

THOUGHTAUDIO



SECOND VARIETY

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THE Russian soldier made his way nervously up the ragged side of the hill holding his gun ready. He glanced around him, licking his dry lips, his face set. From time to time, he reached up with his gloved hand and wiped the perspiration from his neck rushing down his coat collar.

Eric turned to Corporal Leone. “Do you want him? Or can I have him?” He adjusted the view sight, so the Russian’s features squarely filled the glass, the lines cutting across his hard, somber features.

Leone considered. The Russian was close, moving rapidly, almost running. “Don’t fire. Wait.” Leone tensed. “I don’t think we’re needed.”

The Russian increased his pace, kicking ash and piles of debris out of his way. He reached the top of the hill and stopped, panting, and staring around him. The sky was overcast, drifting clouds of gray particles. Bare trunks of trees jutted up occasionally; the ground was level and bare, rubble-strewn, with the ruins of buildings standing out here and there like yellowing skulls.

The Russian was uneasy. He knew something was wrong. He started walking down the hill. Now he was only a few paces from the bunker. Eric was getting fidgety. He played with his pistol, glancing at Leone.

“Don’t worry,” Leone said. “He won’t get here. *They* will take care of him.”

“Are you sure? He’s gotten awfully far,” Eric said.

“They hang around close to the bunker. He’s getting into the bad part. Get set!” Leone said.

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The Russian began to hurry, sliding down the hill, his boots sinking into the heaps of gray ash, trying to keep his gun pointed upward. He stopped for a moment, lifting his field glasses to his face.

“He’s looking right at us,” Eric said.

The Russian continued coming forward. They could see his eyes, like two blue stones, his mouth slightly open. He needed a shave; his chin was stubbled. On one bony cheek was a square piece of tape, showing blue at the edges. It indicated a fungoid spot. His coat was muddy and torn. One glove was missing. As he ran his belt counter bounced up and down against him.

Leone touched Eric’s arm. “Here comes one now.”

Across the ground something small and metallic came into view, flashing in the dull sunlight of midday. It was a metal sphere. It raced up the hill after the Russian, its treads flying. It was small, one of the baby ones. Its claws were out, two razor projections spinning in a blur of white steel. The Russian heard it. He turned instantly, firing. The sphere dissolved into particles. But already a second had emerged and was following the first. The Russian fired again.

A third sphere leaped up the Russian’s leg, clicking and whirring. It jumped to his shoulder. The spinning blades disappeared into the Russian’s throat.

Eric relaxed. “Well, that’s that. God, those dreadful things give me the creeps. Sometimes I think we were better off before.”

“If we hadn’t invented them, they would have.” Leone lit a cigarette, his hands shaking. “I wonder why a Russian would come all this way alone. I didn’t see anyone covering him.”

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Lt. Scott came slipping up the tunnel into the bunker. “What happened? Something entered the screen.”

“An Ivan,” answered Leone.

“Just one?” Lt. Scott asked.

Eric brought the view screen around. Scott peered into it. Now there were numerous metal spheres crawling over the prostrate body, dull metal globes clicking and whirring, sawing up the Russian into small parts to be carried away.

“What a lot of claws,” Scott murmured.

“They come like flies. There’s not much game for them anymore,” Eric said.

Scott pushed the sight away, disgusted. “They are like flies. I wonder why he was out there. They know we have claws all around.”

A larger robot had joined the smaller spheres. It was directing operations, a long blunt tube with projecting eyepieces. There was not much left of the soldier. What remained was being brought down the hillside by the host of claws.

“Sir,” Leone said. “If it’s all right, I’d like to go out there and take a look at him.”

“Why?” asked Lt. Scott

“Maybe he came with something,” answered Leone.

Scott considered. He shrugged. “All right but be careful.”

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“I have my tab.” Leone patted the metal band on his wrist. “I’ll be out of bounds.”

He picked up his rifle and stepped carefully up to the mouth of the bunker, making his way between blocks of concrete and steel prongs, twisted and bent. The air was cold at the top. He crossed over the ground toward the remains of the soldier, striding across the soft ash. A wind blew around him, swirling gray particles in his face. He squinted and pushed on.

The claws retreated as he came close, some of them stiffening into immobility. He touched his tab. The Ivan would have given anything for that tab! Short hard radiation waves emitted from the tab and neutralized the claws, putting them out of commission. Even the big robot with its two waving eyestalks retreated respectfully as he approached.

He bent down over the remains of the soldier. The gloved hand was closed tightly. There was something in it. Leone pried the fingers apart. It was a sealed container, aluminum, still shiny.

He put it in his pocket and made his way back to the bunker. Behind him the claws came back to life, moving into operation again. The procession resumed, metal spheres moving through the gray ash with their loads. He could hear their treads scrabbling against the ground. He shuddered.

Scott watched intently as he brought the shiny tube out of his pocket. “Is that what he had?”

“It was in his hand,” Leone answered, unscrewing the top. “Maybe you should look at it, sir.”

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Lt. Scott took it. He emptied the contents out in the palm of his hand. A small piece of silk paper was carefully folded. He sat down by the light and unfolded it.

“What does it say, sir?” Eric asked. Several officers came up the tunnel. Major Hendricks appeared.

“Major,” Scott said. “Look at this.”

Hendricks read the slip and asked. “Did this just come in?”

“It’s from a single runner. Just now,” snapped Scott.

“Where is he?” Hendricks asked sharply.

“The claws got him,” Scott replied.

Major Hendricks grunted. “Here, take a look at this.” He passed it to his companions. “I think this is what we’ve been waiting for. They certainly took their time about it.”

“So, they want to talk terms,” Scott said. “Are we going along with them?”

