back.

"—all the people," it said. "*Then move the slide to the right and wait for the message.*"

And that seemed all.

"What on earth——" I started.

"Quiet!" Kevin said sharply.

The voice came again.

"*This contains an important message for the people of Kirdale. Whoever finds this must take it into one of the dwellings. Place it in the center of a room. Assemble all*

the people. Then move——”

He took his hand away. The voice stopped. “Which is where we came in,” he said. “Touch the antenna, it starts. Take your hand away, it stops. The same thing over and over.” He straightened. “*Dwelling . . .* a bit on the archaic side.”

I said the first thing that came into a head befuddled by what was the last item in a whole string of incomprehensible and frightening events. “Whose voice was that?”

“A good question.” Kevin tugged at one ear. “A variation on the ‘take me to your leader’ theme? It sounded human enough, for all it was on the tinny side. And it used good English. No detectable accent, even. But, as you say, whose voice? A recording, obviously. Even if these contraptions do look more like radios than tape recorders. And why two of them? I suppose the thing to do now——”

He was gazing over my shoulder. I turned quickly to find out what had caused him to break off in midsentence.

Three shapes loomed through the fog. They became three men. One of them was Mr. Fox. The other two, if Mr. Tadman’s list of remaining inhabitants had covered everyone, had to be Major Emery and his son.

The son, tall and elegantly slender, towered a good 12 inches over the father, stumpy and broad. Where general appearance was concerned, Donald Emery had nothing in common with his father. His hair was sandy, parted low on one side and swept smoothly across a high, intelligent-looking forehead. His eyes were clear, pale blue, almost sapphire. His was a long face, while his father’s was square.

Square, unsmiling, unprepossessing. Solid flesh that was the sullen scarlet, perhaps, of high blood pressure. The major’s hair was white—a mass of tiny tight curls, almost like wool, that covered his scalp thinly and evenly as if they had been sprayed on. The deep lines that sprang from the cleft corners of eyes, nose and mouth made raised pads of the flesh they bisected. He wore a biscuit-colored alpaca jacket and black trousers—perhaps his idea of the uniform of a village squire. Donald Emery, in silver-gray suit, pale-blue shirt and dark-blue

tie, would have looked more at home in some city office.

The trio came to a halt a few paces in front of us. Mr. Fox thrust his hands into his pockets and stared at nothing in particular. Donald Emery smiled—apologetically, I fancied. The major cleared his throat noisily.

“Mr. Ince. Mr. Sowden.” An officious-sounding roll-call opening—designed, no doubt, to let us know he knew all about us. “Tadman tells me you lost your way and had to spend the night at his place.”

“The situation in a nutshell,” Kevin agreed.

“An unusual time of the year for mountain climbing.”

Kevin looked at Fox. “We’ve gone through all this before. We take our holidays when we’re told to take them.”

“I see. And now you will be going on your way?”

“As soon as the fog lifts.”

The major looked about him. “It is lifting now. You will have no trouble if you keep to the road. It will bring you out close to a bus stop. The mist will certainly have lifted down there. The Ennerdale bus will be running.”

“Thank you very much,” Kevin said drily.

Donald Emery said awkwardly, “It must sound as if we’re anxious to get rid of you. We are, in a way, but only for your own good. Under normal conditions, we would make you more than welcome. But there’s been some trouble here——”

“Mr. Tadman put us in the picture,” I inserted.

“So you know all about it.” Donald looked relieved. “We feel that more trouble might be on the way. We wouldn’t like you to become involved.”

“What my son is trying to say,” said the major heavily, “is that, although we have lost one fight, we aren’t finished yet. We intend staying in our homes until the very last moment. We intend that, in the final stages, the authorities will have to use force to evict us. In that way, and only in that way, can we make our grievances known to the outside world. The publicity will not help *us* in any way, but it will help others by bringing to public attention how authority, left to its own devices, can ride roughshod over ordinary people. We may prevent the same thing happening to the people of another village in some other valley.”

In its way, quite an impressive speech. And one that

had the stamp of prerehearsal.

"In your place," Kevin said, "I think I would do the same."

"We have made our intentions plain to the authorities," the other continued. "They have done everything, short of using force, to dislodge us before the date set. Last night, as you know—using the storm as an excuse—they cut off both the electric and water supplies. Their next move is obvious. If we still refuse to move, they will sever the road—thus cutting us off from our only source of supplies."

Kevin glanced quickly at me and then back at the major. "You think the electric and water were cut off deliberately?" he asked incredulously.

"We don't think—we know. We had been expecting something of this nature. Their next immediate move must be to send someone to inspect and assess the outcome——"

"If they haven't already done so," inserted Mr. Fox with ponderous significance.

"We suggest," the major finished, "that you leave before they arrive. We have no intention of taking this sitting down."

Fox, hands still in pockets, moved away from his companions. And moving, spotted the two metal contraptions for the first time. He pointed triumphantly at them.

"What did I tell you? Walkie-talkies! I've seen them being used up yonder by the dam. I told you this pair of beauties didn't show up by accident!"

"We've got damn-all to do with the people who are trying to turf you out of your homes!" I exclaimed angrily. "Those things aren't ours. We'd never seen them before till a few minutes ago. And they're not——"

"Bloody spies," Fox growled.

Donald had stopped smiling his gentle smile.

The major said brusquely, "The sooner you are on your way the better. And take those things with you."

I think I must have shouted. "I keep telling you they're not ours!"

"Then leave them." The major came forward to take hold of my arm in no gentle grip. "It's all the same to us. If your employers want to say we stole them from you, it's all the same to us."

There was nothing we could do about it. Even if we had felt like starting something—and brawls had never been to my taste—we wouldn't have stood a chance against the three of them.

We were hustled, figuratively if not literally, back along the road. I didn't even bother trying to protest. Kevin did and got nowhere for his pains. We were the representatives, the spies, of authority and that's all there was to it.

They came with us while we collected our rucksacks. Donald, helping me on with mine in the tiny, crowded hall, whispered under his breath, "I'm sorry about all this."

Mr. Tadman hovered unhappily in the background. "Mother's upstairs lying down. This heat has got on top of her." As we had expected, he refused to take anything from us. "She'd never forgive me if I did. It's been real nice having you." And, coming up against the major's disapproving gaze, "No matter who you are." He made a ceremony of shaking hands with us. "I'll tell mother you left when you saw the fog lifting."

It was lifting, certainly, but we still couldn't see more than a few paces ahead. We were escorted—no other word for it—along the road like criminals or undesirables. A new and vastly unpleasant experience. There was a nightmare quality to that short walk. And it was, indeed, only short—nothing more, it seemed, than a token gesture on the major's part. He stopped after we had been walking for less than a minute.

"Keep to the center of the road and you will be all right," he told us. "It's less than two miles to the main Ennerdale road."

"You can't go wrong," Donald supplied.

Mr. Fox cleared his throat and spat on the ground.

We went on our way.

"They're mad," Kevin said steadily enough.

We had both had a chance to cool down.

"Obsessed," I said. "The major, anyway. He's just got one thing in his mind and it clouds everything else. The others seem to follow him like sheep. I liked what I saw of his son, though."

"I don't much care for anyone that throws his weight around like that. No matter what his motives. All that

guff about standing up to authority." He snorted. "Hell, he's nothing but a petty village dictator himself."

"Fox had a lot to do with our being booted out," I said. "It stuck out a mile he'd been discussing us with the major. I have the feeling he doesn't much care for strangers of any kind. I don't believe for one minute that he thought we were anything to do with the people who've built the dam. He just used that as an excuse to——"

A green parachute came drifting between us. It moved slowly, losing height, smoke trailing thinly from the tiny spark that glowed at the point where the gray stems were gathered together underneath.

"So that's what they look like," breathed Kevin, curiosity overcoming indignation.

We followed it until it touched down. Then we crouched intently over it, hands splayed on the ground to balance the weight on our backs. The green canopy remained upright, swaying as if alive. The spark winked out. As we watched, the stems which had formed the container slowly uncoiled. At the tip of each was a small protuberance. Each gray stem—and there were six of them—seemed to grope its separate way over the surface of the road. One of them found a narrow, soil-filled cranny. Tip of stem and protuberance vanished into the crack. The parachute collapsed abruptly, becoming nothing more than a spray of leaves. Leaves that came apart—already changing color, starting to shrivel. All except the one that had anchored itself to the crack. Gradually, that one rose upright, remaining fresh and green. What had happened was obvious.

Kevin came to his feet, one of the dying leaves in his hand. He made a spinning motion with it. "When we were kids . . . remember? Those things that used to come whirling down from trees. I forget which trees. Seeds with propeller blades attached. We used to play with them for hours."

I looked down at the new seedling. "And what sort of tree did that come from?"

"God knows." He let the leaf fall. It seesawed to the ground. "A tree that forms its leaves into efficient parachutes and then fits those parachutes with the means of providing hot air to keep them flying. You ever heard

of anything like that before?"

"If there was such a tree, we'd have heard about it."

"Even if it only grew in the Amazon jungle." He stared into the mist. "There's one not very far from here. Unless——"

I knew what he was thinking. The same notion had just occurred to me. I suppose I had reached the stage where I was prepared to consider anything.

"It's mad," Kevin said slowly, "but it all fits. That's the devil of it. It all fits. They don't like our weather; so they bring their own. They don't much care for our trees; so they bring the seeds of the kind they do like. They drop boxes containing the message that they have arrived. They drop more than one in case some get damaged."

"You honestly think that some kind of alien spacecraft has landed?" I asked and marveled at the evenness of my own voice.

He grinned briefly. "If it has, the major will have to look to his laurels. No"—he was serious again—"I just don't know what to think, Stuart. All I am sure about is that something unusual, something abnormal, is going on. But who or what is responsible for it——" He shrugged.

"I wonder if it's the same everywhere. This fog, I mean, the heat, the smell, the parachutes. . . ."

"We'll soon find out." He hitched up his rucksack and tested its new position. "Hell, that's even worse. I'll have to do something about it; we've got a long trek in front of us."

Wriggling his shoulders out of the straps, he let the rucksack slide to the ground. Because, in this new heat, my straps were also causing me discomfort, I did the same. We spent some time manufacturing shoulder pads. Kevin used dirty handkerchiefs, I a pair of socks. By the time we were ready to set off again, the sweat was quite literally pouring down our faces.

We kept to the center of the road. A couple of cottages, both patently unoccupied, grew out of the fog and were swallowed up by it. I saw no sign of the stream or the place where it had been. I would have liked to examine the dry bed for myself.

We walked with our backs bent, thus keeping most of

the weight on our shoulders. In that position, it was easier to keep our eyes on the surface of the road rather than strain to squint ahead. Which is why the first indication we had that something else unusual had happened was when that surface suddenly, abruptly, dissolved. One moment, we were walking on smooth tarmac. The next, with a strange kind of melting of one thing into another, the road surface deteriorated into patches of some kind of loose red cinders. We came to a halt together, looked up together.

And in front of us. . . .

First, a narrow strip of desolation—a frozen tide of smoking red cinders from which, here and there, projected smoking, blackened stumps.

And behind, a jungle. A bright-green nightmare barrier that reached away into the mists on either side, that stretched up into the murk overhead. Trees growing so close together—trunks linked by the drooping coils of some kind of climbing plants—that it would be impossible to force a way through.

CHAPTER FIVE

I don't know how long we stood there—not moving, not speaking, too stunned to do anything more than stare.

At the sheer enormity of the thing. At its utter impossibility.

Kevin found his voice after a while.

“At least, we know now where that smell was coming from,” he said with an obvious effort.

Gray smoke rose from the cinder desolation. I watched it mingle with the white tendrils that came drifting from the nightmare trees.

“And the fog,” I said stupidly.

“Not to mention the flying leaves.” His voice was steadier now. He hitched up his rucksack with an automatic movement. “This little lot didn't spring up overnight. Which puts paid to part of my alien-ship theory.” He let his eyes travel slowly across the expanse of brilliant greens and serpentine grays. “I've seen pictures of the Amazon jungle. I never expected to come face to face with the real thing in the middle of Cumberland. I suppose it *is* real, not some kind of hallucination. A mirage. . . .” He took a step onto the cinders. And came back more quickly than he had gone. “It's real. I could

feel the heat through my shoes.”

My mind was starting to work again. “They obviously don’t know it’s here,” I said. “The major and the others.”

“Obviously. So we go back and tell them. Or try to tell them. One thing’s for sure: We can’t go on. I doubt whether a bulldozer would make any impression against that lot.” He looked at me. “What the hell do you make of it all, Stuart? I’m lost. Any moment now, I’m going to wake up to find myself in my own bed. I wish to God I was dreaming. . . . What’s it all about?”

I tried to use reason, logic. Not so much to find an answer to his question as to help myself—to try to put some semblance of solid ground under my feet. The jungle was here in front of us, a real, solid thing. No hallucination. No mirage. I could see it, smell it—my nostrils were filled with the rich, cloying stench of overlush vegetation. It was here and so there had to be an answer.

“It couldn’t have grown up overnight,” I said.

“I’ve already said that.”

“It hasn’t always been here; otherwise, they wouldn’t have told us to use this road.”

“A jungle in the Lake District,” Kevin said. “No, it hasn’t always been here.”

“Only two explanations,” I said. “Both impossible. Either that forest was transported bodily here, or else we’ve been transported bodily to it. Take your choice.”

He thought about it. And came up with a third explanation—one with some small substantiation and therefore not quite so impossible as my two.

“Or else the ground opened up during the night and that lot came popping up from some huge underground cavern. There was that earth tremor, remember.”

“Something left over from the past.” It was an idea. “Like the Loch Ness monster.”

“And those fish they found. I forget what the things were called. From prehistoric times. If livestock, why not plants and trees?” Which led to another thought. “I wonder if there are any animals prowling about in there?”

We listened. If there were creatures in that jungle, then they were either silent ones or too far away from us to hear them. And how far did it extend? Just how large an area did it cover?

“Guessing like this”—Kevin shrugged—“gets us nowhere. The only thing to do is take things as they come, hoping that sooner or later we’ll find the sense to it all. And hell—there’s got to be sense; there always is. Let’s go back and see what the major and his merry men have to say.”

So we went back.

The fog was still slowly but surely lifting. Now we were able to make out the shapes of cottages while still some distance away—first the empty ones, then the two occupied ones that almost faced each other across the narrow road. The doors of both the Emery and Tadman establishments stood open.

There was a moment of indecision.

“The major wouldn’t give us time to explain the last time,” Kevin brooded. “Chances are—the same story again now. Much better to tell the old folks and get them to pass the word on.”

“We can’t worry them with something like this.”

He sighed. “Perhaps you’re right. It wouldn’t be fair to them. The lion in his den, then.”

He went to tap on the door of the Emery cottage. When there was no reply, he knocked again, louder, calling, “Anyone at home?”

It seemed that the place was empty.

“So where is everybody?” Kevin leaned forward to peer into the hall. He beckoned me to do the same, pointing toward the open door of one of the rooms. One of the metal boxes—the undamaged one—stood in the center of the floor.

“We can’t just barge in,” I protested as he made to move toward it.

“We found the damned things first. We’ve as much right as anyone to find out what they’re all about.”

With some reluctance, I followed him into the room—just an ordinary, pleasantly furnished cottage parlor. He stooped over the box, one hand touching the antenna. The voice droned.

“This contains an important message for——”

It stopped when he took his hand away.

“In the center of the room. . . .” He glanced up at me. “They obeyed the instructions and received the message. Yes?”

"No!" I cried quickly, not because I disagreed with his reasoning—I did—but because his fingers had moved to the slide.

"We don't know what will happen," I explained to his arched brows. "There's no way of telling what has happened to the major and the others."

"Then, let's find out," Kevin said and moved the slide.

I took a pace backward as a faint hum came from the grille. Kevin, straightening, eyes riveted on the box, came to stand at my side. The hum grew in intensity. A glow came into being, poised in the air at one side of the box, seeming to have as its point of origin the lens set in the cylinder. The light grew, flickering, spreading out until it had filled all the space between box and wall, floor and ceiling.

Flat, like a screen. Brightest at the center. A spot, first of all, of brilliant light. Slowly, that spot elongated. Slowly, it formed itself into a shape. A vague outline resembled the figure of a man. Wavering, fading from time to time, it was difficult to see clearly. But it was undoubtedly a man of some kind. Thin, incredibly tall. So tall that the head seemed to be bent to fit under the ceiling. There was an impression of whiteness where the chest and thighs would be—clothing, perhaps some kind of short tunic. The face, features indefinite, was an elongated oval. The domed head seemed to be completely without hair. And the mouth was moving, smiling—certainly smiling while it spoke. In a voice so soft that we had to strain to hear.

"This is a message for the people of the village of Kirdale. Listen carefully. There will be insufficient power for it to be repeated. The following should be present. Males: George Tadman, Herbert Donaldson Emery, Donald——"

The voice faded, became inaudible.

"Damn," Kevin said. "I wonder if there's any way we——"

As he started to cross the room, the voice returned.

"—be alarmed. The apparatus by which I am speaking to you is very similar to the television appliances with which you will be familiar. It was selected for this purpose because its appearance will not be strange to you. I am not a scientist. My profession is that of historian. I

have been selected——”

Again the voice died away. But this time the image also began to fade. While we watched, the shape shrank until it was little more than a line. The line collapsed into a spot of light. The spot lost its brilliance, vanished. The screen danced for a moment and then was gone.

“And that’s that,” Kevin said disappointedly. “Only enough power, as he said, for one showing. All over, leaving us none the wiser.” He went to bend over the box, fiddling with the slide, touching the antenna. “Dead,” he grunted unnecessarily. “What did you make of what little we did hear?”

“And see,” I said, for I had been more intent upon the speaker’s appearance than his words. “Some kind of projected television, I suppose. Although I’ve never seen anything like it before. I’ve never seen a man like that before, either.”

“Distorted,” he said knowledgeably. “Like the reflection in a curved mirror. Whoever he was, he seemed to know all about Kirdale. That roll call of inhabitants. . . . And he used good English. Even if it was a mite stilted and he was inclined to stumble over some of the words. But that could have been because of faulty recording.”

“I don’t think he was the same as us,” I said slowly.

“Not human, you mean?” He didn’t smile as I half expected he might.

“I don’t know. He seemed—somehow different.”

Turning to go, my rucksack—a forgotten extension of my shoulders—brushed against a small table, sending an ornament crashing to the ground. I gathered the fragments together and piled them on the table. A china dog that debris had been. A black-and-white dog with one ear up, one down, sitting on a table in a cottage parlor. And there, squatting incongruously on the carpet of the same room, a contrivance that could have come from another planet. And outside—tropical heat and strange floating seeds and steaming, stinking jungle. And a village and its people now, with the blocking of the road, perhaps virtually cut off from the rest of the world.

Kevin pushed past me. Our rucksacks became jammed in the narrow doorway. For all his placid enough exterior, his nerves, like mine, were on edge. He pushed me angrily away. “For God’s sake, make up your mind

whether you're coming or going."

His hair was plastered to his head. The armpits of his red shirt were black. Dust had settled on the sweat on his face, streaked with rivulets. I must have looked the same.

Outside, the mist was certainly thinner. Across the road, Claire Emery stood in the doorway of the Tadman cottage. We went over to her. Arms hanging listlessly at the sides of her gray frock, she gazed along the road, where there was nothing to be seen but mist, not moving at our approach, not turning to look at us even when we were standing in front of her.

"Miss Emery," Kevin said.

She did turn then, but her eyes were empty.

"We were looking for your father."

"He's——" Dazed—no question of that—she looked blankly at us. "I don't know where he is."

"There's something we think he ought to know about," Kevin said gently. And added, "That's if he doesn't already know."

She roused herself with an effort. "Donald's inside," she said tonelessly and turned to go indoors. We followed her through the familiar hall into the kitchen.

Donald Emery stood by the window, his back to the room. He didn't move until the girl spoke: "They're looking for father." Then he turned. His face was gray, his eyes as empty as his sister's had been. That something had happened to shock and stun them while we had been away was as obvious from his expression as it had been from Claire's.

"We had to come back," Kevin told him. "It was impossible to go on. The road ends at a forest."

"A forest. . . ." Donald drew his breath in sharply. "He said it would probably be like that." He looked at his sister. "You hear that, Claire? It *has* happened. You must accept it. Try to pull yourself together. . . ."

"What has happened?" I asked.

"I can't believe it," whispered the pale-gray ghost that was Claire. "It's impossible . . . horrible. . . . I *won't* believe it."

"You heard what he said," her brother said gently. "Forest. The road ends at a forest." He put his arm around her shoulders. "We came across to tell George and Mary," he said to us over the girl's bent head.

"They——" He broke off. "I left them together upstairs."

"We would be grateful," Kevin said with restraint, "if you would put us in the picture."

"But you've seen for yourself." Donald frowned. "You've seen more than we have. You've actually seen the forest."

"But we don't know how it came to be there," I said. "We're guessing that it's connected with the metal boxes in some way. We found them first——"

"We tried to explain about them," Kevin put in, "but you wouldn't listen. A few minutes ago, we saw your cottage door open. We saw one of the boxes inside. We switched it on. We saw a man—or what looked like a man. He started talking, then faded out before we'd learned anything."

"It would fade out," Donald said. "I'm sorry—I forgot you weren't there. You can't know, of course. . . . He told us there wouldn't be enough power for the message to be repeated. That's why we were supposed to gather everyone together to listen. He told us to smash the thing as soon as it was over. It's powered by something he called kinestasis."

"Called what?" I asked. And, "Who is he?"

Claire was weeping silently, her face pressed against the front of her brother's shirt, her shoulders shaking. He stroked her hair.

"I'm sorry," Donald said. "I can't think straight yet. I can hardly think at all. God knows how long it will take us to get used to it. If ever we do. . . . It's like a dream, a nightmare. . . ."

"After you'd gone——" He paused. "I'm sorry about that. We did want you to go, but not in that fashion. Fox would have it that you were company employees. I said it was unlikely."

"That's over and done with now," Kevin said impatiently.

"Yes. Who or what you are makes no difference now. We're all in the same boat. After you'd gone, we discovered that when the undamaged box was touched——"

"We know all about that," Kevin broke in even more impatiently.

"Father insisted that it had been dumped here to try to scare us away. He wouldn't listen when we told him

that sensible people wouldn't try a stupid thing like that. I wanted to call the others, but he said no, it would only spread alarm. So there were only four of us who actually heard the message. You saw what he looked like, the man who spoke?"

"Not very clearly," I said.

"Very tall. Much taller than us. Easily seven feet. And although he looked to be young—no lines on his face—he was completely bald. How much of the message did you manage to hear?"

"Not very much. It faded out the first time when he was listing names."

"The names——" Claire pushed herself away from her brother. Taking the handkerchief from his breast pocket, she used it to wipe her eyes. "When he was going through the names, Donald, remember? Only ours, just the seven of us. No mention of anyone else."

"There's a reason for that," he told her. "Their names wouldn't be in the papers because no one knew they were here in Kirdale when it happened." He looked at me. "It was odd, hearing all our names read out like that. In a way, it made the rest of it more believable. Perhaps that's why he did it—so we would know he was speaking the truth. It was even more strange when he read the newspaper articles. You didn't hear any of those?"

Kevin said, "He faded out for good just when he was on the point of telling us why he had been selected for the job."

"Because he was a historian and so knew something about our language. Only he didn't call it English at first. He used another word"—Donald frowned—"Anglingus—something like that. Then he corrected himself. He slipped up over other words, too. And he apologized once, explaining that there hadn't been sufficient time for him to prepare the message thoroughly. He told us——" Donald broke off. "You're not going to believe this. . . ."

Claire, more composed now, returned the handkerchief to its pocket. Donald took hold of her hand, asking anxiously, "Feeling better now?"

She nodded, swallowed. "I'll be all right."

Changing my position, transferring my weight from one foot to the other, I became aware of aching shoulders. I took my rucksack off. Kevin did the same. He

looked up from propping both of them against the wall.

"After what we saw a while back," he said drily, "we're just about ready to believe anything." He straightened, one hand clasped to the small of his back. "Anything within reason, that is."

"There's no kind of reason to this," Donald told him bleakly. "He told us that he was speaking to us from the year 5016."

I stared at the patch of window visible over Donald's shoulder. It looked brighter outside. Perhaps the sun was trying to break through.

Claire said worriedly, "It's time father was back."

"He and Bob Fox went to see for themselves," Donald told us. "In the other direction from that you took. To see if—if things had changed."

Kevin subsided on one of the rucksacks and stared at the opposite wall.

"I told you it was unbelievable," Donald said with a faint smile. "Now you know how we felt."

"No." Kevin shook his head. "It's not that so much. I was trying to work out which way it was. Have they found some way of communicating through time? Or have they come back to us? Or have we gone forward to them?"

"We've passed them," the other said. "How far past, I don't know. They don't, either—the people who have done this to us. He tried to explain why they had to do it, then how.

"They have something they call kinestasis. He said we wouldn't be able to understand what it was, even though we know about some of its effects. Telekinesis, he mentioned. And poltergeists. Things like that. Just like mankind once thought the natural effects of electricity were supernatural.

"They discovered it about the middle of the Fiftieth Century. He said that if we could imagine a magnetic field being split in the same way as an atom, we'd have some idea of what it was. He talked about atom bombs as if they were bows and arrows. But they don't have wars. They used kinestasis for peaceful purposes. A substitute for electricity. Only, unlike electricity, once it's been used, it isn't finished with. It stays in the atmosphere, building up, mixing in some way with the natural

magnetic fields. They didn't know that at first. When they did find out, it was too late. The damage had been done. They shut down the new power stations; they started making machines to neutralize the charged atmosphere. But it was too late. The free kinestasis was increasing. It would continue to build up until a critical point was reached. Then it would explode. It would burn up the atmosphere, destroy all living matter, roll up the earth's surface.

"He said it would be useless for them to build shelters, no matter how deep. The whole of the earth's crust would be affected, the whole surface changed out of all recognition. And when it was all over, the world would have to start from scratch again. Just as it had at least once before.

"Their research had led them to believe that the same thing had happened before—that a past civilization had destroyed itself in the same way. They believed that the scientists of that civilization had found some way of preserving the seeds of mankind. There was only one way in which that could have been done. They decided to use the same method.

