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Illya scanned the soldiers and found her attention drawn to one in particular. This was the soldier she'd been in contact with, she thought excitedly. This was **her** soldier. She reached out to probe his mind.

There was nothing. She seemed to strike a wall—as if he were fighting back to keep her from invading his thoughts. Frowning intently, she tried again. Did he know what she'd been doing, she wondered. Was he aware of her power? Like fingers reaching into the dark, her thoughts forced into his consciousness.

No, she realized. He wasn't aware of her probing. He wasn't trying to fight her, but himself.

She then felt the shock as **her** soldier's fingers touched something softly yielding hidden in the corner of a crate. His hand jerked back, then reached in again to wrap itself over the huddling rat.

**No!**

She drove the thought at him. She could feel it spear into his consciousness. Anchoring her power in his mind, she made an order of her thought. **Let the rat be.**

Tense, the soldier hesitated, then drew his hand away from the squirming beast.



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**DOOMSMAN**  
**by HARLAN ELLISON**

**TELEPOWER**

**Lee Hoffman**

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**NEW YORK CITY**



**DOOMSMAN/TELE-POWER**  
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# TELEPOWER

By Lee Hoffman

## I

"RATS!"

The shout rammed through the night. It jerked Beldone like a heavy hand, shattering his sleep. He rolled over, blinking at the misty light of the lantern that was kept burning in the barracks. Men stirred all around him in the tiered bunks. He groped for his boots automatically as he sat up.

*Rats*—the word was echoed from the next bunk. Ambler was stuffing one foot into a heavy plate-armoured boot. Bent over to fasten the catches, he kept grunting it over and over again; "Rats, rats, rats . . ."

Beldone slapped closed the catches on his own boots and stood up. His legs felt stiff and unyielding. He never slept well wearing the chain mail of battle dress. But during the nights of the Spring Moon, the soldiers had to be prepared.

The guns were hung on racks down the center aisle of the bunk room. He slipped his arms through the harness of his own gun and settled the fuel tanks against his shoulders. The helmet of chain and plate, with only narrow slits for him to see through, fit snugly to his head. With it in place, he tugged on his gauntlets. Covered, armoured, he stepped into the forming rank.

The secaptain, whose cry had turned out the men,

stood anxiously shifting weight from one foot to the other, watching as the squad ranks filled. From the grim set of his face, Beldone judged that it must be bad this time. His gloved fingers snugged around the nozzle of the gun.

"Out!" the secaptain called.

The men moved at a lumbering trot, weighted with their armour and guns. Through the door, spreading without orders into a loose line on the grounds surrounding the barracks—no orders were needed here. Soldiers were trained to their work.

To his right, Beldone could still hear Ambler's muttering. "Rats, rats, rats . . ."

He glanced toward the man, feeling a vague disgust. Ambler was going mad. He'd be discovered and incinerated soon, if he lived through the battle.

Ahead, the walls of Cleveland were a low, dark bulk rising from the plain. Lights danced along the parapets—tiny golden moments against the white-starred night. The moon, full and brilliantly cold, hung low over the city, etching the field with shadow and light as stark as lightning.

Beldone scanned the fields. There should have been men from the night patrols already fighting. There should have been the flare of their guns spewing sheets of flame at the enemy. Battle was in progress—he smelled the familiar stench of burnt hair and flesh—but he saw nothing.

And then the earth moved.

The grounds around Cleveland and around the garrison were kept barren, burned free of any speck of vegetation. Flat as a plank, stark naked, dead earth—now suddenly alive—a broad span of it undulating in the moonlight. It rolled like the swells on the distant lake.

Not the earth itself, but a carpet of life, Beldone realized. A velvety mass of rats.

He hesitated, staring. For six years he'd been a fully qualified soldier, but he'd never seen such a pack as this before. He'd fought the rats in scant rabble packs and in organized hordes, but nothing like this. This was a force of hundreds, a wide front pushing toward the city. It was a broad mass blanketing the ground, fanning out, spreading as more oozed from the brush beyond the grounds.

The instant of hesitation passed and with it all



thoughts. The scent of rats—not the scorched smell of death but the warm stink of the living beasts flooded into Beldone's body. It washed away every thought. The world—his world—became but one emotion: hatred. He lunged forward, driven by the urge to kill.

The line swept on—a wall of soldiers side by side, advancing against the carpet of rats. A curved wall, one end pressing toward Cleveland to put itself between the invaders and the city.

The rats recognized their enemy. Outranks turned toward the oncoming soldiers. Did they snarl? Beldone wasn't sure. He might have heard a snarl. He may only have felt it—a shock of hate from the rats that was as strong as his own hatred for them. Within range now, he steadied the nozzle of the gun and his hand closed on the trigger.

Wet flame, flowing liquid fire sweeping out, spraying over the oncoming rats. Did they scream? Or was it his own shout of anger that Beldone heard? It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that outlash of flame. The white flare sizzled, blossomed, as it hit flesh. A burst of light within light of rats fried in their own juices. Lost in light. Black ashes. A wall of soldiers with a wall of flames in their hands, moving steadily into the mass of rats.

Too many rats. They were piling on top of each other, clambering into the ashes of their own foreranks. They tumbled over one another. Strays broke through. The fire seared away a surface of rats and under it there were more.

Beldone felt the tug at his boot. A monster of a pale gray rat—dirty orange by flamelight—was at his leg, climbing onto his boot. Instinct—revulsion—his free hand swung for the beast. It eluded his blow. Claws caught at his gauntlet. It was clinging to his hand.

He lashed out again, slamming it against the chain mail that covered his thigh. It clung. Again—and this time he could feel the squish, the cracking of its skull. It fell away from his glove.

But he'd been distracted. Although his gun hand still held the trigger closed and the nozzle swept flame, it swung



wildly, without direction. The rats swarmed almost at his feet.

Wheeling, he ran. Half a dozen long strides back, with the scurrying rats close at his heels, he ran. He spun again, sweeping fire across them. Too many—too close—they were at his boots, climbing.

He dropped the gun nozzle and swung with both hands. Claws caught into the mail of his leggings. Teeth tore at the armour plates on his boots. He flung rats from him and more came—and more—until the weight of them was pulling him down. They tore at the mail. They searched for its openings.

In the distance, Ambler screamed. But Beldone heard only the pounding of his own blood. At his neck—one had gotten through the opening between shirt and helmet—he felt the fierce shock of pain as its teeth tore into the flesh of his neck. Both hands were grabbing at it. He caught its body. He felt flesh and bone crumple together under the panicked closing of his fingers.

But there were more. They were on his face, fangs seeking the eye slits of his helmet. His hands grappled at them. Too many rats. He couldn't hold them back.

The scream of fear was a sharp pain within his head. *Hatred.* He'd known hatred before—it had been trained into him. He'd felt it, intense in the bone of his body. But now, suddenly, it was a hatred more vivid, more violent than he'd ever conceived of. It was a hatred swelling beyond the limits of his body, swelling as if to burst open his veins and spew itself like acid into the rats that engulfed him.

It seemed as if walls broke—as if suddenly he was outside of his own body, watching from somewhere above. He saw the rats—saw them blanketing his own figure—saw himself writhing under them.

*Hatred.*

They began to fall away. The hands of his body felt the one they clamped onto go limp. The cloak-weight of the rats climbing to his back dropped from him. He was struggling to his feet, standing with the rats falling from him like rotten fruit from a tree. Tense, jerking his hand closed on the gun nozzle, he swung the spray of flame



around. It lapped almost at his feet, and now he stood within a circle of ashes.

The sensation of being outside himself was gone. He stood. A realization of sound came suddenly, startling him. He looked around, seeing that the soldiers were pushing forward now, shouting their victory. The horde of rats withered before their fire.

The mass of invaders was breaking up. Ahead of the flame guns, the rats fled in broken retreat. Into the brush, back toward the ruins that were their own fortress. The wall of soldiers pressed after them. In place in the line again, Beldone moved with them, his gun flaring across the earth in front of him.

At the Boundary, the edge of the clearing, the men stopped. Flame guns flared and sputtered out as the triggers were released. The soldiers stood on the field of ashes, silent now hearing the rustling as rats fled through the grass. Then, faintly, from the walls of Cleveland, Beldone heard the voices of the watchers.

All along the parapets the citizens stood with lamps in their hands. They'd watched the battle. Now they sang. Their voices were soft at first, then rising, swelling to the chorus of the dirge. Not a song for the slaughtered night patrol, not for the soldiers who'd fallen to the rats—but a song for the enemy. They sang the death of the rats.

Beldone stood exhausted. There was no hatred now—he felt too weary to hate. Too weary even to remember the strange disassociation he'd felt during the battle. As the secaptain called the men back into ranks, he straightened his shoulders. A pain spun through his neck where the rat had pulled out skin and flesh with its teeth. Ignoring it as best he could, he stepped into place in the line.

The secaptain called out, "Ambler?"

There was no answer.

*The rats got him*, Beldone thought. It was just as well. Madmen were judged and then incinerated. He had no doubt that Ambler had been going mad. It happened often enough: A soldier suddenly became insane and had to be destroyed. That was the way things were. Beldone thought no more of it. He answered to his own name and

when the check had been completed and the deadlist made out, his squad marched back into the barracks.

First he stripped his helmet and gloves, then checked out and reloaded the gun. After he'd replaced it on the rack, he reported himself to the medical officer.

With rough, thick fingers the man washed out the rat bite and covered it with a sticky patch. Then he gave Beldone a potion to kill pain and sent him back to the barracks. With luck, there'd be no infection.

Relieved of standby duty because of the wound, Beldone stripped off his armour and sprawled in his bunk. He was asleep in moments.

Within the garrison there were captive rats kept alive for the Ceremony of the Scientists. Beldone dreamed that one got loose, that it crept through the barracks, among the sleeping-soldiers. He thought that it was on his back, crawling up his spine and sinking its teeth into his neck.

He woke cold but sweating. The pain he felt was only a dull, latent aching of the wound. He realized that and it didn't worry him. The dream did.

He'd never dreamed before.

He lay gazing at the shadowy bunk above, feeling a thin-edged terror. A thing had happened that he could not understand. A rat had come into the barracks—but yet a rat was not in the barracks. He'd heard of men thinking such things. He'd heard that when a soldier went mad, he might experience things which were not real. Was insanity a thing that could be passed from one man to another? Had Ambler's madness sunk itself into his own mind?

These questions—this confusion—had to be madness. The mere fact of self-questioning was alien to a soldier's mind. A soldier *knew*. From a time before his memories began, he was trained. He existed and his purpose was to fight back the rats, to hate and to kill them when they crossed the Boundary. This was a truth as simple and unquestioned as hunger or the need for sleep.

The thing that had happened to him—he had no word for *dream*—could be nothing other than madness. He should report himself at morning call. But then he'd be judged insane and he'd be incinerated . . .

What happened to a man when he died?



A soldier did not question.

Confusion—madness—

He rolled over and pressed his face into his arm. The turmoil of thoughts was a pain worse than any wound.

Illyna dreamed of a rat. It was a huge skewbald sow that sidled into the room, scurrying across the floor and forcing itself up under the bedclothes. She'd been unable to move, terrified and immobile at the touch of its pin-tipped claws. She'd felt each paw on her bare flesh, and the wavering drag of its tail as it made its way along her spine, darting, then hesitating before it hurried on.

And in the way of dreams, at the same time, she'd been able to see its face—the thick, ugly snout, the eyes like beads of hot metal, flicking whiskers and suddenly revealed foreteeth like curving yellow chisels. It was the first time she'd ever seen the face of a rat.

It had stopped on her shoulder and nuzzled the nape of her neck. Then—the sharp horror of those foreteeth piercing her flesh. She'd wakened screaming.

But it was a silent scream that echoed only in her mind. She jerked herself awake and sat up. The roof door overhead was open and a pale shaft of moonlight angled in, hinting at the shapes within the room. The dresser with its imported mirror, the backstrap loom that she hated so, the strange piece of sculpture that had come from some unknown place, these were all still and solid objects. All familiar things.

She listened, hearing only the deep-drawn breathing of her sister Chatya, in the bed above her own. Chatya was dreaming pleasantly, untroubled. Illyna could sense that.

*Stupid beast!* She lashed out the thought. From above, the rhythm of Chatya's breathing broke. There was a small, distressed gasp.

Satisfied, Illyna leaned her head back into the nest of pillows. A wisp of the dream horror lingered in her mind. She clung to it, intrigued by it. This dream was not the only strange and curious thing—something else had happened today. There, on the parapet, in the early part of the night, she'd experienced something that filled her with wonder.

She thought it might have begun earlier, while she was still at her loom. Her eyes had been on the quickly grow-

ing pattern of the weft, but her thoughts had ranged. She was bored—damnably, unbearably bored. She hated the loom; she hated weaving. She hated everything about life in Cleveland. *Rats take it!*

She thought of rats—if only they'd attack—if only something would happen to break the bitter gray monotony. She wondered what it was like to be a rat, living somewhere in the fields or in the Ruins. She tried to imagine herself, furred and four-legged, crouched to the ground. It seemed almost as if she could—as if she caught the scent of the garrison and the city and understood the scent to mean food, the way it must to a rat. She thought again of attack.

It was an evil thought—a blasphemous thought—and all afternoon she had entertained it, smiling to herself at it. Then, after she'd settled into her bed and half-drifted into sleep, the crier's alarm had come.

Suddenly awake with excitement, she'd pulled on her best robe and hurried to join the other mourners. They had to be there on the wall, ready to sing the death of the rats when the soldiers won the battle. Of course the soldiers would win. They *always* won. But for a moment . . . she'd stood there wishing that just for once the rats would win.

She had climbed the stairs and taken her place on the parapet with the rest of the citizens. The world outside the city had been wildly beautiful, silver and gray, vivid with black shadows, washed in the clean white of moonlight. The rats had been beautiful, an undulating mass of fur marked by the sudden golden flashes of the night patrol guns. She had thought that just this once the rats should win . . .

To be a rat—a sleek, furry fighting creature—again she'd tried to imagine herself one with them. She had watched as they swarmed over the night patrolmen, pulling them down. She had felt the pleasure of their victory. The soldiers disappeared, one by one, under that overwhelming mass of rats . . . buried . . . gone . . . nothing remaining but the metal of their armour and bits of ragged bone.

As she watched a new thought came to her: The soldiers had bodies and bones the same as citizens did. They looked almost human. But of course they weren't. She'd



been taught that as a child. Soldiers could not be human: They did that which no human was capable of doing. They—she let the blasphemous word form itself within her mind—they could *kill*.

It wasn't the first time she'd thought of that word. It no longer frightened her, the way it once had done. Instead, she felt a rising pride in her ability to deal with such concepts. The other citizens couldn't. Chatya's mind, for instance, quivered at the haziest hint of such a thought. She didn't even have to speak of it, but only concentrate intently on the idea, and she could feel Chatya's discomfort.

But she—Illyna—was different from the others. She could think different thoughts. She could sense the feelings of others. She could know things that no one else could.

She watched the ranks of soldiers coming from the barracks and wondered again at how like humans they looked, despite the bulk of their armour. She watched them move out with fire fanning from their guns. Ahead of them, the rats scurried, broke, rebanded and attacked again, only to have their foreranks blaze into white flame.

It was cruel and evil, this slaughtering of the rats. All her life, Illyna had been taught that. Man was a creature of peace. Even the rats were not his enemies. But they could not be allowed within the city. Neither could the soldiers.

Rats and soldiers—the two great evils in the world—according to the storytellers a long time ago both had destroyed the world. If rats got into the city they could destroy it, so the soldiers were necessary. The city kept the garrison outside its walls and the soldiers held back the rats. It was necessary. Yet it was evil and the citizens had to atone for it. They would sing the death of the rats. And the song would be as beautiful as the battle.

Illyna breathed the stench of burning rats. With the scent, she seemed to breathe of the hate that the rats carried in them. The excitement of their battle overwhelmed her. She watched, her attention focusing on one soldier.

The rats were attacking him. They swarmed around him, clambering up his legs, flowing onto his shoulders,

seeking for his eyes. She could feel their eager hate of him, their lust for his flesh.

He screamed.

She hadn't heard the scream. But she felt it and with it the taste of terror. Did soldiers actually feel fear? It was a new concept and one that intrigued her. She'd always considered them to be simply mechanical creatures, a mimicry of men. Could such things contain emotions?

She drew her mind away from the rats, concentrating on the soldier. She tried to imagine herself within that armour, encased in mail and covered with rats.

The image was real.

The scream of fear was a pain within her mind. *Hatred*. She had known hatred before—it had grown from faint whisperings like seeds within her from the time of her earliest memories. She knew it was an alien feeling to the other citizens, but she had understood and nourished it within herself, intense in the bone of her body. Now, suddenly, it was a hatred more vivid, more violent than she'd ever conceived of. It was a hatred swelling beyond the limits of her body, swelling as if to burst open her veins and spew itself like acid onto the rats that engulfed her.

It seemed as if walls broke—as if suddenly she were in a dream, a nightmare, standing on the parapet watching and at the same time lying inside that armour, under the weight of the rats. Two minds—the combined hatred encircling, reinforcing—striking out at the rats.

They began to fall away. The hands of the soldier felt the one they clamped onto go limp. The cloak-weight of the rats clinging to the armoured shoulders dropped away. The soldier began to rise.