“That’s not for us to decide,” Hendricks said as he sat down. “Where’s the communications officer? I want to contact Moon Base.”

Leone pondered as the communications officer raised the outside antenna cautiously, scanning the sky above the bunker for any sign of an observing Russian ship.

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“Sir,” Scott said to Hendricks. “It’s sure strange they suddenly came around. We’ve been using the claws for almost a year. Now, all of a sudden, they start to fold.”

“Maybe claws have been getting down into their bunkers,” Hendricks responded.

“One of the big ones, the kind with stalks, got into an Ivan bunker last week,” Eric said. “It got a whole platoon of them before they got their lid shut.”

“How do you know?” Hendricks asked.

“A buddy told me. The thing came back with — well, with remains,” responded Eric.

“I’ve made contact with Moon Base, sir,” the communications officer said.

On the screen, a face appeared on the lunar monitor. His crisp uniform contrasted with the uniforms in the bunker, he was clean-shaven. “Moon Base,” the face said in an abrupt tone.

“This is forward command L-Whistle on Terra. Let me have General Thompson,” barked Hendricks.

The monitor faded. Presently General Thompson’s heavy features came into focus. “What is it, Major?”

“Our claws got a single Russian runner with a message. We don’t know whether to act on it — there have been tricks like this in the past.”

“What’s the message?” asked the General.

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“The Russians want us to send a single officer on the policy level over to their lines for a conference. They don’t state the nature of the conference. They say that matters of”— he consulted the slip — “that matters of grave urgency make it advisable that discussions be opened between a representative of the UN forces and themselves.”

He held the message up to the screen for the general to scan. Thompson’s eyes moved slowly through the message.

“What should we do?” Hendricks asked.

“Send a man out,” replied the General.

“You don’t think it’s a trap?” questioned Hendricks.

“It might be. But the location they give for their forward command is correct. It’s worth a try, at any rate,” said the General.

“I’ll send an officer out. I’ll report the results to you as soon as he returns,” Hendricks said.

“All right, Major.” The General broke the connection. The screen died. Up above, the antenna slowly came down.

Hendricks rolled up the paper, deep in thought.

“I’ll go,” Leone said.

“They want somebody at the policy level.” Hendricks rubbed his jaw. “Policy level. I haven’t been outside in months. Maybe I could use a bit air.”

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“Don’t you think it’s risky?” Leone asked.

Hendricks lifted the view-sight and gazed into it. The remains of the Russian were gone. Only a single claw was in sight. It was folding its claws back into itself, disappearing into the ash like a crab — as some hideous metal crab.

“They’re the only things that bother me,” Hendricks said rubbing his wrist. “I know I’m safe as long as I have this on me, but there’s something about them that gnaws at me. I hate those atrocious claws. I wish we had never invented them. There’s something wrong with them. They’re relentless little scoundrels.”

“If we hadn’t invented them, the Ivans would have,” Leone said.

Hendricks pushed the sight back.

“Anyhow, it seems to be winning the war. I guess that’s good,” murmured Leone.

“Sounds like you’re getting the same jitters as the Ivans,” Hendricks said as he examined his wristwatch. “I guess I had better get started if I want to be there before dark.”

He took a deep breath and then stepped out onto the gray, rubble ground. After a minute he lit a cigarette and stood gazing around him. The landscape was dead. Nothing stirred. He could see for miles, endless ash and slag, ruins of buildings. A few trees without leaves or branches, bearing only their trunks. Above him, the eternal rolling clouds of gray, drifting between Terra and the sun.

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Major Hendricks began his trek. Off to the right something scuttled, something round and metallic. It was a claw, going rapidly after something, probably after a small animal or a rat. They devour rats, too, as a sort of sideline.

He came to the top of the small hill and lifted his field glasses. The Russian lines were a few miles ahead of him. They had a forward command post there. The runner had come from it.

A squat robot with undulating arms passed by him, its arms weaving inquiringly. The robot went on its way, disappearing behind a pile of debris. Hendricks watched it go. He had never seen that type before. There were getting to be more and more types he had never seen, new varieties and sizes emerging from the underground factories.

Hendricks put out his cigarette and hurried on. It was interesting, the use of artificial forms in warfare. Why had they started using them? Necessity. The Soviet Union had gained great initial success, which was normal for the side that started the war. Most of North America had been blasted off the map. Retaliation was quick in coming, of course. The sky was full of circling disc bombers long before the war began; they had been up there for years. The discs began sailing down all over Russia within hours after Washington got hit.

But that hadn't helped Washington.

The American bloc governments moved to the Moon Base the first year. There was not much else to do. Europe was gone; all that was left was a slag heap with dark weeds growing from the ashes and bones. Most of North America was useless; nothing could be planted, and no one could live. A few million people kept migrating to Canada and South America. But during the second-year Soviet

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parachutists began to drop, a few at first, then more and more. They wore the first highly effective anti-radiation equipment; what was left of American production moved to the moon along with the government.

Eventually, everything moved to the moon base, all but the troops. The remaining troops stayed behind as best they could, a few thousand here, a platoon there. No one knew exactly where they were; they stayed where they could, moving around at night, hiding in ruins, in sewers, cellars, with the rats and snakes. It looked as if the Soviet Union had the war almost won. Except for a handful of warheads fired daily from the moon, there was almost no weapon in use against them. They came and went as they pleased. For all practical purposes, the war was over. Nothing effective opposed them.

And then the first claws appeared, and overnight the complexion of the war changed.

The claws were awkward, at first, slow. The Ivans knocked them off almost as fast as they crawled out of their underground tunnels. But then they got better, faster, and more cunning. Factories, all on Terra, churned them out from deep underground, behind the Soviet lines; factories that had once made atomic drones, which at the time of the first attacks were almost forgotten.