"He said that some years previously they had discovered, purely by accident—he was honest enough to admit that—a process he called 'displacement'. They had experimented with it, but using only inanimate objects. He said that we would probably know that the scientists of our time had put forward the theory that time travel is impossible. The same theory still holds good in the Fifty-first Century. If you take something out of one time and move it forward to another, you leave a gap in one place and create a duplication in the other.

"He used an analogy to help us understand. A jigsaw puzzle. It seems they have them in his time, too. Imagine two puzzles, he told us—one making the picture of the past, the other that of the future. If you take a piece from the past, you leave a gap. And you can't put it in the future, because that picture is already complete.

"But if something happens to the past picture so that it becomes possible to lift out one piece without disturbing the whole, then that piece can be taken away. And if something happens to the future picture so that one of its pieces is destroyed, then the gap left can be filled

by the piece from the past.”

“Put and take,” Kevin said when Donald’s pause invited comment. “You have a good memory.”

“He made it all sound very simple. And it’s something I’m never likely to forget.”

“And we’re all part of one of the pieces of the past. Is that it?”

I marveled at Kevin’s steady voice.

“All of us”—Donald’s gesture took in the room, the cottage, its surroundings—“everything. The village, everything in it. All at one end of a lever. That was another analogy he used. A lever. The fulcrum is in his time—the machine, whatever it is, they use to do the tilting. One end of the lever rested here, in our time, in our village. The other extended away into the future. But before they could set the lever up, they had to find some event in the past which would be the equivalent of the missing part of the picture. A disaster it could only be. Something that completely obliterated everything concerned with the event so that nothing at all would be left to connect with the remaining surrounding pieces—so that those pieces could come together as if the missing piece had never existed.

“They searched through their archives and museums looking for a disaster from the past that would serve their purpose. They had to know the exact location. More importantly, they had to know the exact time. Among a whole series of such disasters, they came upon the one that involved a place in Cumberland. A news item told them that at exactly nineteen minutes past two on the morning of the first of May 1968, a village called Kirdale was completely obliterated, not a trace remaining.”

“The village and everyone who lived there,” Claire whispered.

Donald put his arm round her again.

“In a way,” he said, “that was the hardest part of all to grasp. The rest of it—that was way up in the air, out of reach . . . acceptable, I suppose, because it was beyond our comprehension. But to hear about the destruction of the village was a personal thing. That was something we could understand. He read one of the actual news items to us. From the local paper—our local

weekly rag. I even knew which reporter had written it; I recognized his style. You hear someone you know describing to you exactly how you came to be killed. You know something's happened and you think, just for a while, that you really are dead. You look down at yourself. You move your arms, your legs. You touch yourself. You're alive, and somebody has just finished telling you how you came to die. But we are all alive. We were lifted out—village, everything—in the same moment that the pylon was struck by lightning.”

He looked over our heads, upward, toward the mountain. Toward where the mountain had been yesterday. I wondered if it was still there. The earth's crust would be rolled up like a carpet. . . .

“That's what happened,” Donald said. “It was all there in the paper—today's paper. The pylon came down across the hut that contained the explosive. It smashed through the roof, carrying broken cables with it. The explosion blew out the side of the mountain, tore the dam apart, started a landslide. Nothing left. No bodies recovered. No chance of their ever being found. Obituaries. Seven of them. I was described as being a freelance journalist—I suppose, on the strength of a couple of articles I once wrote for the local rag. They never called me a journalist while I was alive.” Donald used his faint smile again. “You see? While I was alive. . . . I said it without thinking.”

“We might just as well be dead,” Claire said softly, passionately.

“A whole slab of countryside,” Kevin mused. “Cottages, roads that lead nowhere now, trees, people. At least, we have something. A settlement. . . .”

It was strange how I had accepted it all without question. Perhaps because so many strange things had already happened. This was a gathering together of those things, an explanation. My dazed mind accepted it. So much so that, after a fashion, I was able to think clearly and try to reason things out. I thought about the green parachutes. I remembered the eager way the seed had found its way into that minute crack of soil. I wondered—already dealing with the problems of this new existence—how long it would be before the jungle invaded our set-

tlement, taking it over completely. I wondered what kind of things lived in that jungle.

"A circular area," Donald said. "About one-third up the sphere of displacement was how he described it. About eight hundred meters in diameter. I make that roughly half a mile. I'm open to correction; my school days are a long time behind me.

"They pinpointed Kirdale on their maps and moved their equipment to where they judged the center of the village must once have been. Then they recorded the message that we listened to and made a great number of copies, each in its own container. Shortly before the time set for the tilting of the lever, they systematically destroyed all the containers. Obliteration under conditions of imploding space was how he described it. They hoped that when the lever was tilted and we started our slide into the future, we would pick up at least one of the boxes on the way. They didn't know if it would come off. They didn't know if any part of the experiment would work. There was no way of telling if it had been successful. They were trying the same thing with other disasters in other times and countries."

"Hiroshima," I said.

"Not complete annihilation," Kevin said. "The ruins of some buildings still left standing." And, to Donald, "Did he tell you where we would end up?"

"No, only that it would be in the far-distant future. The other end of the lever was sent probing into their future. It would only touch down when it found conditions that were right. A time when something had happened to make an empty space for us to fill."

"I think I can hazard a guess as to what that might have been," Kevin said slowly and looked at me. "In front of the jungle, Stuart, remember? A strip of ashes and cinders, still hot. Either a volcanic eruption or an earthquake. Perhaps both. And we've touched down in the mess it made."

"It would have to be something like that," Donald agreed. "Some kind of natural upheaval. He warned us that we would find the world still in a state of flux. He told us that they were allowing a certain space of time for things to settle down after the holocaust. They could only

guess how long that would take. But to make absolutely certain, the lever was set to start probing into the future in the year——”

He paused.

“About the only thing we can be sure of is that this is sometime after the year 40,000.”

CHAPTER SIX

Leaving Donald still talking—rounding the thing off, answering Kevin's questions—I went to stand outside. Not to think. Just to be alone.

There was a garden at the front of the cottage. I hadn't noticed it before. But, then, it was only very small—just two narrow strips of thin grass, bisected by the trodden-earth path. There had been a tree here at one time. Perhaps it had been cut down to let more light into the tiny windows. All that remained was the dead stump. I leaned against it, resting my elbows on the slanting oval that still carried the marks of the long-ago ax.

The mist still seemed to be lifting. Now I could see well beyond the Emery cottage across the road. There was the gray shape of a mountain slope, mist clinging to it, outlining rock formations that would otherwise pass unnoticed. Just an ordinary mountain slope. Treeless, bare. Part of a circle that was half a mile across. Part of the countryside that had come with us. Soil and granite and grass. Bricks and mortar. Chairs and tables, cups and saucers. And flesh and blood. . . .

Sometime after the year 40,000.

I was numbed. Too numbed, I think, to be afraid.

A long time ago, when I was a small boy living in the country, I had once played a game with other boys. Some of them had been newcomers, strangers, "towners"—old beyond their years with the wisdom of city streets, used to playing in different, harder surroundings. The game had been their own invention, a kind of hide-and-seek.

We'll show you how it's done, they told us country children. You go and hide first, they told me. I chose a tree with a wide trunk—not a clever place, but one from which I could watch the start of the pursuit. And that pursuit, when it did start, was not a thing of shouts and laughter, but of silence, stones and sticks. Terrified, I ran to a field, a hayfield. I wriggled to a hollow that only I knew of. For a lifetime I lay there, listening to the rustling all around. I wasn't afraid anymore, even though fear lay everywhere. I wasn't afraid, because I knew I was safe so long as I stayed where I was.

There was the same false sense of security now. The cottages, the road, the stump I leaned against were my hollow from the past. Nothing could harm me so long as I stayed close to these normal, everyday things. Everything I could see was sane and sensible.

High in the air, over the slate roof of the cottage across the road, something green went drifting by. I looked away from it, down at my feet. A plant grew from the hard earth of the path, a plant with a single, long green leaf. I stamped on it in sudden, senseless, blind fury. It sprang upright when I took my foot away, intact, unharmed. Crouching, I took hold of it, tugging. It refused to budge. I tried to snap the stem, a stem that was as tough and resilient as rubber.

I straightened, looking at a hand where the fury of effort had broken skin. Another green parachute came sailing by, so close that it all but touched my face. I struck out at it. The leaf cluster collapsed. The thing fell to the path, the red glow winking out. I set my heel on it, grinding savagely.

Kevin emerged from the doorway. "Caught something?" he asked. And when I took my foot away, "Oh, just one of those things."

His red, sweat-soaked shirt, unbuttoned, hung loosely over sweat-stained shorts. He had rolled his woolen socks down as far as they would go, thick gray coils over the

shoes he had bought specially for our climbing holiday.

Our holiday. . . .

"It's clearing," he observed. "Is that part of one of our mountains I see yonder?"

"It looks like one of ours."

"One that made the trip with us." He felt in his hip pocket and brought out a package of cigarettes. "Three left. What about you, Stuart?"

"I think there's some in my rucksack."

He shrugged. "Once they're gone, they're gone. They'll either dry up in this heat or go moldy with the humidity. So what the hell. No point in saving them for special occasions." He offered me the packet, flicked his lighter for both of us. "How's it going?" he asked over the steady flame.

"You know."

"Yes, I know." He drew deeply on his cigarette. "This sort of thing doesn't happen. It *can't* happen. But it has. We know it has because of that jungle. A question of accepting it—getting used to it." He laughed shortly, humorlessly. "Getting used to it. Hell, I can't even begin to think about it in rational terms. Your mind flounders when you start. All I can think of is that we've got a wall all around us. That's the only thing that's come through. There's a kind of barrier all around us. We're here, they're there—everybody else—outside. Just a stone's throw away. But we can't get to them."

"They'll think we're dead," I said.

"We *are* dead. To them. That's something else we've got to get used to. It wouldn't be so bad if there was some way of sending a message. They won't know yet. Our people, I mean. Your parents. Mine. They'll read about Kirdale, but they won't associate us with the place. Our names will make a later edition. Much later. Days, perhaps. They probably won't know anything's wrong until Saturday, when we don't show up. That's when they'll start getting worried. They'll go to the police, I suppose. The Ennerdale police. Then the——"

"Belt up," I said harshly.

"It doesn't do any good. You're right, no bloody good at all. Only makes matters worse. We're here; we've just got to make the best of it. Live in hope that there might be some way of getting back." He looked along the

road. "Seen anything of the major?"

"No."

"He and Fox went off to explore. According to Donald, neither of them believing a blind word of the message. I'll warrant they'll have changed their minds by now." Carefully pinching out his cigarette, he returned the stub to the package. "Save that for later. It's funny the notions you get when you can't think straight. I never used to bother about smoking. Take it or leave it. Now it's suddenly important. And I found myself thinking about the Tower. You ever been to the Tower of London?"

"Once—a long time ago."

"The suits of armor there. Small affairs. Just about fit an overgrown schoolboy. The men of those days must have been about five feet tall. We've pushed it up to about six. And that man from the future—maybe seven feet or more."

"Man may change his height," I said. "He doesn't change his nature. It's still 'I'm all right, Jack.'"

"I don't get you."

"They sent a couple of metal boxes with us. From their time. Which means they could have sent themselves. But they preferred using someone else for the experiment."

"I hadn't thought of that." Kevin leaned against my tree stump. "But they're not all right, you know. Far from it. Don't forget, they were all due to die, anyway. Even so, they could have sent some of themselves instead of us. Maybe they figured we'd be better. Tougher. Better able to stand up to what they were sending us to. And they haven't just dumped us here and forgotten all about us. According to Donald, they have left the lever machinery working, just in case——"

Still not able to think clearly, I had forgotten that the very reason we had been brought here was because the people responsible had only a short time left to live. But even that knowledge didn't stop me hating them bitterly. We were suffering now for their mistakes. Because they had developed some sort of process and then let it get out of hand. An error of judgment. If you could call it that. And not the only one those so clever scientists had made.

“When they dumped those boxes on us,” I said, “they forgot to take into account any change in the height of the land. That’s why one got smashed—because it fell from a height. It was only by luck that a roof broke the fall of the other.”

“Now you’re splitting hairs,” Kevin said. “I know how you feel, though. But don’t forget one thing. If it wasn’t for them, we’d all be dead now. Buried under tons of rock and water. And you can’t blame them for what happened at Kirdale.

“I reckon they’ve done everything they can to make things easy. Without that message, I reckon some of us would have stood a fair chance of going out of our minds. At least, we know where we are—and why. And, like I said, they’ve left the displacement machine running on the off chance they’ll be able to send other things through to us. But they don’t hold out much hope. If you’d have waited till Donald had finished his story, you’d know all about it.

“They even told us to be sure to destroy the boxes because they could be dangerous, because they’re powered by that kinestasis thing. They’re toys, incidentally. Children’s playthings. That’s how advanced they are. They could have used something more elaborate, but they didn’t want us to come up against something we didn’t understand. They knew we were used to television sets. Those boxes are the nearest thing they have to them. They’ve done everything for us they could.”

“Including sending a sample of the same power that caused all the trouble,” I said bitterly.

“Because they had no choice. You should have stayed till Donald had finished. They had to work very quickly; there was no time to adapt the boxes to another form of power.”

I looked at the gray mountain slope. “If only they were clever enough to find some way of letting our people know what has happened to us.”

“I can just see their faces.” He smiled grimly. “Would anyone believe such a message? Whoever picked it up would be labeled a crank, and that’s as far as it would go. No, that’s something——”

The tree stump started to vibrate, as if activated by some hidden internal mechanism. Startled, I lifted my

elbows and backed away. The ground under my feet was trembling. There was the same terrible, terrifying sense of insecurity I had experienced during the night. Then, lying down, I had been in an elevator. Now, standing, I was balancing on a raft that floated on turbulent invisible water. The panes rattled in the windows. From somewhere inside the cottage came the muted crash of something falling and breaking. Thunder rumbled distantly. If it was thunder.

Gradually, the tremor passed. The ground settled and became firm and substantial again.

"A state of flux," Kevin said shakily. "He wasn't kidding. I suppose we'll just have to get used to that sort of thing."

The fog had suddenly thickened. Above the sickly sweet smell of the jungle came the other smell—the acrid tang of smoldering sulfur. Far away to the left, a dull red glow hung in the sky. It flared through the mist, wavered, flared again and then faded away.

"Etna," Kevin said. "No, Vesuvius. The one behind Naples. A volcano, anyway. And not all that far away, by the look of it."

We turned at the sound of approaching footsteps. Three people were coming down the road, the major a little ahead of the other two. Fox had his arm about the woman's waist.

This was my first sight of Mrs. Dorran. Kevin's earlier description had been no exaggeration. Sultry. Huge dark eyes and sulky scarlet mouth. Features that were perhaps just a little large for such a small face. Thick black hair that coiled loosely across a white forehead and then drooped to rest on the shoulders of a white long-sleeved blouse. A blouse with froth at the throat, gathered and held in place by a gilt brooch. Her black skirt was short and tight. Her legs were bare, her shoes high-heeled. Her normal way of walking was both arrogant and provocative.

Kevin and I might not have existed for all the notice the three took of us. The major turned off the road to stump into his cottage. Fox and Mrs. Dorran followed without even a glance in our direction.

Kevin said sourly, "And a good morning to you, too. I won't ask what you think of our Mrs. Dorran, Stuart. I

can see you dribbling.” He grinned fleetingly and then was serious again. “Just occurred to me . . . not a very even balance of the sexes in our little colony. Leaving the elders out—four males to only two females. And one of those not terribly exciting. I have the feeling there’s going to be trouble sooner or later. Once the novelty—if that’s the word—has worn off. Something else you can lay at the door of our Fifty-first Century friends. Come the long, dark nights, and——”

He broke off as the major reappeared, alone, coming across the road toward us, now minus his alpaca jacket, shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows. The fiery red of his face was in vivid contrast to the snow of his hair. He looked past us to the cottage behind, demanding brusquely, “Are they in there?”

“They are,” Kevin told him.

The major marched into the cottage.

“Nice of him to inquire if we’re all right,” Kevin observed drily. “I have the feeling that very shortly there’s going to be a showdown. If that’s the right word. A sorting out, anyway. I suppose we’d better play ball when the time comes.”

“I suppose so.”

“You sound as if you couldn’t care less. It’s going to be a question of survival. Had you thought of that?”

I hadn’t. Sometime in the future I would be able to think clearly again. Right now, there was no future, only the immediate present. There was just the village—as much of it as was visible. Just that and nothing else. I stubbed out my cigarette against the tree stump and watched the sparks drift to the ground.

“We’ll have to get organized,” Kevin stated. “At least, we do have somewhere to live. Things could have been worse.”

The major emerged from the cottage. Claire and Donald followed like sheep. Mr. Tadman, lagging behind, said unhappily, “I don’t like leaving mother.”

They filed by. The major, halfway across the road, looked back at us over his shoulder.

“You’d better come, too,” he said ungraciously.

We followed them into the Emery’s front room, where the metal box still squatted in the center of the floor. Mrs. Dorran sat in an easy chair. Fox, one leg swinging,

l lounged on the arm. The major took up a commanding position with his back to the tiny black fireplace.

Claire discovered the debris of the china dog.

"I'm afraid that was my doing," I apologized.

"It doesn't matter. . . ." She gathered up the fragments, looked round for somewhere to put them, found nowhere and poured them back on the table.

Donald went to stand by the window, motioning for Mr. Tadman to join him. Kevin and I, the last in, only present on sufferance, stood in the doorway.

The major clearly had a speech to make. He looked slowly round the room.

"I am a soldier," he said, "not a scientist. I have been trained to accept and deal with a situation without having to know how that situation arose. I listened while that"—he looked at the box—"told us what has been done to us. In some manner, totally incomprehensible to me, the entire village—along with its occupants—has been moved bodily from one place to another. To discuss how and why that has been done would be a waste of time. We have to accept it as an accomplished fact. And, having accepted it, take stock of our new position. Which is why I have collected everyone here.

"This cottage is sited roughly at the center of a circle which contains most of the village and which is about half a mile in diameter. Outside that circle, completely surrounding us, is unknown country. Until we are able to learn something about that country, we must regard it, and everything it contains, as potentially dangerous.

"I am a soldier. I view our situation through a soldier's eyes. When the enemy is an unknown quantity, one goes on the defensive. Our main task will be to do everything necessary to protect ourselves against anything which might invade our village."

"The invasion has already started," I said.

He frowned heavily at the interruption. "What do you mean by that?"

"Some kind of plant or tree is already seeding itself."

"Plants——" He shrugged such things aside. "Those are easily dealt with. I am mainly concerned with the people who may live out there. Savages, almost certainly."

"According to the message," Donald said diffidently,

"we have been brought here because there are no other people. There may be animals, but even that seems very unlikely."

His father frowned again. "We can take nothing for granted. The impression I received from that message was that the people who sent it, and who were responsible for bringing us here, were as much in the dark as we are."

Mr. Tadman said, "I can deal with any plants that seed themselves."

"You'll need a spade," I told him. "Hands are no use."

"When you have quite finished——" the major said coldly. "Have you finished?" He was looking at me.

"The floor's yours."

"Our first main task," he continued, "must be to protect ourselves against any intruders. To erect a stockade all the way round the perimeter would be beyond our limited capabilities. We must accordingly sacrifice the bulk of the territory that came with us by reducing the size of our circle. Fortunately, two of the only three still-occupied cottages are sited close together. This one and"—turning to Mr. Tadman—"yours, George. Our best plan will be to use these as the nucleus of a small, compact fortress. Mr. Fox and Mrs. Dorran can move in here with my family. You two——" His gaze rested bleakly on Kevin and me.

"They'll come in with me and mother," Mr. Tadman inserted before that disposition could be announced.

"I was about to say that."

"What do you propose using to build your fortress?" Kevin asked.

"Stone, bricks, wood." The major's tone left no doubt that he was replying to someone who should have known better than ask such an unnecessary question. "There are plenty of trees out there. In the circle, there are eight empty cottages and the ruins of a farmhouse. We have hammers, axes, saws. We also have——" His gaze traveled round the circle of faces, not so much counting them, one felt, as inviting, daring, repudiation. "We also have six able-bodied men."

"Those trees," Fox said laconically, "they're out there, outside the circle. You'll need a foraging party. They'll have to be armed——"

"I intended dealing with the question of exploration," the major said stiffly. "There are other things we must deal with first. The most important is water. In this heat, we are going to need a great deal of drinking water. All we have, at the moment, is that which still remains in the tanks of the empty cottages. It must be collected. . . ."

He detailed his daughter for that job.

"Drain all the tanks," he told Claire. "Bring the water back here, boil it and store it in receptacles. Is that clear?"

She nodded silently.

"Food must be our next concern. Perishables, including bread, may as well be eaten immediately. Canned food is a different matter. That must be collected together in order that it can be rationed. It has got to last until we can find an outside source of supply. There are two extra mouths to feed."

"We'll earn our keep," Kevin said evenly.

"I trust so. There is one thing we must all understand. For us to have any hope at all of survival, we must all work together."

"United we stand," Kevin supplied.

"Someone has got to give the orders," the other said harshly. "Much as we dislike it, there has got to be discipline. Because of what has happened here in the past, I had automatically assumed the role of command. I am ready to step down. If there is anyone here who has objections, who feels he can do the job better, now is the time for him to speak."

"Or forever hold his peace," Kevin murmured under his breath.

If there were any objections to the self-appointed leadership, no one saw fit to voice them.

The major took the silence as a vote of confidence. "Very well," he said. "Clothing. What we have, we must take great care of. The same applies to those who have to rely upon such things as spectacles and dentures. What soap and cleaning materials we have must be made to last as long as possible. We must start a calendar—some means of recording the passage of the days. We must also collect and preserve all books and newspapers that came with us. Nothing—and I repeat, nothing—must be thrown away. I think I have dealt with all of

the urgent points.”

“Medicines,” Donald suggested. “Dressings, bandages.”

“Perhaps worth taking into consideration,” his father admitted grudgingly. “We will have everything of that nature brought here. Has anyone else any suggestions to make?”

Mr. Fox had a query. “What happens to my things and Cherry’s when we move in here with your lot?”

The major frowned impatience. “We are only dealing with essentials. That sort of thing can wait.”

I looked round the circle. A circle of faces that, surprisingly, showed little sign of the strain their owners must surely be feeling. The overall impression was that of mute acceptance of the inevitable. Donald’s face had lost its former grayness. Even Claire looked composed, for all there was little color to her cheeks. Mrs. Dorran was examining the scarlet nails of one hand through half-closed, heavy-lidded eyes. Fox had taken off his glasses, folded them and was now balancing them on one knee. The thick mat of hair on his chest was plastered down with sweat. Bulky and thick-fleshed, he was the type of man who sweats easily.

At Donald’s side, Mr. Tadman looked down at hands clasped at his waist. Solid brown hands. Thick thumb resting on thick, capable thumb. A gardener’s work-gnarled hands. I remembered him telling me that he had once been a market gardener.

The thought came so suddenly that I spoke more loudly than I intended. “Seeds!” And when they all looked at me—even Mrs. Dorran, “Vegetable seeds.”

“Yes.” The major nodded reluctant approval. “Something worth considering. What did you say your name was again?”

“Ince.” I almost added “sir,” just biting the word off in time.

He looked at Mr. Tadman. “What have you got in that line, George?” he asked and then had to repeat the question before the old man, miles away, heard and looked up.

“You usually grow all your own vegetables,” the major said.

“Not this year.” The other smiled a little. “No point, like. Being as we wouldn’t be here to lift the crops.

Seeds. . . .” He creased his forehead with the effort of thinking. “Maybe some left over from last year. Peas, maybe, beans . . . I’d have to look. Bound to be potatoes knocking round. Not intended as seed, but they’ll grow.”

“Have a good look round,” the major told him. “Go over to the old farm and see if anything’s left there.”

Donald pointed to the metal box. “What about that? Hadn’t we better do as he said and destroy it—both of them?”

“I’ve already said that we destroy nothing,” his father said flatly. “I thought I had made that clear. It seems that I am the only one to fully appreciate the position we’re in. So far as we are aware, we are now in an uncivilized country. If we destroy something, throw it away, that is the end of it. Even a can which has contained beans must be cleaned and polished and——”

“But——” Donald would have interrupted and was silenced by nothing more than a glare. The subject was closed. The major turned to the next subject.

“Exploration of the surrounding country,” he said. “With the main purpose of finding water.” He debated how that might best be arranged. “Parties of two. You, Donald—and Fox.” He eyed Kevin and me doubtfully.

“Always ready and willing,” Kevin said lightly.

“Yes.” The major didn’t seem too happy about the offer. “Donald, you had better go to the south. Fox and I have already conducted a preliminary survey of the north. So far as we were able to make out through the mist, there is a mountain quite close to us, bounded on the east by what appeared to be jungle. In front of the mountain was a large tract of what we both took to be hot lava.”

“There’s more to the south,” Kevin told him. “Not much of it, and cinders rather than lava, but hot. Too hot to walk across in comfort. Just a narrow strip, and then comes jungle. It looked to be impenetrable. There may be a way round it. It was too misty for us to see.”

“You had better take axes,” the major told his son. “And my shotgun and a dozen rounds. And a compass.”

Then it was our turn to receive instructions. We were to go in the opposite direction, to the north. To either find a way across the lava or around it.

“A reconnaissance,” the major rounded the thing off.

“The main purpose of which is to find water. The secondary, to learn something of the nature of the terrain. Memorize landmarks and estimate distances in order that we may start making a map. Keep your eyes open for food of any kind. Fruit, berries. Bring samples. Be on the alert for any signs of life. Animal spore. Footprints. You have watches?” We had. “Check them.” We did. “It is now two minutes to eleven. Be back here not later than one. Is that clearly understood?”

We said that it was.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was still misty outside. Although it was getting on for the middle of the day and the sun must have been almost overhead, the murk still persisted. I had the feeling that it would never clear completely, that it would always be like this, that we would never be able to see clearly for any distance.

We had left the others in the cottage. Only Mr. Tadman had come with us. He was more concerned about our lack of equipment than his job of looking for seeds. "You can't go off just like that. . . ." He brooded over our empty hands. "Come with me."

"Dispositions made," Kevin remarked as we crossed the road. "All units to return to base before oh one hundred hours. Is that how he ran things when you were having your little set-to with the dam builders?"