And Illyna was no longer with him. She stood on the wall watching. She was exhausted, drained of emotion now. On the ground below, the rats milled in confusion, breaking their ranks as if they'd lost leadership and their sense of purpose. They were retreating before the flame guns. She no longer sensed their emotions. Leaning her hands against the rising lip of the wall, she felt only the empty weariness. And when the rats had been driven back across the Boundary, she joined in the singing only be-



cause she'd been trained until her voice responded from habit.

Finally, when the song was done, she made her way down with the others, heading home. Back in her room, still numbly tired, she had dropped into her bed and slept. She'd dreamed of a rat . . .

Now she sat gazing into the shadows of the room, making the images live again in her mind. She knew a thing that no other citizen knew. She knew the feeling of a soldier in battle. She had lived for a moment as a soldier. She had experienced the all-engulfing urge to *kill*.

She tried to recapture that weird emotion. It came only as an echo, a vague memory. But even this filled her with elation. Like a god, she had tasted of a secret unknown to ordinary humans. Like a god . . .

## 2

BELDONE slept again. He woke suddenly at morning call, startled as if the clanging gong had been unexpected. Something was wrong; of that he felt certain. But what? Everything in the barracks seemed normal.

He rubbed his hands over his face and shook his head slowly. It ached. But worse than that was the feeling that there was something important he should remember. Something hovered in the back of his mind like a lurking rat. But though he tried, he could recall nothing of his dream nor the thoughts of madness that had followed it. There was only the vague uneasiness that persisted as he dressed, reported, and went on to mess.

There had never been any question of like or dislike. Food was eaten because one was hungry. Hunger came at regular intervals. Soldiers ate. The fungoids that the Clevelanders grew and supplied to their garrison for nourishment were not unpleasant in taste. Beldone had

always eaten as a matter of habit and custom. He'd never given thought to food before.

This morning though, he suddenly found the bowl of grayish pulp inedible. Not foul—nor revolting—just inedible. Puzzled, he tried to force down a mouthful. He gagged on it. He tried again with no better results, and, finally, gave up. Through the rest of the meal period he sat poking at the pulp and wondering if he should report himself as sick. And that, too, was a strange phenomenon.

There were seldom doubts or questions of any kind. A soldier knew his duty, knew procedures and routines. He knew customs and ways that things were. He did that which was to be done and rarely wondered about anything.

The secaptain eyed the full bowl. Rising from his place at the head of the table, he ambled to Beldone's side and asked, "Something wrong with the food?"

"No sir."

"Then eat." It wasn't an order but a statement.

"I don't . . . I can't . . ." Beldone looked blankly at the officer as he groped for some answer. The ache throbbed in his head and his neck was stiff from the wound. He put his fingertips to the bandage. "The rat bite, sir. I think I'm sick from it."

"Then report sick," the secaptain said, and again it was a statement.

Beldone nodded agreement. It was the proper thing to do. With the decision made, he felt more at ease. That was the trouble—some poison in the rat's bite.

The medical officer washed the wound again, put a fresh bandage patch over it, and told Beldone that it looked fine. That disappointed him. Some sign of infection would have confirmed his opinion that the wound was the cause of his strange emotions. He started to ask a direct question, then thought better of it. If the rat bite wasn't the cause, his peculiar behavior would go on his record. A symptom of madness? His mind jerked away from the thought.

The question unspoken, he returned to his squad.

It was midday when they were called to hear the special duty orders. A merchant caravan had heliographed



that it would arrive at Outcamp by evening. Beldone's squad was to meet it and escort it in.

The caravans traversed the rat-infested lands with their own armed guards, but they were not allowed to approach the walls of the city without an escort from the garrison. Beldone didn't know why this was. He'd never questioned the reason.

In full battle dress, he fell in with the rest of the squad, forming a square around their supply cart. They set out along the wide burned swath of ground that was the trade road west, alert for the possibility of a rat attack. In the spring the rats grew restless. Still hungry from the winter's famine, they became wildly bold.

Beldone would almost have welcomed an attack, though he didn't admit it to himself. Just marching and watching wasn't enough to hold his mind from the sense of uneasiness that plagued him. But there was no trouble and by nightfall the squad had reached the caravan.

The merchant traders had already made their camp in the usual place. Beldone had come to such caravans on this campsite many times before. Now though for the first time he found himself *looking* at the camp as he approached.

The Outcamp site was a broad circle of earth atop a low rise. It was kept bare of encroaching vegetation by the caravans and by patrols sent from the garrison. The sky, still a hazy twilight violet, silhouetted the merchants' trucks huddled together in the center of the clearing and the guardsmen standing at intervals along the Boundary. The rest of the merchants gathered around bonfires built at the four quarters of the circle.

A man rose from among the shadows and stepped forward. Beldone recognized him as the caravan master, a tall broad-shouldered, unshaven man who looked top heavy in his tight-fitting breeches. Even by firelight his clothing showed more brilliant colors than citizens wore, and spangles flashed around his boot tops. His bracelets clinked as he raised a hand in the ritual salute and called out his welcome to the soldiers.

The secaptain replied according to ritual. The soldiers knew their duties. They needed no orders. At the secaptain's gestured signal, they entered the circle and the first



watch dispersed itself, taking positions to alternate with the caravan's guards.

Along with others of the second watch, Beldone helped move the supply cart into place beside one of the merchant trucks. He glanced at the bulging meal box on treads that was a truck and suddenly wondered why soldiers didn't have such self-propelled vehicles. Angry at himself for the thought, he threw his shoulder against the high-wheeled cart, shoving it into place. *This* was the soldiers' vehicle. It always had been. It always would be.

When the cart was parked and the soldiers' bedrolls had been stretched out on the ground, the food urns were opened. Stripped of his helmet and gauntlets now, Beldone took his place in line and accepted his bowl. But again, he found himself unable to eat the fungoid. He drew away from the other men and stood in the shadows, staring at the dark shape in his hands. He knew he was hungry. But he couldn't eat.

There were scents in the air—the smell of the wood smoke and that pungent odor he knew to be the merchants' strange foodstuff. They were preparing their own meal by heating it over flames. He looked toward one of the fires, amazed to realize that the smell of their cooking was causing a watering in his mouth. The faint ache of hunger stirred itself in his belly. But still he couldn't eat the fungoid.

The impulse was sudden. He set down the bowl and walked toward the bonfire. Men grouped around it looked up at him curiously, their faces glistening in its light.

His words came without foreplanning. "Can *soldiers* eat that stuff?"

The merchants exchanged glances with each other, then looked toward Beldone as the blackbearded one—the caravan master—spoke: "Try it."

He held out his stick with the food lump on the end of it. The lump was a crusty brown, charred in places and dripping grease.

"How is it eaten?" Beldone asked.

The man at the caravan master's right grunted. It sounded like a stifled laugh.

"With your teeth," the caravan master said, amuse-



ment edging his voice. Her jerked a piece from the lump with his fingers and stuffed it into his mouth, working his jaw in exaggerated chewing. Then he thrust the stick toward Beldone again.

The food was hot under Beldone's fingers. He dug into the greasy stuff and tore loose a piece. As he raised it to his mouth the scent filled his nostrils. It was a good smell, even though it brought to mind the death scent of battle. He sunk his teeth into the morsel.

The fungoids he'd eaten all his life were bland of flavor. This was a strong-tasting stuff, stringy and tough under his teeth. He bit gingerly into it and discovered a pleasure he'd never conceived of. Why didn't *soldiers* have food like this, he wondered as he swallowed. Eagerly, he asked for more.

The traders exchanged glances again. Shoving the cooking stick into his hand, the caravan master told him, "Help yourself. We've got plenty."

"And more where that came from," another trader chuckled.

The lump of food had bones in it. Small, familiar-looking bones. Wiping at his grease-smeared mouth with the back of his hand, Beldone asked, "What is this food?"

"Roast meat."

"Where does it come from?"

"Rats," the caravan master said. "We catch them in snares."

*Rat meat!* Beldone felt as if his stomach had tumbled over, churning inside him. As his mind accepted the man's words, he felt his stomach threaten to refuse the food. Wheeling away from the merchants, feeling their amused eyes on his back, he struggled against the rising sickness. Stiff-shouldered, he strode toward the dark shadows of the trucks. As he ducked around the end vehicle, he heard their laughter following him.

He was not sick. The racking cramp in his stomach eased. He leaned wearily against the cold metal wall of the truck, drawing deep breaths as the feeling of illness faded. Slowly his body accepted the flesh of rats.

And again he became aware of the strange emotion of puzzlement. Speaking to the traders, asking for their food and eating it—these were things that were not done.

Questioning and wondering—what was happening to him? Was he going mad? The thought had a familiar feel to it. Quickly, he forced it away.

He tried to force away all thought as he walked out of the shadows. Soldiers of the second watch were sprawled on their bedrolls, resting. None glanced toward him as he seated himself on his own blankets. Had anyone noticed his strange behavior? Would one of them report him for it? What was happening?

He folded his arms across his knees and rested his head against them, his eyes closed. He wished he could sleep until the watch was called, but he knew that he wouldn't. He tried to reassure himself that he was only ill from some poison on the teeth of the rat that had bitten him in battle. He'd be well of it soon—wouldn't he?

Shifting his head slightly, he looked through half-closed eyes toward the merchants around the fire. What kind of creatures were they to eat the flesh of rats? Were they *men*, like soldiers were? Or were they something else with just the shape of men?

The questions were forming in his mind like bubbles in boiling water. He could feel the pressure of them. And with them there came a memory—vague and elusive—but persistent. He struggled to give it form. Sometime long ago, in the very beginnings of memories there had been questions. There had been a nameless urge to know—a wondering what things were and *why* they were.

As he became aware of that long lost memory, another formed itself. This one came distinctly, so vivid that he could almost hear the very inflections of the voice that had told him *it doesn't matter—that's the way things are*.

That had been the answer to every question, repeated again and again. *That's the way things are*. He remembered, and he knew that he had finally stopped trying to ask questions and, in time had stopped wondering. Eventually, he had simply accepted.

What was the urge to know that he had felt as a child? Seeds of madness suppressed through the years, now suddenly blossoming?

Illyna had risen early. She had fixed breakfast for her-



self and her sister, but she'd only toyed with her own food while Chatya ate. The excitement within her had left no room for interest in eating.

Once the breakfast utensils were cleaned and put away, Chatya dashed out, and Illyna turned to her loom. As much as she hated the boredom of it, weaving had to be done. The sisters lived by trading the cloth Illyna wove, and Chatya's fine embroidery. And a merchant caravan was due soon.

Her fingers moved automatically, sending the shuttle through the warp almost as swiftly as thoughts darted through her mind. She clung to the memories of the night before—to the strange and wonderful thing that had happened during the battle. Now, by light of day, it seemed far away, as if it might only have been a dream.

But it was no dream, she told herself. She had shared the emotion of a soldier in battle. It had been too strong—too strange—to real to have been her own imagining.

Not even the poems the tale-spinners sang were so bizarre, she thought. She had wanted a battle—the rats had come. For that moment while she shared his feelings she had wanted the soldier to survive—and the rats had fallen away from him as if they were stunned. It had seemed as though the beasts had heard her wishes and obeyed her commands. As if she were a god . . .

"Illyna!"

It was Chatya's voice, calling through the open roof door. The girl was back earlier than she'd expected. She looked up, feeling resentment at this interruption of her thoughts.

Sunlight washed the wispy blonde curls that made a halo around Chatya's soft young face. She seemed radiant with her happiness as she called, "Langtry's with me."

"Come on in," Illyna answered with a grunt. Her fingers kept the shuttle moving as she watched her sister swing one loose-trousered leg over the sill, hunting for the top rung of the ladder. A bundle of yarn fresh from the drying racks filled her arms. She struggled a moment, trying to get her footing.

*Clumsy beast!* Illyna flung the thought at her.

Chatya fumbled. The bundle slid out of her arms and

broke open, scattering skeins of yarn as it hit the floor. With a tiny sigh, the girl scrambled down the ladder after it.

"Chatya, are you all right?" Langtry's voice sang with concern.

"My foot slipped," she answered, giggling. "You'd better toss me the other bundle. I don't want you slipping too."

Laughing, Langtry gripped the bundle he carried under one arm and swung himself onto the ladder. He winced at the rough thought Illyna threw toward him, but his feet were firm on the rungs. He bounded lightly to the floor, a lean and lithe young man with a face as radiantly innocent as Chatya's. But a haze of perplexity lingered a moment in his eyes.

"I almost did slip," he muttered. "I'd better look at that ladder. Maybe a rung's coming loose."

"Theres nothing wrong with it," Illyna snapped.

"I can take a look . . ."

"I said there's nothing wrong with it!"

Langtry shrugged slightly. The sharpness of Illyna's tongue was nothing new to him. She'd always seemed dissatisfied with the match her sister had made.

Chatya was kneeling to pick up the yarn she'd spilled. He turned to help her and their fingers touched. Illyna could sense the warm excitement that raced through their touch, the sense of secret happiness Langtry and Chatya shared.

It was unjust, and cruel, she thought as she snapped the shuttle through the warp. These fools—these blank-minded toadstools with their shallow emotions—they knew nothing of *real* feeling or of the wonders that she—Illyna—knew. Yet they experienced this bond of love while *she* was alone. Always alone.

It had been that way even when their parents were still alive. Chatya the younger child, with her angelic face and innocent eyes, Illyna thought. The ripest berries had always been saved for Chatya, the sweetest songs sung for her. Chatya, the dull and ordinary had always gotten the best. It was Chatya, who'd had the love of their parents, and now she had the love of this man. It was unjust.

Illyna knew there'd never be any such match for her-



self. There were no men in Cleveland who were like her. They were all Langtry's kind, superficial vegetables. Her thoughts, her imaginings, her powers, all soared above them. She despised them. She could never open her heart to one the way Chatya did.

Letting her hands move automatically, she looked at Langtry. He was tall and blond, light-boned with a fine sensitivity in his face. The girls of Cleveland considered him a handsome man. But nothing in his appearance stirred her own emotions. She knew no urge to have those slender fingers touch her. The almost translucent softness of his face repelled her. He was too gentle, too bland—he was a fungoid. But Chatya wanted him, and why should Chatya always have what she wanted?

Illyna put down the shuttle and slid out of the loom strap. She stood up, stretching, comparing herself to her young sister. Her own figure was the better, wasn't it? A full, mature figure, firm and strong with nothing of the baby fat look that still clung to Chatya. Her own face was more sharply drawn, with high cheekbones and more distinct planes. Her own eyes were a deeper, more vivid blue. Her honey blonde hair fell in thick waves to her shoulders, while Chatya's lighter curls always tousled wildly. Chatya was little more than a chubby child. She—Illyna—was a *woman*. And such a woman as Cleveland had never known before, she added silently.

As she rose, she caught Langtry's eye. She stretched, forcing her breasts against the fine homespun of her tunic, rising on her toes and turning slightly. But he only glanced at her and continued helping Chatya gather up the spilled yarn. Their fingers touched again, and Chatya giggled.

Illyna stifled her anger. Lips pursed slightly, she told herself that it would take a little time and a little effort to break the bond between those two. But she didn't doubt that she could do it.

"Chatya, dear," she said, "would you and Langtry like some tea?"

The undertone of mockery in the sweetness of her voice was lost on Chatya. She could feel the girl's happy surprise. Always before, she'd been cool toward Langtry, sometimes openly rude. That had disturbed Chatya. Now

this first show of possible acceptance, this hospitality, pleased the little sister. And Illyna smiled smugly.

"Why, yes!" Chatya answered. "You build the fire and I'll get the water." Turning to Langtry, she added, "I'm terrible with fires. I can't ever get them started."

"I'll teach you," he grinned.

The iron stove was an excellent one, trade goods from the city of Gary, where the best ironwork was done. It had cost Illyna yards of fine cloth. Just a touch on the fuel primer, then a flaming splinter tossed into the fire-box, and it burned merrily. A child could light such a stove, Illyna thought, and so could Chatya.

But the girl looked at Langtry with wide eyes that suggested helplessness, and he slipped a protective arm over her shoulder. Illyna sighed with disgust as she started the fire.

Chatya slid from under Langtry's arm, asking, "Will you take down the kettle? I don't think I can reach it."

He stretched and lifted the pot off a high shelf. When Chatya took it from him her hand touched his again. She filled the kettle from the catch water tank and set it on the stove.

Illyna busied herself setting the table and putting out the sitting cushions. It was easier to hold her resentment in check while she kept her hands busy. She didn't want Langtry sensing her true feelings. Not now . . .

They drank tea together and made conversation about his garden where, he told them proudly, he had tomatoes almost as big as a man's fist. Illyna listened with a show of interest.

As they finished the tea, Langtry said impulsively, "Illyna, we're going to the concert tonight. Would you come with us?"

"It's going to be a singing of the new poem by Deev," Chatya added enthusiastically. "You'll love it."

*Unlikely*, Illyna thought. The tedious six tone word plays of the new poets bored her almost to tears. But she smiled and answered, "I'd love to."

Chatya and Langtry exchanged glances, happy in the thought that Illyna was finally coming to accept and approve their match.



The concerts took place in the open market, and the audience began to gather at twilight. This one would be well attended; the poet, Deev, was the new darling of the populace. When Illyna and the lovers arrived, they had to hunt for space to spread their cushions. Illyna was glad that the place they found was a good distance from the rostrum that had been set up for the singer. The further away from his caterwauling the better, she thought as she settled herself next to Langtry. The formal skirt she wore was of a finely woven blue stuff with a border of Chatya's best embroidery. She arranged it carefully to drape over her legs, showing the curve of her calf and the line of her ankle. Her tunic was white, cut low to exhibit her slender neck and the graceful slope of her breasts. When he'd come to pick up the sisters, Langtry had complimented her on the costume, and she'd felt a sincerity behind his words. Now, seated at his side, Illyna was warm with confidence she could easily outshine little Chatya.