Over time, the claws got faster, and they got bigger. New models appeared, some with feelers, some that flew. There were models that had the ability to jump long distances.

The best technicians on the moon were working on designs, making them more and more intricate, and more flexible. They became uncanny; the Ivans were

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having enormous trouble counteracting them. Some of the smaller claws were learning to hide themselves, burrowing down into the ash, lying in wait.

Then they started getting into the Russian bunkers, slipping down when the lids were raised for air or when the Ivans were surveilling the landscape. It only took one claw inside a bunker, with its churning sphere of blades and metal — that was enough to annihilate life within the bunker. And when one got in others followed. With a weapon like that the war couldn't go on much longer.

Maybe it was already over.

Maybe Hendricks was going to hear the news. Maybe the Politburo had decided to throw up the white flag. It was too bad it had taken so long — six years. That was a long time for a war like that, especially the way the war had been waged. There were the automatic retaliation discs, spinning down all over Russia, hundreds of thousands of them. There were bacteria crystals, Soviet-guided missiles whistling through the air, and the use of chain bombs. And now this, the robots, the claws.

The claws weren't like other weapons. They were *alive*, from any practical standpoint, whether the Governments wanted to admit it or not. They were not machines. They were living things, spinning, creeping, with the ability to shake themselves alive suddenly from the gray ash and begin darting toward a man, climbing up his body, rushing for his throat. That was what they had been designed to do. The total destruction of the human body was their job.

They did their job well. Especially lately, with the new designs coming up. Now the claws had the ability to repair themselves. They had an existence of their own. Radiation tabs protected the UN troops, but if a man lost his tab, he was fair

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game for the claws, no matter what uniform he donned. Down deep below the surface, automatic machinery stamped them out en masse. During the production process, human beings had to stay a long distance away. It was too risky; nobody wanted to be around them. The claws were left to themselves, and they seemed to be thriving and building a culture of their own thanks to advancing artificial intelligence technologies. The new design models were faster, more complex, more efficient, and equally self-sufficient.

Apparently, the United States had won the war.

Major Hendricks lit a second cigarette. The landscape depressed him. Nothing but ash and ruins. He seemed to be alone, the only living thing in the whole world. To the right, the ruins of a town rose, with a few walls and heaps of debris. He tossed the dead match away, increasing his pace. Suddenly he stopped, jerking his gun upward, his body tense. For a minute, he thought he saw something that looked like a person.

From behind the shell of a ruined building a figure emerged, walking slowly toward him, walking hesitantly.

Hendricks blinked and then shouted, “Stop!”

The boy stopped. Hendricks lowered his gun. The boy stood silently, looking at him. He was small, not very old, perhaps eight. It was hard to tell. Most of the kids who remained alive were stunted. He wore a faded blue sweater, ragged and dirty, and short pants. His hair was long and matted. He had brown hair that hung over his face and around his ears. He held something in his arms.

“What’s that you have?” Hendricks said sharply.

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The boy held it out. It was a toy, a stuffed animal, a teddy bear. The boy's eyes were large but without expression.

Hendricks relaxed. "I don't want it. Keep it."

The boy hugged the bear again.

"Where do you live?" Hendricks said.

"In there," the boy answered.

"The ruins?" Hendricks asked.

"Yes," the boy answered.

"Underground?" Hendricks asked.

"Yes," the boy answered.

"How many are there?" Hendricks asked.

"How — how many?" The boy didn't seem to understand the question.

"How many of you are there? How big is your settlement?" Hendricks asked again.

The boy did not answer.

Hendricks frowned. "You're not all by yourself, are you?"

The boy nodded.

"How do you stay alive?" Hendricks asked.

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“There’s food,” the boy answered.

“What kind of food?” Hendricks asked.

“Different kinds,” the boy answered.

Hendricks studied him. “How old are you?”

“Thirteen,” the boy answered.

It wasn’t possible. Or was it? The boy was thin, stunted, and probably sterile. He must have been exposed to radiation for years straight. No wonder he was so small. His arms and legs were like pipe cleaners, knobby and thin. Hendricks touched the boy’s arm. His skin was dry and rough; it was radiation skin that was easily recognizable. He bent down, looking into the boy’s face. There was no expression. Big eyes, big and dark.

“Are you blind?” Hendricks asked.

“No. I can see some,” the boy answered.

“How do you get away from the claws?” Hendricks asked.

“The claws?” The boy looked puzzled.

“The round things. The machines that run and burrow in the ground,” Hendricks said.

“I don’t understand,” the boy said.

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Maybe there weren't any claws around. A lot of areas were free. They collected mostly around bunkers where there were people. The claws had been designed to sense warmth, the warmth of living things.

"You're lucky." Hendricks straightened up. "Well? Which way are you going? Back there?"

"Can I come with you?" asked the boy.

"With *me*?" Hendricks folded his arms. "I'm going a long way. Miles from here. I have to hurry." He looked at his watch. "I have to get there by nightfall."

"I want to come," the boy said.

Hendricks fumbled in his pack. "It isn't worth it. Here." He tossed down the food cans he had with him. "You take these and go back. Okay?"

The boy said nothing.

"I'll be coming back this way, in a day or so. If you're around here when I come back, then you can come along with me. Is that all right?" Hendricks said.

"I want to go with you now," the boy said.

"It's a long walk." Hendricks was quietly assessing the situation.

"I can walk," the boy said.

Hendricks shifted uneasily. It made too good a target, two people walking along. And the boy would slow him down. But he might not come back this way. And if the boy were really all alone — then what?

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Hendricks relented. “Okay. Come along.”