"He always did have a way of getting things going." Mr. Tadman paused by the tree stump to look back at the major's cottage. "Maybe not so——" He was lost for the right word.

"Military?" Kevin suggested.

"I suppose it comes of him having been a regular. He was in the army for over thirty years. Sergeant—infantry.

I don't know who first started calling him Major. Thirty years must take a deal of throwing off."

"We *have* got to get ourselves organized," Kevin said. "I'm all for it—it's plain common sense. But the way he went about it——"

"It's just his way. Once things is running smoothly, he'll slack off." Turning, Mr. Tadman spotted the seedling on the path. Thankfully, it hadn't grown since last I had seen it. Grunting, he bent over it. Perhaps he was stronger than I; perhaps his hands were more skillful. But when he twined his fingers round the gray stem and pulled, it came up slowly, then with a jerk—a long white root and a small ball of soil. A worm wriggled in the soil.

"Someone else who came with us," he said and removed the worm with gentle fingers, putting it back in the ground, covering it with earth. "Not that I've seen any birds. . . ." He straightened, the seedling on the palm of his hand. "I don't reckon any of those came with us. The blasting drove them away months ago. Maybe one or two might have made it. Mice, too. And there was a mole out yonder. Hills all over the place. That's about all. Not much to start off a new world with."

"It might already have started up." I said. "Animals, at least. God knows if they'll be the same as those we've been used to."

"No birds." The old man looked up. "If there were any, I reckon we'd have seen them flying over afore now. No birds, so likely no animals. All the same——"

He looked at us.

"You've got to be careful when you go out there. I'm not saying as plants can think. They can't. Not our sort. But they do have something. Some sort of instinct, maybe. You put a seed in the ground and something tells it which way up is. It always knows which way to go to get to the light.

"You got to remember that plants have only one reason for living. That's to propagate theirselves. They grow just to make seed and then scatter that seed as far away as they can. Take berries. They only change color to make it easier for birds to spot them. But when there's no birds to eat the berries and get rid of the seed later—miles away, maybe—then there's got to be some other way."

"Like parachutes," I said.

"I took a good look at one earlier." He held up one finger. "And got burnt for my trouble. I reckon that whatever plant or tree makes them things must grow close to the hot lava the major mentioned. That's what burnt me—a bit of red-hot cinder. And the stems wasn't even scorched." He held up the seedling by the tip of its leaf. "This couldn't have been growing for more'n a couple of hours. Look at the length of root already. It's not going to be easy keeping free from plants like that.

"Worse'n groundsel." He smiled a little. "Give it an inch and it'll take a mile." He laid the seedling on the stump. "I'll burn that later. If it will burn. Otherwise, I'll have to find some other way of getting rid of it."

"Point taken," said Kevin soberly. "One plant uses hot-air balloons to disperse its seeds. Others might have different ways."

"Just as well to be on the safe side," said the old man. "I'll go and see what I can find for you. I won't ask you in, in case mother's sleeping and we disturb her." He went into his cottage.

"He's taking it very well," I said.

"He's that type." Kevin nodded. "Stolid—taking things as they come. And that's not because he hasn't any imagination. He has. The old boy's going to be a damned sight more use to us than the military-minded major."

A green parachute drifted by. Then two more. Then a whole flock of them. One touched down by my feet. I set my heel on it as the gray stems started their writhing search for soil.

"It's going to be impossible to keep them in check," I said. "There are too many of them."

Mr. Tadman reappeared. He had a small ax in one hand, a curved steel blade set in a stubby wooden handle in the other. Frowning a little, as if disturbed by something, he handed the ax to Kevin and the billhook to me.

"Mother's up. . . ." Biting his lip, he turned to gaze at the cottage. "She's got dinner on the go, just like nothing had happened, just like any other day. Now she's going through the larder—seeing what food there is, she says." Worried, perplexed, he shook his head. "Smiling—singing away to herself like she always does."

"Perhaps she hasn't been able to grasp what has

happened," I suggested.

"That's just it," said Mr. Tadman. "She grasped it quicker'n me. When Claire was telling us, she was onto it afore I was. She knows what's happened."

"Dazed, then," Kevin said gently. "And better that than being frightened."

"That's what I'm trying to tell myself. Only mother's not that sort. When they told us our son was dead, she took that real bad. She didn't get dazed then. She's——" He broke off helplessly. There was nothing we could do about it.

"We'd better get going," I said to Kevin.

"We had." He tested the swing of his ax. "Before the commanding officer has our guts for garters."

As we started off, so the southbound party made its appearance—a party much better equipped for what might lie ahead than were Kevin and I. Fox wore a battered soft hat, the brim pulled well down, darkening his already swarthy face. A short-hafted ax was thrust through his leather belt. A canvas haversack hung from his shoulder. Given a gun, he would have passed anywhere for a hunter on safari.

Donald had the gun—his father's shotgun that would be. He lifted it, calling, "Good luck!" He had changed his clothes. Even in khaki shirt and shorts, he managed to look coolly elegant.

"And you!" Kevin called back.

We set off in the opposite direction. I swung my bill-hook at a drifting parachute in the halfhearted way one flicks at the nuisance of a fly.

"I shouldn't bother," Kevin said. And, "I hope she's all right. Mrs. Tadman. He's worried about her."

"She must know what's happened. I mean, checking off to see how much food she's got."

"Could be it's her day for doing that. Making a shopping list. Only now there's no Ennerdale to take it to."

We were passing the empty cottage where he had climbed on the roof to recover the box.

"They were able to send those damned boxes," I said. "You'd think they'd have sent other things as well. Useful things——"

"They're going to try. I told you that. But the boxes came through when the lever tilted—all part of the same

operation. We sort of picked them up as we slid down." He grinned. "What do you want—a brace of ray guns?"

I held up the billhook. "This won't be of much use against the sort of jungle we saw back there."

"Quit moaning," he said equably.

We had come to the place where we had found the first, damaged box. At the side of the road, where soil had lodged in the gutter, seedlings grew thickly—evil, shining soldier leaves on parade.

The mist wasn't thickening, but immediately ahead it seemed to be darker. As we walked, so that darkness took shape. A mountain appeared—a mountain with a jagged volcanic peak that towered into the sky.

The road ended abruptly. In front of us, lava—glowing redly in places—stretched away into the murky haze.

"Which way now?" Kevin wondered. "Right or left? Not much to choose between them."

A lifetime ago, in another world, he had asked the same question. We had taken the wrong direction. If only we had turned to the left after crossing the bridge, instead of the right, we wouldn't have ended up in Kirdale. We wouldn't be here now.

We went to the right again. "Away from that volcano," Kevin said, turning off the road to lead the way across the grass. "The more distance there is between that thing and me, the happier I'll be."

We followed the boundary between two different places, looking for a spot where we could step from one world into another. We climbed the gentle slope of half a hill—a hill that had been sliced through by the same power that had been used to bring us here. The newly exposed raw earth was already thick with parachute seedlings.

The boundary was not the smooth perimeter of a circle. At one point it swung outward, making a detour around an outcrop of rock. There was a hollow—half a hollow—where a pond had been sliced through, the water drained away, more of the damned seedlings growing in the exposed rich, black sludge.

As our way curved, so the outline of the volcano slid slowly to the left, finally becoming swallowed by the mist. There was another bisected hill to climb, higher than the first. From the new height, with the stretch of lava nar-

rowing, we caught our first real sight of the far side. Not clearly at first, just a blur of color. Then shapes came. Bushes, shrubs, small trees. Not growing tightly together, as had been those in the jungle, but thankfully in clumps, with open spaces between. Bright emerald greens, chocolate browns, flaring yellows. Arcadia through the mists. A pleasant, almost inviting vista.

"Could be worse," Kevin observed judiciously. "Let's hope that distance, allied with fog, isn't lending enchantment."

The lava was thinning. Mounds showed through it—small islands covered with scorched, still-smoking vegetation. A large one was almost the shape of a boat, three blackened stumps serving as masts. And then there was a place where a whole chain of islands all but formed a bridge from our side of the red-brown expanse to the other.

Kevin pointed with his ax. "What do you think, Stuart?"

The islands were only small, their surfaces uneven, the spaces between wider than had appeared at first sight. I didn't relish the idea of using them as stepping-stones across lava that must still be almost red-hot, but if we were to cross, they were the only way.

We scrambled down the raw-earth slope to the brink of the volcanic outspew. Heat rose in waves. The far side seemed a long way away.

Eight islands bridged the nightmare sea. Kevin went across at a half run, arms outstretched like a tightrope walker. I took it more steadily. As I launched myself from the last island to the mainland, there came a distant rumble of sound. The ground shuddered.

"Here we go again," Kevin said resignedly.

There was no red glow from the direction of the volcano. Perhaps we were too far away to see it through the fog.

Something whined past my head. A glowing fragment of rock struck the ground in front of us. Something stung my cheek.

We raced for the shelter of the nearby trees. The ground steadied as we reached them; the rain of red-hot cinders ceased. The small grumbling eruption was over.

"A fine welcome." Grimacing, Kevin flicked a cinder

from his shoulder and squinted to inspect the hole it had made in his shirt. "It's all very well for the gaffer to tell us to make our clothes last. At this rate, they're soon going to be worn out. What do we turn to then—leaves?" He gazed about him. "No shortage of those."

We might have been standing in an ordinary woodland glade from our own time. There were the same colorings, the same vistas, the same familiar groupings of bushes and trees. It was only at second glance that the differences became noticeable.

What I had first taken to be grass underfoot wasn't grass at all, but a kind of emerald-green velvety moss, as resilient and springy as an expensive carpet—so thick that when I tried to part it, with some idea of seeing how it grew, I was unable to make any impression on it.

The bushes seemed to be mostly of the one type: small and compact, smacking of the Orient, luxuriant with foliage, branches covered with masses of small, perfectly circular leaves.

The trees were more outlandish, more alien in appearance. Partly because of the soft moss that covered their squat, deeply indented trunks, covered them so completely that there was no dividing line between ground and trunk. Partly because of the way in which the branches—instead of growing outward and upward—pointed downward, forming a kind of grotesque umbrella.

Bright greens, soft grays, rich browns . . . springtime in arcadia, indeed. But something was missing. There were no birds, no butterflies, no insects. No sounds at all. There were no flowers. And no sign of fruit or berries. . . .

But, then, this was only spring. Or had we left that behind in our time? Another era, another season of the year? I didn't think so. The circle of seasons was governed by factors that surely no holocaust could ever change. So spring it must still be, and fruits and berries would only come with autumn.

If they were to come at all. I hadn't needed Mr. Tadman to tell me that berries ripen and change color so that birds may all the more easily see them. When there are no birds, then there is no reason why they should change. There is no reason why, in a world in which the only living things are plants, berries and fruit should be

produced at all.

One thought led to another. Even if there were some and we were to find them, how would we know if they were safe for us to eat, when there were no animals to do the testing for us? Someone—one of us—would have to act as guinea pig.

“Act as what?” Kevin wanted to know.

I hadn’t realized I had spoken some of my thoughts aloud. I told him what and why. He didn’t seem all that concerned.

“A bridge to cross when we come to it. No doubt we’ll figure something out.”

His bland indifference angered me. “Look, there can’t be much food in the village! Maybe enough to keep us going for a few days. And then what the hell do we do?”

“Live off the land,” he replied simply and went on quickly before I had time to snap back.

“I’m not trying to be sarcastic. I meant what I said. Use your head, for Pete’s sake. Look about you; think back to that jungle. Where do you imagine all the trees came from in the first place?”

It was something I hadn’t thought about.

“Do *you* know?” I asked sharply, still angry.

“I can have a stab at guessing. Way back, so they tell us, the earth was nothing but a molten mass. It cooled and hardened, and then plants started to grow. Don’t ask me where the first seeds came from. Maybe they came drifting through space; maybe they just grew.

“All right. That’s talking in millions of years. According to Donald, that johnny-in-the-box was only talking in thousands. Which means it hasn’t been a question of history repeating itself right from scratch. There hasn’t been time. The things growing here must have sprung originally from seeds that survived the disaster. Perhaps hidden in clefts of rock, perhaps buried in mud. But they survived. And when things had settled down, they took root. Now do you see what I’m driving at?”

“They’re the same trees and things we had in our time,” I said.

“Only mucked about somewhat by nature. New climate, changed environment. Mutated. You name the process—they’ve probably gone through it. Nature ad-

justing to changed conditions. But old habits die hard. I have the feeling that some of the plants here will still be flogging themselves to death producing fruit, even if it is all so much wasted effort."

"Then the sooner we find some," I said, "the better."

"I won't argue with that. But you're forgetting we're under orders from the gaffer back yonder. Water—that's our target. Fruit only if we happen to spot any. And as for testing it"—Kevin showed his white teeth in a grin—"that's the gaffer's headache. I'll be only too happy to let him sort that out."

Talking, he had been looking about him. Now he pointed with his ax. "That bush yonder particularly interests me."

I followed the direction of the ax. "It looks no different from any of the others."

"Ah, but it is. Thicker. Affording better cover. Not that cover's really necessary now, but, like the plants, old habits die hard." From the breast pocket of his shirt he produced a wad of paper, unfolded it, carefully divided it and gave me half. "Never let it be said that I didn't share my last precious possession with you. I won't be long."

He made toward his selected bush. Holding the paper in my free hand, staring at it, I walked slowly along the glade. In the shelter of one of the umbrella-branched trees was a flat-topped boulder, almost covered with the bright-green moss. I sat down on it, still looking at what he had given me—a strip of soft, pink toilet paper.

He had taken it from the roll in his bathroom. Now I remembered him coming down the stairs with it, holding it aloft, to where I waited in the hall with my rucksack. Emergency supplies, he had informed me, folding the paper and tucking it away, luxury in the wilderness. I wasn't brought up on newspaper. Comfort at any price. . . .

And here in my hand now, in this alien place, a piece of that paper—a strip of ordinary pink toilet paper. Pink because that was the color of his bathroom. Ours was green and black.

Our bathroom. . . .

And then, for the first time since it had happened, the full realization of what that happening meant exploded

inside me, triggered by the thought that I would never see that bathroom again.

I would never see my home again. I would never see my parents again. There would be no more television, no more cinemas, no more morning papers. Someone else would have to take my books back to the library. One was a week overdue. Fourpence to pay.

Someone else would have to finish the suit I had been working on. Single-breasted, gray worsted. Someone else would have to finish mowing the back lawn.

I stuffed the paper into my hip pocket.

Mother and father were dead. They had died a long time ago. Just how long, I didn't know. The suit had been finished and collected and worn and, centuries ago—thousands of years ago—had crumbled into dust.

A green parachute—the first I had seen in some time—came sailing along the glade. It touched an overhanging branch, wavered and sank slowly down to settle on the moss close to my feet. I left it alone. The spark winked out; smoke trailed for a moment.

This was a new world. Nothing remained of the old. Everything had gone—buildings and people, towns, cities, even, perhaps, whole countries and continents. Everything had gone except for one small circle just half a mile across.

I watched, absently at first, the gray stalks of the parachute leaves turn into groping tendrils. I watched them try to find a way through the carpet of moss—a carpet that seemed to resist all attempts at penetration.

I leaned forward, intently now. And then—for a moment I thought my eyes were playing tricks—the moss writhed and heaved as if it had suddenly come alive.

It parted in one place to expose something long and thin and white. Something that rose slowly into the air and poised itself, the tip splitting into three. Slowly, it sank over the still-upright swaying leaves, pressing them down, wrapping itself around them like a three-fingered tentacle, dragging them along as it pulled itself back under the moss. Now only the tips remained above ground. Now——

Engrossed, fascinated, I didn't know Kevin had returned. When he shouted—I didn't catch the words—I looked up, startled, to see him racing toward me. I didn't

realize anything was wrong—not even when he flung himself bodily at me, grabbing my arm, the billhook sent flying, jerking me forward so roughly that I lost my balance and went sprawling face downward on the moss.

Dazed, for a moment I lay there, not attempting to move. Then he helped me to my feet.

Before I could speak, while I was still collecting myself, he pointed—silently, panting from running—at the boulder where I had been sitting. Snakes I took them to be at first and then saw that they were larger editions of the thing that had dragged the leaves away. Five of them, at the back of the rock, rearing up into the air, hanging there, three-fingered tips poised, seeming ready to strike.

Kevin had regained his breath. “That one”—he pointed again—“almost touching your arm. What the hell are they? Snakes?”

They were collapsing now, slowly, withdrawing, shrinking—so slowly that it was hard to detect the movement.

Recovering the billhook, I used it to slash at one of them. The blade met no resistance, cutting through it cleanly. The severed triple-headed tip fell to the ground. I touched it cautiously with my foot. When it didn't move, I picked it up.

“What the devil is it?” Kevin asked over my shoulder.

I held it up for him to see. It was smooth and cold to the touch. A colorless sap oozed from the cut. It wasn't alive, never had been alive, not in an animal sense.

“A root?” he breathed incredulously.

I threw it away. “They don't confine themselves to an underground search for food. They believe in coming out into the open.” I told him how they had dealt with the parachute. “I don't think they'd have done me any harm.”

“Maybe not.” He didn't sound too sure. “If we want to get back before the major's oh-one-hundred deadline, we'd better be on the move again.”

“If you must be all military,” I said, “make it thirteen hundred hours. You're talking about one in the morning.”

“Am I?” He rubbed the side of his nose with the back of the ax blade. “So I am. Not that it matters now.”

We made our way through the trees and bushes in a more or less northerly direction. Kevin misinterpreted my interest in the passing scenery. “Looking for

cover of your own, Stuart?"

"No," I told him.

He grinned. "It just occurred to me—I'll always be able to say that I was the first one to leave any impression in the new land, as it were. Comparable with the first man to set foot on the moon. The moon . . . I wonder if we ever made it? I don't think we must have done—not in strength enough to form a colony. Otherwise, there'd have been no need for our journey through time."

"Perhaps any colony up there was wiped out by the same holocaust," I suggested.

The bushes thickened. In places, it became hard work forcing a passage through them. When a clump of umbrella trees barred the way, Kevin used his ax as if slashing a way through forest was something he had done every day of his life.

Because the stream flowed so slowly, the water making no sound, we came upon it unexpectedly. It was only narrow—narrow enough to be stepped across. Clumps of reeds lined the far bank. Bedraggled collapsed parachutes floated on its surface. But it was clear enough for us to see the bottom.

"It looks like water." Kevin stooped to dabble his fingers. "Feels like water. A bit on the warm side." He touched his fingers to his lips. "Mission accomplished. It *is* water."

He drank one-handed, American Indian fashion. I laid the billhook aside so that I could cup both hands together. I hadn't realized till then just how thirsty I was. The water was lukewarm and had a faintly metallic taste. I splashed it on my face and let it run down my chest. Kevin removed his shirt and used his handkerchief as a face cloth. I sat on the bank and waited for him to finish.

The stream flowed from the mists on the left and disappeared into those on the right. In front was another glade, a duplicate of the one we had just passed through. I fancied I could see a distant small patch of scarlet. Scarlet that suggested the presence of flowers.

I wondered lazily how far we had come. It was almost 12 o'clock now. We had left a little after 11. At a rough estimate, we had covered a couple of miles. The major, if he intended starting a map, would want information

about distances. Say half a mile, then, from where we had left the road to the stepping-stones across the lava. Then a mile and a half from lava bed to stream.

Kevin shook out his shirt before putting it back on.

"It's going to be a long way to have to haul water back home," I said.

"Home." He picked up his ax. "You said that as if the village was the only home you've ever known. Getting used to things?" He went on without waiting for an answer. "It *is* a long way, and water's heavy stuff to lug about. No doubt we'll think of something. If we don't, likely the gaffer will. Dig a new channel, maybe. Or make pipes out of tree trunks. Let's go back and report success. Maybe we'll get a medal."

We retraced our steps through the glade. The lava still smoked around the stepping-stone islands, but the heat that rose didn't seem as intense as it had been. Perhaps it would soon be cool enough to walk across.

We climbed back up the crumbling earth slope of our own hill, followed the curving boundary to the road and made our way back along it to the center of the village. And there found a tableau waiting for us—a grouping of people, faces tense, that suggested something was wrong.

The major, shotgun held across his chest, stood near the front door of the Tadman cottage with Donald and Fox at his side, the three deep in conversation. Claire and the exotic Mrs. Dorran stood together a short distance away. There was no sign of the Tadmans. We went to stand behind the two women.

"What's going on now?" Kevin asked Claire in a low voice.

Her back to us, intent upon what was going on, his voice startled her. She turned, one hand to her mouth.

"Oh—it's you." She turned back to watch her father again. "It's George—Mr. Tadman. He's locked himself in his cottage with Mary and won't open the door. Father told Cherry to collect all the food there was in the village. George gave her some cans and said that was all. Father said he knew there was much more than that and told Cherry to go inside to see for herself. That's when George locked the door. It doesn't make sense—not George and Mary. Before, they would always help;

they were always ready to share everything they'd got."

"Did he say why he's locked himself in?" I asked.

She was too busy watching to bother about replying.

"I think they're going to break the door down," she exclaimed with dismay.

CHAPTER EIGHT

From what I had come to know of the Tadmans, I felt sure that if they were deliberately withholding food, they must have a very good reason. They were neither selfish nor greedy. I wondered if there was any connection between what was happening now and Mrs. Tadman's earlier stocktaking of supplies.

The major propped his gun against the tree stump. He and Fox started toward the door. Donald hung back, obviously reluctant to have any part of it. Barely realizing what I was doing, I ran toward them.

The major saw me first. He stopped. "So you're back, Ince. I'll hear later what you have to say."

"Let me talk to them," I said.

Fox already had his shoulder to the door. "We've wasted enough bloody time already," he growled.

"They refuse to open to me," the major said harshly. "Why should they take any notice of a stranger?"

Fox stepped back a few paces and gathered himself for a run.

"At least, let me try," I begged. "Anything rather than forcing a way into their home."

"It isn't their home any longer," the major said. "Like

mine, it belongs to all of us."

Kevin had come up behind me. He added his entreaty to mine. "They're old; perhaps they don't understand. You've got to make allowances." Slipping by me, he went to stand with his back to the door.

Fox, crouching ready, showed his teeth in a grin. "Step aside, sonny boy, unless you want to get hurt."

Kevin made no attempt to move. There was a tense moment of silence. The other straightened slowly, thin lips still smiling coldly, humorlessly.

"If that's the way you want it——"

Donald came quickly forward. "Take it easy, Bob." He put his hand on Fox's shoulder. "This is only making matters worse."

His hand was shaken roughly away. Fox, arms hanging loosely at his side, started to move forward.

There was the sound of a bolt being drawn. Behind Kevin, the door opened. Mr. Tadman came out, closed the door behind him and then set his hands on Kevin's shoulders to move him gently aside.

"I'm glad to see you got back all right," he said steadily and looked beyond Fox to the major. "We don't want any more trouble," he continued in the same level tone. "God knows, we got enough of that as it is. Mother and me, we're not trying to be awkward. I told Cherry what we'd done. We divided what food there was and gave her half. We kept the rest for ourselves. We don't want none of yours. I reckon that's fair enough for anyone."

"It's not a question of what you think fair." Face fiery, the major pushed his way roughly past Fox. "All the food must be collected together so that it can be properly rationed. I thought I had made that clear."

The old man rubbed his chin. "The way I see it," he said slowly, "I reckon you was getting the best of the deal."

"I'm not going to argue!" the major snapped. "Are you going to let us in to collect the rest?"

Mr. Tadman hesitated, wavering, his eyes traveling unhappily round the half circle of faces. Then, "Have it your way," he said resignedly, turned to open the door and stepped aside. "You'll find it all in the kitchen."

The major issued his orders to Donald. The way he

worded them, the way he issued them, set the hair bristling on the back of my neck.

"Go and collect what there is," he said curtly. "Search the place to make sure they've got nothing hidden away."

The incident was over. The small crowd dispersed. The major beckoned us over to him.

Still inwardly fuming, I left it to Kevin to do the talking, only adding my assessment of distances at the end. And for that part of it, we had to follow him into his cottage, Claire trailing listlessly in our wake, to where he had pinned a large sheet of white paper to one wall of the front room, outlines already inked in—the road and some contour lines. To it, watched by Claire, he added the information we had brought.

"Did you explore the course of the stream?" he barked over his shoulder.

"Not enough time," I told him.

Kevin added something else, something he hadn't mentioned before. He stubbed his finger at the newly marked glade. "Along here are trees we'll have to be wary about. They have roots that can push themselves up out of the ground."

Turning, the major discovered Claire. "Food?" he asked curtly.

"It's all ready, father."

"Then, why didn't you say so?" He laid his pen down. "We'll continue with this later."

We ate—all of us except the Tadmans—at two tables set together lengthwise in the other front room.

During the meal, Donald gave us a resumé of his and Fox's exploration. They had walked down the road until the jungle had blocked their way. Then they had turned to the right to follow the perimeter of the circle—as we had done—until they found a place where the jungle thinned. They had crossed the lava strip and forced their way through the trees in a more or less straight line. They had kept going until their watches had told them it was time to turn back. They had found no water, had seen no signs of animal or human life. But they had come across something of interest.

"Palm trees," Donald said. "No question about it. A whole plantation of them." They had looked for nuts,

but had found none.

"Perhaps the wrong time of year," I said.

The major issued his instructions for the afternoon. The fact that so far we had seen nothing that might suggest the presence of life—hostile or otherwise—hadn't made him change his mind about reducing the perimeter of the circle and erecting a stockade round it. Work was to start immediately. But there must also be further exploration. And for that, two parties as before, but with changes in personnel. Donald was to team up with Mrs. Dorran for another probe to the south. I was detailed to go north again, only this time with Claire for companion. We were to take receptacles to bring back water—two polythene containers. We were to plot the course of the stream. Kevin was told to start leveling the ground for the foundations of the stockade. Fox was to start demolishing the empty cottages.

The detailing of duties, started over the table, ended outside in the road, ended with some unpleasantness—Fox objecting, not to being given orders but about being turned into what he called a "bloody laborer" when, in his opinion, that labor wasn't necessary.

The major kept his temper. "So long as I am in command, I will be the judge of what is necessary."

"Just a bloody waste of time," Fox growled mutinously. "We've already told you there's damn all out there."

"Because we haven't seen any signs of life doesn't mean there is none."