As the poet stepped to the rostrum, there was a burst of applause. Dutifully, Illyna joined in. But her thoughts were not on him, and she paid no attention as he began his song. Instead, she gazed at the stars that were just appearing against the velvet twilight, and concentrated on Langtry. In her mind, she traced over her own beauty, hinting at the pleasures she might offer a man.

But she felt no response to her thoughts. Langtry was gripping Chatya's hand, his shoulder pressed against hers, and both listened intently to the poem. His attention was too firmly focused, Illyna decided. She'd try again when the song was done.

The poet's voice droned on and on. It forced itself into her mind with its dull, dreadful monotony. The boredom was overwhelming. If only something would stop him. Maybe a rat attack.

Memories of the battle the night before flooded into her mind. Smiling to herself, she conjured the ghost of that moment when she had been one with the soldier. What was *he* doing now, she wondered. Was he part of the squad that had gone to escort in the merchant caravan? Perhaps at this very moment he was fighting for his life again . . .

### 3

IT WAS one of the merchant guards who cried the alarm. Beldone responded reflexively, grabbing for his helmet, slipping quickly into the harness of his gun, and jerking on the gauntlets. Thoughts of madness shattered, vanishing, as he rushed for the battle. A soldier's life and purpose was the killing of rats.

The light of bonfires and spurting guns flickered over the weeds around the Boundary. Rippling and rustling, the long grass suggested the surging of the rats among its blades. A dark shadow scurrying into the clearing suddenly burst into a white brilliance of burning flesh as a soldier blasted it. The stench of seared meat and hair filled Beldone's nostrils. He charged, his hand tight on the trigger. The gun spat flame ahead of him, catching at shadows. Rats squirmed, burning under his fire.

It seemed to be a good-sized herd, though not uncommonly large for this time of year. The rats stretched over a broad front, darting in as if to draw fire, then wheeling in retreat while another spearhead of beasts struck the Boundary at a different point. Twisting, Beldone fanned the gun flame along the edge of the grass, meeting fire on either side from other weapons.

Soldiers and merchant guards alike intermingled, walling the circle of the campsite. In the wild light rats broke through. A soldier screamed, pulled down under their claws and teeth. An eye-searing flare of whiteness—someone had flamed the fallen soldier and his attackers—and for an instant Beldone could see nothing but the image of that blast.

He swept the gunfire ahead of him as he tried to blink away the afterimage. He couldn't see the rats—panic lashed through him at the drag of weight on his boot—he



kicked, stomping, and felt the soft squish of meat and bone under his foot.

Deep within his mind a voice was crying for the kill. It blossomed like a flare, overwhelming him. Frenzied with the sound of it—with the stench, the shouting, the fire of battle, he lunged after the damned rats. The flame of his gun leaped across the Boundary. Grass sputtered, burning as the rats hidden in it were seared under his fire. He was running—shouting—plunging through the smouldering knee-deep weeds.

A voice—not in his head, but at his ear—blurred words screamed at him. A touch on his arm—he wheeled with the panic rising in him again—and the spurting flame gun swung toward the attacker.

A hand grabbed at his wrist, struggling to force back the gun. Another hand, fisted, swung like a hammer toward his face.

“Dagit, man, stop!” the voice shouted.

The fist struck heel-first into his mailed face. The armour took most of the blow. But it jarred, startling him. He hesitated, realizing that this was a *man* fighting him, clinging to his arm.

“Get the hell back across the line!”

Dazed, Beldone responded to the order and the hands that dragged at him. He stumbled back, through knee-high grass, and over the Boundary. Vaguely he was aware of the other soldiers shouting their victory, driving the rats into retreat across the line.

“You try going into *their* territory alone and they’ll pull you down for sure.”

Beldone glanced at the man who spoke, seeing only that it was not an armoured soldier. Of course not—soldiers never crossed the Boundary. But he had done it, hadn’t he? And this merchant had pulled him back. Numbly, he stood, his eyes unfocused, broken thoughts tumbling in his mind. He had crossed the Boundary.

The *clear* call of the secaptain cut through his confusion. Reacting automatically, he turned to step into his place in the forming rank. The roll was called, the dead were accounted for. Then the men were dismissed. If any of the soldiers had seen Beldone’s lunge into forbidden territory, none spoke of it.

Relieved that he was not reported, but still feeling dazed by his own peculiar behavior, Beldone stumbled back toward his bed. In the shadows of the trucks, a hulking figure stopped him.

"Wait a minute, Soldier." The voice was familiar.

"Huh?" Beldone grunted, startled. He squinted into the shadows, but he couldn't make out the man's face.

"Wait, I want to talk to you." It was so sharply an order that he obeyed, falling into the formal *rest* position.

"Over here," the man gestured toward one of the bonfires. Beldone followed and, at his command, seated himself on the ground with the traders who still lingered at the fire.

Squatting before him, peering into his face, the man said, "I am Gamesh, the caravan master. I'm the one who pulled you back."

Beldone looked at him uncertainly. The man's face was shadowed. Recollections of the battle were a blur in the soldier's mind. Somehow the memories—and the world around him—seemed unreal.

"Why did you go across the Boundary?" the caravan master asked.

Beldone mumbled an automatic response. "A soldier doesn't cross the Boundary."

"You did."

He sorted through the pieces of memory, focused on one and slowly nodded in agreement.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

An edge of firelight flashed on the merchant's cheekbone as if a corner of his mouth had twisted in amusement at the reply. He said, "A soldier is forbidden to cross the Boundary?"

Beldone nodded.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"You did it. You disobeyed orders. Why?"

"I don't know."

"You came to us earlier and ate our food. You asked for it. Why?"

"I don't know."

"You must have had a reason."



Dully, Beldone said again, "I don't know."

"Do you know *anything*?" Gamesh asked, his voice patiently curious. "Do you know where that gun you're carrying came from?"

The soldier shook his head.

"Do you care? Did you ever wonder? Or do you suppose some little old lady in Cleveland wove it on a loom? Do you think our trucks grow in vats like yeast?"

Beldone glanced back at the dark silhouette of the grouped trucks. Thoughtfully, he ran a hand over the nozzle of his gun. These were things that existed. He had never thought to question them before. But now . . . frowning, he said, "I don't know."

"Do you *care*? Do you want to *know*?"

It took him a long moment of consideration to find the answer, and another moment to make a word of it. "Yes."

The highlight flashed on the merchant's cheek as if he'd grinned again. With a satisfied sigh, he settled himself on the ground. "Then I've a long story to tell you, if you're ready to listen."

"Yes," Beldone repeated.

Gamesh leaned forward. His voice was oddly gentle. "Do you know that there are other cities besides Cleveland?"

Beldone nodded, feeling vaguely proud that he knew at least that much. He knew that merchant caravans brought goods from other places and took the wares of Cleveland back to them. But he'd thought no further than that. He asked, "The guns and trucks are made by men in other cities?"

"Yes, but not these walled villages like Cleveland. *Real* cities, across the river."

"What river?"

"The Mississippi," Gamesh said, stretching out a hand. Tracing a line across the palm with his other forefinger, he told the soldier, "This land is a huge continent and it's cut almost in two by a wide river called the Mississippi. Understand?"

Beldone nodded, though he wasn't sure he did.

"You're here, east of the river," the merchant said,

touching the fleshy pad at the root of one finger. "We come from here, across the river."

"Rivers are water, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"How do you cross one?"

"We used to ferry over. But we've rebuilt one of the ancient bridges and now we cross on that," Gamesh answered with a trace of pride. "We've rebuilt a lot, but of course we weren't hurt as badly in the war as you were. We had more to work with . . ."

"War?" Beldone interrupted. "With the rats?"

"War with men."

He looked at the merchant blankly.

Gamesh sighed, then started over. "A long time ago—so long ago that we've lost track of time—there was a war. We think it must have been centuries ago. Before this war, the land was covered with cities. Some of them were so big you could have fit your little hamlet of Cleveland into one corner and hardly have noticed it. Do you know the Ruins on the lake?"

"Yes." Beldone recalled the vast expanse of weed grown rubble that was visible from the roof of the garrison building. It was the fortress of the rats.

"That's no natural formation, and the rats didn't build it. That's what's left of one of the ancient cities. They were huge places with buildings as much as ten or fifteen stories high, maybe even higher. There were hard-surfaced roads and trucks for everybody. Hundreds of people living in every city. Thousands in some. There were factories—places where men made things—and farms. In those days there were other animals besides rats and some of them were grown especially for men to eat. There were things even *I* have trouble understanding." The merchant gazed into the fire, as if he were looking at visions of wonderful and mysterious things. Then he looked toward Beldone again. "But there were no walls around the cities, Soldier. And there were no garrisons."

"How did they keep out the rats?"

"They didn't have rats—not the way you have them. There were a few scattered bunches living in the walls of old buildings and in cellars and places like that. There were some wild kinds, too, but all of them were tiny ani-



mals, not half the size of the rats you fight now. They lived hidden and they ran from men. They rarely attacked, and never in armies, the way they do now."

Beldone stared at him incredulously. It was hard enough to put concepts to the man's words about cities, but to imagine a world without rats. . . . He asked, "What did the soldiers do?"

"They warred on each other," Gamesh said. "In those days cities were banded together into what they called *nations*. One nation would send its soldiers to attack another. That was what happened. Bombings and invasions—disruptions of the whole system—oh, people in those days worried about war, but it was something they called total destruction they were afraid of. But what destroyed them was a broad extension of their *limited* warfare. It broke down their communications and isolated one city from another and . . ." He paused, realizing that Beldone couldn't follow what he was saying. "Well, the war started it and then the plague struck."

"Plague?"

"A sickness that spread from one city to another and killed almost everyone who caught it. Those scant, feeble packs of rats were the carriers. There had been other rat-spread plagues in the history of mankind, but nothing like this. Some people speculated that it was an ancient disease that had been dormant for centuries. Some said it was a new evolution—a natural mutation—of some known virus. Others thought it was a laboratory developed bug meant for biological warfare and that the bombings had enabled infected rats from the labs to get loose and intermix with the wild ones somewhere . . ." He stopped, knowing he'd lost the soldier again.

"What I'm saying is that during the war, people began to die of a sickness that no one understood or could stop. It began on the east coast and spread across the country from there. Survivors evacuated the cities, blasting and burning the buildings behind them in an attempt to kill off the rats, but it was a feeble effort. The packs kept increasing. They traveled, hunting food. They carried the plague everywhere they went. It killed most of the population. But it did stop the war. As best we can tell, it must have spread across the oceans, or else have started



in some other nation and spread here. We're sure the other continents were all hit, too. We've never remade contact with any other country but someday . . ." He frowned at Beldone, "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I think so." Many of the words the merchant spoke were strange to him, and the concepts completely alien. But almost as if he could see into the man's thoughts, he found the words were forming images in his mind. That didn't make sense, but many things had happened in the past two days that didn't make sense.

Gamesh studied him curiously, then spoke again. "Our people tried to check the spread of the rats, and the plague, at the Mississippi River. We were only partially successful. We lost most of the population of the West, but not all of our cities were so completely destroyed as in the East. Even so, there wasn't much left when the plague finally ended."

"They found a way to stop it?"

"No, it stopped itself. Either the virus was unstable or else the people began to develop immunity. Whichever it was, after several generations there was no more plague. But by then, the rats had increased and grown into the kind of hordes you have here now. Once people realized the threat of the plague was past, in the West they began to band together to rebuild. In the East though, well, we can only speculate about what happened.

"Merchants, men like me," he continued, "travel and see a lot. We learn a lot and we share our findings. We think that in the East small groups of survivors started establishing villages and reviving what remnants of the ancient crafts they still had, with old industries as nuclei. Cleveland, for instance, seems to have grown up around an experimental yeast food production facility that the people reactivated."

"What?"

"Never mind, that's not important. What I'm trying to say is that small groups of survivors began to build little communities and they walled them in the same general patterns we see in the cities here now. They probably had cleared land around them that they guarded just as you



soldiers guard the grounds inside the Boundaries now . . . .”

“But soldiers and citizens are *different*,” Beldone protested.

“Now maybe,” Gamesh admitted. “But they come from the same roots. We think there were other bands of people roaming the land who didn’t form settlements of their own. They must have attacked and pillaged many of the early villages. We believe that somewhere along the line, some of them formed alliances with villagers, living outside their walls and guarding them from other wild tribes and from the rats in exchange for food and goods that the villagers could supply to them.

“Everywhere our caravans have penetrated this side of the river, the pattern is the same. The Citizens consider the Soldiers to be brute beasts that they have to maintain in order to defend themselves from the rats. And the Soldiers hold the Citizens in contempt as a form of work animal that exists for the purpose of providing the supplies they need.”

Beldone nodded in agreement.

“That’s your weakness—it’s what holds your cities in their present barbaric condition. They stay isolated from each other and they maintain this animosity toward their own soldiers and all outsiders. It took us generations to establish the merchant trade we operate now. It was only when we began bringing in the flame guns and armour for the soldiers and pretty geegaws for the citizen women that we managed to induce them to trade with us. It’ll probably be centuries more before we’re able to start the wholesale export of *ideas* to them.”

“Ideas?”

“Sure. We’re rebuilding our civilization across the river and we’d *like* to spread it into the East. But the Citizens are as bad in their way as you soldiers are. You’re *all* trained from birth never to think or question. The goal of your philosophy, if I can call it that, is to maintain the status quo. You’ll fight against change even harder than you fight the rats. Do you have any idea why you never cross the Boundary and take your battle to the rats, but only wait for them to attack you?”

“No.”

"Because sometime in the past, when your ancstors were just beginning to learn how not to think, some soldiers decided that if they ever wiped out the rats completely, it would put an end to their own usefulness. All they had to exchange for their keep was their ability to kill rats. *Your* heritage is the fear of winning your war and making yourself obsolete.

"And those dagfools inside the walls have inherited the remnants of such a fear of war that they've trained themselves to be incapable of killing anything, even a rat. They huddle inside their cities scared sick of everything that's outside the walls." The merchant worked his jaw and spat as if his own words had left an ugly taste in his mouth.

Beldone sat silently, the wild thoughts and new concepts a painful whirl within his mind. Strange words—strange images—these things Gamesh spoke of—they were madness—or the truth.

"How can you know things from the past?" he asked.

"Nobody sees as much of the world as a merchant trader," the caravan master told him. "And I am a student of these things. I listen to what others have to say. I gather evidence. I speculate. I think. I learn. Are you capble of learning, Soldier?"

"I don't know," Beldone muttered dully. Within his mind a voice seemed to be crying *I am!* But it was not his voice . . .

After a moment, the merchant spoke again. "Do you know what's going to happen to you now?"

"No."

"Either you'll desert, or you'll die. You're no good as a soldier now. You've begun to ask questions. If you try to stay with your garrison, you'll be found out and incinerated as insane."

Beldone nodded.

"But you *can* desert. When we've finished our business with Cleveland, you can hide in our caravan and join us—if you last that long. You're no good as a soldier now, but you'll make a decent enough caravan guard. Reformed soldiers are often the best guards. Some of them have even risen to be caravan masters themselves . . ."

"There've been others?"



"Of course. You're hardly the first soldier ever to ask questions. It doesn't happen often, but occasionally . . ."

The thought of desertion was—was—unthinkable. Bel-done's mind rebelled against it. Yet what the merchant had said was true: If he stayed in the garrison, he'd be recognized as mad. He shook his head slowly, muttering, "I don't know."

"*Think* it over, Soldier," Gamesh said, the firelight flickering across his face, hinting at his grin.

Illyna's eyes were closed. The voice of the poet surged past her like the roar of a distant sea. In her mind were the images of rats—an attack on a camped caravan—battle—through the eyes of a soldier—*her* soldier—his raw emotion engulfed her and she pressed screaming into battle.

Frenzied with the sound of it—with the stench, the shouting, the fire of battle, she lunged after the damned rats. The flame of her gun leaped across the Boundary. Grass sputtered, burning as the rats hidden in it were seared under her fire. She was running—shouting—plunging through the smouldering knee deep weeds—on across a forbidden Boundary, lost in the fervor of battle. But something had caught at her arm. A hand was trying to pull her back, away from the kill . . .

She opened her eyes and saw the poet, silhouetted against the star-flecked nightglow, still spilling out his interminable song. The memory of a touch lingered on her arm and she glanced toward Langtry at her side. But she realized it had only been his sleeve brushing against her bare arm. He gazed at the poet, enraptured, his fingers twined with Chatya's.

Resentment mingled with disgust and flared with Illyna. She saw her sister frown slightly as the girl caught a hint of her thought. As if to reassure herself, Chatya leaned her head onto Langtry's shoulder.

Illyna turned away, closing her eyes again, trying to recapture her contact with the soldier. The battle was ending. And someone was speaking to the soldier. She heard the voice faintly, as if it echoed from a far distance. Intent, she tried to catch the words.

Slowly, the blurred images began to focus. The voice grew stronger as she concentrated on probing her strange power deeper into the soldier's mind. She could see the bonfire now, and the shadowed face of the man who was speaking. His words struck sparks of excitement in her. If only she could make the contact stronger! If only she could reach into the mind of the man who was spinning such a marvelous tale!