The boy fell in step beside him. Hendricks continued moving to his destination. The boy walked silently, clutching his teddy bear.

“What’s your name?” Hendricks asked, after a time.

“David Edward Derring,” the boy answered.

“David? What happened to your mother and father?” Hendricks asked.

“They died,” David answered.

“How?” Hendricks asked.

“In the blast,” David answered.

“How long ago?” Hendricks asked.

“Six years,” the boy answered.

Hendricks slowed down. “You’ve been alone six years?”

“No. There were other people around here for a while. Then they went away,” David answered.

“And you’ve been alone since?”

“Yes.”

Hendricks glanced down. The boy was strange, saying next to nothing. He was withdrawn. That was the way they were, the children who had survived. They

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were all quiet, stoic. A strange kind of fatalism gripped them. Nothing came as a surprise. They accepted anything that came along. There was no longer any *normal*, any natural course of things, moral or physical for them to expect. Custom, habit, all the determining forces of learning were gone; only brute experience remained.

“Am I walking too fast?”

“No,” David answered.

“How did you happen to see me?”

“I was waiting.”

“Waiting?” Hendricks was puzzled. “What were you waiting for?”

“To catch things,” David answered.

“What kind of things?” Hendricks asked.

“Things to eat.”

“Oh.” Hendricks set his lips grimly. A thirteen-year-old boy living on rats and gophers and half-rotten canned food, his home was a hole under the ruins of a town. He lived among radiation pools and claws, and Russian drone diving mines above, coasting around in the sky.

“Where are we going?” David asked.

“To the Russian lines,” Hendricks answered.

“Russian?” The boy didn’t comprehend.

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“The enemy. The people who started the war. They dropped the first radiation bombs. They began all this.”

The boy nodded. His face showed no expression.

“I’m an American,” Hendricks said.

There was no comment. On they went, the two of them, Hendricks walking slightly ahead, David trailing behind him, hugging his dirty teddy bear against his chest.

At about four in the afternoon, they stopped to eat. Hendricks built a fire in a hollow between some slabs of concrete. He cleared the weeds away and heaped bits of wood around a firepit and then started the fire. The Russian lines were not far ahead. The area surrounding him had once been a long valley, with acres of fruit trees and grapes. Nothing remained now but a few bleak stumps and the mountains that stretched across the horizon at the far end. The clouds of rolling ash blew and drifted with the wind, settling over the weeds and the remains of buildings, with isolated walls standing here and there, and traces of what had been a road.

Hendricks made coffee and heated up boiled mutton and bread. “Here,” Hendricks said to David, handing him a piece of bread and a slice of mutton. David squatted by the edge of the fire, his knees knobby and white. He examined the food and then passed it back, shaking his head.

“No,” the boy said.

“No? Don’t you want any?” Hendricks asked.

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“No,” the boy said.

Hendricks shrugged. Maybe the boy was a mutant, used to special food. It didn't matter. When he was hungry, he would find something to eat. The boy was strange. But there were many strange changes coming over the world. Life was not the same, anymore. It would never be the same again. The human race was going to have to realize that dreary fact.

“Suit yourself,” Hendricks said. He ate the bread and mutton by himself, washing it down with coffee. He ate slowly, finding the food hard to digest. When he was done, he got to his feet and stamped out the fire.

David rose slowly, watching him with his young eyes that had grown old.

“We're going,” Hendricks said.

“All right,” the boy answered stoically.

Hendricks walked along, his gun in his arms. The Ivans were close; he was tense, ready for anything. The Russians should be expecting a runner, an answer to their own runner, but they are tricky. With the Ivans, there was always the possibility of deception. He scanned the landscape around him. Nothing but slag and ash, scattered hills, charred trees, and concrete walls. Somewhere ahead was the first bunker of the Russian lines, the forward command. It would be underground, buried deep, with only a periscope showing, a few gun muzzles, or maybe an antenna.

“Will we be there soon?” David asked.

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“Yes. Are you getting tired? Do you need to stop and rest?” Hendricks asked.

“No,” David responded.

“Why do you ask me how far we have to go then?” Hendricks asked.

David did not answer. He plodded carefully along behind Hendricks, prodding his way over the ash. His legs and shoes were gray with dust. His pinched face was streaked, lines of gray ash in rivulets down the pale white of his skin. There was no color to his face, the typical features of the new children growing up in cellars and sewers and underground shelters.

Hendricks slowed down. He lifted his field glasses and studied the ground ahead of him. Were they there, someplace, waiting for him, and stealthily watching him the way his men had watched the Russian runner? A chill went up his back. Maybe they were getting their guns ready, preparing to fire, the way his men had prepared, making ready to kill.

Hendricks stopped, wiping perspiration from his face.

“Damn,” he said.

His approach made him uneasy. But he should be expected. This situation was different.

He strode over the ash, holding his gun tightly with both hands. Behind him came David. Hendricks peered around, tight-lipped. Any second it might happen. A burst of white light, a blast, carefully aimed from inside a deep concrete bunker.

He raised his arm and waved it around in a circle.

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Nothing moved. To the right a long ridge ran, topped with dead tree trunks. A few wild vines had grown up around the trees, remains of arbors surrounded by a ground strewn with eternal dark weeds. Hendricks studied the ridge. Was anything up there? It was a perfect place for a lookout. He approached the ridge warily, David coming silently behind. If it were his command he would have a sentry up there, watching for troops trying to in-fil-trate into the command area. Of course, if it *were* his command there would be a throng of devastating claws around the area for full protection.

He stopped, feet apart, hands on his hips.

“Are we there?” David asked.

“Almost,” Hendricks answered.

“Why have we stopped?”