They glared at each other. In its way, a clash of wills. God knows what Fox's background was. If I had had to make a guess—prejudiced—I would have gone for something verging on the criminal. Crude stuff. Nothing subtle. But whatever that background was, it didn't match up to the other's disciplined army years. The major held his ground. Fox swung on his heel to stalk away. And it was obvious as could be that this was something that would happen time and time again until—

Until they actually came to blows? I thought that more than likely.

Kevin, another spectator of the scene, had his own explanation for Fox's attitude.

"His private piece of homework being let loose in the

sylvan glades with another man," he murmured. "Is that it?"

The notion hadn't occurred to me. Kevin could be right. One thing was for sure: No one was going to turn awkward because Claire had been detailed to accompany me.

She had changed from drab gray linen to white shorts and a pale-blue silk shirt—shorts that were very brief, blouse that was snugly fitting. She had altered her hair style, brushing it back from her face and tying it with blue ribbon. There was color to her face. Certainly, she had used lipstick; I was almost sure she had used eye makeup. The result was a marked improvement in her appearance. One that verged on a transformation.

And there was another change, too. The last time I had had cause to take notice of her, she had been weeping on her brother's breast. Now those tears might never have existed. She was calm, assured, confident. Perhaps, like me, she had had the moment of truth that had brought acceptance of the inevitable.

She insisted upon carrying one of the polythene containers. I let her. Empty, they were no weight at all. We walked down the road in silence. I took the lead when we came to the lava. I didn't speak until we came to the island stepping-stones.

Then, "This is where we have to cross."

She went across first, before I could make any move to help her. She flew across—lightly, surefooted—to wait for me on the far side, asking, "Did you think I would funk it?"

"Yes," I admitted frankly, and she laughed, and so the ice was broken.

"It's pretty." She gazed about her interestedly as we walked through the trees. "I didn't expect it to be like this. It could almost be——"

"Home?"

"I was going to say England—only it seemed silly, because this is still England. Or where it used to be. It's funny"—she reached up to touch a branch, leaving it swaying in her wake—"I'm almost used to being here already. What about you, Stuart?" She used my first name easily, naturally.

"I was too dazed even to think at first. Sleepwalking.

The penny dropped suddenly. A kind of moment of truth. It came"—we were just passing the stone where I had sat. I pointed—"there." But I didn't tell her what had sparked it off. Instead, "Incidentally, that's one of the trees with the wandering roots."

She stopped to look at it.

"They come poking their heads up out of the moss," I explained. "For all the world like white snakes. But I don't think they're interested in flesh and blood."

We walked on.

"Did you leave anyone behind, Stuart?" she asked.

I knew what she meant. "My parents."

"I thought you must have done. That's one thing we don't have to worry about. We left no one. I can imagine what it must feel like." She touched my arm to convey sympathy.

"Like being dead and alive at the same time. Dead to them, alive to yourself."

"We *are* dead to those back there."

I looked up at the sky—at where the sky, but for the damned haze, would be. "They stopped mourning me a long time ago," I said. "Thousands of years ago."

She laughed tremulously. "That's the part of it I can't get used to. I can't stop myself from thinking that they're all still alive. They were alive yesterday. . . . It *was* only yesterday?"

I had to think. "Only yesterday, Claire."

"Bob—Mr. Fox—left no one. He wasn't married. I don't know all that much about Cherry. We're friendly enough, but she doesn't talk much. Not even to Bob." She glanced sideways at me, smiling mischievously. "Does that surprise you?"

It did. "I've given up being surprised at anything," I lied tactfully.

"George and Mary had someone——"

"A son, I know."

"Peter was in the army. He was killed by one of our own mines. That seems to make it even worse." Her tone changed. "They're good people, Stuart. Really good. I've known them for almost ten years. They came to Kirdale about the same time we did. I can't understand why George should have acted that way about the food. It just doesn't make sense."

"I think I may know what it was all about," I said slowly. I told her about Mr. Tadman checking her stores. "I think all this has been too much for her. Subconsciously, she wants something sane and solid to cling to—something from yesterday. She picked on the contents of her larder."

"You could be right, Stuart." But Claire sounded very doubtful. "Do you know how we came to be in Kirdale?"

"Mr. Tadman told us a little about it. Something to do with a business venture that failed."

"When father came out of the army, he had quite a large gratuity. He used it to buy himself a business—a kind of investment-advice bureau. Only the whole thing was a racket. The men who sold it to him had done the same thing before. They looked out for regular soldiers leaving the forces. Easy meat. They took the money and moved on to another town. Father is a proud man. He couldn't face his friends after having been made to look a fool. So"—she ended on a shrug—"here we are." And smiled. "We're far enough away from them now."

We walked in silence for a while. It seemed to me we had been walking for a long time. For a moment, I was afraid I had lost my way. Then—only because I was looking for it—I saw the sparkle of water through the bushes ahead.

We drank. Then we filled the containers and set them ready to be collected on our way back. It was almost half past three. At a rough guess, all things being equal, it should start to get dusk about half past eight. If we turned back at five, we should be home again before nightfall. I had no great inclination to meet darkness out here until we knew more about the place.

Claire let me help her across the stream—perhaps to atone for her earlier independence. Her hand was cool and soft. Her legs—I only really noticed them for the first time as she walked on ahead—were attractively long and slender.

We had no trouble keeping to the bank of the stream. In front of us, the volcano loomed through the mist, gradually taking shape, a shape that was reminiscent of some Japanese painting. Claire—none of last night's shyness now—chatted away. She told me about herself. She had been born in Aden. Her mother had died 12 years

ago, when they had been living in Gibraltar. She asked me my age, told me hers. Getting on for 30 had been my guess the first time we had met. I had already revised that estimate. And as it turned out, she was just 24. She asked, with the smallest hint of coquetry, "Did you leave a girl behind, Stuart?"

"Nobody that will cry for me," I told her.

The stream swung to the right and became edged with tumbled rock that slowed our progress. Helping her up a steep incline, she held my hand for much longer than was necessary. The ghostlike volcano moved slowly to the left.

Claire talked about the clash of wills between Fox and her father—a subject I would rather she hadn't brought up.

"Do *you* think we ought to build a stockade, Stuart?"

"I bow to your father's judgment," I replied diplomatically.

We were climbing now. I went in front so that I could help her over the rougher places—a chore that provided me with a certain amount of pleasure.

"Father was lost when he first came out of the army," she said. "Before he could adjust to the new life, all his money went. He felt that everyone was against him. I often thought that he chose to live in Kirdale because, subconsciously, he felt the mountains were a wall between himself and the rest of the world. Perhaps that's why he's so keen on the stockade now."

"Could be," I said. "All the same——"

I broke off as she clutched my arm with one hand and pointed with the other. "There, Stuart! See? A bird!"

In one place, the mist had thinned a little. Across the gap, something moved slowly—golden-winged—gliding rather than flying. It was hard to assess the size because there was no way of telling how far away it was. I guessed it had a wing span of perhaps 12 feet.

"So there is life out here after all!" she exclaimed excitedly. "It *was* a bird, wasn't it, Stuart?"

It could have been a giant bird. But in that one brief glimpse, I had noticed no sign of a body. No head, no tail. Just huge golden wings and nothing else.

"We'll have to keep our eyes open for another," I said.

The stream became a series of miniature cascades. Climbing became hard work. We crossed to the left-hand bank, where the going seemed easier, and, having crossed, were diverted by a nearby glow.

It came from a stream of molten lava—an evil, scarlet-and-gold stream that could have sprung from hell itself—oozing slowly along the deep channel it had burned for itself in the rock. And growing on the banks were the trees that gave birth to the parachutes. Branches, long in proportion to the squat gray trunks from which they sprang, hung pendulously over the molten, glowing mass, almost touching it, suffering no apparent harm from the blistering heat. The familiar slender leaves grew in tight clusters.

We watched the stalk of one leaf detach itself from the parent branch and droop until it all but touched the lava. Another came to join it, then another, until the parachute was complete. And after a while it rose, lifted first by the hot air of the lava, then carried away by the warm air generated by the red-hot fragment held underneath. The seedlings would take root wherever they found waiting soil. I wondered if they were only able to so propagate themselves when they grew close to lava.

We returned to the cascades. High up now, we would have had a commanding view of the surrounding country but for the mist. As it was, all we were able to see was the slow procession of trees and bushes that sprang from the all-enveloping emerald moss. It seemed that grass had been driven out of existence, at least in this part of the new world.

We followed the miniature waterfalls to their source—a deep cleft in the rocks. There were still 30 minutes left before it would be time to turn back. The first ten of them we spent resting.

I made sure there were no trees in the vicinity before allowing Claire to sit down. She chose a level patch of moss where there was a rock against which she could lean. I sat nearby. I wondered if there had been any men at all in her life. She would have been only 14 when she came to live in Kirdale. The ten years spent there couldn't have produced much in the way of male company. I had the feeling that if there had been any presentable young men, the major would have vetoed

any alliance. A widower, and being the sort of man he was, he would have been against anything that would have meant his losing the only female of his household. Claire would have been earmarked as the prop of his declining years. I had come across such men before. And women.

I think Claire had fallen asleep. Certainly, I had to touch her before she opened her eyes. "Time we were moving," I said and helped her to her feet again.

Now we had to leave the guide of the stream behind. As we climbed, I made mental notes of landmarks which would help us find our way back. A particularly steep climb brought us out on a kind of flat-topped plateau—mist on three sides, a frozen sea of cold, hardened lava on the other, fold upon fold of gray pumice that sloped up toward the darker mass of rock behind. We had left the sound of our cascades behind some time ago. Now we could hear the splash and gurgle of more water.

Stepping gingerly down on to the pumice, I tested it with my weight before turning to help the girl down. We walked toward this new sound of water.

A swift-flowing stream, almost a torrent, jetted from the darkness of a deep cleft. And within yards of that cleft, another—and this one the entrance to a cave.

We went inside. The walls were smooth, the floor level covered with fine sand. After the heat outside, it was unexpectedly and pleasantly cool. It was too dark for us to see how far back it extended—without lights, we couldn't explore—but by the echoes, it must have been quite a sizable affair.

"How would you fancy a Robinson Crusoe existence?" I asked Claire, more for something to say than anything else—even though it had occurred to me that there was always the possibility of a strong earth tremor rendering our present homes untenable.

"Is that an invitation?" she wondered. It was too dark to read her expression, even though she was close at my side. By her tone, she was smiling.

"The original Mr. Crusoe wouldn't have found time hanging so heavily on his hands if he'd been provided with feminine company," I said.

"And if you had been the original Mr. Crusoe . . . ?"

It was an invitation if ever I had heard one.

I didn't have to feel for where she was. I put one arm round the shoulder that was touching mine, turned her gently, found her mouth. . . .

Her lips were warm and soft. She responded to my kiss, but there was nothing to it—no feeling, nothing. Just a dispassionate caress, the kiss of sister for brother.

I would have tried again, but she pushed me away a little.

"Yesterday"—her eyes shone in the pale oval of her face—"would you have tried to do that yesterday, Stuart?"

I couldn't have lied to her then if I had wanted to.

"No," I told her.

"And now—only because you think there's no one else? Because I'm better than nothing?"

"No." I let my hands fall from her shoulders. "No, Claire. That's not it at all. We're both different people from yesterday. We've both changed."

"Have I changed?" By her tone, my answer was important to her.

"Yes," I said.

"Thank you." She came close to me again, laid her hands on my breast and reached up to touch my lips with hers again and then stepped quickly back.

"Isn't it near time we were making our way home?" she asked.

It was. "Claire——" I started and then changed my mind. After all, we had the future in front of us. And that odd expression of her gratitude puzzled me. I needed time to think about it. I needed time to analyze my own feelings. I wasn't an animal yet. I hoped the day would never come when I would be one.

We made our way back to the plateau and then down to the source of the stream. She crossed to the other side without giving me a chance to help her. And then, as if the incident in the cave had never happened, she started chatting about nothing in particular, asking me about myself and my work, wanting to know—and she seemed to be genuinely interested—how one went about making a suit of clothes.

Talking, we came to the place where the stream changed course. About halfway down, I estimated. I took time out to examine a clump of reeds, finding nothing

usual about them. The Egyptians had made paper of a kind from reeds. Papyrus. I doubted whether we would be able to do the same, even if we came across the right kind of reeds.

As I straightened, the ground shuddered—a long, low wave that set the water surface rippling. The volcano growled. The earth heaved again, so violently this time that I staggered, almost losing my balance. The rumbling sound that followed seemed to come from directly beneath our feet.

Grabbing Claire's arm, I dragged her to the shelter of the nearest clump of trees. Through the branches, I could see the glow that hung in the sky. Debris pattered on the leaves and through them. A glowing chunk of rock struck the ground in front of where we crouched. Something else came crashing heavily through nearby branches. The surface of the stream was broken by innumerable small splashes. Steam rose from the nearby clump of reeds I had been examining.

The girl clung tightly to me while the ground trembled, while fire rained down. Then it was over. One last shudder and everywhere was still again. We waited a few minutes before emerging from our shelter.

Apart from a plume of smoke that rose from the reeds, the scene was unchanged. The moss was unmarked, the trees and bushes seemingly unharmed.

Claire still held my hand. "I suppose we'll get used to them in time," she said unsteadily.

"Like the stuff that grows here. That seems to take it all in its stride."

"That"—she looked fearfully in the direction of the volcano—"I wonder how safe it is."

I tried to reassure myself as much as her. "I don't think we're in any real danger from it. It's almost certain it erupted last night. This, now—a kind of aftermath, part of the settling-down process."

A small but very friendly disagreement arose when we had crossed the stream to where the two water-filled containers waited. She wanted to share the load. I explained that it would be easier if I carried both, one balancing the other.

It was still daylight when we started down the glade. As we neared the lava, darkness came down like a cur-

tain. No warning, no twilight, no prolonged transition from daytime to night. Ten minutes, no more, and the change was complete.

We crossed the islands with the help of the last fading glimmer. Climbing back up the loose-earth slope took some time. But after that, even in the darkness, it was straightforward.

We had almost reached the road when Claire—a few paces in front—stopped, pointing in the direction of the village. I looked, and there was nothing to see.

Then a scarlet tongue of flame pierced the darkness, leaping high into the sky.

CHAPTER NINE

The volcanic rain of hot ash and burning fragments had started three fires in the village. Two, in the sparse brushwood on the slopes, had been spotted and dealt with without trouble, small enough to be stamped out. But the third had been a different matter. A larger fragment must have smashed through the window of one of the empty cottages, setting the place ablaze. And in that oxygen-rich atmosphere, flames took hold very easily.

With no water to spare for fire fighting, they had had no option but to stand by and watch it burn, only making sure that sparks didn't drift to the neighboring cottages. The flames Claire and I had seen from the distance had been those that had burst out with the collapsing of the roof. By the time we arrived on the scene, all that remained was a shell filled with a sea of dancing flames.

The major's face, scarlet indeed in the reflected light, was set in grim lines of concern. A concern that was understandable. That burning cottage could quite easily have been one of the two occupied ones. We would have lost what food remained and most of the things that had come through with us from our own time.

Surprisingly, that wasn't the main cause of his worry. That would have been bad enough—a disaster from which we would never have recovered. But it would have been infinitely worse if the cottage set alight had been the one at the far end on the right.

I had forgotten Mr. Tadman telling us about the explosive. Three cases of dynamite. Enough to have wiped out the entire village and everyone in it—including Donald and Mrs. Dorran, who had already returned when the eruption started. Only Claire and I would have been left alive. With no food, nowhere to live, nothing.

If I had forgotten about the explosive, then—apart from the major—so had the rest of them. Before he had finished reminding us, Fox exploded into rage. Leaving him ranting, I went back along the road to collect the containers I had dropped in my haste to get to the fire.

Kevin came after me, running to catch up. There was enough light from the still-burning cottage for us to see each other's faces.

“Had enough of him?” He took one of the containers from me. “Talk about unbridled tempers. He blows up at the least thing. One would almost think he was out to bring matters to a head. He and the major had a set-to a while back. Over the local sanitary arrangements. Village loos out of bounds, says the gaffer. Holes to be dug in the surrounding countryside. Route march every time nature calls and hope she doesn't call in a hurry. Fox didn't mind that, but he saw no reason for hole digging. I don't know who won. The gaffer, most likely. He still has the upper hand.”

Fox was still storming away. I could hear the major barking back at him. I stopped, putting my container down. “Let's wait till they're through,” I said wearily.

“I know what you mean. It does tend to get on the nerves.” Kevin put his container down. “And we haven't been here twenty-four hours yet.” He wiped his face with his handkerchief. “How did you get on in the wild blue yonder?”

“So-so. Traced the stream to its source. Found a cave. Oh, and we saw something that looked like a bird.”

“The first signs of life. Talking of birds, how did you make out with the glamorized Claire?”

“All right,” I said briefly.

"In other words, mind my own business." He put his handkerchief away. "But don't be too surprised if someone else asks you the same question and won't be put off by the same sort of reply."

I stared at him. "You don't mean the major?"

"Who else, for Pete's sake? Or hadn't you noticed this latest facet of his organization ability? Pairings-off. Donald and Mata Hari. Claire and—who? Not Fox, for a start. I'm still a doubtful quantity in his books. So——" He shrugged.

And he was perfectly serious.

"In his own way," he added, picking up his container, "playing at being God."

The road in front of the burning cottage was empty now. The flames were beginning to die down.

"Food for thought?" Kevin wondered with some amusement as we made our way toward the lights of the major's cottage, the pale, insipid glow of oil lamps.

"Not that." I shook my head, but with not all that much conviction. "Not matchmaking. He wouldn't dabble in that."

"Wouldn't he?" Kevin snorted. "You think about it, old son. He's had a bash at just about everything else."

Playing at God—a sorting-out, to his own satisfaction, into approved Adams and Eves. The more I thought about that new notion, the more it seemed possible. But if that was the way of it, then I felt certain Claire was ignorant of her father's intention. That episode in the cave had been inspired by something other than a desire to obey his wishes. Just what had brought it on, I didn't know. Certainly not any feelings she might have for me—the coolness of her kiss and the way she had brought the thing to such an abrupt end had made that very clear. It was something I needed time to think about. About as far as reason would take me at that moment was that Claire wasn't the type to indulge in idle flirtation for the sake of it—not even under those unnatural conditions. If I was any judge of character, everything she did would have a purpose.

The table was laid for the evening meal, such as it was—a scratch affair now that most of the fresh food had been used up. There was no question of removing dust and sweat before sitting down to eat. Washing was

something we had to forgo until such time as a store of water had been collected.

They were all there, with the exception of Mrs. Tadmán. Tired, her husband said, gone to bed early.

"She's all right, George?" Claire asked anxiously.

"She's fine, lass, Just done up." But the old man looked far from happy, only toying with the food set in front of him.

It appeared that Claire had already reported on our afternoon excursion. The major was particularly interested in the cave. He invited my opinion as to its suitability as a storage place for the dynamite. I told him that it was a fair distance from the volcano, that it seemed quite large, that it was both cool and dry.

"Dump the bloody stuff where it can do no harm," Fox growled from his end of the table. "Take it out to the swamps and sink it."

"Swamps?" I asked Kevin in an aside. He brought me up to date. Donald and Mrs. Dorran—this time he called her Delilah—had taken a new direction for their afternoon sortie, turning this time to the left when they came to the jungle, following it until they had reached the seemingly impassable barrier of an expanse of swampland.

The major and Fox were still arguing about the future of the explosive. Fox—and for once I was half-inclined to agree with him—wanted it disposed of. But in the major's eyes it was the most useful commodity we had brought with us. It must be carefully stored away. The cave sounded as good a place as any. But right now there was something more important to be discussed. The matter of night duties.

"At least one of us will have to be on watch at all times." He held out his cup for Claire to refill with coffee. "One should be enough." He had compiled a rota. "Donald, you will mount watch at nine, as soon as you've finished eating. You will arm yourself with the shotgun and ax. At the slightest hint of anything wrong, you will immediately rouse the rest. Ince"—he looked at me over his cup—"Donald will wake you when he comes off at midnight. You, in turn, will wake Fox——"

"Count me out," that gentleman said flatly.

The major slowly set down his cup.

"Here we go again," Kevin said resignedly, this time loud enough for everyone to hear.

"We can't work all bloody day," Fox stated, "and be up most of the bloody night. What are you afraid of—burglars?"

"We've been through all this before." The major sounded old and tired. "You all trusted me enough to put me in command. If you don't like the word, I don't have another to offer in its place. I've done my level best to justify that trust. My first concern has always been that of survival—survival of what may well be the last of the human race. Until we know for certain that we are the only living creatures left, we can't relax our vigilance for one moment. Ince and my daughter have reported seeing what they took to be a very large bird. There may well be other things out there, animals which perhaps only emerge at night. There is the more positive danger of another eruption occurring while we are asleep."

He paused.

"Those are my reasons for ordering a night watch. It would serve no useful purpose to discuss the matter further. I have worked out a rota in which all the men, with the exception of George Tadman, take turns to keep watch."

The old man looked up from his plate. "There's no call to leave me out. I can take my turn along with the rest."

"I have made my dispositions." The major's tone more than suggested he had had enough arguments for one day. "They will stand as they are."

Mr. Tadman, clearly upset about the omission of his name, brooded over his untouched plate. For myself, the idea of a night watch struck me as being essential, inconvenient though it would be. I didn't think we had anything to fear from prowling night creatures, but the volcano that had rumbled off and on all day wasn't going to shut down for the night. Tremors we could take in our stride, but another rain of red-hot fragments could easily start another blaze. It was a point I thought worth mentioning.

"That is what I had in mind," the major said flatly.

Fox was finally convinced.

"So what the hell are we supposed to do if there is an-

other fire? Put it out with our bare hands?"

"I have established a fire point at the rear of this cottage," the major told him. "There are four buckets filled with used, dirty water. Not enough to deal with a large outbreak, but more than enough to put out a small one if it is detected in time. Are there any more questions?" He waited a moment. "Very well. Ince, you will wake Mr. Fox at two o'clock. Fox will hand over to Sowden at four, who will in turn rouse me at six." The major looked pointedly at his watch. Donald wiped his mouth and came hastily to his feet.

Kevin and I walked with Mr. Tadman to our designated sleeping quarters in his cottage. Claire came with us. "Just in case Mary isn't asleep. I would like a talk with her."

I stumbled over something by the tree stump, a pile of leaves, by the feel.

"I meant to move those," said Mr. Tadman. "Seedlings. What I've collected. Left them there hoping they'll dry out enough to burn."

He ushered us into the parlor, lighted an oil lamp, tiptoed up the stairs, came softly down again.

"Mother's fast asleep," he reported. And when Claire, disappointed, moved toward the door, "Don't go, lass. There's something I got to say. It's about what happened earlier. Us trying to hang on to that tinned stuff——"

"There's no need to say anything, George," Claire told him gently. "Knowing you, you had a reason. We think we know what it is." She glanced at me. "Mary wanted something from the past to hang on to."

"Hang on to?" he echoed, perplexed. Then his face cleared. "No, that weren't it. I got to tell you about it, because I need help. I was going to do it myself, only now it looks like the major's got his eye on me, thinking I'm not to be trusted anymore. I reckon that's why he won't let me take my turn with the rest.

"I got to get some of that there food back. Not much, just a few bits and pieces—just enough to keep me and mother going for a few days. We don't eat all that much now."

It was Claire's turn to be perplexed. "You mean you want to keep yourselves away from the rest of us?" She

answered her own question in the same breath. "No, that's not you and Mary. There must be another reason."

"Aye." He nodded slowly. "There's another reason. Maybe you'll think us both mad. Maybe you'll say it's just a waste of good food. But I reckon as how you will understand, lass. It's to do with Peter, you see. . . ."

She stared at him. "Your son? I don't understand."

Mr. Tadman sat down, hands resting flat on the table, one on either side of the oil lamp. The light made solid silver disks of his glasses, hiding the eyes behind them.

"He were killed back in 1941," he said. "You know all about that, lass. An accident, it were, something that should never have happened. On the way back after a commando raid. Him and five others in the landing craft. And a whole mass of ammunition. They got separated from the rest. Them boats was never meant to cross the Channel by theirselves. But they made it all the way back—just five men in a tiny boat. And then they ran the boat up on the beach, right on top of a mine. There was nothing left of ship or men. Not a trace.

"There was people on the prom. A seaside place, it were. They saw it happen. That was how it came to be in the papers. A minor tragedy of war, they called it. In them days, they used to try to keep that sort of thing out of the papers. But too many saw it happen. So it was all printed—the exact time it happened, the names of those killed. . . ."

And then, while he was still talking, I saw where all this was leading.

"You think they may try to bring those five through time the same as they brought us?" I asked incredulously.

"Not so much me." Mr. Tadman gazed at the glass globe of the lamp. "Mother. She wants to go and see."

"Oh!" Claire's hand flew to her mouth.

Kevin said, "Names. Exact time and place. The whole lot destroyed completely. It *is* the same as us. Only on a smaller scale. Where did it happen?"

"A little place called Yarbay," the old man said. "Down on the south coast. We know where, mother and me."

"They went through the stuff in their museums to find us," I said. "They could have come across yours at the same time. It's possible."

The lamp started to smoke. Mr. Tadman turned the wick down a fraction. "Needs trimming." He leaned back in his chair.

"I've thought a lot about this, ever since mother came up with the notion. Them people as brought us here, they must have come across hundreds of incidents just like us, just like Peter. They'd be able to pick and choose. I reckon as how they wouldn't bother about just a few men. Not *all* men."

I saw what he had in mind. Pointless to put six Adams in the Garden of Eden without one solitary Eve. Not when you have others to choose from.

"Not a hope," the old man said. "But I haven't said so to mother. She's made up her mind Peter's alive again. I'm going to let her go on believing that. She wants to go and find him. So that's what we aim to do. That's why I want the food."

"The Channel coast," Kevin said. "Hundreds of miles. . . . That's if there still is a Channel and a coast. South—that's jungle. You haven't seen what it's like. You don't know what you'd be up against. The heat will probably get worse. There might be animals out there—even savages. You might come up against a desert. What about water? And food? The amount you'd be able to carry wouldn't last long. And neither of you are as young as——" He broke off.

"Can't you talk Mary out of it, George?" Claire implored. "She's not all that strong. She wouldn't be able to stand up to it."