Her body tense with effort, she grasped for the thoughts of the merchant. The emotions she felt reflected within her were those of the soldier—his confusion, his self doubt. But slowly the misty visions grew clearer. She saw bright worlds—alien worlds—cities beyond the river. Wild thoughts spun in a brilliant kaleidoscope of strange concepts that she knew came from the merchant.

Ecstatic, she pressed the soldier to listen, to ask questions, to draw out the exotic thoughts of the stranger.

And then suddenly—too suddenly—the poet was done with his song. Illyna was jolted back to the marketplace, to the dull and disgusting boredom of Cleveland, by her sister's hand grasping hers.

"Wasn't it wonderful?" Chatya sighed. Her other hand was still wrapped in Langtry's. Her face glowed with the blank-minded happiness that repelled Illyna so.

"Wonderful," Illyna mumbled, suppressing the urge to throw an unspoken curse at the girl that would sting like a whip. She had business here now. She had to break that affectionate bond between her sister and Langtry.

As she stooped to help gather up the cushions, she concentrated on Langtry, on impressing him with desire for her. It seemed strange that she could make such strong contact with the soldier, but yet she barely seemed able to touch the citizen's thoughts.

Was it possible that Langtry's love for Chatya was stronger than her own will? She rejected the thought. It must be simply that the soldier's mind was more receptive. She had the power—a greater power than a common citizen could ever conceive of. It would just take a little time . . .

Pain speared through Beldone's head. As if some force



that had held them in check was suddenly withdrawn, the wild thoughts seemed to explode, driving a thousand sharp-edged shards into his mind. Segments of concepts too weird to be borne slashed at him. The *self* within his mind jerked back, its silent scream piercing through him. Beyond the surging pain of insanity, he barely heard the merchant speaking.

"*Think it over,*" Gamesh said.

But the words only tumbled formlessly in the distance. Within his awareness, Beldone fled from thoughts far worse than hordes of rats.

## 4

THE LONG-SLANTING rays of the morning sun were pleasantly warm. Beldone had wakened feeling giddy and light-headed, with a sense of relief, as if he'd shed some overwhelming weight during his sleep.

He was aware that time—two nights and a day—had passed since the battle before the walls of Cleveland in which he'd been bitten. He could remember that distinctly. He'd almost died under the attack of the rats. But memories of the time since then were vague and formless. He supposed he'd been sick with a fever from the wound and he made no effort to recall what had happened during the two nights and a day since then. A soldier did not wonder or question.

He made himself busy with dressing and checking his gun. He returned his bedroll to the supply cart and he ate the pulpy breakfast of soldiers without thought. Then he busied himself with the forming up of the escort around the caravan trucks. It seemed somehow important to keep active.

There were three of the lumbering boxes-on-treads that were transportation for the merchants and their goods. As

they rolled out, the soldiers surrounded them, marching alert for any sign of rats. The merchant guards, relieved now of their duty, sat atop the trucks, dangling their legs, laughing and joking with each other. Their voices were a meaningless murmur to Beldone as he marched along beside one truck. He made no effort to catch their words. It was the babbling of alien creatures, and no concern of a soldier.

On an outcropping of the kind of rock called a *foundation* at a distance from the road, a pair of rats skulked, watching the caravan. The soldiers sighted them, eyeing them suspiciously. But they made no move and the caravan proceeded past, trucks rumbling in low gear to match the marching pace of the soldiers.

Beldone saw the door of the lead truck swing open. He watched, feeling a twinge of disquiet, as the blackbearded caravan master dropped agilely to the ground. There was something of menace about the man.

Eyes dark and as shining as a rat's turned toward Beldone and fastened on him. The merchant gazed at him with a strange steadiness. Suddenly uncomfortable, he shifted the weight of the gun tanks on his shoulders, but it didn't ease the feeling. A few strides of the march brought him up to the waiting caravan master, and for a moment he felt an urge to turn and run. But what threat was this alien merchant?

Gamesh spoke softly, his voice no louder than the rustling of a rat through the grass. "Have you thought it over, Soldier?"

The words seemed somehow ominous. Blankly, Beldone said, "I don't understand."

The caravan master squinted, studying Beldone's face as he paced the soldier's stride. Then, shaking his head slowly, as if he'd been badly disappointed, he stopped. Beldone marched on and after a moment, the merchant hurried to catch up with his truck again. The incident was past.

But the sense of uneasiness stayed with Beldone.

The sun lifted itself to midsky, spilling its hot light on the soldiers. Beldone could feel his sweat soaking into the garments under the encasing armour. The trickle of salt sweat seeped under the bandage on his neck, stinging at



the still raw wound of the ratbite. He welcomed the slight pain, concentrating on it. That, the heat and the growing weariness of the march managed to fill his narrow focus of attention. Slowly, the feeling of disquiet about the caravan master settled, forgotten, with the other memories that his mind had pushed into oblivion.

At last he could see the walls of Cleveland ahead, rising from the fire-blackened ground within the Boundary. The familiar five-sided figure of the garrison building squatted in the sunlight, halfway between the wall and the Boundary. Near it a squad of children were drilling while some of the camp's small herd of women watched proudly. The sight filled him with a sense of home and security.

On the parapets of the city walls he could make out the figures of citizens gathering, come to watch the caravan arrive. The crane had already been swung out and the huge basket-walled platform it lifted swayed slightly in the breeze off the lake. That platform was the only way into the city: everything that entered Cleveland had to be hauled up by winch.

As he gazed at it, a long-dulled memory stirred itself in Beldone's mind. Once, when he was a child, drilling in the garrison yard, he'd seen soldiers in battle dress ride up in that basket. There'd been a rat scare inside the walls. Panicking, the citizens had sent for men to search out and kill the invaders. He'd wished then that he'd been full-grown and able to join that search party. He had wondered what lay behind the high walls.

*... it doesn't matter ...*

He pulled away from the memory and the question that had oozed into his consciousness as if it were some slimy obscene thing. He didn't want to know what was behind the walls. He didn't want to *know* . . . a soldier didn't wonder . . .

Illyna had dreamed of strange cities. The tale the caravan master had told was still fresh in her mind when she woke. No, not a *tale*, but the *truth*. She'd kept telling herself that as she went over each image she'd captured from

him, brightening and clarifying its details in her own imagination.

A wide continent divided by a mighty river, he'd said. Beyond the river there were great cities and beautiful people. There were wonderful machines, good foods, clothing and jewelry worthy of such as *she*. There was excitement and adventure—much to do and much to learn. Beyond the river a woman such as she would not be a slave to a loom.

As she reviewed the merchant's story a new thought began to shape itself within her mind: An enthralling thought. *She* would go to that civilization beyond the river. She would escape Cleveland and its damnable boredom. Somehow, she would escape . . .

The blossoming thought, the myriad images of strange cities, left no room in Illyna's mind for memories of the soldier or of her plans for Langtry. She focused her anxious dreams on herself.

As she bolted her breakfast and hurried to finish bundling up her trade goods, her mind ranged in search of a way of escape. No one from Cleveland ever went outside the walls, except for wise men who occasionally counseled with the leaders of the soldiers. And no one from inside *ever* crossed the Boundary. Even the soldiers only went onto the road in squads to meet the caravans. No, only merchant traders ever traveled.

Glancing toward her sister, she snapped, "Will you hurry, Chatya! The caravan is on the way."

"It won't be here for hours," the girl murmured. She put down the necklace of greenstone and picked up one of gold links. Holding its ends, she tried it against her throat, studying her reflection in the mirror critically. Her brow furrowed at the struggle of decision. Finally she chose the golden chain that sparkled warmly against the pink of her tunic. Then her wide eyes moved to Illyna's image in the glass.

"The concert was lovely, wasn't it?" she said.

Illyna only grunted as her fingers darted agilely folding the lengths of handloomed cloth.

"And Langtry was so charming," Chatya added dreamily. "You *do* like Langtry, don't you?"

She paused, watching Illyna's reflection. When she got



no answer, she insisted, her voice almost pleading, "You do, don't you, Sister?"

Illyna sighed. Well, let her have the fool, she thought. Better things than the petty torment of her sister waited beyond the walls—if she could find a way out. And she would.

In reply, she muttered, "Yes, Sister."

Chatya smiled. Turning, she began to gather up her finished embroidery to pack for the traders. Still soft-voiced, she said, "He's going to meet us up on the parapet."

"All right," Illyna sighed.

The girl's fingers traced over a bit of bright blue needlework, a swirling pattern of sparkling shades. She lifted it and pressed it against her cheek. "Illyna, do you think I might keep this scarf? See, it has the same blue as my eyes in it."

Illyna flung a surge of impatience at her and she winced, the cloth slipping out of her hand. Hurriedly, she bent to finish bundling the package. Her fingers trembled as she folded the scarf, laying it on top of the other trade goods. The shock and bewilderment she felt at Illyna's lash of thought radiated from her.

Illyna paused, feeling the emotion clearly. The power was growing stronger, she thought, smiling to herself. With such power in such a place as the civilization across the river, she'd be a personage of great importance—a leader, perhaps a ruler.

*Why not*, she asked herself as she picked up the finished bundle and hurried to the roof. Chatya followed dutifully behind. The parapet steps were just a short walk away: Langtry met them there. He stood with his yellow hair bright in the sunlight, his fresh-scrubbed face almost glowing. Politely, he nodded to Illyna, but his eyes barely touched her. They moved to grasp Chatya as if they could caress her.

At the sight of him, the revulsion and resentment surged in Illyna again. Langtry seemed to personify everything hateful about Cleveland and its dull weak citizens. She thought again of finding a way to destroy this romance before she escaped Cleveland. But there wouldn't be much time. And freedom was far more important.

They'd arrived early. The citizens with goods to trade

had just begun to gather on the walls. Illyna chose a place to open her bundle for the merchant's inspection. As she unwrapped it, the sun caught in the shimmering colors of her weaving. She alone of all the Clevelanders had the nerve to use the truly brilliant dyes undiluted. Sliding a hand into the glowing green fabric, she turned it to flash light from its surface, and she pictured herself in a garment of such luster. Beyond the walls, in civilization, the women dressed so. She'd seen that in the merchant's thoughts.

Beyond the walls . . .

A woman, herself a weaver, looked critically at the cloth Illyna was holding, and muttered, "Bright."

She meant *garish*: Illyna recognized the distaste underlying the word. Scorn and jealousy, she thought as she reached out, trying to feel the woman's actual emotion.

She recoiled, startled. She'd expected envy. She'd found a mixture of revulsion and pity. This dull, shallow-minded citizeness seemed to see her—Illyna—as some kind of freak.

*Rats take you! Rats, rats, rats . . .!*

Illyna flung the thought and the woman shuddered as if a chill had leaped down her spine. She turned away quickly. Illyna watched her hurry across the parapet and threw the thought after her; *Rats, rats, rats . . .*

The woman peered over the wall as if she expected to see an attack beginning. She stood a while staring out. Then, scurrying like a rat herself, she went to open her own bundle of wares—at a distance from Illyna.

Satisfied, Illyna let her thoughts drift back to the dream of escape.

At last the cry went up. Someone had spotted the caravan. Citizens rushed to the wall to watch it move slowly over the trade road below. There was time yet before it would reach the Boundary, and more time to wait while the goods the merchants brought were unloaded and then inspected by the soldiers of the escort. Every bundle had to be checked thoroughly: rats could sometimes get through the most secure guards and hide themselves in the trade goods. It was said that had happened in times past, and soldiers had been brought into the city to hunt them down.



As the caravan drew nearer, women went to their handiwork and busied themselves anxiously brushing away imaginary dust and turning items this way and that to catch the light best. Confident of the way she'd arranged her cloth, Illyna stayed at the wall. Intently, she watched the unbearably slow progress of the trucks that had come from exotic places—and would be going back to them. Somehow, she thought, she would find a way to get down the wall to that caravan. She would leave Cleveland with them.

Surrounded by their armoured escort, the trucks rolled onto the grounds in front of the barracks. They pulled up short of nosing against the wall, and the whine of their internal mechanisms stopped. Illyna picked out the tall, blackbearded man who was caravan master, recognizing him from the contact the night before. As he stepped out of one of the trucks, she could hear his shout of orders to his men.

Under the glaring sun, the soldiers of the escort pulled off their helmets and settled themselves to rest as the trucks were unloaded. Illyna scanned them and found her attention drawn to one in particular. He was tugging at a gauntlet, then wiping at his forehead with the back of his bared hand. She watched him run his fingers through dark hair damp with sweat and she sensed his weariness. This was the soldier she'd been in contact with, she thought excitedly. This was *her* soldier. She reached out to probe his mind.

There was nothing. She seemed to strike a wall—as if he were fighting back to keep her from invading his thoughts. Frowning intently, she tried again. Did he know what she'd been doing, she wondered. Was he aware of her power? Like fingers reaching into the dark, her thoughts forced into his consciousness. She became aware of heat and weariness . . . of a dull pain under the bandage on his neck . . . of a vague feeling of uncertainty . . .

She concentrated on that. In a wordless, undefined way the soldier was worried. About her power? She examined his emotion.

No, she realized, he wasn't aware of her probing. He wasn't trying to fight *her*, but himself. He was struggling



to keep the thoughts out of his own consciousness. The fears and self doubts that she found edging his mind were chilling—so unpleasant that she drew back from them.

She held only a slight and tenuous contact as she watched him join the others beginning to examine the goods the traders had unloaded. They lifted the lids of boxes and thrust their armoured hands into bundles.

She felt the shock as *her* soldier's fingers touched something softly yielding hidden in the corner of a crate. His hand jerked back, then reached in again to wrap itself over the huddling rat. He would haul it out and fling it down to be flamed by one of the men standing by, gun at ready. She felt his hate as he groped for the animal. And she was aware of its long teeth trying to pierce through the mail of his gauntlet as he caught it.

*No!*

She drove the thought at him. She could feel it spear into his consciousness. Anchoring her power in his mind, she made an order of her thought. *Let the rat be.*

Tense, he hesitated, then drew his hand away from the squirming beast. He let the lid of the crate fall closed, and nodded, then moved on to the next bundle.

Illyna smiled with satisfaction as she waited. It wasn't until all the wares had been inspected that the hoist was finally lowered to the ground. Then the traders began loading it with goods.

Balancing on a crate, the caravan master rode up with the first load, his bright clothing and jewelry flashing in the sunlight. There was dash in his stance. As Illyna watched him, she thought that no man of Cleveland could have stood so, or have grinned in that way. No man like Langtry would have leaped so agilely off the hoist as it came even with the top of the wall. Or stepped back, planting his hands on his hips with such an air of authority, to supervise while the citizens unloaded the lift. This was the leader of the merchants, and the only one allowed even this far into the city. This was a man and a master of men.

She watched him with admiration, then turned her attention to the crate where the rat lay hidden as one of the citizens pried the lid open. Silently, she called to the rat.

It appeared suddenly, poising for the blink of an in-



stant on the rim of the box, its whiskers and snout working, its eyes fever bright.

Someone screamed. And the rat darted, a blur of an animal plunging across the parapet, suddenly lost down the stairs. Men gasped, leaping back as the beast scurried past them. They fled in panic and the rat hurried on unhindered into the maze of the city's streets.

The wise men conferred. Illyna could sense their hesitancy. This was disaster beyond the experience of the younger men. Even the old ones who had been wise men when a rat invaded within the walls once before were uncertain. The need was known: Soldiers had to come into Cleveland to find and destroy the furred evil. But to call for soldiers was the most extreme of measures: someone had to make the decision and speak to the leader of the garrison.

Illyna chose the strongest of minds among the wise men and placed her urge. And, finally, the man spoke the decision. Reluctantly, deep in worry, he went to the hoist and rode down to the garrison with the news

There was no pause or question on the part of the leader of the soldiers. It took only moments for orders to be snapped out and passed along. Quickly, the secaptain of the armoured squad at the base of the wall was calling his men into ranks. Illyna watched, pleased that *her* soldier was among them. Even with his face masked by the helmet, she could find him now. It took only a touch of thought to locate his mind.

She stayed on the parapet, watching, until the entire squad had ridden up the lift and was reforming its ranks atop the wall. Then she hurried down the stairs. The plan in her mind was still vague, only partially formed. She weighed ideas and discarded them as she clambered onto her roof and down the ladder into her own home.

Beldone was aware that he had done a strange and evil thing. Guilt was like lead, stiffening and weighing his arms as he jerked on the helmet. Grabbing for his gun, he hurried to fall in with the squad. This was an emergency, and he was in armour. It was his duty to go. It was his



duty to kill the rat—he had let it into the city. Why had he done such a thing?

He was dazed by his own behavior, but the familiar action of forming ranks and the comfortable feel of the gun nozzle in his hand were things to concentrate on. They steadied him, helping him push back the puzzled thoughts that surged on the edge of his mind.

As the squad was reformed on the parapet, he felt that long forgotten question shape itself again: *What was inside the walls?* He fought it, but he could not stop himself from glancing curiously across the roofs.

The wall was a vast irregular loop surrounding a jumble of cubicles that he found he knew to be houses. They were in clusters, a few odd-sized cubes piled together with ladders leaning against their sides, and holes in the roofs that he somehow recognized for doors. Each group of houses had an area of open ground adjoining it, and to his amazement, he understood that the Clevelanders grew plants on these grounds, taking their fruit for food.