“I don’t want to take any chances.” Hendricks advanced slowly. Now the ridge lay directly beside him, along his right flank overlooking him. His uneasy feeling increased. If an Ivan were up there, he wouldn’t have a chance. He waved his arm again. They should be expecting someone in the UN uniform, in response to the note capsule — unless the whole occurrence was a trap.

He turned toward David and said, “Keep up with me. Don’t drop behind.”

“With you?” David asked.

“Come up beside me! We’re close. We can’t take any chances. Come on,” commanded Hendricks.

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“I’ll be all right,” David said, remaining behind him in the rear a few paces away, still clutching his teddy bear.

“Have it your way.” Hendricks raised his glasses again, suddenly tense. For a moment his muscles flexed — had something moved? He scanned the ridge carefully. Everything was silent. The whole area was dead. He could not see life up there, only tree trunks and ash, and maybe a few rats. The big black rats that had survived the claws — mutants — built their own shelters out of saliva and ash making some kind of plaster. It was nature’s way of adaptation. He started moving forward again.

A tall figure came out on the ridge above him, its gray-green cloak flapping. It was a Russian. Behind him, a second soldier appeared, another Russian. Both lifted their guns, aiming directly at him.

Hendricks froze. He opened his mouth. The soldiers were kneeling, sighting their guns down the side of the slope. A third figure had joined them on the ridge top, a smaller figure also dressed in gray-green attire. It was a woman. She stood behind the other two.

Hendricks found his voice. “Stop!” He waved at them frantically. “I’m the UN envoy you requested.”

The two Russians fired. Behind Hendricks, there was a faint *pop*. Waves of heat lapped against him, throwing him to the ground. Ash tore at his face, grinding into his eyes and nose. Choking, he pulled himself to his knees. It was all a trap. He was finished. He had come to be killed like a steer. The soldiers and the woman were coming down the side of the ridge toward him, sliding down through the soft ash. Hendricks was numb. His head throbbed. Awkwardly, he picked up his rifle

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and took aim at the rushing Ivans. His gun felt as if it weighed a thousand tons; he could hardly hold it. His nose and cheeks stung. The air was full of the blast's smell, a bitter acrid stench.

“Don't fire,” the first Russian said, in heavily accented English.

The three of them came up to him, surrounding him. “Put down your rifle, Yank,” the other said.

Hendricks was dazed. Everything had happened so fast. He had been caught. He realized they had blasted the boy. He turned his head. David was gone. What remained of him was scattered across the ground.

The three Russians studied him curiously. Hendricks sat, wiping blood from his nose, picking out bits of ash. He shook his head, trying to clear it. “Why did you do that?” he murmured thickly. “Why did you kill the boy?”

“Why?” One of the soldiers helped him roughly to his feet. He turned Hendricks around. “Look.”

Hendricks closed his eyes.

“Look!” The two Russians pulled him forward. “See for yourself. Hurry up. There isn't much time to spare, Yank!”

Hendricks looked and gasped.

“Do you see now? Now do you understand?”

From the remains of David, a metal wheel rolled, along with an array of relays and glinting metal, various electronic parts, and wiring. One of the Russians

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kicked at the heap of remains on the ground. Parts popped out, rolling away, wheels and springs and rods. A plastic section collapsed in on itself, half charred. Hendricks bent shakily down. The front of the head had come off. He could make out the intricate brain, wires and relays, tiny tubes and switches, and thousands of minute studs.

“It is a robot,” the soldier holding his arm said. “We watched it tagging you.”

“Tagging me?” Hendricks was still whirling, confused.

“That’s their way. They tag along with you all the way into the bunker. That’s how they get in,” responded the Russian soldier.

Hendricks blinked, dazed. “But — I don’t understand.”

“Come on,” said the woman soldier. They led him toward the ridge. “We can’t stay here. It isn’t safe. There must be hundreds of them all around here.”

The three of them pulled him up the side of the ridge, sliding and slipping on the ash. The woman reached the top and stood waiting for them.

“The forward command,” Hendricks muttered. “I came to negotiate with the Soviet command in response to its message.”

“There is no more forward command. *They* got in. We’ll explain,” said one of the Russian soldiers. They reached the top of the ridge. “We’re all that’s left. The three of us. The rest were down in the bunker.”

“This way. Down this way.” The woman unscrewed a lid, a gray manhole cover set in the ground. “Hurry and get in.”

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Hendricks lowered himself. The two soldiers and the woman came behind him, following him down the ladder. The woman closed the lid after them, bolting it tightly into place.

“Good thing we saw you,” one of the two soldiers grunted. “It had tagged you about as far as it was going to.”

“Give me one of your cigarettes,” the woman barked. “I haven’t had an American cigarette for weeks.”

Hendricks with hands shaking gave the pack to her. She took a cigarette and passed the pack to the two soldiers. In the corner of the small room, the lamp gleamed erratically. The room had a low ceiling and was cramped. The four of them sat around a small wooden table. A few dirty dishes were stacked to one side. Behind a ragged curtain, a second room was partly visible. Hendricks saw the corner of a cot, and some blankets and clothes hung on a hook.

“We were here,” the soldier beside him said. He took off his helmet, pushing his blond hair back. “I’m Corporal Rudi Maxer. Polish. Recruited in the Soviet Army two years ago.” He held out his hand.

Hendricks hesitated and then shook it. “Major Joseph Hendricks.”

“Epstein.” The other soldier, a small man with an olive complexion and thinning hair then shook his hand. Epstein plucked nervously at his ear. “Austrian. Recruited God knows when. I don’t remember. The three of us were here, Rudi and I, with Tasso.” He indicated the woman. “That’s how we escaped. All the rest were down in the bunker.”