"I know all them things," Mr. Tadman said stolidly. "But we got to go. It don't matter about me. Mary's all that matters. There's something you don't know—that she don't know, either. She's only got a short while left. That's why we was sticking it out at Kirdale; she'd been happy living here. Nine months left, at the outside, the specialist told me. That was when I took her in to Carlisle almost eight months ago."

"George"—Claire stared at him aghast—"not Mary. Oh, no!"

"It's all right, lass. There'll be no suffering. That's a blessing. He told me what it was called. I forget now. A long name. Here"—Mr. Tadman touched his head—"some sort of growth. When it comes, it'll come quick,

be over quick. She'll just sort of lose the use of herself, he said. She won't even know what's happening. Only a few days like that. And no pain."

I remember getting to my feet and going over to the tiny window, there to stare outside—seeing nothing but the dim lights of the major's cottage, seeing them through the ghost reflection of my own face.

"We're fixing to leave tomorrow night," the old man's untroubled voice went on behind me. "Night would be best, to save unpleasantness, like. Mother's packed a few things ready. We're going whether we can get food or not. But a bit would be a great help. Just enough to give mother a start. I can manage without until we find something else."

Kevin said, "The major had all the food put in his larder. Mostly tinned stuff. That'll be heavy to carry. But there's packets of cheese, biscuits——"

"I go on watch at midnight," I told my reflection. "I'll get as much food as you're able to carry."

I turned to face the room. Claire was crying silently, her hands folded in her lap, the tears streaming down her face.

"There's no call for that, lass," Mr. Tadman said gently, compassionately. "Just you think about it. Mother's happier now than she has been in many a long year. And when she's happy, so am I."

I swallowed, managed to find my voice. "You can't go off alone like that."

"The very words taken from my lips," Kevin agreed, with a good attempt at lightness of tone. "I'll join you on your food-pillaging expedition, Stuart. We came empty-handed into the village; so we won't take anything for ourselves. After our midday blowout, I'm good enough for at least a week. We'll take water, though. In all fairness, we're entitled to some of that. So it's all settled. A party of"—he looked expectantly at the girl, waited a fraction of a moment, reading her expression, then frowned a little before completing the tally—"four."

"No," Mr. Tadman said firmly. "Me and mother leaving won't do no harm. It'll be a good thing for the rest of you. We're old, and old folk only get in the way, hinder things, hold the younger ones back. You two are different. You're needed here. You got to stay."

"Supernumeraries," Kevin said. "Surplus to establishment. We were never on the official list of personnel."

The old man was stubborn. "You're here and that's all that counts. No point in four of us——" He didn't finish the sentence.

"He's right," Claire whispered.

Mr. Tadman smiled. "We won't forget what you wanted to do. I'll tell mother; she'll like that."

The girl came to her feet. "Father will be wondering where I am. I should be helping Cherry with the dishes."

When she had gone, Mr. Tadman, lamp in hand, led us upstairs, waiting at the bedroom door while we lighted last night's candle. Then, satisfied we had everything we needed, he wished us good night and padded back down the stairs.

I sat on the mattress to untie my shoes.

"Who do you take over from?" Kevin asked, stripping off his shirt.

I had to think. "Donald."

"If I happen to sleep through the changing of the guard, give me a nudge when he's gone."

I lay on top of the mattress without taking off my clothes. Midnight wasn't all that far away.

I thought about the old people, trying to picture them on their lonely trek through unknown country, wondering how far they would get before something brought them to a halt. And I wondered, too, what Mr. Tadman would do when he was finally left on his own.

I thought about all those things when, by common sense, I should have been thinking about the really important things. The things that were going to affect our future: the threat of more volcanic eruptions, the strange bird we had seen, the seedling invasion. It was as if I wanted desperately to cling to those things I could understand. The village and the past were more important to me than the outside world and the future. I didn't want to get involved with that new, strange world. I was back in my hayfield, lying hidden, refusing to admit to the danger that lay all around.

One moment, I was gazing up at the raftered ceiling through half-closed eyes. The next, someone was shaking my shoulder and light was dazzling on my face. Not the glare of a torch, as I first thought, but the blue-green

glow of moonlight that streamed through the uncovered window.

Donald straightened, shotgun in hand.

I put my shoes back on. "All quiet out there?"

At my side, Kevin lay on his back, mouth open, snoring gently.

Donald smiled. "Quieter than in here." Then he was serious again. "Moonlight," he said unnecessarily. "Must be a full moon. Not that you can see it. I did think I saw something a while back." He opened the door for me.

"An animal?" I asked on the landing.

"No. No, I don't think so. Hard to describe. Just a sort of movement. Some distance away. I went to check, but there was nothing there. More than likely I imagined it. I only mentioned it to be on the safe side."

Outside, the moonlight seemed to fill the haze and be retained by it—no single source of light and so no shadows. Nothing moved. Everywhere was silent and still.

Donald put something in my hand. "Whistle. If in doubt, blow. I very nearly did a while back." He handed me the shotgun. "You know how to handle these things?"

"Point that, press this."

He grinned, his teeth white. "Got a watch?"

I hadn't taken it off before going to bed. There was enough light for me to read the time. Twenty past 12.

"Thanks for the extra time," I said. "I can't promise to do the same for Fox."

"You'll find him sleeping downstairs. The room on the right. But when you do wake him, don't give him this." He touched the gun. "Take it back to your room with you."

"Orders?"

"To save unpleasantness," Donald said, "I should dump it in your place before you go to wake him. Right. I'm off to bed."

He went into his cottage. I strolled down the road.

Imagination could play tricks in this weird radiance, this heavy, unearthly silence. Twice I fancied I saw something from a distance—a formless, drifting movement, no impression of substance, as if in certain places the mist had somehow collected itself into denser patches and those patches were floating along slowly at chest height. But each time, when I went warily to investigate, gun at

the alert, I found nothing.

I gave Donald half an hour to be in bed and fast asleep before returning to the Tadman cottage to find something in which to carry the food I intended to take.

An open, half-packed suitcase stood on a chair in the kitchen. There was a small pile of things—mostly articles of clothing—on the table. A black plastic shopping bag hung from a hook behind the door. Gun in one hand, bag in the other, I went across to the major's cottage.

The larder, Kevin had said. That would lead off from the kitchen. But the kitchen door was closed and locked.

So outside again and round to the rear of the cottage. Two windows, both closed and fastened. The larger was that of the kitchen. There was enough light for me to make out the neat piles of crockery on the table, a stove, a washing machine. And a door on the right which had to be that of the larder. Closed. Doors of that kind aren't usually fitted with locks, but with the major, anything was possible.

I moved to the smaller window. Cartons, packets and cans were stacked on shelves. More food than I had expected to see. Or perhaps it looked a lot because it was spread out. There was a small sack on the floor. Potatoes, some had spilled out. Alongside were the two metal boxes. It looked as if someone had had a stab at straightening the bent antenna of the damaged one.

Putting the shopping bag on the ground and propping the gun against the wall, I examined the window. There was a gap where something thin might be inserted to slide the catch across. It was almost a duplicate of a certain washhouse window of my youth that I had learned to open with a penknife.

I went back across the road and into the Tadman's kitchen. The first drawer I opened contained an assortment of cutlery. I selected a bread knife with a serrated blade. On the way back, I hesitated at the foot of the stairs—only just then remembering that Kevin had wanted in on the operation. But I hadn't the heart to wake him, and in any case, his help wasn't necessary. And this was something that, for some reason, I wanted to do by myself. Perhaps my own personal way of repaying the old people for their kindness to me.

I went outside, out into that ghostly light, that weird silence.

And this time there could be no question of imagination. The thing—whatever it was—was there in front of me, hovering above the road, motionless. An almost transparent thing, like some monstrous flying jellyfish, changing shape as I watched, one moment an almost perfect globe—three, four feet across—the next, amorphous, no outline at all.

I went slowly toward it, the knife held in front of me—such a stupid, futile weapon against something that seemed no more tangible than a puff of smoke. And so unsubstantial it was that even the displacement of air I caused was enough to set it wobbling, moving, drifting quickly away, changing shape as it went, flicking suddenly out of existence. If I had wanted to take a closer look at it, there was nothing left to show me even where it was.

I turned to continue across the road.

And another of the things—larger than the first—was only inches away from me, moving toward me at face level. I was too late in stepping back, in bringing up the useless knife. It touched me, seemed to break, wrapped itself round my head.

There was a sensation of coldness, of a myriad of tiny points making contact with my flesh. There was a smell—the filthy, choking stench of decay. I was drawing in that decay because there was nothing else to breathe, because instinct told me I had to breathe something. And then I was drawing in nothing, fighting air. Someone was screaming—the sound coming from a long way away.

It wasn't until afterward that I learned the sounds had been coming from my own mouth.

CHAPTER TEN

I think I must have lost consciousness for a few minutes. If I did, then I came round as I was being carried into the major's cottage, for that part I can recall clearly enough—looking up to see Donald's inverted face suspended above me, Fox's dark one facing me from somewhere over my feet.

They put me on the mattress Fox had been using in the front room. They were all there. According to Kevin—white face filled with relief that I was seemingly unharmed—I had made enough racket to wake the dead. And what had it all been about, for God's sake?

I told them, sitting up while Mr. Tadman finished wiping my face with a handkerchief. He held the handkerchief up, wondering aloud at the brown stains, taking it over to the lamp to examine it more closely while I described the things I had seen for the particular benefit of the major—who wore blue-and-white-striped pajamas with, of all things, a blue silk scarf round his throat.

"Transparent," he repeated.

"Almost. Shapeless. And cold." I tried to prevent myself shuddering at the memory. "It seemed to wrap itself round my head."

"It must have been what I thought I saw earlier," Donald said. "What the devil could it have been?"

"I can make a guess." George Tadman rejoined the circle. He was still fully dressed. He held up the handkerchief, displaying the brown stains. "I've seen something like this before. Looks the same, has the same musty smell. Spores, I'd say—fungus spores. Like the sort you get when a puffball gets broke."

The stuff was in my ears, up my nostrils. I could even feel it on my lips. It covered my hair, my chest and shoulders. Unpleasant, but if the old man was right—and he should know what he was talking about—harmless enough.

Ashamed of myself for my exhibition, I started a halting apology and explanation. "I'm sorry for making such a fuss. It was the unexpectedness, the smell, the way it stopped me breathing."

Kevin helped me to my feet.

"You dropped this." Fox had the knife balanced across his palm.

Which reminded the major. "Did you bring the shotgun in, too?" he asked sharply.

"Gun?" Fox flicked the knife high into the air and caught it deftly, expertly, by the hilt. "No gun out there."

"I'll go and get it," Donald said quickly, making for the door.

I went after him, but not nearly quickly enough. Fox, grinning, beat me to it. "You'd better stay here, sonny boy. There might be more flying toadstools out there. We don't want another screaming bout."

It was a few minutes before they returned. But, then, they'd had to scout around. Donald carried the gun under his arm and Fox dangled the shopping bag from one finger. Donald laid the gun down without saying anything, not even looking at me.

"Under the pantry window." Fox waved his trophy. "Every picture tells its own bloody story. Cheeky young bastard."

I braced myself for the major's expected outburst.

All he said was, "I'll talk to you tomorrow, Ince. You'd better get back to bed. Fox can take over your watch."

Surprisingly, Fox raised no objections. I thought it

best not to ask him for my knife back.

Kevin and I walked back to our cottage. Before crossing the road, he made an elaborate pretense of looking in both directions. "Fungus drill," he called it. And, "Why the blazes didn't you wake me?"

"You were fast asleep. It seemed a pity to disturb you."

"And look at the mess you've dropped yourself in. What will you tell the gaffer tomorrow?"

Feeling for my handkerchief, I found the whistle. "I forgot to give this back." I slipped it back in my pocket. "I'll think of something."

As it turned out, I didn't have to rack my brain for a story that would sound convincing and would not involve the old folk in any way. Kevin was lying down and I was undressing when the door opened and Mr. Tadman came softly into the room.

"I reckoned you wouldn't be asleep yet." He came closer, peering at me in the moonlight. "Did you manage to get all that stuff off you, Stuart?"

"Most of it," I told him.

"I'm right sorry about what happened," he said earnestly. "I should never have asked you to try. I didn't stop to think." He paused. "I told the major all about it—why you was after the food."

"There was no need for that!" I cried.

"I couldn't sit back and let you take the blame, lad. That's something I'd made up my mind about from the first. If all had gone well, I'd have waked mother and we'd have left tonight. Then the major would have known, without asking, where the food had gone."

Kevin sat up. "How did he take it when you told him what you intended doing?"

"With him, it's hard to tell sometimes." The old man shook his head. "Didn't say much at all. Reckon that'll come tomorrow." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Thanks for trying, lad."

"Damn," Kevin said softly, viciously, when he had gone. Drawing up his legs, he rested his chin on his bare knees. "I suppose that's put paid to it."

"He told us earlier that they intended leaving whether they could get food or not. I think that's what they'll try to do now—leave without anything. I don't see how the

major can stop them. He can't watch them all the time. He can't lock them up."

"But he can keep them apart from each other," Kevin said bitterly. "Just the sort of thing he would do. He knows damn well that one won't leave without the other. That's supposing he does want to keep them here. I think he will. The old man, with his gardening background, will be a useful person to have around." He yawned. "And now settle down, for Pete's sake, so that I can get some sleep in before Fox comes to hand over the keys of the castle."

I settled down. This time, it was a while before I dropped off. But when at last I did, I must have slept soundly enough, for I knew nothing of the changing of the guard.

On board a ship—that's where I was—clinging for dear life to the rail, wind tearing at my face, fighting to keep my balance on a deck that tilted from side to side with the fury of the storm. Then I was awake, with reality taking over from dream.

The wind roar became the rumblings of the volcano. My mattress—part of the floor—rocked and swayed, rising and falling sickeningly. And I was alone—Kevin had gone.

The window rattled in its frame. Debris scrabbled in the chimney and came pattering down like hailstones on the screwed-up paper in the tiny black-leaded grate. The door shook as if someone was trying to get in.

I knelt, then came to my feet, staggering, arms outstretched, across to the window. Far over to the right, a red glow hung in the sky—a beacon that flared, sank and flared again like some monstrous signal lamp. I felt the whole cottage lurch. A crash outside must have been slates dislodged from the roof.

Gradually, the tremors eased. The glow blossomed scarlet and died down for the last time. The volcano grumbled menacingly and was silent. I went back to my bed, to sit down and fumble in my rucksack for cigarettes, in the pockets of my shorts for my lighter. The whistle had gone, I noted absently. Kevin must have taken it with him. If there was any danger out there, he'd have used it before now.

I was still awake when Kevin returned from having

roused the major.

"Not that he needed any rousing," he remarked drily, taking off his shirt. "I don't suppose anyone slept through that lot."

"Is everything all right out there?"

"No flying bug-eyed monsters." He grinned at me over his naked shoulder. "Although I did see something that might have been one of them. I gave it a wide berth. Nothing else. I didn't see any sparks come down. Old Faithful must have decided to spout in the opposite direction for a change. Soon be light." He looked at the window. "Dawn number two in the year God knows what."

Squatting on his mattress, he looked up from untying his shoes. "Incidentally, I had a chat with friend Fox before he returned to his bed. Both he and Donald figured you were after that food for yourself. You can't blame them. I put him wise. He said it was a bloody pity you didn't tell him beforehand what you intended doing and why. If he'd have known, he'd have helped."

"You're joking," I said sourly.

"I'm not. But don't start measuring him for a halo until you've had time to think about it. No question of the milk of human kindness. If I know Fox, he subscribes to the same theory that George Tadman came up with—that old folk only get in the way and eat good food in the process. The best thing for all concerned is for them to pack their traps and walk out into the night, never to return." He lifted his nose, sniffing the air. "You been indulging?"

I tossed him the pack of cigarettes.

"Celebrating something?" he wondered.

"Only that the cottage didn't collapse about my head."

He leaned toward me, the cigarette jaunty between his lips. "Got a light?"

I flicked my lighter.

"Thanks." He inhaled deeply. "Something puzzles me about Fox." He leaned back, propping himself on one elbow. "He raises objections to most of the major's orders; yet when he was told to break up his and Cherry Dorran's little love nest to come and muck in with the major and his brood, he didn't say a blind word. I mean, it can't be convenient for amorous activities. Maybe even

impossible. I have the feeling that the two girls are bedded down together in the same room. And yet there hasn't been a squeak out of Fox. Or Cherry, for that matter. It doesn't make sense. They must have been living together for——"

He broke off as a piece of plaster flaked from the ceiling and spattered on the floor. And the floor, I noticed for the first time, was already liberally speckled with white.

"The old homestead has had a right shaking-up," Kevin said. "It wouldn't take much more to bring the whole of the ceiling down. I have the feeling that the major will have changed his mind about turning the place into a fortress."

He was right.

Before breakfast, the major beckoned for me to follow him into the front room, which, map and calendar on wall, had become his headquarters. He marked off the date before going to stand in front of the map. It was a large affair, made from two lengths of wallpaper tacked floral side down—one could see the ghost outlines of pink roses—to the wall facing the fireplace. The scale was marked at the bottom: six inches to the mile. At the center was the half-mile circle that had come with us: a tiny 20th Century inset on a—what?—400th Century background. The contents of the circle were marked with great detail. From it—sprawling spider legs—dotted lines were the routes taken by yesterday's parties of exploration.

The major was concerned about the relative positions of volcano—a penciled circle toward the top left-hand corner—and cave—a croquet hoop some six inches to the right. His finger moved from one to the other. Did I think he had got them in the right positions? Were the distances correct?

I told him, anxious to please, that they seemed all right to me.

"Is it possible that the cave is actually sited in the lower slopes of the volcano itself?"

I frowned with the effort of bringing a picture to mind. I thought I knew what was troubling him.

"The haze made it impossible to tell," I said.

"I know very little about volcanoes and their be-

havior." That was a confession which, by his tone, he hadn't much liked having to make. "You say the cave was cool inside. Even so. . . ." He used two fingers as calipers to measure the distance between the center of the volcano and the cave. About half a mile he made it and shook his head, unhappy at his findings. "Little enough. . . ." He brooded silently for a few moments, chewing on his bottom lip.

"You are thinking in terms of somewhere to live?" I asked diffidently.

"After last night's tremor, I would have thought that was obvious."

"Out here"—I reached over his shoulder to point to the virgin paper of the top right-hand side—"there may be more caves out this way." Well, it was something to say, something to show him that I was trying to take an intelligent interest. "The trouble is, in this mist it's impossible to see for any great distance."

"I am well aware of that, Ince," he retorted impatiently. "I am debating which of two courses of action is deserving of the greater priority: to more accurately survey our first cave, or strike out in a new direction in the hope of finding more."

Privately, I felt that first priority should be given to removing the explosive to some far distant place as speedily as possible. In my opinion, the chance of another rain of fire setting its present home alight was a very real danger—something much more likely to happen than a tremor bad enough to wreck all the cottages. But to voice that opinion would have been so much wasted breath.

He issued his orders for the day over the breakfast table. No probe to the south. Instead, two to the more fruitful north. I thought he might have decided to accompany one of the parties this time, to see for himself what it was like out there, to form his own estimates of distances. But for all his intentions of finding some place else for us all to live, the work of demolishing the empty cottages preparatory to the building of a stockade was to go on—under his watchful eye. I wondered if that decision was the outcome of his years of military indoctrination: the army policy of keeping men at work even though that work was to be wasted.

Donald and Mrs. Dorran were to go to the stream and

then turn to the right. George Tadman was to accompany them part of the way. The old man looked up from his plate at mention of his name. There was nothing about his expression to tell me whether or not the major had had words with him over last night's affair. He was to leave off weeding—the major's word, that—and, carrying the two polythene containers, he was to go with them as far as the stream. Having filled them, he was to return home, continuing the process until a reserve of water had been built up. Another pointless operation if we were to quit the village in the near future. Not so pointless—I met Kevin's "I told you so" gaze—if it was just an excuse to keep the old couple apart.

Claire and I formed party number two. Kevin added a heavy wink to the same "I told you so" expression. We were to leave before the others. From the stream, we were to go to the right, following yesterday's route. We were to make a survey—how did one go about that?—of the terrain between volcano and cave and then carry on until we reached yesterday's farthest point. Then we were to strike across country in a westerly direction. And we were to make a day of it. We would be supplied with a haversack containing rations for two.

For the rest of the community, it was back to pointless demolition. For once, Fox let the thing pass without opening his mouth. Neither did Mrs. Dorran have anything to say for herself. Now I came to think, I doubted whether I'd heard her speak more than a dozen words in all the time I'd known her. In all the time . . . a lifetime of 24 hours.

All the dispositions had been made. No, not quite.

"The shotgun. . . ." The major eyed me pensively.

"I don't think we're likely to need it, sir," I said. The *sir* slipped out unintentionally.

Claire wasn't so sure. "That big bird we saw, Stuart. . . ."

I took the gun and eight cartridges. She carried the haversack. There was a brief delay while she replaced a button that had come adrift from her blue silk blouse.

Everything was the same as yesterday—the heat, the mists, the menacing hazy outline of the volcano. We walked in silence until we had crossed the island stepping-stones.

"A cat," Claire said inconsequently. "It would have been nice if we had brought a cat with us. A dog"—she changed the haversack from one shoulder to the other as we entered the glades—"a dog would have been even better."

"I can offer a mole," I told her. "Or, rather, Mr. Tadman can. He thinks one may have come through with us. There might be a few mice, as well. I haven't seen any birds from our time."

"The explosions scared them all away. Oh—ages ago. Stuart—last night. That thing. . . ."

"I kicked up a rumpus because I didn't know then that it was harmless. It was just a glorified puffball—nothing more—probably come from the swamps, probably filled with marsh gas." I flicked at a passing parachute. "The same idea as these things."

"So George says," doubtfully.

"He's an expert on the subject."

"He was an expert where we came from. But things are very different here. You said you were frightened because you couldn't breathe. So, no matter what you say now, it could have been dangerous."

If that damned thing had clung without bursting as it had, if it had stayed wrapped round my face——

"I suppose it could have been," I admitted.

"And that tree." She looked about her. "Are these the ones, Stuart?"

We were passing a clump of the squat, ungainly umbrella trees.

"Yes," I said.

"We don't know for certain that those roots were only interested in vegetable stuff. They might go for flesh."

"It's most unlikely."

"But we can't be sure," she persisted and stopped, pointing. "Would that be the rock where you were sitting?"

It was. My face told her it was.

"I'm going to try for myself," she declared and left my side before I could stop her, going to seat herself on the mossy slab of stone.

She shook her head when I went toward her. "Don't try to play at knight-errant, Stuart. Be sensible. We've got to find out about them sooner or later. And what

better time than now, with you standing at the alert, armed to the eyebrows?"

"Then, let me——"

"And leave me holding the gun?" She shook her head again. "Not likely. I'm more afraid of that thing than your airborne roots." She gazed expectantly about her. "How long do we have to wait?"

At one side of the rock, the moss writhed, heaved, parted. Out glided the familiar three-headed white tendrils.

Claire saw it at the same time. "So that's what they look like." She shivered a little. "You were right, it does look like a snake."

Now there was another, on the other side. A third broke moss close to her feet. The first one—tall now, still growing—turned, groping toward her.

"No." She waved me back as I took another step forward. "Let's see what it does when it finds me."

It found her. The tips touched the bare brown flesh of her arm. Fascinated, she watched as the triple-pointed white head glided across it. "It feels cold and slimy." She shivered again.

The thing started to wrap itself round her arm. Then I could stand by no longer. I clutched her shoulder and dragged her, protesting, away. Eight—no—nine of the things hung poised in the air.

I was angry with both of us, mostly with myself for having let the thing go so far. I spoke the first words that came into my head.

"If we must experiment, let's use someone else as guinea pig. Someone better able to fight back. Someone more expendable, like——" I bit the last word off in time.

"Don't you consider me expendable, then?" Rubbing her arm where the root had touched her, she smiled up at me. "Not even after the way I behaved yesterday?"

"Not even after that," I assured her, all anger gone.

"I shouldn't have done it, Stuart." She sounded genuinely regretful. "Made you kiss me, I mean. But I wanted to see if I *could* do it. Can you understand that?"

"Yes," I said truthfully.

"I thought you would." She took my arm as we started to walk again, matching her stride to mine. "I like you, Stuart. Very much. That's why I didn't let it go any

further. It wouldn't have been fair to you."

I found nothing to say to that. We walked in silence for a while.

Then, "You don't like Bob very much, do you, Stuart? He was the one you were going to say was expendable."

"I've not had all that much to do with him."

"He's not really like what he seems. That's just his way. Always on the defensive. Did you know he started out to become a doctor?"

"A doctor?" It was impossible for me to keep the disbelief from my voice.

"It's true. He'd almost finished his studies. I think he'd one last exam to sit. Then he got into trouble—something that started out as a prank, a students' joke, and got out of hand. But instead of just fining him, like the others, they sent him to prison. As an example. And afterward, they wouldn't have him back in the medical school."

The gun was heavy. I tried carrying it over my shoulder like a soldier on sentry duty.

"A prison sentence seems unusual for a students' prank," I said. "I always thought the police made allowances for that sort of thing."

"I don't know the full story." The girl looked down at her feet as we walked. "It was something to do with a car they stole. And the things that happened to be in the car. It wasn't easy for him to get work when he came out of prison. For a time, he sold vacuum cleaners from door to door. Then he was a waiter in a hotel. From there, he drifted to a nightclub in London. That's how he first came to meet Cherry. She was an entertainer there. A speciality dancer." Claire made a small face. "You know the sort of thing."

"I can guess. She has all the fittings. Whatever brought them to Kirdale, of all places?"

"I don't know the full story. Bob doesn't talk about it much. So far as I can make out, it was because of something that happened at the club. Some men came, from a rival club, and there was a fight. One of them was badly hurt. Bob and Cherry were blamed. Not by the police, by the people from the other club."

It was the kind of thing one reads about in the Sunday papers and never quite believes. Too unreal. Like an epi-

sode from a fourth-rate thriller.

I said, "The first time Kevin and I met him, we both got the impression he thought we were someone else. What's the word? Hatchet men?"

"I wouldn't know, Stuart." She let me help her across the stream. "He did once say that they'd picked on Kir-dale because it was just about as isolated as any place could be."

"And Mrs. Dorran?"