Almost in the center of the city, he spotted a huge roof that was in sloping segments instead of a single flat plane like the roofs of the houses. He knew somehow that this was the ancient building the caravan master had spoken of: *A yeast production facility . . .* The Clevelanders grew fungi in that building, according to arcane formulas, providing the staple foodstuffs for themselves and their garrison. How was that possible, he wondered. But the mysterious source of knowledge gave him no answer this time.

The secaptain was calling his men to march. The call broke Beldone from his study of the city. He concentrated on the hunt. He had to kill the rat. A soldier's purpose was to kill . . .

At the foot of the stairs the squad broke into groups of twos and threes, fanning out to spread through the winding streets in their search. At first, Beldone was with two other men. Then, somehow, he found he was alone, wandering along ways that seemed almost familiar. It seemed as if he had been here before, in some time now forgotten, though he knew that was impossible. Yet, he seemed to know the way. But the way to *what?*

He turned a corner, knowing he was supposed to turn.



It was as if he were being led . . . he stopped and looked up at a ladder, feeling that he should climb it. Awkward in the heavy armour, he clambered up onto the roof. The door was open. He lowered himself down.

Something awaited him at the foot of the ladder. He sensed that as he climbed into the twilight gloom of the little room. Stepping off the bottom rung, he turned and blinked, trying to adjust his eyes to the darkness.

He was not alone.

Reflexively, his hand jerked up the gun nozzle, tightening on the trigger.

"No!" the woman screamed.

Illyna had stood silently watching the soldier lower himself through the door. His armoured bulk filled the opening, suddenly blocking the sunlight. In his shadow, she suddenly felt chill.

His emotion was fear-edged bewilderment, And she herself was afraid. Tense and cold, she stared at this creature she had called. It descended the ladder clumsily, an inhuman hulk of chain and plate mail.

Soldiers and rats: the two great evils. Her whole life she'd been taught to hate and fear them. Now she'd brought them both into Cleveland, and she'd brought the soldiers here, into her own room.

She gazed in horror as the thing stepped from the ladder and turned toward her. She saw the gloved hand jerk, bringing up the nozzle of the flame gun. She felt the surge of the creature's fear, and its almost instinctive emotion: *kill . . .*

"No!" she screamed.

The soldier froze, a metallic monster looming before her with death in its hands. The blank face of mail seemed to be staring at her with its dark-shadowed eye slits. That was the terror, that inhuman mockery of a face. She couldn't stand it staring at her that way . . .

Swallowing hard, hoping desperately that whatever lay behind the mask was not so awful, she said, "Take off the helmet."

She could feel the soldier's uncertainty. He wavered suspended in the web of his confusion, caught between



his own training and her command. Intent, her voice clearer and firmer now, she repeated the order.

The soldier let the gun nozzle slip out of his fingers. His hands rose slowly, and he tugged off the helmet. The thin light falling through the skydoor caught on his face.

Illyna sighed with relief, her fearful loathing for the soldier gone. Without the cruel and awkward mask, he was no longer a nightmare menace. He *was* human, she thought as she gazed at him. *Quite human. . . .*

The sunlight shadowed his eyes, but splashed highlights onto the bone of his cheeks and jaw. It was strong bone sheathed in hard muscle. There was nothing delicate or ethereal about his face—no resemblance to Langtry and the men of Cleveland. She made the comparison, savoring it as she studied the soldier's face.

"Take off the gloves," she said thoughtfully.

His fingers trembled as he jerked at one gauntlet, then the other. She looked at hands that were hard-knuckled, cabled with tendons that ridged from tension. Strong hands—hard hands that might be rough in their touch. Fingers that might dig into her yielding flesh like claws. She shuddered with a strange pleasure at the thought.

Her voice quavered as she said, "Take off the gun."

Obediently the hands rose to pull back the straps of the gun harness. As he shrugged his shoulders out of the straps, he twisted back his head and the sunlight traced over firm lips set in a hard thin line.

Such lips would be cruel in their kiss, she thought, shuddering again, caught in the image. Her own lips drew taut at the imagined touch, parting slightly. The sensation was as real as a dream.

The soldier's hands reached toward her. She felt them, warm and strong, through the fine fabric of her sleeves. Like the reflection of a flame in a mirror, she felt the soldier catch her emotion and turn it back toward her. Strong hands and the thrill of those fingers digging into her upper arms. His mouth was hard and hot against hers, a shock of vicious desire. He held her gripped in her own dream, a dream that fed itself through him and back again, intensifying with the reflection.

A dream suddenly shattered by a voice that lanced through it like lightning.



"Illyna, are you there? Chatya was worried and I . . ."

The voice was Langtry's. It jarred Illyna, and she felt the soldier's hands fall away from her arms. Wheeling, she faced Langtry as he stepped down through the door, onto the ladder. He halted, shocked at the sight of the soldier with the girl.

Illyna's fury lashed out . . .

Blinding flame—Langtry's rising scream suddenly lost in the brilliant white flare and the stench of burning flesh—the gun nozzle suddenly in the soldier's hand again, now splashing wet fire—just for an instant—just as long as it took for Illyna's outburst of fury to turn into horror. Then the gun sputtered out, the nozzle slipping from the soldier's now-limp fingers.

Illyna stared aghast at the charred lump that tottered a moment on the smouldering rungs of the ladder and then fell. It struck, its surface shattering into puffs of black ash. It lay oozing ruby-bright droplets of fresh blood through cracks in the caking black ash.

Illyna stared. And her sister's unvoiced scream was a knife through her consciousness. She saw Chatya's head silhouetted against the sky, sunlight making a flaming yellow crown of the girl's tousled hair. She heard the sharp rasp of the girl's breath drawn in terror.

And then Chatya was gone, her footsteps fading as she ran across the roof.

Her sister's hysteria still hung suffocatingly close around Illyna as she heard the girl finally find voice in appalled sobbing screams. The people would hear her, and would come to investigate. A single panicked thought flooded into Illyna's mind—*run!*

## 5

THE SOLDIER was close behind her as Illyna scrambled up the ladder. She could feel her own panic reflected in him, feeding back to her. She felt a charred rung crack under his heavy boot, felt his hands grip at the edge of the doorway. She knew the strength of his arms, hauling his mail-weighted body through the opening. The sound of his running was close behind her as she fled over the roof.

The world was a wild jungle of impressions, the soldier's mingling with hers as she dashed down the outside ladder. Familiar streets seemed strange nightmare stuff. She twisted into a narrow alley—one that she *should* have known—and realized too late that it was walled at the far end. Her hands pressed against the cold stone, she gasped at the tears that burned in her eyes.

The soldier stepped back, looking at the top of the wall. Dropping to one knee, he cupped his hands together. She understood. Bracing herself against his shoulder, she put a foot into his hands. He rose, lifting her and she swung herself onto the top of the wall. Poised there, she looked at the ground. It was a long way down.

The soldier leaped, his outstretched fingers catching the wall's top. She stared at his hands as he sought a foothold against a rough joint in the stone face of the wall. He dragged himself up and lay for a moment atop the wall, then dropped to the far side. She could feel the jolt of his landing. And from a distance she could hear shouting.

From the sound of it, there were mobs combing the city and moving nearer. She had to hurry.

"Help me," she called aloud to the soldier.

His hands stretched up toward her and she lowered herself into them. He lifted her down gently. Her feet firm on the ground, she gazed at his bare hands and then his face. His eyes were blank dark discs. In a hoarse



whisper, she told him, "I need armour. A full suit of it. And a gun."

He nodded obediently and turned to leave.

The plan was still vague in her mind, barely forming itself one step ahead of action. Alone now, waiting for the soldier's return, she reached out with her mind toward the crowds in the streets. There were soldiers and citizens both, hunting in confused haste, searching for a rat and for the madman who'd flamed down Citizen Langtry. It was easy to locate a single thread of purposeful thought—the mind of her captive soldier—among the muddled and fear-laden emotions of the citizens.

Her own moments of terror seemed to have given new strength to her power. Now, calming herself, she concentrated on the soldier. He had found another soldier moving alone through the maze of alleyways. He stalked his quarry now with animal instinct, clutching a loose cobble in one bare hand. She felt the quarry's startled confusion as a thin thing, lost in the desperate wave of emotion she threw at her captive. She knew the sudden violence of his attack.

The armoured soldier went down as she'd seen men go down before an onslaught of rats. The hard cobble he's used for a weapon slid from her captive's hand. He had emotions of his own—fear, revulsion—they overwhelmed him. For an instant she was afraid her contact with him might break.

Hands clenched, eyes pressed closed, she forced her thoughts at him. She ordered to bring the body of the unconscious soldier back with him.

In moments, he appeared around the corner, hurrying to her with the limp body slung over his shoulder. At her order, he dropped it and began stripping off the armour.

Impatiently, she waited until he'd done. Then, with his help, she began to dress herself in the mail. She had to stuff cloth torn from the soldier's undergarment into the boots to keep them on her slender feet. The hauberk hung loose from her shoulders. The weight of it and of the helmet pressed so that she wasn't sure she could bear more, but her captive was holding up the gun harness for her to slip into.

Finally dressed, braced against the wall, she looked at



her soldier and spoke this last command aloud. "Now run. Show yourself to the hunters. Let them chase you. Lead them away from here."

He obeyed.

When he was gone from sight, she turned her attention to the problem of standing erect and walking with the bearing of a soldier under that stifling cloak of mail.

She could hear as well as feel the turmoil of the chase. The captive had obeyed and the hunters were plunging after him through the labyrinth streets. Their shouts grew fainter as he drew them away from her hiding place. Satisfied, working at balancing the weight of the battle dress, she moved out of the alley to follow after them.

The hunt was over by the time she'd caught up. The rat had been destroyed and the madman captured. Holding to the edge of the crowd, she watched two fully-armoured soldiers holding the helmetless man between them, their gauntlet-encased hands pinning his arms.

But their force wasn't necessary. The captive yielded to their commands, his face blank with bewilderment. Illyna could feel his confusion. Now that she no longer forced control over him he was lost in a jumble of broken thoughts blurred by his inability to comprehend.

For a moment as she gazed at him through the eye slits of the helmet, she let the memory of his hands—his mouth—rise into her consciousness. For a moment, she regretted.

Drawing her shoulders taut under the weight of the mail, she pressed back every thought but that of escape. Instant by instant her plan had grown, each step barely formed before its happening. Now she knew the next step.

The secaptain was snapping orders in a thin, nervous voice and the soldiers moved at his commands like automatons, dull with the shock of strange events. The ranks formed, a slim figure in overlarge armour dropping into place in the last row. She willed that the officer not notice her, and she sighed with relief as he scanned the squad without hesitation. At either side of her, soldiers stood gazing straight ahead, seeming blind to all but the orders they received.

The watching citizens kept their distance as the soldiers



marched past them. Many were dutifully chanting the death of the rat, but some were too stunned even for that. The flaming down of a human being was a thing beyond comprehension, but it had happened. Eyes blurred with shock were turned toward the marching figures—the inhuman devices of unspeakable purpose that had brought inconceivable evil into the city.

Among the ranks, Illyna marched unnoticed.

Of all assembled, only the caravan master seemed unperturbed by the killing. His face showed only detached curiosity as he watched the soldiers. Curiosity, and perhaps a glimmer of pitying disappointment as he looked at Beldone. He'd liked this strange young soldier with the questions in his mind.

As they boarded the lift, the merchant's glance touched the slight figure in armour that crowded into a corner, and Illyna shivered. For an instant she felt as if he could look through the mail and see her face. She reached for his thoughts.

At first she found nothing. But then, at last, she was relieved to discover him assembling an account of the killing to tell to his men.

As the lift touched ground, the caravan master stepped off to be surrounded by his crew. Traders were curious men, anxious to know what had happened.

The secaptain marched himself off the hoist and called the squad to follow. They had to push themselves past the clutter of merchants. Illyna found it easy to separate herself from the crowd.

There were soldiers on patrol, walking their rounds, but they seemed oblivious to the excitement of the traders, completely incurious, even unaware of the faint sound of a death song that rose behind the walls. They marched, alert only for an attack of rats from beyond the Boundary. No one looked toward Illyna as she darted between two of the parked trucks.

The gray metal of the door handle was cold to her touch. But it was anxiety that shivered along her spine as she swung the door open. Her escape was under way now. Soon the caravan would be moving on, and she'd be going with them—going to the civilization beyond the river.



She climbed into the truck and closed the door gently behind her. In the darkness, her fingers awkward with excitement, she began to strip herself of the cumbersome armour. That done, she curled up among the bales of trade goods, relaxing now. Waiting . . .

At first Beldone felt only blankly numb, as if the part of him that gave life to his body had been torn away. Sight blurred and there were no thoughts. But then awareness came. There were metal-gloved hands on his arms, forcing him to move. He was surrounded by the squad and he was without helmet, gauntlets or gun. He was a prisoner.

The memories returned as bright sparks, burning when they touched his mind. He jerked away from their pain and they became hazy shards of thought. But he could neither obliterate them completely nor assemble them into any sensible pattern. There had been a rat inside a crate—a woman inside a house—a mouth on his and emotions more violent than he'd ever known before—there had been the flare of a flame gun and an all-enveloping panic—and madness.

With the dazed calm of complete bewilderment, he let the hands that held him lead him on into the garrison. He stood before an officer, only vaguely aware of the voice that said, "Beldone, you have committed an insane act."

He accepted the truth of the statement and nodded in agreement.

The voice told him, "You will be incinerated tomorrow morning."

He nodded again.

The hands led him away then, into the heart of the garrison complex. He stood unmoving as the fingers stripped him of hauberk and leggings. He offered no resistance as they shoved him into the man cage. As if from far distance, he heard the bolt on the door snapping into place. Only dimly was he aware that he was locked in the cramped cage to await death.

Illyna had drowsed, half-waking at the jerk of the



catching engine and the jolt as the truck began to move. In moments the drone of the engine and the rocking sway of the rolling truck lulled her into a deeper sleep. She dreamed of bright colors and bright cities.

It was the click of a doorlatch that woke her again. Refreshed by sleep, excited by her dream, she blinked at the firelight spilling through the door. A figure bulked black against the reddish purple of the twilight sky beyond. She sensed rather than saw that it was the caravan master.

"Is that a rat I smell?" he called aloud.

Startled, she reached for his thought. It came clearly: He knew she was there!

Other feelings came with his thought: Ominous feelings that throbbed through her like the unheard undertones of a deep bass. She couldn't quite capture or translate them, but the sensation of them sent a shudder along her spine.

"Come on, little mouse, let's have a look at you," the caravan master said.

She stirred herself reluctantly. Behind the caravan master, the traders were bunched together waiting. The light of their bonfire flickered over unshaven faces, glimmering on bright metal earrings and bangles, flashing off white teeth bared by their grins. The nerve-tingling undercurrent of strange emotion touched her again at the sight of them. Their eyes seemed beads of hot metal—like the eyes of rats.

The caravan master offered her a hand. She took it gracefully, though she shivered again at his touch. His fingers were thick and calloused, backs matted with curly black hair that spread up onto his hand and arm. There was cruelty in that hand, she thought. And she remembered the soldier with the strong lean fingers and the hard vicious mouth. Her lips and teeth remembered that mouth—for a moment the thought overwhelmed her—the soldier had been a *man*. And these were men too, these bright-eyed creatures who stared at her and grinned.

She choked back the subtle fear, telling herself that she could control these men, just as she had the soldier.

"My name is Gamesh," the caravan master said, his



voice startlingly gentle, a deep musical rumbling in his throat. "Eh, little mouse, and what are you called?"

His cruel hand was gentle, too, as he helped her from the truck. She stood before him, washed in the warm light of the fire. She gazed up at his face with the highlights dancing on his cheekbone and brow. Shadows lay over his eyes and twisted his mouth.

"My name is Illyna," she said. Her voice seemed small here in the open of the campsite. And it seemed almost to tremble.

"You're not afraid of me, are you, little mouse?" Gamesh said.

No, she told herself. In reply to him, she shook her head.

One of the men chuckled. It was a high-pitched sound, but that ominous bass undertone clung to it. Her head jerked as she looked toward him.

The caravan master's hand was still holding hers as softly as a caress. But when she moved to pull away, his fingers locked suddenly over hers. Ironhard claws were wrenching into her flesh. And she was afraid . . . completely and terribly afraid.

"Please!" She jerked at the hand. Her voice came in a sobbing breath. "Let me go!"

"Go where?"

"I . . . please . . . I want to go to the cities with you."

"With *me!*" He laughed then. "Yes, you'll go with me, little mouse. I know what it is you want, Citizeness. I'll take you with me and show you pleasures they don't know inside the walls."

The trader who'd chuckled spoke now. "We'll *all* show her, eh Gamesh? That's the agreement of merchants. We share our profits, eh?"

The caravan master was grinning broadly. "Yes, Cheech, we all share. But the first share is the master's."

His free hand moved toward Illyna's shoulder. The fingers brushed soft flesh as they caught at the thin fabric of her tunic. His thoughts were flames, burning into her mind.

She struggled. Where was her power? She couldn't con-



centrate against the heat of his emotion searing into her thoughts.

She winced as he ripped at the tunic. Hot cruel hands—but not like the soldier's hands had been—not under *her* control, answering her own desire. She cursed the caravan master. She cursed the power that had deserted her, leaving her victim to this coarse but strong-willed creature. Pride asserted itself within her. She—Ilyna—who knew the secrets of a god—she was not meant for the pleasures of this brute and his cohort. She was not meant to be dominated. She was meant to be a ruler—a master!