“And then *they* got in?” Hendricks asked.

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Epstein lit a cigarette. “First it was just one of them, the kind that tagged you. Then it let others in.”

Hendricks became alert. “You said, *the kind?* Is there more than one kind?”

“The little boy. David. David holding his teddy bear. That’s Variety Three, the most effective,” answered Epstein.

“What are the other types that exist?” Hendricks asked.

Epstein reached into his coat. “Here.” He tossed a packet of photographs onto the table tied with a string. “Look for yourself.”

Hendricks untied the string.

“You see,” Maxer said, “that was why we wanted to talk terms. The Russians, I mean. We found out about a week ago. Found out that your claws were beginning to develop new designs on their own. New types of their own. Better types. They manufacture them in your underground factories behind our lines. You let them stamp themselves, repair themselves, and made them more and more intricate. It’s your fault this happened.”

Hendricks examined the photos. They had been snapped hurriedly; they were blurred and indistinct. The first few showed David. David walking along a road by himself. There was a David and another David. Then there was three Davids all exactly alike, each one carrying a ragged teddy bear. They all looked pathetic.

“Look at the others,” Tasso said.

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The next pictures, taken at a great distance, showed a towering, wounded soldier sitting by the side of a path, his arm in a sling, the stump of one leg extended, and a crude crutch on his lap. Then two wounded soldiers, both the same, were standing side by side.

“That’s Variety One. The Wounded Soldier.” Klaus reached out and took the pictures. “You see, the claws were designed to get to human beings. To find them and destroy them. Each kind was better than the last. They got farther, closer, past most of our defenses into our lines. But as long as they were merely *machines*, metal spheres with claws and horns and feelers, they could be picked off like any other object. They could be detected as lethal robots as soon as they were spotted. Then once we caught sight of the other varieties — that became the problem.”

“Variety One subverted our whole north wing,” Rudi said. “It was a long time before anyone caught on. Then it was too late. They came to the bunkers looking like wounded soldiers, knocking, and begging to be let in. So, we let them in. As soon as they were in, they took over. We were watching for machines — not fellow Russian soldiers.”

“At that time, we thought there was only one type of machine,” Epstein said. “No one suspected there were other types. The pictures were flashed to us. When the runner was sent to you, we knew of just one type, Variety One, the big Wounded Soldier. We thought that was all.”

“Then your line fell to the Variety One type?” Hendricks asked.

“No, to Variety Three, David and his bear. That worked even better.” Klaus smiled bitterly. “Soldiers are suckers for children. We brought them in and tried to

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feed them. We found out the hard way what they were after. At least, those who were in the bunker.”

“The three of us were lucky,” Rudi said. “Klaus and I were visiting Tasso when it happened. This is her place.” He waved a big hand around. “This little cellar is where she lives. We finished and climbed the ladder to go back to our barracks. When we reached the ridge, we saw that there they were all around the bunker. Fighting was still going on. They were all David and his bear. Hundreds of them. Klaus took the pictures.”

Klaus tied up the photographs again.

“And it’s going on all along your line?” Hendricks asked.

“Yes,” Rudi answered.

“How about *our* lines?” Without thinking, Hendricks touched the tab on his arm. “Can they infiltrate our lines?”

“They’re not bothered by your radiation tabs. It makes no difference to them, Russian, American, Pole, or German. It’s all the same. They’re doing what they were designed to do, carrying out the original idea. They track down life, wherever they find it, and destroy it.”

“They go by warmth,” Klaus said. “That was the way you constructed them from the very start. Of course, those you designed were kept back by the radiation tabs you wear. Now they have designed a workaround for that. These new varieties are lead-lined.”

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“What’s the other variety?” Hendricks asked. “The David type, the Wounded Soldier — what’s the other?”

“We don’t know.” Klaus pointed up at the wall. On the wall were two metal plates, ragged at the edges. Hendricks got up and studied them. They were bent and dented.

“The one on the left came off a Wounded Soldier,” Rudi said. “We got one of them. It was going toward our old bunker. We got it from the ridge, the same way we got the David tagging you.”

The plate was stamped: I-V. Hendricks touched the other plate. “And this came from the David type?”

“Yes.” The plate was stamped: III-V.

Klaus took a look at them, leaning over Hendricks’ broad shoulder. “You can see what we’re up against. There’s another type. Maybe it was abandoned. Maybe it didn’t work. But there must be a Second Variety. Here you can plainly see models marked One and Three.”

“You were lucky,” Rudi said. “The David tagged you all the way here and never touched you. Probably thought you’d get it into a bunker, somewhere.”

“Once a David gets in, it’s all over,” Klaus said. “They move fast. Once one gets in, he lets all the rest inside. They’re inflexible. They are precision machines built with one purpose in mind. They were built for only one thing.” He rubbed the sweat from his lips. “We saw firsthand their deathly work.”

They all were silent.

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“Let me have another cigarette, Yank,” Tasso said. “They are good. I almost forgot how good they were.”

It was night. The sky was black. No stars were visible through the rolling clouds of ash. Klaus lifted the lid cautiously so that Hendricks could look out.

Rudi pointed into the darkness. “Over in that direction are the bunkers, at least where they used to be. They are not over half a mile from us. It was just by chance that Klaus and I were not there when it happened. It was our human weakness. We were saved by our lust.”

“All the rest must be dead,” Klaus said in a low voice. “It came quickly. This morning the Politburo reached their decision. Forward command notified us. Our runner was sent to your location at once. We saw him start toward the direction of your lines. We covered him until he was out of sight.”