"She's all right. Quite nice when you get to know her. She's divorced. She came here with Bob, I think, because there was no place else for her to go. They don't get on all that well, even though they live together. She told me once, quite seriously, that she pays her rent and that's as far as it goes."

"An arrangement," I said, "not a marriage, of convenience." And, "You wouldn't happen to be in love with him, Claire?"

"Ever since I first saw him," she replied simply. "Oh—ages ago. But there was nothing I could do about it—"

"Because of your father." There was no need for me to make a question of it.

"And because of Bob himself. He never thought of me in that way. I was just someone—oh—to talk to when he felt like talking. I never had the chance to let him see what I was really like. I don't suppose I ever would have had the chance if all this hadn't happened. Things are going to be different now."

You hope, I thought.

She squeezed my arm. "Yesterday, Stuart—in the cave. . . ."

"I know," I said wryly. "Guinea pig."

"Do you mind?" She seemed genuinely concerned that she might have upset or offended me. A child, for all her years. Nothing more than a child. One day, she would grow up. Perhaps that day wasn't all that far away.

"What do you think?" I said, smiling. "Of course I mind."

She chose to take me seriously. "I'll try to make it up to you."

We had reached the bend in the stream. I stopped, our

conversation put aside for the time being, wondering if this might be a good place from which to launch out for the purpose of making the survey. There was the volcano, almost directly in front. Over there, on the right, the cave.

"What are we waiting for?" Claire asked impatiently.

I told her.

"Oh, that——" She dismissed her father's instructions with an offhanded gesture. "Can't we just take that as read? Can't we say we had a look and the cave is far enough away from the volcano for the dynamite to be stored there? Anything to get it away from the village."

"No," I told her, "we can't."

"Very well," she retorted crossly and changed direction, going ahead of me.

"Doesn't it matter that they've been living together?" I asked.

"Why should it?" she threw back over her shoulder. "It didn't matter all that much back there. It doesn't matter at all here, now."

"And your father?"

"I don't have to answer to anyone now," she replied.

The pale Claire—although not all that pale now—and the dark, forceful Fox. Two people just about as unlike each other as any two people could be. Was that where the attraction lay? The unlike magnetic poles that attract. . . . Magnetism—my thoughts drifted. Kinestasis. That was something to do with the natural magnetic fields of the world. Some sort of energy that the people of the future had discovered and tapped. And, having tapped it, had allowed it to get out of hand.

And how did Fox feel about Claire?

Once away from the stream, we found ourselves climbing over tumbled rock. Hampered by the gun, by having only the one hand to pull me up, I fell even farther behind. At the top of a particularly steep section, Claire stopped—a slim figure silhouetted against the haze, turning, waiting at last for me to catch up.

And then her gaze lifted suddenly from my face to a point somewhere above my head.

She screamed shrilly in the same moment that I looked up to find out what had attracted her attention, what had caused her expression to change.

The bird, the gigantic golden bird, filled the sky—so close that it seemed I could have reached up to touch it, so close that I could feel the breeze of its passing on my face. Wings motionless, it sailed by, gliding directly toward the girl.

Instinct made me bring up the gun and level it. Twin muzzles, golden bird and horror-stricken face were all in the same straight line. I shouted frantically for her to get down. She seemed hypnotized, unable to move. I dropped to the ground.

Claire screamed again as I pressed the trigger.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I had handled guns before, had fired those small-bore air rifles one finds at fairground sideshows. But this was a heavy, old-fashioned, double-barreled and -triggered shotgun. It was only afterward that I found I had pressed both triggers together. It was only in the moment of firing that I remembered I was using cartridges filled with shot—pellets intended to spread. And there were only inches of daylight between the target of the bird's body and the oval of Claire's face.

The gun roared deafeningly. I was unprepared for the savage recoil of a butt set hastily, clumsily, against my shoulder. And the target—such a surprisingly small target to be supported by such enormous wings—disintegrated. The wings flew apart, then came drifting down, swaying, seesawing from side to side.

Dropping the gun, I scrambled up to where Claire stood with her hands covering her face. She didn't come into my arms; I took her into them. For no other reason now than that I wanted to reassure and comfort her, and that seemed the only way.

I could feel her shuddering. I couldn't see her face; that was pressed tightly against my chest. I asked her if

she was all right, and I felt her head nod, just managed to catch her whisper. There was inexpressible relief in that she was unharmed, that none of the pellets had touched her. After a while, she pushed herself away.

"I'm all right now." Her voice was steady enough. "It was coming straight at me." She looked about her—even up at the sky—as if expecting to see it still there.

"Down there." I pointed. "What's left of it." I wondered if they had heard the shot back in the village.

We climbed down to where the two severed wings, each six feet of feathery gold, lay where they had fallen on the rocks.

Gold, yes. But not feathery. Not feathers, not wings. I picked one of them up. I held it out, light enough to be easily carried in one hand, for her to see.

Claire started to laugh. Reaction, perhaps, more than anything else.

"Fern," she said. "It *is* fern? That's all it is?"

"The same idea as the parachutes," I said. "Just a way of dispersing seeds over a distance." I looked for the rest of the thing—the slender central part from which the huge fronds had sprouted. But there was no trace left at all of that.

I went to retrieve the gun. It was then I found I had fired both barrels. The act of reloading brought another discovery—the realization that when I had first been given the weapon, I had never thought to check to see if it was loaded. When I had aimed at that fern, I could have been aiming an empty gun. And what I had aimed at could have been what I had believed it to be at the time—some monstrous bird of prey. And Claire, instead of standing there, calmly patting her hair back into shape, could have been lying on the ground, face slashed to ribbons.

And another thought, one even more horrifying: If my aim hadn't been true—if it had been only a fraction off—the story would have been the same.

And our Garden of Eden would have been short of one of its Eves.

I sat down on a rock, the gun across my lap.

"The haversack," the girl remembered. "I dropped it up there." She started to climb, turned to see if I was following, saw I was still sitting and came back down again.

"Are you all right?" she asked, more puzzled than concerned.

The use had left my legs. I couldn't have stood up just at that moment to save my life. Thankfully, an excuse presented itself. The numbness was leaving my shoulder. It was starting to ache. Unbuttoning my shirt, I slipped it off my shoulder. The exposed purple bruise wasn't all that bad, but as a reason for taking things easy for a while, it was better than nothing, certainly better than the truth.

Claire bent over me. "Oh—did the gun do that, Stuart?" She touched the discolored flesh with cool fingertips. "Does it hurt very much?"

"It looks worse than it is." I pulled my shirt together again. "I'll be more careful next time. If there is a next time."

She stepped back, regarded me with her head on one side, then smiled.

"I was just trying to think what you remind me of," she said, completely her little-girl self again. "Sitting there with that gun across your knees . . . a settler. You know? Or a homesteader. Something to do with the wild and woolly West."

I removed it so that I could stand up. My legs were bone and muscle again.

At the top of the rise, she recovered her haversack, shook it—"Nothing broken"—and opened it to peer inside. "Nothing to break. Cream crackers, fish paste." She rummaged happily. "Cheese—processed, of course. Oh—and some homemade shortbread. That's nice." But not so nice after all. She grew up for a moment. "That will have come from Mary's pantry." She replaced the things in silence.

We started climbing again. Some 15 minutes later, we came upon the hot springs. Water gushed, bubbling, from the dark hollow of a rock cavity, forming a series of steaming pools.

Claire, delighted by the discovery, knelt to test the temperature with her finger, withdrawing it quickly. "Not far off boiling."

With the major's map in mind, I hazarded a guess at the distance we had come from the stream. Half a mile, I judged, and this was as far as we were going to be able

to travel in this direction, for behind the springs, the rock face rose steeply with no ridges or cracks that might serve as footholds.

We turned to the right, to follow what I felt sure must be the lower slopes of the actual volcano. If my sense of direction wasn't at fault, we must now be heading toward the cave.

"The silence"—Claire paused for a moment—"it's uncanny. Apart from us, no sounds at all. It's strange not even hearing birds. It's almost as if the whole place was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen."

I replied unthinkingly, "Maybe for Old Faithful to blow his top." And then could have bitten my tongue off.

She peered anxiously upward through the haze. "You said he was settling down."

"He is. I only said that for something to say."

We skirted an expanse of pumice—a desolation of rough gray stone, light and porous but with sharp edges that would have played havoc with our shoes. And what were we going to use to protect our feet once our shoes had worn out?

"I was thinking, Stuart," the girl said. "That fern thing. We *know* it was only a fern. But the way it came at me, almost as if it knew what it was doing, as if it could see."

"It only came your way by chance. Don't forget it had to pass over me to get to you." But I had been in a hollow; she had been standing on the crest.

"Could it have been alive in some way, Stuart? I mean alive like an animal?"

"A cross between plant and bird." I smiled at her troubled expression. "Seeds or eggs?"

"No." She shook her head a little crossly. "A plant on the way to becoming a bird. They say we were once apes. And before that, something that crawled out of the water."

"I did enough biology at school to know that animal cells and vegetable cells are two very different things. They can't mix." I hoped I was right. "It has to be one or the other."

"That was in our world," she said. "Things may be very different here."

"It's *still* our world," I reminded her. "All this stuff

here now came originally from our time. Look, the next time we spot a flying fern, I'll try to bring it down by shooting through one of the fronds. Then we'll be able to see what the middle part looks like."

"It flew," she said stubbornly.

"It glided."

"I saw the wings move."

"I wonder if there's a close season for flying ferns?" I asked.

She laughed and the small tension was broken.

A shoulder of rock forced us down to a lower level, back to the moss and the misty glades. We traveled in a small private circle of enclosed, constantly changing scenery. And after a while, the circle came to include trees that bore fruit.

It was Claire who first spotted the clusters of golden-yellow globes and went flying toward them, taking one, plucking it, holding it under her nose, then excitedly under mine, digging her thumb into the skin so that I was in no doubt that it was an orange.

An orange grove. Branches covered with small shiny leaves. Fruit hanging in heavy clusters. Did the oranges of our world grow like this, in grapelike clusters? I didn't know. But they did here—the smaller fruit at the bottom still green, those at the top verging on scarlet.

Claire had hers peeled and quartered and into her mouth before I realized what she was doing. Too late then to tell her to wait until we were sure. But what other way was there of testing than for us to eat them ourselves?

I picked and peeled one for myself. A childhood-Christmas smell. A Saturday-morning-cinema taste. The juice ran down my chin. I couldn't remember how long it was since I had last eaten an orange.

Claire crammed the last of hers into her mouth, wiped her hand, little-girl fashion, down the sides of her shorts and then filled the haversack with fruit. "For lunch," she said indistinctly. "And to take back to show the others." Not "father"—"the others."

We passed through the grove and started climbing again as I changed direction to that in which I felt the cave must lie.

We emerged quite close to it. I added another distance

estimate to my mental list. And the fact that, unfortunately, the cave did appear to be in the actual rock of the volcanic mountain itself.

From there, we struck out in a more or less westerly direction. Rock gave way to the inevitable arcadian glades. We passed a place where white plumes grew tall—a kind of pampas grass, I guessed. And we saw flowers, scarlet-petaled flowers not unlike poppies. We stopped for lunch at the side of a stream.

“Give me your shirt,” Claire ordered.

Something for her to sit on, I thought. And so I stripped it off and gave it to her. Holding it at exaggerated arm’s length, she bore it to the stream and there, on hands and knees, like the inhabitant of some remote Italian mountain village, set about washing it, pausing once to glance back over her shoulder, eyes wicked, telling me, “If you think when I’ve finished yours, I’m going to do the same with mine, you’ve got another think coming.” And this was the same self-conscious girl who had stood, hands twisting, in the Tadman’s cottage only two nights ago, too shy almost to open her mouth. A new Claire altogether? Or had she always been like this, true nature hidden by the false veneer of clumsy shyness that was the product of parental domination? It was hard to say. An enigma, anyway.

She wrung the shirt out and spread it on a rock. “It won’t take long to dry.”

It was dry by the time we had eaten, rested and were ready to go. Remembering yesterday’s sudden and dramatic change from daylight to darkness—no leeway of twilight—I worked out that three o’clock would be the time to start back. That would give us five hours of daylight for the return trip. And allow two hours now in which to find another cave.

We found it—them, rather—about an hour later. We emerged from the trees and bushes to find a gentle slope in front of us, a slope that led up to a massive outcrop of rock. Set in the rock face were the openings of five caves. The three larger ones had smooth, sandy floors and entrances large enough to admit a reasonable amount of light. And close by was another stream. It struck me, looking at it, that we had come across quite a few streams in the course of our various journeys. More than

one might have expected to find in a place where it never seemed to rain.

But distortion of time was responsible for that notion. We had, after all, been here for only two days. The major was wise to have started a calendar. Without it, we would soon have lost all track of time. I added more information to my mental list. We were now two miles from the place where we had stopped for lunch, say six from the volcano. The major should be happy enough with that distance.

We sat in front of one of the cave openings. Claire wasn't too keen on the idea of becoming a troglodyte.

"It seems so—so *primitive*, Stuart."

Girl-woman again. But I had to laugh at her tone, her expression.

"We *are* primitive, Claire."

"Not so long as we have the cottages and the things in them." She looked down at herself. "And our clothes."

"We might not always have the cottages."

"The earthquakes. . . . No, I suppose not. We could make partitions, I suppose." She looked back over her shoulder. "Cave dwellers. . . ."

"We can turn them from caves into homes. Carpets on the floors, pictures on the walls, chairs and tables."

She turned back again. "But what a long way to have to bring it all. Think of the wardrobes and the beds."

"We've all the time in the world."

"And four able-bodied men." She grimaced. "How's your shoulder now, Stuart?"

Mention of it reminded me that it was still inclined to be painful. I lay flat on my back and something dug into my side. Not a stone, but the wallet in my hip pocket—a wallet more bulky than usual by reason of the money it contained: 30 pounds and more, so carefully saved up, hoarded for the holiday.

Claire smiled. "That's not going to be much use now."

"Oh, one can never tell." I fanned notes. "Cut into strips, pasted together—Christmas decorations."

"Paper chains." She drew up her legs, tucked them beneath her and gazed upward. "I suppose if we could see the sky, it would be blue."

"I suppose so."

"Why is it always misty?"

"I'm not sure."

It was a mist that seemed to cling to the ground—thickest there, thinning as it rose. Certainly, from where we sat we could see the top of the volcano reasonably clearly, enough to make out the plume of smoke that rose from the jagged summit, the black pall that hung over it.

"Perhaps something to do with extremes of temperature," I hazarded. "Cold air from the swamps meeting the warm, moisture-laden air from the hot springs. Or could be the ground was saturated by a heavy rainstorm just before we arrived and this mist is the aftermath."

We started back at 20 minutes to three, not retracing our steps but aiming directly at where we thought the village lay, using the volcano as a guide. So long as we kept it there on our right, we couldn't go far wrong.

We skirted a plantation of tall, alien-looking, spine-covered growths. Cacti, they could have been, but much taller than any cacti I had seen in pictures.

Claire said, "Have you noticed how things seem to grow in groups, Stuart, not intermingled? I mean, we've only seen the one group of orange trees. Then the glades of umbrella trees. And those trees that make the parachutes. We only saw them in the one place. And at the other side of the village, it's thick jungle, not a bit like it is here."

That was something I hadn't thought about before. I thought now and came up with what was probably the right answer.

"It'll be because there are no birds or animals to disperse the seed. There was just the one orange tree to start with." I hoped she wouldn't ask how it had got there in the first place. "The fruit ripened and fell, the seeds germinated and the grove slowly spread out. Other kinds of trees will probably only thrive in the right conditions. We know that the seeds from the parachute trees will take root anywhere, but they don't grow everywhere, which means they only feel at home close to hot lava. The thing that barged into me last night was looking for a suitable swamp in which to touch down. And I'm guessing that the flying ferns only grow somewhere very high up—perhaps on steep walls, where, when the time comes, they can detach themselves and go gliding off in the hope of finding another rocky perch."

"It flew," Claire said, small chin jutting mutinously, a little girl again.

The first of the three tremors came as we were making our way through a wood of what looked like fir trees but in this climate were probably something very different. The ground trembled and that was all. No sounds came from the volcano, but the underside of the smoke pall had become tinged with red.

The second came just as we were leaving the wood. This time the tremor was accompanied by an ominous rumbling.

The third one came about five minutes later, and this was a really bad one—certainly the worst we had so far experienced. The ground rose abruptly, poised, fell, almost as if we were standing on a carpet that was being shaken by invisible hands. The volcano growled. The cloud turned a brilliant scarlet. The world shuddered and shuddered again.

My arm about the girl's waist, we hurried, staggering toward the cover of a clump of trees, new trees—squat, thick-trunked affairs with heavy-leaved, spreading branches. I crouched to the ground, pulling Claire down with me, her face against my breast.

The rumbling grew to a roar. Through it, I could hear the hailstone patter on the leaves above. A large piece of burning debris, smoke trailing in its wake, hurtled across the open space in front to strike a moss-covered boulder, bursting like a bomb, scattering blazing fragments in all directions. I covered as one came right at me. It missed my head by inches, thudding against the trunk behind.

Another fell about a yard away—a jagged segment about the size of a football. For all it was glowing with heat, the moss on which it rested seemed unharmed. I had seen the same thing happen before, but watching it again now, a thought occurred to me.

If these eruptions were a regular feature of this place, then the ground ought to be littered with pieces and chunks of rock. But it wasn't, unless the moss covered them very quickly. But even then, the shapes would still be there. And there were no shapes. The ground, for the greater part, was level and even.

I could find only one explanation, a comforting explanation. Up until the massive eruption which had

paved the way for our trip from our own time to this new one, the volcano must have been quiescent, dormant. When, to allay my own fears as well as Claire's, I had said that the volcano was now in the process of settling down again, I had been right. I hoped, fervently, that it wouldn't take too long over that process.

The roaring had subsided to a rumbling. The ground became solid again. We straightened and moved out into the open, careful where we set our feet.

"I thought it was going to go on forever," Claire said shakily.

I looked at the cause of all the trouble. The peak was hidden by a dense black pall. Trailing from its shadow were fiery ribbons that must be new streams of molten lava.

"The cottages——" Claire said.

"We'll have to wait and see. Most likely they'll have stood up to it."

But as we were to find, some three hours later, when we finally arrived back home, they hadn't. Two—fortunately unoccupied ones—had collapsed completely. Part of the roof had gone from a third. And there was a crack from ground to chimney stack in the major's cottage. Plans for complete and immediate evacuation were already under way. Boxes and cartons packed with breakable items had been stacked in the open.

The major greeted the news of the discovery of the new caves with what was, for him, great enthusiasm.

The plaster that littered the floor of his front room crunched under our feet as I followed him to the map to point out the various positions of our latest discoveries.

He walked two fingers from the volcano to the spot I indicated. "Six miles, you say, Ince?"

"At least that."

"Excellent." In anyone else, his smile could have been described as a beam.

I gave him the rest—the hot springs, the cacti, the wood, the stream by the new caves. And the best—at least what I thought was the best—saved to the last. "And just about here, a grove of orange trees."

I was disappointed at his reception of that item, even though he did raise his brows, did ask, "Orange trees? You're sure?"

"We brought samples back with us," I told him.

But, to him, the discovery of the new caves overshadowed everything else. Under the circumstances, he was probably right. I checked in the gun, was thankful I didn't have to account for the expended cartridges and went outside to where Kevin, stripped to the waist, was roping a large cardboard carton.

"Assorted crockery." He wiped his forehead with the back of his arm. "I feel like an itinerant street trader. Make yourself useful and put your finger on this knot."

Outside the Tadman cottage, Fox was packing glassware. There was no sign of George Tadman. "Still playing Gunga Din," Kevin told me. "Still toting water." Donald and Cherry Dorran hadn't yet returned. But there was still the best part of an hour of daylight left.

Kevin lowered his voice. "You're lucky. Venturing into the unknown means you escape all the local upheavals."

"Another barney?"

"You can say that again." He glanced at Fox's back. "For once I was on his side. He blew his top. It took me all my time not to do the same."

I felt sick to my back teeth of the quarrels between Fox and the major. "What was it all about this time?"

"That last shake-up. Cottages collapsing in all directions. Fox—credit where it's due—his first thought was for old Mrs. Tadman. Went racing into her cottage, up the stairs, to come up against a locked bedroom door with no sign of the key. He had to smash the door down to see if she was all right. And then came storming out to tell the major what he thought of him. It ended with the major telling him that if he didn't like the way things were being run, the best thing he could do was get the hell out of it, leave the community and go forage for himself in the wilderness. He meant it, too."

"And?"

"I left them to it. As you can see, Fox is still in the fold." Kevin picked up the carton to test the cords. "That'll hold."

I said, "Claire thinks she's got a thing about him. Fox, I mean."

I expected him to be surprised, even shocked. He was neither.

“Had an inkling something like that was in the wind.” He turned to look for another empty box. “Mr. Tadman had a chat with me earlier, in between his water-carrying spells. Went all round the houses—pass me that pile of plates—but his message came through. Waste of time—and those jugs—making up to Claire. Only cause more trouble. Take things easy for a time—that was the gist of it all. More than enough friction as it is.”

“The major doesn’t know.”

“Don’t be too sure about that. There’s not much he misses. It’s no coincidence that Claire and Fox have been kept apart. And there’s nothing the major would like better than to see Fox pack his bags and move out. He made that very clear a while back. Hand me that bowl.”

I handed it to him.

“How did you get on out there?” he asked.

I told him about the oranges and the caves. Like the major, his interest centered on the latter. “Thank God for that. How far away?”

“Five, six miles.”

He broke off packing to whistle soft dismay. “And the only thing we’ve got on wheels is one lady’s bicycle. Not even an old pram or a blasted wheelbarrow. So it’ll all have to be carried the hard way. And in the meantime, what—beds dragged out under where the stars ought to be?”

We weren’t told to do that. The major did debate the point, but decided against it—with the proviso that at the first indication of another tremor, everyone was to leave the cottages.

Donald and Mrs. Dorran, returning just before dusk, had nothing of importance to report. They had met George Tadman and he had come back with them, weary—by his face—to the point of exhaustion. He was not allowed to return to his own home. A bed had been made up for him in the major’s room.

Night watch was the same as the previous night.

Apart from one small tremor toward dawn, over before anyone had time to tumble out into the open, the dark hours passed uneventfully.

I remember, toward the end of my tour of duty, standing in the lonely, silent road, gun cradled in my arms, looking in the direction of the volcano.

A prophetic mood. . . .

I had the feeling—almost the conviction—that before the volcano finally settled down to another thousand years of inactivity, it would have one last fling, show us what it was really made of, what it could really do when it set its mind to it.

And I had the conviction—the certain conviction—that we were in for an explosion of another kind. All the ingredients were here—had been here before we had arrived on the scene. Up until then, they had been kept apart. Now, under these new, unnatural conditions, they were coming together. All that was needed now was one spark big enough to touch it off.

I wondered which eruption, which catastrophe, would happen first.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Friday. Just a name now. A title without meaning. Just a convenient way of telling this third day apart from those that had gone.

"I think we ought to start our own calendar," Kevin observed as we made our way toward breakfast and briefing. "What's the point of carrying on with the old? It doesn't mean anything. For one thing, we don't even know what year it is."

"Day three, month one, year one," I said.

"Something a bit more imaginative than that." He scratched at the stubble on his chin. "I don't know about you, but I feel like I've spent most of my life here. Where we came from—home—has got pushed into the shadows. Sometimes it's even an effort to remember. I suppose it's because we've been kept so busy."

"The novelty, more than that. Everything new. It was the same when we first moved to Manchester. For a time, everything was fine. New faces, new streets, new shops. Until they weren't new any longer. Then I'd have given anything to be back home again."

We stopped outside the major's cottage, both of us, for some reason, reluctant to enter.

"We're not kids," Kevin said.

"Being grown-up won't stop us getting homesick when the time comes."

"The rest of them seem to have taken it in their stride and settled down. No moping, no complaining. If anything, just the reverse. And I don't think we can blame the major-Fox feud on our present surroundings. Being here only brought it to the surface."

"All they've done is change one way of life for another," I said. "They've left no ties behind, and so there are no regrets. All they've lost by being brought here is some of the comforts of civilization. Individually, most of them have gained on the deal."

"Quite the little philosopher. I know what you mean. Mrs. Tadman's last days made happy. And because she's happy, so is her husband. The major has all the authority his military heart could desire. El Supremo. And the others?"

"Claire"—I shrugged—"she never had a chance to grow up before. Now she's catching up fast. Fox has found a place where his sordid past can't catch up with him in the shape of retributory razors."

"A fine turn of phrase. Just a phrase?"

"Fact," I said.

"You must tell me about it sometime. And his lady love?"

"Mrs. Dorran, too."

"Which only leaves Donald," Kevin said. "And from something else Mr. Tadman told me, I have the feeling she's going to be the thing he's gained. That and perhaps his independence."

"We're the outsiders," I said. "We're the only ones to lose on the deal."

"Let's go and eat," he said.

As usual, the major issued his orders over the breakfast table. This was to be our last day in the village; the exodus to the caves was to start immediately. An advance party of four, carrying as much as they could: Donald, George Tadman, Mrs. Dorran, and myself to show the way. I was to blaze the trail for future, unguided parties. The method: a bundle of four-foot garden canes. The major and Claire would follow later with the first of the bedding. Kevin and Fox were to remain

behind to continue with the packing.

And that was it.

Were his instructions clear? the major wanted to know. They were, we told him. All except Fox, who contented himself with a curt nod. I tried to see him through Claire's eyes, this man who had set out to become a doctor, who had ended up in fear of his life and with a large-size chip on his shoulder. I couldn't find it in my heart to blame him for that chip. In his place, I would have been the same. The fear had gone, but the chip still remained. It would go in the course of time. Claire—and I could see the way he looked at this new Claire—would help him get rid of it.

The advance party left as soon as breakfast was over. Donald and I led the way, carrying one of the larger cartons between us, the bundle of canes balanced on top. Mrs. Dorran and George followed a few paces behind, each with one of the smaller boxes. I drove in the first cane at the entrance to the glades. As a marker, in this mist, not all that effective. But better than nothing, and orders were orders.