But his hands were forcing her body, and his emotion overwhelming her mind. Through the turmoil of her frenzied thoughts, she heard the man called Cheech laugh. She felt one emotion—growing—spreading to encompass all of her thoughts, swallowing them like a flame. She knew the surging strength of focused hatred.

“Rats take you!” she screamed. “Rats, rats, rats!”

Like an echo, she heard a gruff voice cry out, “*Rats!*”

The hands released her body. The caravan master's curse was an unintelligible grumble as he wheeled away from her, a new emotion diluting his lust. He must answer the alarm.

“Hundreds of rats!” Panic edged the voice of the merchant guard who had cried the warning.

Ilyna leaned against the truck, her body weak. She watched the traders scurry to grab up their guns. The ones acting as night guards were already busy on the Boundary of the campsite, fanning flame along its periphery. But the rats were coming in massed hordes, spearheading through the long grass, tumbling over each other and over the ashes of their foreranks in singleminded purpose.

Abandoned for the moment, she gazed in relief at the wild activity of the merchants. She could feel her shoulders trembling and she could taste the salt of her own tears. She was weak, hollow with the terror of what had been happening to her. But she couldn't allow herself to be weak now. *No*. She understood what was taking place. She had called the rats with her hatred. She needed them



now, and needed the strength of her power to keep them. She wanted them to win this battle.

The one thought—*hatred*—steady as a white star—she held it, gazing at it with her mind, spewing it toward the rats just as the guns spit out the flames. She felt it entering into them, felt it catching fire in their animal minds. *Hatred*. It whelmed around her, reflected back at her from a multitude of tiny consciousnesses. She called to the rats and, wordlessly, they answered her.

*Kill!*

It was a scream in her mind, a pure emotion untainted by intellect. Her eyes were on the figures of the merchants, silhouetted against the fire of their guns and the flaring of seared rats.

*Hatred!* It was the blood that rushed through her body, tingling into her hands, into her fingertips. *To kill!* Hatred was her strength, multiplying itself within her. The hands before her face were her own—sharp-clawed as any rat's—tendons drawn hard, clutching, grasping . . .

Among the merchants only the men on guard duty wore full armour. The others—those who'd grabbed up their guns in the moment of alarm—darted before her with their bright clothes and bangles flashing in the fire-light. Their jewelry tinkled like frenzied bells.

One paused, laughing, as his gun flared into the mass of rats. She knew that laugh, recognized him as the one called Cheech. He'd laughed at *her* before. Now his back was toward her, highlights dancing over the sweat-damp and corded muscles of his neck.

She lunged, her hands closing on that neck.

He jerked—a startled wince—as her nails dug into his throat. Dropping the gun nozzle, he reached up to pry them away. Untriggered, the gun's flame sputtered out.

Illyna clung, her hands clawed into the neck with the strength of undiluted hatred. And the flood of rats poured onto the man's feet, up his legs, their chisel-teeth reaching easily through the fabric of his trousers.

He was screaming. The spears of his panic were a wild stimulant to Illyna's fury. She *knew* now—she understood the lust of the rats—white teeth sunk into the flesh of his neck. Blood trickled from the corners of soft lips, staining the fine fabric of her tunic.



Blood stained the yellow teeth of hot-eyed rats. And the trader's screams stopped.

With a sense of cunning, Illyna stripped the gun tanks from the dead man's body. She knew how to slide the harness onto her own shoulders. The trigger was a hard tension against her fingers. Wet fire spurted from the nozzle like arterial blood. She turned it toward the nearest merchant.

The brilliant white flare—Langtry had burned that way under the soldier's gun—but not so beautifully. The soldier had dropped the trigger too soon, she thought as she let the flame play over the body. She rejoiced in the rich scent of man-flesh searing. And around her hundreds of small lusting minds rejoiced with her. The Enemy was destroyed in just the way that it had destroyed so many of her brothers in battle.

The rats brought down another man. And then another. They moved to converge on the big, black-bearded figure that wheeled, spraying them with flame. But Illyna called to them.

"This one is *mine*, little brothers!"

They heard and paused, letting her through their ranks.

She stood before the caravan master, and he faced her. For an instant she could see the reflection of her gun's flame in his wide eyes.

This time it was she who laughed.

## 6

BELDONE woke suddenly, though he had not been asleep—not in the sense that he knew sleep. He was sitting huddled within the confines of the man cage, his legs drawn up and his back pressed against the bars. With his arms across his knees and his chin resting on them, he had been gazing unseeing at blurs, his mind inert.



Then—suddenly—he saw. He recognized this room: He had done guard duty here in the past, sitting on that same high stool where an armoured soldier rested now with a gun in his lap. This was the place where captive rats were held for the Ceremony of the Scientists, and where insane soldiers were kept imprisoned, awaiting execution.

Through the bars he looked at the table with its row of double-walled cages, each large enough to hold a single rat. He lifted a hand, touching his fingertip to the cold metal of the bars and he understood that he was himself in the man cage. He had been sentenced to die. That made sense, he thought, because he *was* insane.

The memories were returning. They were vivid, but yet disassociated, seeming more like things he'd seen someone else do than things he'd done himself. He could visualize every moment: The rat in the trade goods, the ride up the hoist, the march into the city, and the woman. . .

Her face filled his mind. The cruel, overwhelming desire echoed itself in his memory. But now it mingled with a loathing, as of rats. Desire—her mouth—a voice—and a sudden flare of hatred. It had not been *his* emotion, not *his* will or *his* consciousness that had closed his hand on the gun's trigger. But it had been *he* who turned the flaming gun onto a living man.

He remembered panic.

These were the acts of a madman. No doubt lingered in Beldone's mind now. He accepted his madness, and with the acceptance came a calm that was not dazed numbness but something akin to peace of mind. He was insane. It was as simple as that.

He looked thoughtfully at the rats in the cages on the table. They were ugly, hated animals, but impotent now, locked behind bars to await the Ceremony of the Scientists. And he, too, was locked in a cage waiting to die.

An odd thought formed itself, twisting a corner of his mouth in vague reaction. There was grim humor in picturing himself dying, as the rats would, in the Ceremony. First he'd be stretched out on a table, with high officers in ceremonial white tunics standing over him. One would hold the sharp metal implement kept for the ritual. He'd poise the blade over Beldone's stomach, judging the cut,



then making a quick straight incision while the assembled ranks watched in awed silence.

The internal organs would be removed through that slit, each placed in its separate tray. They'd have to have larger trays for his organs than they used for the rats, he supposed. Were his insides really like those of a rat, he wondered. He'd never given it thought before, but it seemed logical. Men and rats were both made of flesh over bone, even if their shapes were different. Why shouldn't he have the same kind of soft red lumps inside his belly that a rat had?

He envisioned his stripped and emptied hull lying on the table like a ceremonial rat's, surrounded by its own contents. Had there once been a reason for the ritual? That caravan master had spoken of past times when the world was different. Men had known different things and had different thoughts then. Had there been a purpose for the Ceremony of the Scientists, a long-forgotten reason for the careful examination of a rat's internal organs? Was there a meaning for the strange name, *Scientist*?

Lost in his wild imaginings, Beldone had gazed unseeing into space. But suddenly his attention was jerked away from the fantasy he'd built for himself. A soundless scream pierced his thoughts.

The guard was gasping, a gurgle of horror deep in his throat. Focusing, Beldone saw the man's wide eyes staring as if he, too, could see the gruesome fantasy. Slumping forward, the guard clapped both hands against his face as he sprawled on the floor. The armoured legs drew up and the head forced down between the knees. In a rigid foetal curl, the guard lay, ribs jerking convulsively.

Fragments of the images Beldone had built for himself cartwheeled through his mind, wildly distorted with the terror of insanity, radiating from the guard like reflections from a shattering mirror. The man's unvoiced screams lashed into Beldone's consciousness, rasping across the self-contained calm he'd so recently found, threatening to destroy it. His hands clamped onto the bars of the cage, white-knuckled, as he shouted, "Stop it!"

The wild-spinning images, razor-edged with panic, were dragging at him, hauling him into their vortex. This



was a different form of madness—a form that frightened him. He fought back, his mind crying, *stop it—stop it!*

The spinning slowed: The images dulled. The hard iron—the sane reality—of a command became a shaft for the pivoting insanity. The crazed mind of the guard locked on it.

Beldone felt the pain ease. His voice steadying, he snapped the order. "Stop it. Stand up."

The metal-armoured thing on the floor slowly uncurled itself. Chest heaving with deep-drawn but now regular breath, the guard hoisted himself to his feet. He stood at stiff obedient attention to the command.

Beldone gazed at the helmet's eyeslits, wishing he could see the face behind them. Experimentally, he ordered, "Come here."

With wooden steps, the guard moved toward the man cage. As Beldone looked at the armoured figure, he remembered how his own hands had helped a slender woman into leggings and hauberk, how they'd lifted the helmet onto her head and guided the gauntlets onto her fingers. In battle dress, all men looked alike. Even a woman had been able to disguise herself under armour. A man with his face hidden behind a helmet might be able to walk unnoticed through the halls of the garrison.

"Unlock this cage," he said to the guard, fighting the catch in his voice and the excitement of his thoughts.

Almost unbelieving, he watched the guard tug off one gauntlet, then take a key from its wall peg and rasp it in the lock. The door swung open.

He dragged himself out, his cramped muscles complaining as if they were studded with fine-tipped nails. Clinging to the bars, he stood up and studied the guard. The grandeur of thought process—the wonderment of making a plan—surged through him. And with it the fear thrill of possible failure.

How long would the guard respond blindly to his commands, he wondered. He snapped, "Take off your armour."

As the guard's hands pulled off the helmet, Beldone saw the man's face. It was a bloodless white, with a thick pulpy look to the flesh. The eyes were like empty holes



poked into it with a charred stick. They didn't seem to see Beldone. They didn't seem to see anything.

Automatically, the hands moved, stripping away the armour. Beldone grabbed at it, dressing himself quickly despite the tremor in his fingers. The weight of the hauberk on his shoulders was familiar and reassuring.

As his fingers closed onto the gun nozzle, it seemed to absorb their trembling. His hand held steady. In full battle dress, he felt whole and capable. He turned toward the blank-eyed guard again and said, "Get into the cage."

The man obeyed and Beldone snapped the lock shut. Then, with new-found instincts surging through him, he stepped cautiously into the hallway.

The corridor was empty for a moment. Then a soldier in fatigue dress appeared around a corner. Beldone felt a flash of panic—an urge to run or to kill. He fought it back and kept walking, calmly, steadily, on past the soldier.

The man glanced at him, unquestioning, and kept going.

Once he was out of sight, Beldone sighed wearily, wondering if it might not be easier to simply face incineration. But he moved on, now past a barracks door, hearing the snores of the sleeping night guards, even scenting them and sensitive to the heat of their bodies. Strange things—things to be *thought* about—if he survived to have time for thinking.

Ahead, the outer door was a dark rectangle against the wall. Beyond it would be the grounds and the number two day patrol walking the Boundary. He paused, trying to shape a plan for getting past them . . . and suddenly a gong clanged.

The thunder of it shot panic through him. He flattened his back against the wall, then jerked himself erect again. Straining, he forced back the fear. He couldn't let himself be seen acting like this—erratic behavior—symptoms of madness—he'd be caught. He had to keep himself steady . . .

The door swung open. Beyond the man who entered, Beldone could see the purpling sky. Relief flooded through him. The gong had only been first evening call.



And twilight, the coming darkness, might make his escape easier.

He strode boldly past the guard at the door. The outside air had a fresh, free scent to it that roused the excitement within him again. Vestiges of panic were gone now. Striving to look purposeful, he headed across the grounds. But he could not approach the Boundary.

As long as he looked as though he had business here, the patrols would pay no attention to him. But crossing the line would be an act of madness, and the soldiers would catch him, or flame him down. He had to find some way—he had to get to the campsite and the safety of the merchant caravan. Alone, he could travel fast enough to be there by dawn, before the trucks rolled on. And the caravan master had offered him a place as a guard. Would the offer still stand, he wondered. Or would Gamesh trust a man who'd been convicted of insanity.

The self-doubt flared again, his mind filling with images of failure. The odds were against him: Guards to evade, rats that might attack him, and then the possibility that the caravan would refuse him. Wouldn't it be easier to surrender and let himself be incinerated? Wasn't that the right end for a madman?

What was *right* and what was *madness*? Were there answers to all the questions? He grabbed at the thoughts, holding them steady. There had been a *feeling* of truth to the strange story the caravan master had told him. He meant to find the proof of it—or to die trying. He couldn't stand still and let himself be destroyed without ever knowing any of the answers—without even trying.

He walked on, scanning the brush-covered land beyond the Boundary. Groves of trees were irregular black patches against the sunset glow. A wind too gentle to sway them rustled over the grass, reminding him of rats. And the footfalls of the guard pacing along the line were like hammerblows in the twilight quiet.

Beldone listened to his own footsteps and the small noises of his armour. Impatience was a new-found emotion. He had no word for it, but he could feel it gnawing at his consciousness. It bit deep as he gazed at the sky, wishing for complete darkness. There were already specks of starlight breaking through, but bright shreds of pink



and gold clouds still hovered on the horizon ready to silhouette him if he made for the road westward. His lungs ached with tension as he walked on.

If only the rats would attack, he thought. Let them drive at the Boundary a distance from the mouth of the road. Let them grab and hold the attention of the patrols. If only . . .

“Rats!”

Startled, astonished, he looked toward the man who'd called the alarm. The soldier was fanning his gun along the line, catching flares of white within its orange flame. The rats *were attacking!*

Amazement held Beldone frozen for a long moment. From behind he heard the scramble of soldiers being turned out for battle. They were rushing out of the garrison, past him, running to meet the attack.

He flung himself into motion, racing as if to join them—then swinging onto the trade road.

A voice cried, “Soldier, stop!”

He ran on, into the lowering darkness.

“Stop that man!” the voice behind him called.

Heat! A sudden wave of hot light burst at the edge of his field of vision and the force of the heat seared through his armour. Someone had fired at him—a near miss. He had a moment's vision of the fuel tanks on his back—tanks that could explode under the flame of a gun. Swerving, he ran.

Another blast of a gun behind him—but this time the heat was not so intense. He was vaguely aware that he had passed beyond a gun's range from the Boundary. To get him now, the soldiers would have to enter onto the road. Would they dare that while the rats were attacking? He couldn't guess. Nothing like this had happened within his memory.

He ran.

The guntanks were heavy, pounding against his back with every stride. The armour was cumbersome, a dead and clinging weight. Gasping for breath, he ran. And darkness closed around him.

The sounds of battle were dim, lost under the pounding within his ears. Cobbles twisted under his boots. His legs were aching with the strain of each stride, and pain shot



through his chest as he forced air into his cramped lungs.

Darkness—fear—the throbbing of his blood—a feeling of unreality—the world spinning around him—no sense of direction—no sense of up or down—he felt as if he were tumbling, cartwheeling through space as he ran.

Something jabbed at his bootsole, turning under it. His ankle twisted and he *knew* he was falling. His foot slid off a broken stone, throwing him off balance. He fell hard, sprawling face down on the road.

He lay still under the blanket of nightdark fear. His back jerked with the rasp of hard drawn breath. And slowly he felt reality form around him. With effort, he raised his armour-weighted head. Wearily, he lifted himself up on his arms and looked back.

The flames of battle were a small sunset against darkness—a writhing sunset that stormed on itself with bursting stars of white caught in it—the flare of burning rats. Between the fury of light and himself, he could see the expanse of road blankly empty. Above him, the true stars made cold patterns on a vast and hollow sky. There was no pursuit.

Lying motionless, Beldone listened, hearing a multitude of tiny night sounds—the distant cries of battle, the nearby murmuring of small breezes on long grass. The scents of the air were fresh with vapors of growing things, clean with dewy dampness. There was nothing more.

He was alone.

Sated, Ilyna rose. She wiped her palms idly down her torn skirt, then rubbed the back of one hand across her mouth. It only smeared the red stain.

Rats moved over the bared bones that lay at her feet. Their eyes gleamed redly in the low light of the dying bonfires as they nibbled at the still-clinging shreds of flesh. Ilyna watched them, feeling a quiet vicious pleasure.

Lips gone, but with patches of skin still mottling the bone and the remnants of the black beard still in place, the skull of the caravan master was a grinning mockery. It leered like the face that had loomed so threateningly above her just before the rat attack. But the eyes were no



longer heavily lidded pools of life. Now they lay in hollow sockets, round pupil-dotted lumps that gazed sightlessly skyward.

A she-rat, fur splotted with blood, squirmed up to perch where the skull had once worn a nose. It sunk its long yellow teeth into one lidless eye.

Illyna stood watching a moment longer, then turned away. As the fires died, it was growing chilly. But it was only her skin that was cool. A full stomach and the satisfaction of revenge—these were warmth enough inside her. Smiling to herself, she climbed into the open truck.

Myriad bright eyes turned from their exploring to watch her curl into her resting place among the heaps of trade goods. Sated and full-bellied, with the blood drying in their matted fur, the rats moved lazily toward her.

"Rest now," she murmured, her eyes closed. And the small furred bodies pressed against her flesh. A warm living blanket nestled against her. Masses of tiny sparks—wordless emotion—the contentment of hunger and hatred now satisfied—blanketed her consciousness, lulling her into dreamless sleep.