“Alex Ra-driv-sky. We both knew him. He disappeared at about six o’clock. The sun had just come up. At about noon Klaus and I had an hour’s relief. We crept off, away from the bunkers. No one was watching. We came here. There used to be a town here, a few houses, and a street. This cellar was part of a big farmhouse. We knew Tasso would be here, hiding down in her little place. We had come here before. Others from the bunkers came here. Today happened to be our turn.”

“So, we were saved,” Klaus said. “It was all by chance. On any other given night, it might have been others. When we finished, we came up to the surface and started back to the barracks along the ridge. That was when we saw them, the Davids. We understood right away what was happening. We had seen the photos of the First Variety, the Wounded Soldier. Our Commissar distributed them to us

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with an explanation. If we had gone another step, they would have seen us. As it was, we had to blast two Davids before we were able to get back here. There were hundreds of them, all around. They were like ants. We took pictures and slipped back here, bolting the lid tight.”

“They were not much of a challenge when we catch them alone. We move faster than they do. But they’re inexorable. They are not like living things. They came right at us, and we blasted them.”

Major Hendricks rested against the edge of the lid, adjusting his eyes to the darkness. “Is it safe to have the lid up at all?”

“If we’re careful. How else can we operate our transmitter?” answered Klaus.

Hendricks slowly lifted the small belt transmitter. He pressed it against his ear. The metal was cold and damp. He blew against the mike, raising up the short antenna. A faint hum sounded in his ear. “That’s true, I suppose.”

But he still hesitated.

“We’ll pull you under if anything happens,” Klaus said.

“Thanks.” Hendricks waited a moment, resting the transmitter against his shoulder. “Interesting, isn’t it?”

“What is?” asked Klaus.

“The new types. The new models of claws. We’re completely at their mercy, aren’t we? By now they’ve probably gotten into the UN lines, too. It makes

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me wonder if we're not seeing the beginning of a new species. The *ultimate* new species. Evolution at work in real-time. The race to come after man."

Rudi grunted. "There is no race after man."

"No? Why not? Maybe we're seeing it happening now, the end of human beings, the beginning of the new society," grunted Hendricks.

"They're not a race. They're mechanical killers. You made them to destroy life. That's all they can do. They're machines with a very specific job," said Rudi.

Hendricks thought for a moment and then said, "That's the way it appears now. But how about later? After the war is over. Maybe, when there aren't any humans to destroy, their real potentialities will begin to show."

"You talk as if they were alive!" Rudi exclaimed.

"Aren't they?" questioned Hendricks.

Again, there was silence.

"They're machines," Rudi said. "They look like people, but they are still machines."

"Use your transmitter, Major," Klaus said. "We can't stay down here forever."

Holding the transmitter tightly Hendricks called the code of the command bunker. He waited, listening. There was no response, only silence. He checked the leads carefully. Everything was in place.

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“Scott!” Hendricks said into the mike. “Can you hear me?”

Silence. He raised the gain to its highest volume and tried again. Only static.

“I don’t get anything. They must hear me, but they may not want to answer,” Hendricks said.

“Tell them it’s an emergency,” Klaus said.

“They’ll think I’m being forced to call under your direction.” Hendricks tried again, outlining briefly what he had learned. But still, the phone was silent, except for the faint static.

“Radiation pools kill most transmission,” Klaus said, after a short silence. “Maybe that’s it.”

Hendricks shut the transmitter up. “It’s no use. There’s no answer. Radiation pools? Maybe. Or they hear me but won’t answer. Frankly, that’s what I would do if a runner tried to call from the Soviet lines. They have no reason to believe such a story. They may hear everything I say.”

“Or maybe it’s too late,” Klaus interjected.

Hendricks nodded.

“We better get the lid down,” Rudi said nervously. “We don’t want to take unnecessary chances.”

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They climbed slowly back down the tunnel. Klaus bolted the lid carefully into place. They descended into the kitchen. The air was heavy and closed in around them.

“Could they work that fast?” Hendricks asked. “I left the bunker at noon. That was only ten hours ago. How could they move so quickly?”

“It doesn’t take them long. Not after the first one gets in. It goes chaotic extremely fast. You know what the claws can do. Even *one* of these is beyond belief. Each finger is a deadly, sharp razor. They are maniacal.”

“All right, I understand.” Hendricks moved away impatiently. He stood with his back to them.

“What’s the matter?” Rudi said.

“The Moon Base. God, if they’ve gotten there.”

“The Moon Base?” Rudi asked.

Hendricks turned around. “They couldn’t have gotten to the Moon Base. How would they get there? It isn’t possible. I can’t believe it.”

“What is this Moon Base? We’ve heard rumors, but nothing definite. What is the actual situation? You seem concerned,” Rudi asked.

Hendricks turned and answered, “We’re supplied from the moon. The governments are there under the lunar surface. All our people and industries are there. That’s what keeps us going. I can’t imagine what would happen if they should find some way of getting off Terra, and onto the moon.”

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“It only takes one of them. Once the first one gets in it admits the others. Hundreds of them, all of them indistinguishable. You should have seen them. Completely identical. Like ants.”

“Perfect socialism,” Tasso said. “The ideal of the communist state. All citizens interchangeable.”

Klaus grunted angrily. “That’s enough. Well? What next?”

Hendricks paced back and forth, around the small room. The air was full of smells of food and perspiration. The others watched him. Presently Tasso pushed through the curtain into the other room. “I’m going to take a nap.”

The curtain closed behind her. Rudi and Klaus sat down at the table, still watching Hendricks.

“It’s up to you,” Klaus said. “We don’t know your situation.”

Hendricks nodded. “I agree it’s a problem.”

Rudi drank some coffee, filling his cup from a rusty pot. “We’re safe here for a while, but we can’t stay here forever. There is not enough food or supplies.”