Donald had little to say. For the greater part, we walked in silence. We stopped to rest about halfway between lava and stream. Donald leaned forward to shake sweat from his face like a dog. Mrs. Dorran, seated on her box, smiled across at him. From somewhere she had dug up a pair of very brief black shorts—satin, suggestive of things theatrical—and a white shirt, a man's shirt, by the look of it. When she leaned forward to tie the lace of one of her shoes, it was very obvious she was wearing nothing underneath.

Mr. Tadman took his pipe from his pocket, studied the empty bowl, shook his head and put it away again. Meeting my sympathetic gaze, he smiled. "About the only thing I miss."

"Coconut palms and orange trees," I said. "Why not tobacco plants as well?"

We stopped again, this time for a drink as well as a rest, when we came to the stream.

"New country to me now," Donald observed when we had left it behind. He turned to point. "We went that way, along the stream. It started to widen fast, as if it was on its way to join a river or lake. We had to turn

back before there was a chance to find out. There were bushes on the banks. Covered with small whitish flowers. Cherry said blackberries. I wasn't so sure. We'll have to wait and see."

"They *were* blackberry bushes." Mrs. Dorran's throaty voice came from behind us.

"A farmer's daughter." Donald smiled at my expression and nodded. "She is, you know."

Another short break when we reached the fir trees.

"Did you find any seed at all, George?" Donald wanted to know. "I forgot to ask you before."

"More'n I thought I had." The old man mopped his face with a blue handkerchief. "Cabbage, parsnip, lettuce, onion. Some flowers, too. Reckon they should do all right, too, in this soil, once this muck's been cleared away." He dug one heel into the moss.

It seemed to me that the light had faded a little. I asked if anyone else had noticed. Donald had but had put it down to smoke from the volcano.

"I should say it was clouding over for rain," George said more knowledgeably. "Not enough breeze to send smoke drifting this far. By the looks of the stuff here, it must get a fair amount of rain."

"How much farther?" Donald asked with some concern.

I gave an estimate in time. "About twenty minutes." A guess that wasn't far out.

We carried the boxes into one of the larger caves. Donald went off on a tour of the others. The old man, breathing heavily, lowered himself to the sandy floor and leaned back, eyes closed, against the wall. I picked up the box he had been carrying to put it with the others and was surprised at its weight. Yesterday, lugging heavy containers of water, now this.

Mrs. Dorran came to my side. "I wanted to help him with it," she said softly. "He wouldn't let me."

Because I was angry, I spoke sharply. "He wouldn't." When I went outside, she followed me.

"We're supposed to start back straightaway, Stuart." It was the first time she had addressed me by name. "But he's not fit. He needs a rest first."

To hell with the major. "He's going to have one," I rejoined flatly.

Donald returned in time to catch my words. "Who's going to have what?"

Mrs. Dorran explained.

He looked anxiously into the cave. "You're right, he doesn't look too good. All the same"—he was uncertain what to do about it—"we simply can't afford to waste a single minute. We've got to get as much stuff as we can away from the village before another tremor wrecks the rest of the cottages. And if we're going to spend the night here, then we'll need all the bedding there is."

"There's nothing to prevent the two of us going back," I said and turned to Mrs. Dorran. "You could stay here with him until he's had a chance to recover. Then you could follow. Do you think you could find the way?"

She nodded confidently. "Keep the volcano on our right and watch out for your canes. We won't get lost."

"That's settled, then." I took Donald's arm while he still wavered and drew him with me down the slope.

He looked back unhappily. "I don't like leaving them like that."

"They'll be all right. If the old man doesn't have a rest, he could easily collapse. Then we'd be a man short. Your father would want us to do it this way."

He saw the sense of that. But his father wasn't the thing that was worrying him. "I was thinking about that bird you and Claire saw, that you had to shoot."

So she had told him about the incident. To try to set his mind at ease, I made it sound as ridiculous as I could.

"There can't be many people who can claim to have brought down a fern in mid-flight."

"If that's all it was. . . ."

"The same sort of thing as the parachutes," I assured him.

We threaded our way through the clumps of towering cacti.

"Mother used to collect things like these," he remarked. "Small ones." He showed me the size with his hands. "We had a conservatory in those days. That was in Aden."

I wondered what his mother had been like, what kind of woman the major had chosen for a wife. The unlike poles of a magnet again. Plain and colorless was the way I imagined her, tall and little to say for herself.

The ground shuddered as we neared the fir wood.

"Another one," Donald said in the resigned matter-of-fact way one would comment on an April shower.

The volcano growled; the ground trembled again as we entered the wood. For cover, we chose a spot where three trees grew close together. The usual debris started pattering down—miniature smoke-trailing meteorites—as we reached the shelter of the branches.

A glowing hunk of rock plunged through the branches to hit a nearby trunk and ricochet away into the mist.

"Strike one," he said. "You ever played baseball?"

"No."

"Father was attached to an American unit once. I was only young at the time. Chewing gum, coffee, ice cream and baseball."

The eruption was a mild affair that lasted only a few minutes. After its passing, the world seemed even darker.

"George may be weather-wise," Donald said, "but I still say smoke, not cloud."

He was wrong. The first spots of rain came lancing down some 20 minutes later, just as we were approaching the glades.

"The next time I see him," he said, "I'll make a point of doffing my hat to his superior——"

The downpour caught him in midsentence. We were soaked to the skin in the few seconds it took us to race for the trees. I had enough wits about me to tell him—and I had to shout to make myself heard above the din—to keep his eyes on the ground.

For a moment he was puzzled. Then his face cleared. "Roots?" he called back, and I nodded. They were harmless—I felt pretty sure of that—but there was always the thousand-to-one chance I was wrong.

They showed themselves almost immediately. Two came groping blindly in the air between us. We moved away. They withdrew. When more appeared, we moved again. Donald, a short distance away, shouted something. I was only able to catch the one word *Cherry*, but it was enough for me to guess at the rest. I had been thinking about her and the old man, wondering if they had been caught in this out in the open. I wondered, too, if it was possible for anyone to drown in rain like this. Heavy as it was—a solid sheet—I thought it unlikely.

The downpour stopped almost as abruptly as it had started. The light returned. Now we could speak and be heard without having to shout.

Donald had some idea of going back to see if the others were safe. I left him to make his own decision—not trying to dissuade him, only offering my opinion. “If they had started out, if they were unlucky enough to have been caught out in the open, the worst that could have happened to them is a soaking.”

He found reassurance in a thought. “George won’t take any chances.”

“He’ll make sure she comes to no harm,” I said.

We went on.

The stream, when we reached it, was swollen to three or four times its former width. No question now of just stepping across. Donald backed up a few paces, took a run, jumped. Even though he was taller than I, his legs longer, he fell short, landing in the water, swaying, stumbling, finally managing to pull himself out onto the far bank.

“Don’t try it,” he called across.

Only just beginning to dry out after the last soaking, I had no intention of repeating his performance. “I’ll find somewhere else,” I called back.

I made my way along the bank, looking for a suitable place. I found one eventually, but only after walking for quite a distance. My leap from flat rock to greasy bank took me safely over. Then I hurried back, expecting to find him waiting. He wasn’t there. But then, with the marker I had earlier planted on the bank no longer there—obviously washed away by the torrent—with the whole appearance of the stream changed, there was no way of telling if this was the right place.

I shouted his name. If there was a reply, then it must have been drowned by the sound of the rushing water.

I walked slowly along, trying to find the place where he had pulled himself onto land. He must have left some marks, I reasoned, even if only streaks of mud on the moss. But I found nothing. As it turned out, I had hopelessly misjudged the distance from the point where I had crossed. If only I had carried on for another score of yards.

As it was, I gave it up as a bad job and turned to

plunge into the glades, intending to return to the village alone. With occasional glimpses of the volcano to guide me, I couldn't go far wrong.

The scream came before I had taken more than a dozen steps. A woman's shrill scream—a heart-stopping sound—and it seemed to have come from a point somewhere in front and to the left.

Running now, I changed direction, making toward the source of the sound. I shouted something stupid as I ran—"Who is that?" I think.

A man's voice answered, coming from far over to the left—Donald's voice. "Is that you, Stuart?"

"Over here!" I shouted back and then suddenly recognized my surroundings, knew where I was—in the arcade we had made our highway between stepping-stones and stream. A few more yards through the mist and——

We all came together in the same few moments, almost as if the meeting had been timed.

As I came in sight of the rock where I had first seen the root snakes—where Claire had later conducted her foolish experiment with them—so Donald came plunging from the haze on the left, so Fox appeared in front, so Mrs. Dorran and George Tadman came running from somewhere on the right . . . to be confronted by the tableau of the major lying sprawled face down across the rock, with Claire kneeling at his side, tearing, clawing at the white roots that had coiled themselves about his ankles, his arms, his chest, even around his neck.

There were splashes of crimson on the tight white curls of his head. There were dark stains on the emerald moss. When Claire looked up—her face ashen, her features contorted, almost unrecognizable—I could see the streaks of dry blood down the front of her blouse.

I stopped dead in my tracks. So, I think, did all the others. All except Fox, and he kept coming, dragging out a knife—my bread knife—as he ran. He leaned over Claire, then pushed her aside—gently—so that he had freedom to slash at the glistening white coils. He lifted the major carefully, turning him over, dragging him away from the rock, laying him in the center of the glade.

A doctor, Claire had told me; he had been studying to become a doctor. And now all his actions were certainly

the steady, assured ones of an expert, of someone who knew what he was doing, of someone who knew how to tell with certainty whether a man was alive or——

Fox sat back on his heels. "He's dead." He looked up at Claire. "I'm sorry." And by his tone, he meant that.

For a while, no one moved, no one spoke. Fox, coming to his feet, broke the spell.

Donald went to stand at his sister's side, putting his arm about her shoulders.

"How did it happen?" he asked her gently.

She told him, a few whispered broken words at a time. Then George Tadman was talking, explaining—as if it mattered—how he and Mrs. Dorran had heard the scream and come running.

They talked, I think—telling about their various movements—because they were lost, because they didn't know what to do. And so Fox took charge. "We had better get him back to the village." He met Donald's eyes. "His village."

I might not have been there. I didn't exist for them. They left me standing there alone. I remember wondering where Kevin was. Back in the village, I supposed.

Fox and Donald carried the body. The others trailed behind. The procession faded into the mists. No one turned to look back, to see if I was following. It was really brought home to me then that in their eyes I wasn't one of them—I was still an outsider, a stranger.

But it wasn't that knowledge that was bothering me. Now I was able to think again, I had the feeling that something wasn't as it should be. What that something was, I didn't know. The uncertainty grew, nagging. Instead of following the others, I stayed there in the glade. I went to stand by the rock, looking down at the blood-stained moss, at the white coils that littered the ground. I moved a few paces away, going to stand under another tree. I lowered myself to the ground and I sat there, motionless, for all of 30 minutes. Then, with a cold emptiness in my stomach, I came to my feet and started to search. It was another half hour before I found what I was looking for.

The major hadn't sat on that rock to find out for himself whether the roots were harmful or not. They hadn't come groping up out of the moss to wrap themselves

about him, resisting his efforts to free himself, finally bearing him down so fiercely that his head had smashed against the rock, killing him.

That is what Claire seemed to have believed had happened, what they all seemed to take for granted. But it hadn't been like that at all. I knew now what had really taken place. Someone had come up behind the major and struck him on the head—perhaps repeatedly struck him—until he was dead. Then his body had been laid across the rock for the roots to emerge to complete the picture. In my hand, I held the weapon that had been used: a piece of blood-stained rock.

The major had been murdered.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I had some idea of keeping the knowledge to myself, at least for the time being. Until I had had time to think about it, get it sorted out in my mind. But it was the sort of thing that wouldn't keep.

"Murdered?" Kevin echoed incredulously and sat up straight in his chair, gaping at me. "You must be going out of your tiny mind!"

"I almost wish I was," I said.

We were in the Tadmans' parlor. The old man was upstairs with his wife. The major had been buried in soil from his own time. The midday meal was over.

"We carry on from where father left off," Donald had said and that was all. No attempts on anyone's part to step into vacated shoes. No detailing of parties and duties. Just carry on, moving home from one place to another.

"Murdered," Kevin said for the second time. "And where in Hades did you get that notion from?"

I said, "I sat under one of those trees. The roots fastened themselves about my arms and legs. I could feel them tugging, but there was no real strength behind them. When I came to move, I had no trouble freeing

myself. Then I looked round until I found the hunk of rock that had been used to kill him. There was blood and white hair on it. It had been thrown some distance away."

His expression changed. "You found the rock——"

"I had the feeling something was wrong with the set-up. I think perhaps because I'd been half expecting something to happen. Things coming to a head. . . . You know. A final flare-up, with the major as the focal point."

He nodded slowly. "Things between him and Fox finally coming to a head. That was in the cards, right enough. But not this. I couldn't see them actually coming to blows. The major wasn't that sort. That would have meant loss of dignity. He would have gone no further than words, and it takes two to make a fight. I was waiting for a splitting of the community. Something like that. Some of them opting out on Fox's side. Perhaps someone else was expecting that to happen. And decided this was the only way of preventing it. God, it *is* a motive, I suppose."

"When you come to think about it," I said, "every one of them had reasons of one sort or another for wanting him out of the way."

"Sweeping. . . ." Kevin pursed his lips. "Even his own family?"

"Even his own family."

"Claire?" He shook his head. "Donald? Children have killed their own parents before, yes—and in more civilized surroundings than these. But hell, Stuart. . . ."

"They all had motives," I persisted. "And they all had the opportunity. Seized opportunity, not manufactured. I don't see how it could have been manufactured. They were all there, and they all had good reasons for being there. Donald and I became separated purely by accident. Mrs. Dorran and old George left the cave only a few minutes after Donald and I. The old man insisted he was well enough to travel. They sheltered when it came on to rain, but only for a few minutes. He remembered the stream and how the rain would swell it. The longer they waited the more chance there was of it becoming impassable. So they set off again, passing us, actually reaching it before we did. And they became separated in

the same way we did—trying to find somewhere to cross. They lost each other.”

I paused.

“It’s like trying to fit the pieces of a picture together. But there are more gaps than pieces. This mist seems to isolate events, takes away any sense of continuity. Someone is in one place; then there’s a blank and they’re somewhere else.

“Claire says she and her father were well into the glades when the rain started. They sheltered until it had passed. Then they set off again. They were almost at the stream when the major discovered he had dropped his map. He’d had it tucked in the top of one of the bags he was carrying. He told her to wait while he went back to find it.

“Claire says she feels sure now it was only an excuse for him to go back and experiment with the roots himself. He’d had her point out the place where we’d first seen them.”

“I’ll go along with that,” Kevin said. “Knowing him, just the kind of thing he would do. And . . . ?”

“After a while, when he didn’t return, she became worried and went back to see what was keeping him.”

“Which only leaves Fox’s presence on the scene to be accounted for,” he said. “And I can vouch for that. The stuff that came down during the earlier eruption set another of the cottages alight. The one where the dynamite was. And it was only by luck we happened to spot the smoke in time. It scared the living daylights out of me. So when Fox said to hell with the major and let’s dump the stuff, he got no arguments from me. We figured water was best, and we estimated the stream was nearer than the swamps. The boxes were only small, but they were damned heavy. He carried two of them; I tagged along with the other. It started to rain just as we reached the glade. He remembered the beating the major’s cottage had taken during the last bad tremor. The walls were cracked; the roof might be in no better shape. It might be letting in rain—soaking bedding, ruining packet food. He told me to go back to make sure everything was all right. Which was sensible enough; so I did. And just as well. It *was* raining in, but I coped. No real damage done. He went on alone with all three boxes. Must have

the strength of an ox. And when you saw him, he was empty-handed?"

"He was."

"So he must have dumped them when he heard Claire scream." His pause was significance itself. "Or when he came upon the major, engrossed in his experiment. For my money, Fox is the boyo."

"Maybe."

"I know that tone." He regarded me narrowly. "You've got someone else lined up?"

I said, "Claire was kneeling at her father's side. There was blood from his head on her blouse. Dried blood."

"So?"

"If she had screamed the moment she found him, as she says she did, the blood would have still been wet when I got there."

"You mean she must have been there some time before giving voice." He thought about it. "I shouldn't attach too much importance to that, Stuart. Blood dries fairly quickly at the best of times. In this heat, it would dry in seconds."

He could be right. "Have you any ideas, then?" I asked.

"Fox is still the best bet."

"You say he was carrying the explosives when he saw the major. If he was and dropped them to make his attack, then they would still have been there, somewhere close by. But they weren't, and there wasn't enough time for him to have picked them up again and carted them away."

Without replying, Kevin rose to his feet and went over to look out of the window.

"Life goes on. Claire and Fox are just setting out for the caves. Carrying rolls of bedding. I suppose that's what we ought to be doing instead of standing here talking in circles. Bedding first, then back for our rucksacks. The sum total of our worldly possessions." He rested his hands on the glass. "You're sure about all this, Stuart? You couldn't be mistaken?"

"Go and test the roots for yourself," I told him. "When you've done that, you'll find the stone that was used to kill him behind the third tree on the left past the rock."

"I'll take your word for it." He sounded tired. "So what the hell are we going to do about it?"

"I don't know," I told his back.

"No police, no courts of law, no prisons. No trial and punishment, as we know them. I know what the major would do if he was still alive. He'd start off by turning himself into a policeman. If he was successful at that, he'd turn himself into a judge. God knows what he'd have meted out for punishment. But now"—he shrugged—"lynch law? Jungle law? Hell—it doesn't bear thinking about. Shall we tell them, Stuart?"

"We're *all* suspect. All of us." I knew that would bring him swinging round. It did.

"You've only my word for it that I didn't kill him," I said. "There's only your word that you did as Fox told you and went back to the village. There's no proof that even Mrs. Tadman is in the clear, no way of telling for sure if she was in her home when it happened."

"I hadn't thought about it in that way," he said with dismay.

"For all you know, I could have doubts about your innocence. For all I know, you could be wondering about me. Imagine how all the others, except one, would feel if they knew."

"I am trying to imagine it," he replied grimly.

"The murder was unpremeditated. It couldn't have been anything else. Someone saw his or her opportunity and seized it. A trained police force, complete with fingerprint experts and forensic scientists, would probably get at the truth. We never would. The only way we'll ever find out who did it is if the murderer happens to slip up—which is unlikely—or if he confesses—which is more unlikely still."

"You're saying that telling them would do more harm than good."

"We're stuck here for the rest of our lives. We've got to live together—at least until we get to know this place better—whether we like it or not."

"You've made your point." He smiled mirthlessly. "The coward's way out. We keep it to ourselves."

"For the time being, anyway," I said, a coward indeed, thankful that he had been the one to voice the decision.

We met Mr. Tadman on the landing. He was just clos-

ing the door of the old lady's bedroom. I saw where the wood had splintered round the lock. A solid lock and a thick door. Only someone with Fox's strength could have forced it. It had taken brute strength to bring that piece of rock smashing down with enough force to break bone, to kill.

"Mother's fine," Mr. Tadman smiled, answering Kevin's inquiry. "Sleeping now. She always does have a nap after dinner." He opened the door a soft fraction for us to see for ourselves.

The old lady slept quietly against piled pillows, hands folded on the counterpane, her breast rising and falling gently. She smiled in her sleep. I fancied that her features were smoother, more serene than they had been the last time we had seen her.

"It'd be a shame to wake her," he said. "All the same, I reckon she'd like to see you both."

He would have gone to the bed if Kevin hadn't stopped him, telling him that the last thing we wanted to do was disturb her, that we had really come upstairs to ask about bedding.

Mr. Tadman closed the door with some reluctance.

"It's all ready and waiting for you," he said as we followed him into the other room, our bedroom.

"What about your things?" I wondered. "Can we give you a hand with them?"

He smiled. "That's real kind of you, but we're all right. Me and mother, we talked it over and we're going to stay on here. We don't much fancy a cave. We'll stick it out as long as we can."

I caught Kevin's barely perceptible shake of the head. I knew what it meant, what he had in mind—what I had forgotten for the moment. I wished, then, that we had let George wake the old lady up. I would have liked to say good-bye to her.

Mr. Tadman had made up two rolls of bed linen and mattresses, each corded in such a way that there were loops for us to slip over our shoulders. "The way we used to do in the army." He helped me on with mine before doing the same for Kevin.

"We'll come back for the rucksacks," Kevin said at the front door. "Then that'll be our lot." He made elaborate pretense of adjusting the cord over his shoulder—

anything to avoid looking at the old man. "The sum total of our worldly possessions."

"Independent," Mr. Tadman said inconsequently, earnestly. "That's what you got to be. Look after yourself and then you're not a burden to others. You can live your own life in your own way without being selfish. Fix yourself up first, because you're your own responsibility. Then, if any of the others need help, you can give it to them."

He gazed at the cottage on the other side of the road.

"I'm sorry about the major. More sorry than I could ever hope to make you understand. Me and mother's known him for a good many years. He's helped us a lot in the past. He had his own way of going about things, but everything he did, he did for what he thought were best."

For somewhere to look, I looked at the pile of seedlings by the tree stump. A dry, withered pile now. I remembered the parachute seed that had taken root just about where I was standing. I remembered the ease with which the old man had pulled it out of the ground. It had taken a strong grip. . . . I loathed myself for what I was thinking. Was it always going to be like this—looking at faces and hands and wondering?

"We'll see you when we come back for the rucksacks," I said with an effort.

"Aye." He nodded. "See and take care of yourselves."

We walked up the road. I looked back, but he had already disappeared into his cottage.

"We should have had a word with the old lady," I said.

Kevin shook his head. "Better this way."

"They'd have gone, anyway," I said, not making a question of it, not really a statement—just a thought spoken aloud. "Sooner or later. Whether the major was here or not."

"Sooner or later," Kevin agreed. "He'd have found a way. The major being dead has only made it——" He broke off, turning to look at me accusingly. "You weren't thinking——"

"I'm trying not to," I told him bleakly. "It's not easy."

We crossed the lava—cold now. The cord started to dig into my shoulder. I folded my handkerchief into a

pad as we walked.

I was for going past the place where the major had died, but Kevin stopped. He didn't say anything, didn't ask to be shown the bloodstained piece of rock, just stood looking down at the litter of still-white coils, at the stains on the moss. His expression didn't tell me what he was thinking.

We stopped again when we came to the stream. It was back to normal again, the flood subsided, easy enough to cross.

"Claire—" he said suddenly, breaking a silence that had lasted all of half an hour, "she's changed, I'll grant you that."

"Catching up with herself. Growing up."

"You could put it that way. This thing between her and Fox. For George to have warned me off means he knew all about it. I think she must have spoken about her feelings to him, or Mary, in the old days. But, then, with her father always on the scene—not a hope in hell of anything coming of it. And she wouldn't try to do anything about it. Just suffer in silence and maybe hope she wouldn't be too old when the major died. But now——"

"It all depends upon how strong her feelings are."

"You think she's got it pretty bad?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"And Mrs. Dorran?"

"According to Claire, Mrs. Dorran and Fox living together was just a convenient arrangement."

"That's hard to believe."

I remembered something Claire had told me. "Mrs. Dorran just used to pay her rent."

He grinned at that. "A nice way of putting it. And all the time, the luscious Cherry had her eye on Donald while Fox was watching out for Claire."

"It probably wasn't as bad as all that."

"But that's how it's working out now. With you and me left out in the cold, old son. But what I'm getting at is this: There was no need for her to have killed her father, you know. If Fox felt the same about her as she does about him, all they had to do was pack a few things and go and set up an establishment of their own somewhere.

"God!" he exclaimed explosively. "Is this what keeping it to ourselves is going to mean? Are we going to spend the rest of our days thinking of each of them in turn as a potential murderer?"

We passed Claire and Fox in the cactus wilderness. They were talking; they were both smiling. I think it was the first time I had seen the dark-faced Fox smile naturally. He even put up his hand to us, calling out as we passed, "You'll find we've left one of the larger caves for you two. The end one."

"And no prizes for guessing who the occupants of the other two will be," Kevin observed drily when they had gone. "'Me Tarzan, you Jane' in duplicate. Our only hope of home comfort is to stumble upon a race of Amazons out there."

A year, I thought, what would we all be like in a year's time? In ten years, twenty? Beards, hair straggling over our shoulders. There were razors, even scissors—I had seen a pair in the major's cottage. But how long before they became worn out or got broken or we just gave up using them?

How long would we go on wearing clothes? Perhaps until there was no more wear left in them and they fell to rags. And in their place? No animals to trap and kill and skin. Leaves, then, leaves and bark, anything we could find.

And we would grow old. That was a thought that hadn't occurred to me before. There would be all the infirmities that come with age. Toothache. Our hearing and our sight would fail. All our senses would fail—if we lived that long. A minor illness that would perhaps have meant nothing more than a short period of discomfort in our own time here could mean death.

We passed Mrs. Dorran and Donald some ten minutes later. Mrs. Dorran smiled at us; Donald repeated Fox's message, adding that there was food in the first cave if we felt that way inclined. His hair was brushed smoothly back, a shining, sandy-golden skullcap. His khaki shirt and shorts, for all the dark sweat stains, looked as if they had only moments ago been cleaned and pressed. He, if anyone, would cling for as long as possible to the civilization we had left behind. At least so far as personal appearance was concerned.

We dumped our bedding rolls in the cave that was to be our home from now on. Without stopping to rest, we started back, able to walk more quickly now that we had nothing to carry.

The volcano rumbled softly as we emerged from the fir trees.

"Yes?" wondered Kevin, gazing in the direction of the sound. It growled again and then was silent. "No," he said. "For this relief, much thanks."

We reached the stream just as Claire and Fox were crossing on their way back to the caves. She carried a washerwoman's bundle of what looked like clothing. He was festooned with saucepans, kettles and frying pans, all strung together, rattling and clanking with every step.

"And where were you thinking of setting up your stall?" Kevin asked pleasantly.

Surprisingly, Fox took the question in good part.

"To complete the illusion of an Irish tinker," he replied, "all I need is a caravan. Your cave to your satisfaction, Sowden?"

"Home from home," Kevin assured him.

We met the other couple at the entrance to the glades. Donald had a sack over his shoulder—heavy, by the way he bent sideways. Mrs. Dorran, dark hair in attractive disarray, carried a mirror under one arm—her choice of an essential?—and an oil lamp in a box under the other. They stopped to talk for a few minutes, Donald swinging his sack to the moss with a grunt of relief.