When she woke it was with a feeling that she should be gone from this place before the sun rose to spill light among the trucks and over the bones. It was not wise for the furry ones to linger in cleared places during daylight. Too much light was not good. Safety lay in darkness, comfort in warm close burrows away from the prying sun. It was not wise for Illyna to linger here.

She rose and followed the little friends, knowing that they had a home where there were safe dark places. They raced around her, chattering to themselves, the young ones tumbling over each other in the delight of well-fed bodies. The small sparks of their minds acknowledged her wisdom and strength. They sensed that the slight starlight trickling through the heavy foliage overhead was not enough for her eyes. They knew when she stumbled on windfallen branches and they chose a path for her through the forest.

And when they were through the copse of trees, at the edge of *the place*, they paused to let her look at their fortress.

A broken-edged moon washed its light onto the home



of the pack. Ilyna stood seeing it in the faint light and sensing it through her new friends. She recognized it for Ruins, though it was far smaller than the vast rat fortress called by that name which lay beside the lake visible from the walls of Cleveland.

These Ruins were hardly bigger than a cluster of what might once have been the foundations of two walls. The stubs of two more walls still stood, ragged and lapped raw by winds and rains. Beams that had once supported a roof lay at awkward angles, holding a slab of fallen wall at a slant. Her small friends told her that there was a large cozy space under the slab, a space big enough for such as she to curl into.

She thought agreement, and they led her across the rubble to the mouth of the musty cubby. In the warm, friendly darkness, she brushed away cobwebs and tendrils of weeds and then, pleased, burrowed her way into the tiny shelter. There, she settled to sleep again. And the small ones, reflecting her pleasure, scurried to their own nests among the ruins.

Beldone had never been alone before. He lay still, the weight of the emptiness around him far heavier than any armour. He listened to soft winds, tense for the rustling of small bodies through the grass. If the rats attacked him here, alone . . .

. . . alone . . .

The heavy silence pressed in on him. He felt himself reduced to a dimensionless thing, a single point of awareness within cold and vast space, suffocating under an empty and endless black sky. He pressed his armour-masked face into gloved hands, stifling the scream that was building in his throat.

When he lifted his head again, he could see the last sputtering flames of battle through the narrow eye slits of his helmet. Far away, guns flared and faded. The grounds grew dark and the walls of Cleveland became a black mass lying low against the deep luminous sky.

"Damn you," he muttered softly. In his mind he could see the soldiers, back in the barracks now, stripping off



their battle dress and checking out their guns, comfortable within the familiar confines of the garrison.

He remembered Ambler, who had slept in the next bunk and fought near his shoulder. Ambler had gone mad. Had it been like this for him—a turmoil of questions and frenzied thought? So many soldiers went mad and died for it.

But was it madness? Was it such a damnable sin just to wonder? The caravan master had cursed soldiers and citizens alike, saying it was wrong that their narrow-channeled minds never allowed them to question or to learn. He had said they held themselves in bondage with their inability to think. He had spoken of strange and wonderful places beyond the river where thought was no sin, but a virtue. Was that so—or had the caravan master been insane too?

*It was true*, Beldone told himself fervently. And he would find the caravan. He'd travel to such places and see such things for himself. He would *learn*.

Stiffly, he got to his feet. Swinging his head, he scanned the horizon through the eye slits. And suddenly he jerked off the helmet. It was armour, protection against the rats that might yet attack him while he was alone here, but suddenly the weight of it was unbearable. He flung it to the ground.

Turning again, he looked at the world, his range of vision no longer tunneled by the eye slits. The wind was cool and fresh on his bare face. There was a chill to it that sent a shiver along his spine.

Or was it a tingling of anticipation?

Facing into the darkness uproad, he began to walk. Behind him, the helmet that had masked him into a replica of countless other soldiers lay abandoned.

## 7

ILLYNA stirred in her sleep. Around her in their own snug burrows the rats slept too. Tiny litters nestled, well fed and secure, against their mothers' bellies. Adults found their mates and, with them, animal happiness. And Illyna was aware of the contentment of the little friends. It was like a blanket, warming and protecting her.

In the darkness of her sleep, pleasure shimmered. A figure was slowly taking shape. She remembered the black-haired soldier with his strong, sharp-boned face and his eyes like discs of metal. The dream figure acquired features.

Her lips twisted into a faint sleeping smile as she remembered his mouth on hers and the hard grip of his hands. She knew his touch and even the scent of him. She knew his vitality. And she knew she could control him. The pounding of her heart quickened at the reality of her dream.

The warmth of small bodies—the flowing, tumbling mass of rats surged into her dream. Noses twitching, teeth bared, they gazed at the soldier. They pressed toward him, their small minds as one with the cry of *meat!*

*No!*

She screamed at them and they hesitated, turning their awareness toward her in question.

*No, this man is mine . . .*

She held a hand toward the dream image and beckoned. No burrow was complete without the warmth of a body against her own. She called him toward her nest. The blood was hot in her veins: Sweat dampened her face. She stirred in her sleep, remembering and imagining, her body responding to the fantasy of his hands.



Beldone walked through the night, amazed that there was no attack made against him. It seemed almost as if rats did not exist beyond the Boundary. And then, in the long thin shadows of dawn, he found carnage.

The morning breeze was rotten with the stench of death. The bright fresh sunlight washed over bones still darkened by the stains of dried blood. Shimmering with dew-damp, the trucks of the merchants loomed in the midst of devastation.

He halted on the edge of the clearing, unwilling to believe the things he saw. Masses of iridescent flies speckled the fragments of what had once been men. Gun-harness straps tangled in bare ribs, the nozzles still clutched in bone-and-tendon hands. Rags of fine cloth glistened with their bright dyes between the splotches of dirty brown that had been blood and bits of sun-flashing jewelry mingled with shreds of torn dried flesh.

Slowly he began to walk, circling the remains of the caravan, staring at these things. The flies rose around him, buzzing angry complaints at his intrusion and settling again when he'd passed.

The door of one truck stood agape. Glimpsing a late-lingering rat peering at him from it, he wheeled reflexively. His hand closed on his gun, sending a spray of flame to spatter the beast.

The gun nozzle slid out of his hand. A numbness that had begun between his shoulders was creeping along his arms and into his fingers. His mind fought belief. The caravan had been his only hope of escape.

He looked down at what remained of the caravan's master. Black curls of the beard were scattered among bones now gnawed bare. Sockets phlegmed with the drying membranes of broken eyeballs gazed sightlessly at him. Dropping to one knee, he looked closely at the fire-stain that marred the remaining bits of clothing. It seemed almost as if the man had been flamed down before the rats devoured his flesh. That didn't make sense. But it sparked memory. In Beldone's mind, the image of the citizen, wrapped in flame from his own gun, flared vividly.

Madness . . . could it have struck here too? Was it a plague? A sickness such as Gamesh had spoken of that spread itself from person to person? Was it *he* who car-



ried the seeds of it, as the rats had carried that all-destructive plague in forgotten times?

Or had the caravan master already been mad? Perhaps all his stories were the fantasies of the insane. Beldone brushed a hand across his face, feeling his own flesh cold to the touch. The thought was a chill that froze his determination and sapped away his strength leaving only a blank despair.

*Someone was calling.* Awareness of the call came like a faint scent in the breeze. He lifted his head, frowning with concentration. There was no sound but the buzzing of scavenger flies. There was no voice; but someone called.

He rose slowly, a leaden stiffness to the movement. Turning, he began to walk. His boots thudded loudly against the bare earth, then brushed into the grass with a rustling like the running of rats. He crossed the Boundary, gazing toward a copse of trees that seemed shadowy and unsubstantial in the morning light. A misty haze hung under their outstretched limbs. He failed to duck a low branch and its leaves switched across his face, leaving a cool trail of dew on his cheek. Absently, his hand wiped at it. He walked on, into the trees.

A nervous start—reflex—at the sight of the rats: They were lining a windfallen tree trunk like a row of citizens on a parapet, all staring at him. Their snouts and whiskers twitched at his scent and, though they made no sound, it seemed as if a murmur ran among them.

His hand jerked to the nozzle of the gun that hung by his side. His fingers touched the metal of the trigger, then opened again, letting it drop. He did not break pace, but walked on and as he passed them, the rats flowed down from their perch. At his sides, they scurried along as if they were an escort.

Somehow he seemed to understand that there was no danger from them. A lifetime of training made a hard knot of fear in his belly, but the dull pain it raised into his mind could not pierce his dazed response to the call. He walked on, through the tree shadows.

At the edge of the copse, open ground spread out before him—an expanse of time-broken concrete crisscrossed with weeds forcing through the cracks. Heaped rubble was almost lost under a heavy growth of brush.



The stubs of two walls struggled up from the debris, and on a fallen slab, Illyna sat waiting.

Like a carpet of fur, multitudes of rats surrounded her, waiting with her. The black points of their eyes were intent on Beldone as he drew nearer. Whiskers quivered with suspicion as they drank his scent. But they obeyed Illyna's silent command.

"My soldier," she said aloud. Her voice was a husky whisper. She lifted a hand, stretching it out toward him. The fingers were speckled with dark dried stains. More stains blotched the tunic that hung in tatters from her shoulders and even the golden tangles of her hair were smeared with them.

She rose to step toward him, the rats yielding a path before her. Hands reaching, she met him and her eyes pierced into his.

The pupils of his eyes were lenses that caught and focused her intense and wordless emotion into flame within him. Her fingers on his arm were tongues of fire burning through the mailed sleeve of his hauberk.

His hands clamped onto her bare arms, fingers biting cruelly. He felt the ecstatic pain that thrilled through her. His mouth grabbed at hers viciously and . . .

Gates tore open. As if the assembled mass of rats had risen suddenly to overwhelm him, countless sparks of raw wordless emotion funneled through the woman's mind into his own. A flood of their feeling mingling into one unspeakable mixture of lust and man-hate filled him.

Her mouth was the taste of human flesh, still hot with its own blood. She was a *woman* embracing him, enveloping him. She was a mass of rats surging over him, their man-hate tearing into his body. That taste in his mouth was his own flesh and the hot salt of his own blood choked in his throat. She was devouring him. And he was one with her—with the rats—devouring himself . . .

But he was a *man* . . . not a rat. . .

The thought screamed through his mind. His mouth tore free of hers like a body torn from its own flesh. His fingers, locked on her arms, dug deeper and deeper until her pain was stronger than her ecstasy. The muscles of his shoulders knotted, straining against themselves.

The cry of his own revulsion within his mind was louder, more piercing, than her call . . .

Forcing, thrusting at her, his hands opened suddenly. He flung her away from him. Eyes blurred, he saw her sprawl across the rubble. Around her, the rats milled in confused panic.

He wiped a hand across his mouth. It smeared wet blood where her teeth—or his—had broken through the skin. But it wasn't the blood he tried to wipe away. The taste of her lusting loathing emotion still burning on his lips.

Wheeling, he ran. And from behind, he could hear her shrill scream.

"Kill!"

In unfettered horror, he ran blindly. Still, an awareness beyond his own clung to the edges of his mind. Through the whelming turmoil of his fear, he knew that behind him the rats were stirring in a frenzy of man-hate now unleashed against him. They plunged after him in a milling, discoordinated mass of seething hatred.

He ran, his boots crashing through the brush, turning back the way he had come: Back toward the road and the campsite that symbolized *man*. Alone in the woods, with branches slapping at his face and grasping at his body—with a wave of hatred lapping at his heels—he ran.

He stumbled and pitched down into the grass. The sound of the rats was loud in his ears. Rolling, he propped himself on one arm, his other hand squeezing closed the gun nozzle. Flame sprayed around him, white flares bursting, grass crackling as it scorched and sizzled. His palm was slimy with sweat. The trigger slid out of his grasp as he scrambled to his feet. And suddenly they were on his legs—the heavy, thick-furred bundles of hatred with chisel teeth that pried into his chain mail. He caught the gun nozzle again, triggering it, spraying himself in a quick spurt of flame that seared through the armour. The clinging weight fell away from his legs. He ran again.

A miasma of flies rose from the ruins of men as Beldone plunged across the Boundary and into the clearing of the campsite. His legs trembled under him. He



was staggering, fighting to stay on his feet. The rats poured out of the grass, across the line, after him.

He saw the open truck door gaping ahead of him, a dark inviting hole. He threw himself into it, jerking up the gun again. As he sprawled on the floor, he was blasting the doorway with flame.

White flares popped within the brilliant orange of the burning fuel. The frenzied rats were pouring into the fire after him. He filled the narrow doorway with a wall of flame—an impenetrable barrier of fire—and still they came, throwing themselves insanely toward him, bursting like bombs as the burning fuel swept over them.

The gun sputtered—just once—but it was enough to send a fresh shock of panic through Beldone. He knew that there was only a finite amount of fuel in the tanks. How full had they been when he'd taken the gun off the guard? How much of it had he used since then? Images of the rat-gnawed bones outside the truck leaped into his mind.

Fear knotted his muscles, jerking the gun in his hand. The flame sputtered again, then flared brilliantly. The stench of the burning rats filled his nostrils. His thoughts were pinwheeling, breaking into fear-edged fragments. Intent, he struggled to shape them into a solid, perhaps-answerable question: *What could he do if the fuel ran out and the gun died?*

If only he could close the door—lock himself in the truck—he could gain time—think further. He scrambled to his feet, still spraying flame into the doorway, turning the fire downward across the sill and out onto the ground. Above the fire he could see the door leaning open.

The frame, door and handle all glowed a dull red. Reaching, his gauntleted fingers caught at the handle. The door was heavy on its hinges. He jerked and it moved slowly. With his full weight, he dragged it back. At last it slammed shut and he jerked his hand away from the still-glowing handle. The heat that had seeped into the gauntlet with it, stinging at his fingertips.

*Something was on his foot!* A rat had gotten through as he'd given his attention to the door. He grabbed at it with the hot gauntlet. There was satisfaction in its squeal of pain as his hand closed on it. It squirmed, teeth seek-



ing a way through the armour as his fingers clamped tighter over its writhing body. He felt cracking bone. He felt the animal's terror. And then its high-pitched scream ended in a mass of yielding jelly in his hand.

He dropped the lump that had been a rat and tugged off the gauntlet. His fingertips still stung from the heat. Sucking at them, he leaned his shoulders against the wall and looked around.

There was an opening between the cab and the cargo box of the truck. Light spilled through the windscreen, giving shadowed form to the trade-goods heaped around him.

If one rat had gotten in, others could have, he told himself. The way the rats' emotion had come to him—was that something they caused, or was it something he might cause himself? If there were rats lurking in these shadows now, could he find them from the life-sparks of their minds?

His hand wrapped itself around the gun again as he concentrated. The sensation he felt was muffled—a feeling of puzzlement and frustrated hatred. It was a mass emotion, a seeking. And with it came a slowly encroaching darkness. He blinked. The light in the truck was fading. But it wasn't sunset yet.

He saw them then, the blanket of rats flowing onto the windscreen. Snouts were pressed to the glass and black beads of eyes stared in at him. Then—suddenly—the blanket was complete and solid. He stood in total darkness.

He heard the scraping of their claws on glass and metal, and their muffled chattering—more an awareness than a sound. He heard their frustrated man-hate. And then something else—the whispered hint of *the call*. But this time it was not he who was called.

Light cracked through the mass of rats, spreading as the opening widened. The furry blanket slipped back, breaking. The rats were dropping off the windscreen and scurrying away. He was aware that they were flowing back across the Boundary, abandoning their siege. They were leaving him alone. And alive.

He let his knees bend and slumped wearily to the floor. His head resting in his hands, he sat there motionless.

It was the faint throbbing in his scorched fingers that



finally drew him back from the half-sleep of exhaustion. Sucking at them and remembering, he looked through the windscreen toward the sky.

*She had sent the rats after him. And then she'd called them back. Why?* He got stiffly to his feet and forced the door open. The relics of once-men scattered the ground in front of him. He gazed over them wearily, only half-seeing.

If only he were back at the garrison, he thought, he could strip off the unbearable weight of the armour, salve his burnt hand and rest. And be incinerated as a madman . . . He stood alone among the dead, longing for the familiar security of the barracks. But with the longing was a realization that to be alone was not simply a physical thing. Even if he were at the garrison, even with his madness still unrecognized by the others, he would still have been *alone* now. The act of wondering and the creation of questions—these made him different from the others. The new-found emotions and self-awareness would have isolated him from his fellow soldiers. And unless somewhere he could find others with the same kinds of thoughts and questions, he'd always be alone.

He looked past the stark bones, uproad, thinking again of the caravan master's stories about cities beyond the river. And then he thought of the woman.

His feeling was strange, touched with sadness. She was insane—of that he felt certain. Was her madness akin to his own? Had she found herself lost and alone among her own people behind the walls of Cleveland? Was it that despair that linked her with the rat hordes?

And then there was another memory: The stinking taste of her hate-filled lust. Had that emotion been hers, or the rats'?

With stiff, tired fingers he jerked the gun tanks away from the ribcage of a caravan guard. Hefting them, he judged them fuller than the ones he wore. Dropping his tanks, he shrugged the fresh ones onto his shoulders and settled their weight. Then he stepped across the Boundary and began to walk cautiously into the woods.

BELDONE followed the trail of the rats into the woods, alert with his mind as well as with his eyes and ears. The sensation of emptiness around him was reassuring, but yet ominous. There were no rats near enough to attack him. He was certain of that: He would have sensed their life sparks if they were nearby. But if they hadn't lingered in the grass here, where had they gone? And why?