He was concerned about some of the larger items of furniture. "We'll be able to manage the chairs without too much trouble. We can make do without bedsteads for the time being. But we need wardrobes. We must have somewhere to store clothes. In this climate, they're likely to go moldy."

"At least, we won't have moths to contend with," Kevin said.

We carried on to the village—a ghost village—where we were the only things that moved, where the only sounds were those of our own footsteps and voices. A sense of loneliness hung over the place, of neglect, almost of strangeness. It was as if a reversal had taken place, a change from positive to negative. What had previously been a natural insert in an alien world was now

an alien insert in a natural world.

The feeling of emptiness intensified when we entered the old folks' cottage. While Kevin went light-footed up the stairs, I went into the kitchen. The suitcase had gone. Kevin came back downstairs as I returned to the hall.

"Good luck to them," he said in a strained voice and stooped to pick up his rucksack, holding it out for me to help him on with it.

A thought from the past came back to me. "I wonder what he'll do when she's——" I couldn't bring myself to say the word.

He held my rucksack, straps looped ready for my arms to slide through.

"He won't come back here." He slapped the rucksack to let me know it was in position. "He'll stay wherever she is." He gazed about him, almost as if he were saying good-bye to the place. "Let's get moving."

"Do you think they know—the others?"

He shook his head in reply.

We passed no one on the long trail back to the caves. Kevin looked at his watch when we were almost there. "Only ten to six. Have they decided to call it a day?"

They had. Donald took time out from unpacking to explain why. For one thing, the ladies had had enough for one day. They were resting before starting to prepare the last meal of the day.

"An early meal," he said. "About half-sevenish. Then early to bed to save burning oil for light. What little oil we have left we have decided to save for emergencies."

In our cave, Kevin propped his rucksack against the bedding rolls.

"Another trip?" he wondered. "There's just about enough time. Better than hanging around here."

I knew what he meant. There was no place for us here. But here we would have to stay. For the time being, anyway.

"I'm easy," I told him, letting my rucksack fall.

"I'll go and see if there's anything special they want us to bring," he said from the entrance.

My handkerchief pad had become soaked with sweat. I put it to one side to be washed with other things tomorrow. Would the ladies, as Donald had called them, be taking over the laundry duties of the whole com-

munity? I unbuckled my rucksack to find another handkerchief. When I lifted out my spare shirt, an envelope fell out. It had my name written on it in a small, very neat script—a woman's hand, I thought—and, puzzled, I ripped it open.

A single sheet of notepaper contained a few lines of writing with a signature at the foot. I read it through only the once—and quickly at that—and then I sat back on my heels and stared at the blank stone wall of the cave.

I didn't hear Kevin return. His voice startled me. "Right we are." And, "What are you brooding over there—an old love letter?"

"Something like that." I stuffed envelope and letter back inside the rucksack, put the shirt on top and then fastened the buckles, forgetting all about the clean handkerchief.

"Nothing they're urgently in need of," he said as we made our way down the slope. "Just a matter of taking what first comes to hand, with the accent on anything breakable. We won't overload ourselves."

Fifteen minutes of steady walk from caves to cacti. I was coming to know the time it took to walk from one now-familiar landmark to the next. Thirty minutes from cacti to fir wood.

The volcano gave vent to one of its rumblings as we left the tall trees behind. Only a soft sound, remote but—so it seemed to me—with a quality to it that I had never heard before, with echoes that persisted—rolling distantly, seeming to reverberate hollowly below the very ground on which we stood.

There was an impression of vast, awesome power—power beyond comprehension—stirring restlessly, gathering its strength.

And not my imagination, that frightening impression, for it brought Kevin to a halt, his face turned in the direction of the peak. For the first time, the volcano was clearly visible, etched sharply against the haze, a purple-gray triangle, its tip all but touching the dark, thunderous cloud above. And the underside of that cloud was bathed in a sullen red glow.

Kevin put his hands on his hips. "And what did you make of that?" he asked uneasily.

“It’s never sounded like that before.”

“That’s what I thought. I don’t think I much cared for it. What do you think, Stuart? Had we better turn back?”

I hovered on the brink of saying yes, that it would be safest for us to turn round and get back to the caves as fast as we could. There, at least, we would have solid rock overhead. Only one thing—and that the stupid impulse of the moment—made me change my mind and suggest we carry on.

“If we do go back,” I said, “and nothing happens after all, we’d look foolish turning up empty-handed.”

“I’m more concerned about my skin than looking foolish.” He watched the volcano. The glow seemed to have faded a little. “It seems quiet enough again now. Shall we risk being caught out in the open?”

We risked it.

Ten minutes later, just as we were entering the glades, the volcano—without any further warning—erupted with an explosion that rocked the world, that seemed to herald the end of the world.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We crouched under a tree—for my part, terrified out of my wits—while the volcano, after that first ear-shattering explosion, continued to vent its fury in roll after roll of crashing thunder, while the ground rose and fell, while fiery debris rained down—larger pieces trailing streams of scarlet and gold in their wake, arching through the mists like jets from a flamethrower.

A bush, only feet away, burst into sudden flame, blazed furiously for a few minutes and then spluttered out to smolder, filling the glade with acrid gray smoke. A shapeless hunk of semimolten rock struck the ground in front of the smoldering skeleton and burst into fragments, one of them hurtling over our heads to smash its way through the branches, showering us with sparks. I felt the sting of one of them on my cheek and flicked it away. I dusted away another that glowed on Kevin's shirt. He shouted something but, close as his mouth was to my ear, his words were lost in one of the crackling, drawn-out thunder rolls.

The mists—gray with smoke now—took on a pinkish hue, flaring red from time to time. Another chunk of debris plummeted down in front of us, dissolving into a

semiliquid mass that glowed white-hot, the heat searing my face. When I came to move, to edge away, I first had to tear away the white roots that had entwined themselves about my feet and ankles.

This time, the eruption and accompanying tremor must have lasted for all of a quarter of an hour. Certainly, when I finally came to straighten, my bent knees had become stiff with cramp.

The thunderclaps subsided to a sullen rumbling. The ground settled down again. Gray-white flakes of ash drifted through the smoky haze.

Kevin, kicking impatiently at the roots about his feet, was the first to leave the shelter of the tree, stepping warily over the hissing, steaming, still-molten pool. One hand shielding his eyes, he looked in the direction of the volcano. When I joined him—limping, legs still stiff—I found that the peak was no longer visible, hidden now behind a dense blanket of cloud, a coiling gray mass that was pierced from time to time by a lancing tongue of flame.

“A taste of what Old Faithful can do when he really sets his mind to it,” Kevin said unsteadily. “I thought we’d had it . . . any moment, the ground would open up and swallow us.”

He turned, teeth gleaming whitely through the smoke-blackened, sweat-streaked mask of his face.

“If there’s anything at all left of the village after that lot,” he said, “it’ll be a ruddy miracle.”

My eyes were smarting. I felt in my pocket for a handkerchief and remembered how the discovery of the letter had made me forget to get a clean one. I made do with the flats of my palms.

“We’ve had worse tremors,” I said. “The cottages are more likely in flames than in ruins.”

“The sooner we get there the better,” he said. “Let’s hope things will stay quiet for a while.”

The mist—white before, pink during the eruption, gray with smoke now—reduced visibility to little more than a few yards. The floor of the glade was littered with stones of all shapes and sizes, many still glowing redly. We passed the smoking skeletons of bushes. We had to make a detour round a tree that had been brought down. By the pace at which we were forced to travel, if the cot-

tages were on fire, we would arrive too late to be of any use.

We stopped when we came to the stream to kneel on the bank and plunge our faces into the water, first washing away the sweat and grime before drinking deeply. The water was warm, unpleasantly so. But it served its purpose.

Then into the last stretch of glade, and here there were noticeably fewer signs of damage. No burned bushes, only a few stones scattered about on the moss. It began to look as if we were nearing the edge of the area affected by the rain of fire. There was hope for the village after all.

But something was wrong. The smoke, instead of lifting, seemed to be getting even thicker. In places, it was possible to see how it came rolling in waves between the trees. And then I heard another sound—a distant roaring. Not that of the volcano, I had become accustomed to that. This was the steady, muted roar of waves breaking on a beach. A new sound altogether, frightening by its very strangeness.

Through a break in the trees, I caught a glimpse of the volcano. The peak was still obscured by clouds, but from the base of that gray mass came a golden ribbon, narrow at the top, widening as it dropped toward the mists. A ribbon that could only be a flow, a river of molten lava.

And I could feel its heat on the side of my face. No, that was impossible. It was too far away. But that heat wasn't imagination. And the steady roaring sound was growing in intensity. We came to a halt at the same time, without a word being spoken.

Smoke billowed rather than rolled from between the trees. Sparks danced red and yellow on the crests of grayness.

"Fire," Kevin said almost conversationally. "The glades must be on fire. Let's get the hell out of here——" And then his expression changed; his voice rose almost to a scream. "My God! The dynamite!"

I stared at him stupidly for a moment, not understanding that new note of panic, thinking at first of the explosive as being stored in one of the cottages, then suddenly remembering—now with rising panic of my

own—that it was no longer in the village, that Kevin and Fox had removed it, that Fox had been carrying the three cases when he had heard Claire scream, that he had dropped them——

“Where?” I shouted.

“How the hell should I know?” He started off at a jog trot, turning to look back over his shoulder, urging me to follow, sweeping out one arm in a frantic gesture. “Here! Somewhere in here!”

I hurried after him, matching his clumsy half run, the fastest we could go through the dense mist and smoke, blundering along, half-blinded, with the roar of the flames pursuing us, with sparks and blazing leaves floating by.

Panic and fear left me—left me with no feelings of any kind. I was a mindless, senseless thing that moved without conscious volition—a thing of two legs that stumbled along, two arms that warded off sudden branches, two smarting, almost blind eyes that saw nothing but Kevin’s banner-scarlet shirt in front.

Arcadia had become Hades.

The earth tremors probably started again while we were still floundering through the nightmare glades. If they did, I had no awareness of them, not until an eternity had passed and we came out into the open with only the lava and island stepping-stones between us and the doubtful sanctuary of the village.

I felt the ground heave and shudder as I followed Kevin’s shirt across the islands. It writhed as we reached the other side. It rocked and lurched as I started to climb the loose-earth slope—a slope that reared, becoming steeper as I climbed.

As we reached the top, side by side now, so it started to disintegrate—crumbling, sliding away, the new verge following us, snatching at our frantic heels, taking the ground from beneath them. We left it behind at last as we staggered, gasping for breath, toward the road.

A road that had become a living thing, the undulating spine of a tarmac monster, rising and falling, twisting, cracks appearing, widening. The ruins of what had once been a cottage loomed up through the smoke-filled mist. Another, on the other side, was a gray ghost of

empty walls, flames licking between stark, skeletal rafters.

A chasm opened up in front of us and closed again—the edges, the crumbling lips, coming together and then surging upward, tarmac layers rolling back on themselves. A cottage on the left—perhaps the major's, it was impossible to tell—was a pile of rubble. If the Tadmans' home was still standing, I saw no sign of it.

The tremors seemed to be lessening, the ground settling down. We passed the ruins of more cottages. And now we couldn't be far from the jungle barrier.

Our labored jog trot had perforce become a walk. Kevin looked back over his shoulder. He spoke in jerks between deep gulps of the smoke-laden air, one hand pressed against his chest.

"Can't go—much farther. Jungle—now. Should be—safe enough—here." He put one hand on my shoulder as we walked, leaning forward like an old man, coughing, choking.

I wasn't having quite so much trouble with my breathing.

"How do we get back?" I asked—a stupid question, I realized that the moment I had uttered it.

"Hell"—he leaned forward to cough again—"one thing at a time. Let's—get out of this lot—first." He turned to look in the direction of the glades again. "Should have—blown by now—surely. Unless"—and a new thought—"not there after all. Fox might—have come back for it."

But the dynamite was still there.

Our backs were to the explosion when it came, only moments later, a flaring brilliance that blazed across the sky above the jungle trees, silhouetting their shapes—trees that were almost on top of us, closer than I had thought.

And then the sound, the deafening roar.

And then the blast, the shock wave—a solid thing that seemed to take hold of me, lifting me bodily into the air, propelling me forward on the crest of some monstrous rolling wave, then suddenly relaxing its grip to let me fall . . . fall . . . while the wave went thundering on.

I came down heavily, awkwardly, legs at an angle, feet sliding away so that I went sprawling sideways across the rough surface of the road. And I was prepared to go on

lying there until the fury had passed by, until I had had time to collect my senses. But for all the air seemed still enough now, the deafening roar showed no signs of diminishing. If anything, it was getting even louder . . . the source, the cause, coming nearer. And now there was rain on my face and bare arms. Stinging, ice-cold lances of rain.

Still dazed, I struggled to my feet. Kevin—I could just about make out his features through the darkness—was at my side, grasping my arm, tugging at it urgently. He was shouting something. His mouth was open. I could only catch isolated words. “Explosion—volcano—lava——” And, “Higher ground——” Enough for me to guess at the rest.

We struck off the road—feeling our way rather than seeing—onto grass, sodden grass into which my feet sank. Then, thankfully, we were climbing. Where to, I didn’t know. We must still be inside the circle from our own time, but this was part of it that I hadn’t explored. A hill, I guessed, perhaps sliced through like that on the other side of the village—of what was left of the village.

But this hill now was much steeper than that other. Much steeper. And now there was rock underfoot. Now we had to use hands as well as legs.

As we climbed, a cold breeze came to play on my face. The rain had turned to drizzle. We stopped after a while to rest and get our breath back. It was only then that I realized the pandemonium had died down, that, apart from an occasional distant rumble, everywhere was quiet again.

“All over,” Kevin gasped, and I think he tried to smile. “Bar the shouting. I hope. God—that’s something I won’t forget in a hurry.”

I leaned against rock that was cold and slimy to the touch. “What happened?”

“God knows.” He took a deep breath. “Just have to wait and see. I think that when the dynamite blew, it started off other things. Full-scale earthquake. Landslides. And I have a hunch that the volcano’s blown itself apart. That’s why everywhere suddenly went dark. Smoke clouds. I hope to God the others are all right. They should be, they were far enough away. And with a solid roof over their heads. Better off than we. We can’t

risk going back down there until we can see what we're doing. We're stuck up here for the time being. And talking of time——”

He held his watch close to his face. I brought out my lighter. The flame blew out. I tried again with the same result.

“Save your flint and juice,” Kevin said. “No refills when they're gone. No corner tobacconist's to pop into. In any event, knowing the time won't help us any. It must be getting on for night. And night on the bare mountain. Unless we can find shelter of some kind. Shall we try?”

We started climbing again.

A while later, we came upon a path. It climbed steadily, not steeply. Even so, I began to have some difficulty in breathing. Perhaps because we were higher than I had imagined—the air thinner.

The ground fell away abruptly on one side. We kept well away from the verge, not knowing how deep the drop was, hugging the rock wall that had come to rear itself on the other side. And that was how we found the entrance to the cave.

A cleft, no more, but wide enough at the far end for us to sit side by side. It was anything but comfortable, but we were sheltered from the rain and protected from most of the wind.

I was well past the stage of being merely tired. But I found myself unable to sleep. Perhaps because I was indeed too exhausted, perhaps because of the discomfort of wet clothes, bitter cold and the effort needed to draw in each breath. Or perhaps because my thoughts had become independent things, refusing to rest, fretting, nagging ceaselessly.

Circling, circling endlessly. Revolving about a circle, the circle that had come with us. Something was wrong—there was the same feeling I had had back in the glade after they had taken the major's body away. There was something that didn't fit.

I opened my eyes, staring at blackness broken only by the faint outline of the cave opening, almost the shape of a gigantic keyhole, I remember. I could see the major's map, our circle there in the middle, and to the south—where we were now—jungle. A long stretch of

jungle and then swamps. I sat up.

"Quiet!" Kevin said sharply. "Listen."

I could hear nothing.

"A kind of crying sound"—I felt him push himself to his feet—"like an animal." His shape filled the opening. "There it is again."

And now I could hear it, too, clearly—a faraway wailing, eerie, remote, rising and falling with a measured, mechanical rhythm. And because of the trail along which my thoughts had led me, I knew—knew with certainty—what had happened, what that faraway sound must be.

My mouth was dry, my throat constricted, tight. I couldn't speak.

"Lights," Kevin said quite calmly, describing what he could see out there, not realizing its significance. And then his voice rose, becoming shrill with startled incredulity. "Lights! Two of them. Way down there, moving, flashing——"

I managed to swallow. My voice came back. I wanted to sound matter-of-fact, not letting my feelings show—I think, perhaps, because I knew that this was one moment we would want to talk about a great deal in the days to come. This moment above all others—recalling it down to every last detail, every last word.

"They will be either police cars or ambulances," I said perfectly steadily.

He didn't move; his shape was part of the shape of the cave entrance.

I said, "He told them—the man from the box—that they'd left the lever machinery running. The lever tilted back when the dynamite went up. The same sort of thing that brought us here."

I think, for all my composure, I was crying. I didn't touch my face to find out. I was thankful it was dark.

"We're back home again," I said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

There was a time when I was in the cave, telling Kevin that we were back home again. A long while later, there was another time when I was waking in a strange bed in a strange room. But in between—the long night in between. . . . All I have left of that is disjointed memories of half-forgotten scenes and snatches of conversation.

A memory of Kevin, refusing to believe at first—wanting desperately to believe but, I feel certain, afraid to. Kevin coming back into the cave to listen while I told him that, even before we had heard the sirens, I had worked out what must have happened, that if we had still been in the future, we would have had either jungle or swamps to contend with once we had left the circle, not mountains and icy rain and darkness.

He had taken his doubts outside, calling back to say he could see more lights down there now, that he could even hear—and there had been marvel in his voice then—he could even hear the sound of vehicles. Heavy lorries, they had sounded like. And then he had finally believed.

We didn't sleep. We dozed, I think, and that would

account for many of the gaps in my memories.

But I do remember, vividly, Kevin suddenly wanting to know—waking me to ask, as if it was all that important—what day it was, Wednesday or Friday.

Wednesday, I told him, after having thought. Wednesday, yes, for we must have returned to the same point in time from which we had left. Those cars and lorries down there were on their way to the scene of the disaster, a village called Kirdale that had been blasted by explosion, engulfed by rock and water. They would do no good, the men in the grinding lorries down there. They would rescue no one; they would find no bodies. There were no bodies there for them to find.

We had lost—Kevin counted aloud—three days. No—and he was confused for a while—we had gained three days. Three buckshee days. And were we three days older? Or still the same age as when we started?

“What the hell,” I said and laughed at him.

And later:

“I was thinking,” he said. “About the message from that box. Those boxes. . . .” He was silent for a moment. “They were in the major’s cottage. They must have come back with us now. Not that there’ll be much left of them, buried under tons of rock. . . .”

“What about the message?” I asked sleepily.

“It said that the people who made the lever to slide us from their past to their future believed the same thing had happened before, ages ago. People lifted from one time and set down in another. It could explain the Adam and Eve story. How it started . . . two people, the only living things in a changed world.”

“Apart from the serpent.”

“There were serpents in our Garden of Eden,” he said. “Of a sort. We went one better than that other time, though. Two Adams and two Eves. Genesis Two.”

There was something I wanted to tell him. Something to do with serpents. . . . I tried to force myself awake.

“And another thing,” he mused, pursuing the same line of thought. “Science and religion. Two different ideas about the start of things. But they could both be right. Science—who was it—Darwin? The origin of the species. We started off in the sea, crawled out onto land, grew limbs, climbed trees, dropped back to the ground

and stood upright. Then came the first holocaust. At least two people survived, because the scientists of that past civilization found a way of transporting them to the future. Adam and Eve of the Old Testament. That should make everyone happy."

"No one will believe us," I said, still only half-awake.

"No," Kevin said slowly. "No, they won't. Why should they? We've no proof. Cranks. Practical jokers. Publicity seekers. No—worse than that. Off our heads. Delirious—raving after a night spent on the mountain. We could find ourselves in some psychiatric ward. Even an asylum. No, I don't think they'd go that far. But we can't chance it. Something else we'll just have to keep to ourselves."

And then I suddenly remembered what it was I had to tell him.

"That letter you saw me reading, Kevin——"

"Letter? Oh, the love letter."

"No," I told the darkness. "Far from it. It was a confession."

I felt the quick movement of his body as he turned to look at me.

"I only had time to glance through it once," I said. "I can't remember the exact words, only the gist. It was from George Tadman, explaining why he had felt he had to kill the major.

"He said it seemed to him to be the only way. There was nothing wrong in an older, experienced man helping the rest by getting them organized, by telling them what to do for the best. That was a good thing. But it was a bad thing to try to interfere with their lives, treating them as if they were—I think *dolls* was the word he used. They must be left alone to sort themselves out according to their own inclinations.

"He said he was putting it all down on paper because one day they'd find out that the roots weren't the cause of the major's death, and then—unless they knew the truth—they'd suspect each other. When that day came, I was to show them his letter."

"The old man," Kevin marveled softly. "And he did it for Claire. Claire, more than anyone else. Maybe he'd come to think of her almost as his own daughter. She thought the world of him."

He was silent for a while. Then, "Where is it now—the letter?"

"In the top of my rucksack, back there in the cave. They'll find it, sooner or later."

"Thank God for that," he breathed fervently.

And later:

"That new world out there," Kevin mused. "When you come to think, to look back, it wasn't all that bad. Everything laid on—food, water, shelter, even central heating. Snags, I suppose there are snags. That flying-fern affair you saw——"

"Only a fern," I said. "That one I shot—no blood, nothing. Just another plant."

"We'll have things to talk about. Hell, will we have things to talk about in the days to come. Will you tell your people, Stuart?"

"I don't know. Perhaps."

"A family get-together. Both families. Can you picture their faces? What wouldn't I have given now to have had a camera back there. Photos of the glades, the caves, the volcano.

"Old Faithful. . . . They'll have survived that last do, all right. Far enough away. Maybe that was his last fling. He'll settle down. If he doesn't, they'll move away, find other caves. Probably end by building themselves houses. Plenty of wood and stone. You could say that things were good out there. You know? We brought the bad things with us."

"Where every prospect pleases," I said, trying to get to sleep.

"Man wasn't all that vile, though. Not even Fox. And the major——"

We left the cave at the first gray light of dawn, as soon as we could see where we were going. It had stopped raining and the clouds showed signs of breaking. The path continued climbing for a while, then started to drop. Below us, an occasional car or lorry crawled along the gray ribbon of road.

Our path dropped steadily toward the road. Where the two finally met was a sign: ENNERDALE 1 MILE. We moved to the verge to let a convoy rumble by—lorry-loads of silent, grave-faced men, a bulldozer on a trailer, a Land Rover with the words MOUNTAIN RESCUE sten-

ciled on its canvas hood.

That last mile was a long one.

I have no memory of Ennerdale itself—what it was like, how big a place it was. We found a hotel. A woman, her hair in a head scarf, was on her hands and knees scrubbing the steps. No one was up yet, she told us. It was only half past six. But we were wet through, she discovered with concern, and she came stiffly to her feet, wiping soapy hands on her gray apron as she took us round to the back of the hotel, through a maze of yards and alleys, to the kitchen. From somewhere, she unearthed clothing of a kind—boiler suits, I think.

“Take off them sopping things afore you both catch your deaths.”

We sat in front of an open fire while our clothes steamed on a wooden contraption set in front of an old-fashioned cooking range. There were strings of onions hanging from the ceiling, I remember. And a large black cat with only half a tail that came to settle and purr on my lap for a time.

The woman brought us cups of tea. “You’ll be ready for this, I’m sure.” She turned our clothes. “Is this all you had with you up there? No coats? Nothing else?”

“We had rucksacks when we started out,” Kevin told her. “They sort of became separated from us during the night. I don’t expect we’ll ever see them again.”

I remembered my wallet, still in the back pocket of my shorts. Money that would be put to better use now than for making paper chains. At least, we would be able to pay our way back home.

Home. . . .

She hadn’t heard about the disaster but had guessed something was wrong somewhere—puzzled, and a little annoyed, by the unusual flow of heavy traffic.

“It must ’ave been about four when it woke us up,” she told us. “Sirens screaming away. . . .”

She had to leave us to return to her interrupted cleaning. I dozed off with the cup still in my hand. Kevin woke me up to say that our clothes were dry and that the hotel sounded as if it were coming to life.

The proprietor came to introduce himself, a pleasant man with a fleshy smile and a head devoid of hair.

“From what I hear, you got caught up in the moun-

tains all night." He used odd phraseology. "A rough time you seem to have had. Which way would you be coming down?"

"Now you're asking," Kevin said. "We were about as lost as anyone could be. We spent the night in a small cave, then came down a path that brought us out on the road about a mile from here."

"Sounds like you've been somewhere over Kirdale," the landlord judged. "It's a wonder you didn't spot the place. Deserted now, almost, though. A reservoir. They're turning the valley into a reservoir. Well"—he rubbed red hams of hands together—"breakfast. You'll be ready for breakfast."

"And bed," said Kevin.

A strange bed in a strange room. Borrowed pajamas, whose, I didn't know—or care.

Voices woke me. They came from outside windows through which sunlight streamed warmly. I didn't know what time it was; I was too relaxed, too comfortable, to make the effort of reaching out for my watch. I listened sleepily to the voices.

"They'll never find 'em," a man was saying with a great air of wisdom. "You ever been up there since they blasted the new channel and built that bleeding great dam? They say the whole lot's come down. Tons of rock on top of 'em. Water on top of that again. Get through that lot? Not a 'ope in 'ell. They couldn't've known what 'it 'em."

A woman's voice was too faint for me to catch the words.

"I don't know as you could call it a blessing," came the man's reply. "No need for anyone to 'ave been killed at all. By rights, the village should've been empty. There shouldn't 'ave been a soul there. Most of 'em did move out weeks ago. The sensible ones. But you'll always find the few awkward ones, them as likes to make nuisances of theirselves, sticking it out to the bitter end—as if that sort of thing ever did anyone any good. . . ."

The few awkward ones. . . .

I lay and stared at the ceiling.

The major. Claire and Donald.

Fox and Mrs. Dorran.

And the old people—the Tadmans.

The major and George Tadman. Each in his own way had tried to play at being God. I wondered which of them had made the better job of it.

After a while, I fell asleep again.

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