He came to the edge of emotion before his ears caught the sounds. He felt the frenzy of hatred before he heard the shrieking screams. For a moment he hesitated, but somehow he *knew* that they were not aware of him. Something else held their complete attention. Clutching the gun nozzle, he pushed on toward the small ruins.

Still within cover of the trees along the border of the clearing, he stopped and stared. The whole expanse of broken concrete was lost under a vast herd of rats—a gathering greater than any he'd ever seen before—greater by far than even the horde that had attacked Cleveland the night Ambler had died, and his own madness had begun.

They carpeted the earth, covered the rubble and clambered onto the walls of the ruins. They pressed up against the woman's feet and some perched on her shoulders, nuzzling her tangled golden hair. They were a broad mat of fur motionless but for the rippling of their breaths. Not a whisker twitched, not a stark blank eye moved from its intent gaze at the woman.

Silently still himself, Beldone watched enthralled. The woman was standing with her arms outstretched, her face contorted into a vicious mask that mocked humanity. The frantic screeching that tore from her throat was a thrust of the same terrifying emotion that he had felt in her kiss, now doubling and redoubling on itself, multiplying as it



reflected back from the minds of the rats and returned from the woman again to engulf them.

She exhorted them in shapeless screams. But even without words, Beldone understood her call—the man-hate, the lust for battle, the gut-deep hunger for warm flesh. She rallied the rats. And their mass thought was *attack*.

His mind recoiled, shielding itself in a panicking urge to run. With a gasp for breath, he broke the trance of his stillness and turned away. Not running though, but fighting the panic, he moved as quietly as he could, back through the trees toward the ruins of the caravan.

There had been a strange emotion growing within him: a sense of pity and perhaps sympathy for the mad woman. But it had died suddenly and violently. Once there might have been something human behind her eyes. But now he was certain nothing of it remained. She was less a living human being now than those scoured bones at the campsite. She'd become *something else*.

The bones of the caravan master, the charred shreds of cloth that showed he'd been flamed down—Beldone stared at these remnants. He wiped a hand nervously across his mouth as he realized what must have happened. *She* had led an attack of the rats against the caravan. And now she meant to lead the same kind of attack on Cleveland—a massed charge such as had never happened before.

That army she had gathered to her must contain every rat herd within miles. And she, who had watched battles from the parapets so often, would know more of the soldiers' tactics than the rats had ever discovered for themselves. She'd know *how* to fight against men.

In the past the rats had often hit with several spearheads, but always limited to a segment of the Boundary. If there were enough of them to surround the entire city—and if they were *led* to it—they could wipe out the night patrols and be across the Boundary before the men in the garrison could be wakened to the alarm.

Images formed themselves in his mind with sickeningly stark clarity: Soldiers grabbing for helmets and gloves, guns still racked, as the rats surged into the barracks. Men would be grappled and brought down weaponless, perhaps



even overwhelmed by the rats while still in their beds. He could feel himself among them, knowing their terror.

But if the alarm could be sounded *before* the foreranks reached the Boundary—if every soldier was armed and waiting when the attack came—it might be possible to drive them back. *He* could warn them—if he weren't flamed down as a madman before he could speak out . . .

He stayed on the clear path of the trade road. The sky darkened, but a broken moon and multitudes of stars threw down light enough to make traveling easy. There seemed to be more stars than he'd ever seen before. Almost as if the woman had called them, too, he thought. They flooded the sky, smearing it with the pale trace of the Milky Way. Their light was like a cold drizzle, chilling him, following him with an incessant faint pattering.

He had to pause a moment to catch his breath. Resting, he listened to the night—a stillness accentuated by that almost inaudible rustle of starlight. Slowly he realized that what he heard—or sensed—was the army of rats moving along the road beside him. And he was aware that they were gaining rapidly on him. Forcing weary muscles into motion, he lunged on.

He caught sight of the walled city like a black crouching thing huddled against the downpour of starlight. But as he drew closer, the light washed the walls into a pale background for the silhouetted figures of the night patrol guards. They moved in their slow steady rounds, alert to the area immediately beyond the Boundary, but unaware of anything else. He'd gotten close before he saw one stiffen and knew he'd been spotted.

He kept walking forward, words repeating themselves desperately in his mind: *Don't fire—don't fire—don't fire.*

The guard was gazing toward him, gun at ready but untriggered, as if the man stood in a trance. Cupping his hands to his mouth, Beldone shouted at him. "Don't fire!"

He tried to imagine what his own reaction would be if he were on patrol and a man materialized out of the darkness beyond the Boundary shouting orders at him. But he realized he could no longer be certain of capturing the thought pattern of a good soldier—the simple straight-line reaction the guard's mind would follow. He



tried to tell himself that he would have accepted the shout as an order and that he would have held fire. But he wasn't convinced.

"Don't fire!" he called again, as he forced tense legs to keep moving him forward. He was almost under the gun now. And suddenly the guard moved.

His voice high-pitched, hysterical, the patrol man screamed, "An officer! Somebody call an officer!"

In moments there was response: a man rushing from the garrison with others behind him still struggling their gun harnesses into place. As he strode toward Beldone, the moonlight outlined the crossed bars of a dormajor on his collar. Beldone's body stiffened into a position of attention automatically, his hand outthrust in salute.

Awkward with uncertainty, the dormajor returned the salute. He had on gauntlets but no helmet. His close-cropped hair was as pale as his face. With the dark shadows in his eyes, his head seemed a bare skull.

The memory of other bare-stripped skulls was stronger than the years of training. Beldone spoke. "There's going to be a rat attack, sir! A mass of them, more than ever before . . ."

The officer was squinting, wrinkles spreading gash-like shadows over his skin. Then his face widened and in a harshly positive voice, he said, "It's the madman who escaped. Take him."

"Listen to me!" Beldone shouted as hands reached for him. Soldiers were surrounding him. He jerked back, but their fingers were locking onto his arms and shoulders. "Call out the men!"

But the officer wasn't listening. Beldone realized that one single thought completely filled the dormajor's mind: The simple fact of an escaped madman recaptured. That was all.

Anger flared in him—a mixture of thoughts—a cursing of the officer's idiotically narrow-channeled mind—a despair that the attack would hit the unprepared garrison—a vivid memory of the ruins of the merchant caravan. Struggling against the hands that held him, Beldone snarled, "Rats! They'll gnaw your eyes out! Rats!"

"Rats," the dormajor echoed, his voice strangely hollow.

Throwing back his head, Beldone screamed the word: "Rats!"

It was the cry of alarm. Within the barracks, it would be taken up unquestioned. It would be called again and again. Men would be rousing themselves to grab armour and guns. He shouted it again, expecting the night guard guns to spit in reply—to stop the madman's cries with fire.

But the dormajor made no move and the men, in the presence of an officer, awaited orders.

Softly mumbling, the officer simply repeated the single word, "Rats, rats, rats. . . ."

Beldone stared at him, suddenly seeing Ambler again—seeing the dormajor as Ambler, stricken with insanity—seeing his skull face as the bare bone of the caravan master.

And from somewhere behind him, in the night, a knife sharp scream cut through the chill starlight.

Illyna screamed—a curse of anger and defiance—a challenge and a command. She was thwarted, but not beaten. Her wordless cry was a call for attack. And around her the vast undulating sea of rats broke into a snarling run.

She followed, urging them on, adding to their man-hate with her own vicious loathing of the creatures from the garrison that had been warned of her attack. She cried the glory of victory to her armies. She sung to them of the taste of hot blood.

There was no plan now—no stealth and sudden pouncing. This was open attack, brute force to be thrown against the growing lines of soldiers. This was frenzied anger and hatred, lust for battle, hunger for flesh. This was pure driving force shriven of reason.

The mailed hands were still clamped onto Beldone's arms. No longer fighting against them, he leaned toward the dormajor and spoke intensely.

"Order the men out along the walls. Get them spread



out all along the Boundary. Send runners ahead to the rest of the night patrols to warn them."

The officer turned obediently. His shout was an echo of Beldone's voice, repeating his words and even his inflections.

Secaptains, startled into bewilderment at the bizarre command, still responded automatically by repeating it. And soldiers answered to orders: squads reshaped and began to move out, spreading along the walls, dropping ranks to line the Boundary. Half-dazed by their officers' bewilderment and the unfamiliar actions, but always obedient and alert to attack, they began to ring the city.

Beldone spoke to the dormajor again. With a nod toward the men who held him, he said, "Tell them to let me go."

"Let him go."

Fingers loosened and slid away from him. He wheeled, staring back into the starlit grassland. That wasn't the long grass rippling under a night wind.

The grass, the earth itself, was lost. Farther than he could see, it had disappeared, buried under a wave of furred beasts. A spearhead of living hate plunged toward the Boundary. And behind those leaders, the massed body of the horde shimmered in a great tidal wave sweeping toward the city.

Beldone's hands were ungloved. The gun nozzle was cold under his fingers, feeling suddenly strange to bare flesh. But the flare of the gun was familiar. And his response of hatred, his single-purposed acts of battle were automatic. He was shouting with the others, fanning his fire toward the lunging attack. He saw the sizzling bursts of death as the flame found its targets. Then, beyond the spearhead, barely limned by the orange and white light of battle, he saw a slender figure.

The heat of the fighting had soaked him with sweat. It was a slick film on his hands. It trickled into his eyebrows and along his jaw. The flame guns made a furnace around him. But suddenly, gazing at that figure, he was cold. The gun nozzle clamped in his hand still spewed fire but without direction.

Illyna looked toward the fury of battle, scanning the brightly lit figures of the soldiers, all identical in their over-all armour. They seemed less than animals—just flesh wrapped in metal—things that fought back but that could be overwhelmed and destroyed. And then, among the blank chain mail masks, she saw a face.

She knew this soldier who wore no helmet. The sight of him stirred memories, overriding the mass hunger she shared with her army. Now this was a personal thing—a battle between herself and this creature that had tried to defy her.

Drawing away from her forces, she concentrated on that one figure with the human face. And slowly the emotions within her began once more to shape themselves with words.

Beldone stared at the slender form, the willowy human figure that towered above the attacking rats. His own shouting had faded within his throat and the voices of the men around him were dim, as if far away. Above their rumble, he heard words forming inside his mind.

*Soldier, come to me.*

He could see the face clearly now. In the shadowed and colorless flood of starlight, in the orange-tinted glare of flame guns, he could see her eyes. She was no longer distant. He could feel the warmth of her body before him. The army of rats that flowed past her feet were whispers. The men at his sides were ghosts. He and the woman stood alone, facing each other in a void—a skyless, earthless infinity.

“Come to me, Soldier,” she said, her hands outstretched. Warm, beckoning hands, they held promises toward him. His own hands reached—his fingertips touched hers—and jerked away. He saw the dark smear of blood on her lips. Her eyes were lust: Not desire, but hunger and hatred.

A voice shaped itself in his throat. “Who are you?”

“I am the Leader. You will obey me.”

“No!”

“I am the Master,” she said. “You will obey my power.”



He was falling. He felt himself sliding into nothingness. Through vast vacuums, he shouted, "I am Beldone!"

It seemed important. He had a name. He had identity. He screamed, "*I am Beldone!*"

He wasn't falling. He was standing on firm earth, facing the woman. The whisper of rats swirled around her feet. She called, "Come to me, Soldier."

One step forward and he knew he'd be falling again. She was death—and worse. One step toward her and he'd lose the self-awareness that had become precious to him. He sensed his weight shifting, his foot moving against his own will.

"I am Beldone," he repeated to himself, struggling against her call.

He was standing on firm earth, facing the woman. Around her feet, the rats moved to attack. He said, "You command the rats. You order and they obey."

"Yes." Pride filled her voice.

"You've commanded me the same way? You've used my hands and my gun to kill a citizen you hated?"

"I still command you, Soldier."

*A soldier obeys commands.*

"I am not a soldier," he answered, insisting. "No more! Now I am Beldone!"

"Against my power you are nothing. You are less than the rats. You will obey me." Her words, her thoughts, were sharp hooks dug into his flesh, hauling him toward her.

"I am Beldone—my mind is my own—I command myself!" He was screaming, trying to blot out her words. His body was tearing under the hooks of her command. "I am Beldone!"

"Obey me, Soldier."

He was on his knees, his weight heavy against his arms, his palms pressed flat to the ground. He could feel his own weight—the weight of the armour—the weight of a blanket of rats on his back and his shoulders. They squirmed over him, teeth reaching through the chain mail. He had no helmet. He could feel their claws in his hair. Their snouts touched his cheeks with a wet hungry nuzzling.

"I can call them back," the woman was saying. "Yield to me, Soldier."

He tried to form words. The rats leaped at his mouth, digging their chisel teeth into his lips. His tongue was thick with blood. *The gun*, he thought desperately. Somewhere he had a gun. Somewhere he stood with it still gripped in his hand, his bare fingers on the trigger. But the rats were covering him, forcing him down until he lay flat on his face, strangling, buried under them.

He had one weapon. He had identity. Hoarse, struggling, he gasped out the words. "I am *Beldone* . . .

And the rats were whispers, rustling around him as he stood on firm earth facing the woman. His hand was on the gun nozzle, his fingers touching the trigger. But his arm was something apart from him. His will would not move it. His thoughts were scattered shards, whirling into the vortex of her deep eyes.

"I am *Beldone!*" Gripping intently at the single thought, he closed his hand over the trigger.

"*I am Master! I am . . .*" Her voice broke suddenly, rising into a scream that snapped off in a flare of white light.

A ripping—a shattering—the world around Beldone seemed to explode. He was enveloped in pain—in ash and bone and the stench of charred flesh—in the smell of rats and the feeling of myriad sparks of hatred now befuddled, milling aimlessly.

There was silence.

The woman was gone and the rats were no longer whispers. Suddenly Beldone realized that they were a living, lustful horde that tumbled around his feet as he stood in the tall grass.

His hands were his own. He wheeled, spraying flame from the gun, aware now that he was far beyond the Boundary and surrounded. Sputtering white flares filled the orange fire of his gun. Outside that circle of flame, the living rats scurried back, clambering over each other in retreat.

He could hear the shouts of the soldiers—victory cries—and he knew the attack was broken. The rats were scrambling through the grass in frantic abandon, without leadership or direction.



*Pursue*, he thought. Push them on—follow them and destroy them! He stumbled forward, lashing out with the flame, catching up fleeing rats into white balls of fire. Vaguely, he was aware of a burst of fire from one side of him—then another.

“After them!” he shouted. And the soldiers were a wide rank, moving through the grass at either side of him, their guns following the retreating packs. They had answered his command. They had crossed the Boundary. He was shouting victory, leading them on into the rats’ own ground.

But the gun in his hands sputtered. And there was another sputtering gap in the line of flame. Fuel was giving out. The fight could be taken no further. *Not this time. . . .*

He scanned the line of helmeted figures, some with the fire of their guns dying, others with their hands clutching the triggers of cooling, empty gun nozzles, still pressing on.

“Halt!” he shouted.

The line ceased to move.

More quietly, he called out, “It’s over for now. Get back to the grounds. Reassemble.”

They turned, keeping the form of their rank as they headed back toward the Boundary.

Beldone followed, gazing thoughtfully at the armoured figures, dim shapes now with only the stars to light them. They had obeyed *his* command. They had fought as *he* ordered. If he could retain that command, he could equip them properly and send them across the line again. He could make this war with the rats more than a defensive action. If soldiers attacked rats, hunting them into the woods and into their own lairs, it might be possible to break the beasts’ strength, perhaps destroy them completely. And make soldiers obsolete? He remembered things the caravan master had said. He countered his own question: There were other purposes to life beyond the killing of rats. He’d learned that much. He intended to learn more. And he wondered if other soldiers could learn, too.

Striding across the Boundary, he stopped and faced the

assembling squads. Secaptains held their men at attention, their eyes on him.

"From now on, you obey *my* orders!" he said.

No voice rose in objection. The officers stood waiting his next command.

He wiped his face with the back of one hand. The sweat and dirt of battle caked on his skin. His body felt stiff and aching under the armour. Glancing toward the parapets, he saw the lamps of the assembled citizens. Their chant was beginning, a rising murmur of sound.

He looked to the army—*his* army—again. Squads of identically clad figures stood before him. *Soldiers*. Or did they, too, have identities lost somewhere behind their blank metal masks?

He called out, "Take off your helmets."

They moved woodenly, confused by his strange order. But they stripped away the helmets and he saw the faces of men.

The chant of the citizens was growing louder, rasping across the sense of satisfaction Beldone felt. They sang the death of the *rats*. Damn them, why couldn't they understand that the rats were *their enemies*?

The caravan master had said that they were their own enemies, imprisoning themselves with their blank minds, their unthinking prejudices and their unyielding refusal to reach out beyond their high walls. If only they could be made to realize that Cleveland might grow and become a part of civilization such as lay beyond the river.

*They* were the insane ones, Beldone thought as he gazed toward them. They huddled there behind their walls, appeasing dead rats with their foolish singing.

The chant swelled, filling his ears, feeding the anger and disgust inside him. Staring at the pale figures—the ghosts—the empty mockeries of men that lined the parapets, he shouted, "Stop it!"

Silence. Sudden, stark and shocking silence.

The citizens had obeyed his shout. But their voices had been raised and, from where he stood, they couldn't possibly have heard him.

No. They couldn't have *heard*.



The lines of citizens atop the walls stood looking toward him expectantly.

He understood. Not speaking aloud, because there was no need for it, he said, "I am in command now."

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