“But if we go outside — what then,” Hendricks murmured.

“If we go outside, they’ll get us. Or *maybe* they’ll get us. We couldn’t go very far. How far is your command bunker, Major?”

“Three or four miles,” Hendricks answered.

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“The four of us might make it because we could watch all sides. They couldn’t slip up behind us and start tagging us. We have three rifles, three blast rifles. Tasso can have my pistol.” Rudi tapped his belt. “In the Soviet army, we didn’t always have shoes, but we had guns. With all four of us armed one of us might get to your command bunker. Preferably you, Major.”

“What if they’re already there?” Klaus asked.

Rudi shrugged. “Well, then we come back here.”

Hendricks stopped pacing. “What do you think the chances are they’re already in the American lines?”

Rudi looked straight at Hendricks.

“Hard to say. Although, there’s a high probability they are already there. They’re organized. They know exactly what they’re doing. Once they start, they invade like a horde of locusts. They have to keep moving, and fast. It’s secrecy and speed they depend on, the element of surprise. They push their way inside before anyone has any idea.”

“I see,” Hendricks sighed.

From the other room, Tasso stirred. “Major?”

Hendricks pushed the curtain back. “What?”

Tasso lazily looked up at him from the cot. “Have you any more American cigarettes left?”

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Hendricks entered the room and sat across from her on a wooden stool. He felt in his pockets. “No. All gone.”

“Too bad,” Tasso said, disappointed.

“What nationality are you?” Hendricks asked after a while.

“Russian,” she answered.

“How did you get here?” Hendricks asked.

“Here?” Tasso appeared confused.

Hendricks answered in a stern voice. “This used to be France. This was part of Normandy. Did you come with the Soviet army?”

“Why do you ask?” she asked.

“I was just curious.” He studied her. She had taken off her coat, tossing it over the end of the cot. She was young, about twenty. Slim. Her long hair stretched out over the pillow. She was silently staring at him, her eyes dark and large.

“What’s on your mind?” Tasso asked.

“Oh, nothing really. By the way, how old are you?” Hendricks asked.

“Eighteen.” She continued to watch him, unblinking, her arms behind her head. She wore Russian army pants, a gray-green shirt, a thick leather belt with counter and cartridges, and a medicine kit.

“So, you’re in the Soviet army?” Hendricks asked.

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“No,” Tasso replied.

“Then where did you get the uniform?”

She shrugged. “It was given to me.”

“How old were you when you came here?” Hendricks asked.

“Sixteen.”

“That young?” Hendricks was surprised by her answer.

Her eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

Hendricks rubbed his jaw. “Your life would have been a lot different if there had been no war. Sixteen. You came here at sixteen. To live this way.”

“I had to survive,” Tasso said.

“I’m not moralizing.” Hendricks became more sympathetic.

“Your life would have been different, too,” Tasso murmured. She reached down and unfastened one of her boots. She kicked the boot off onto the floor.

“Major, do you want to go with me into the other room? I’m sleepy.”

Evading the insinuation, Hendricks said, “It’s going to be a problem with the four of us here. It’s going to be hard to live in these quarters. Are there just the two rooms?”

“Yes,” Tasso answered.

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“How big was the cellar originally? Was it larger than this? Are there other rooms filled with debris? We might be able to open one of them.” Hendricks was trying to come up with solutions for the current situation.

“Perhaps. I really don’t know.” Tasso loosened her belt. She made herself comfortable on the cot, unbuttoning her shirt. “You’re sure you don’t have any more cigarettes?”

“I had only the one pack,” responded Hendricks.

“Too bad. Maybe if we get back to your bunker we can find some.” The other boot fell. Tasso reached up for the light cord. “Good night.”

“Are you going to sleep?” Hendricks asked.

“That’s right. I’m exhausted,” responded Tasso.

The room plunged into darkness. Hendricks got up and made his way past the curtain and into the kitchen.

He abruptly stopped and stood rigid.

Rudi stood against the wall, his face white and gleaming. His mouth opened and closed but no sounds came. Klaus stood in front of him, the muzzle of his pistol in Rudi’s stomach. Neither of them moved. Klaus had his hand tight around his gun, his features set. Rudi was pale and silent, spread-eagled against the wall.

“What is happening here,” Hendricks shouted, but Klaus cut him off.

“Be quiet, Major. Come over here. Your gun. Get out your gun.”

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Hendricks drew his pistol. “What is it?”

“Cover him.” Klaus motioned him forward. “Come beside me. Hurry!”

Rudi moved a little, lowering his arms. He turned to Hendricks, licking his lips. The whites of his eyes shone wildly. Sweat dripped from his forehead, down his cheeks. He fixed his gaze on Hendricks. “Major, he’s gone insane. Stop him.” Rudi’s voice was thin and hoarse, almost inaudible.

“What’s going on?” Hendricks demanded.

Without lowering his pistol Klaus answered. “Major, remember our discussion? The Three Varieties? We knew about One and Three. But we didn’t know about Two. At least, we didn’t know before.” Klaus’ fingers tightened around the butt of the gun. “We didn’t know before, but we know now.”

He pressed the trigger. A burst of white heat rolled out of the gun, instantly enveloping Rudi.

“Major, this is the Second Variety,” Klaus said.

Tasso swept the curtain aside. “Klaus! What did you do?”

Klaus turned from the charred form, gradually sinking down the wall onto the floor. “The Second Variety, Tasso. Now we know. We have all three types identified. Now the danger we face is less now that we know what we’re facing.”

Tasso gazed past him staring at Rudi’s remains, at the blackened, smoldering fragments and bits of cloth. “You killed him.”

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“Him? *It*, you mean. I was watching. I had a feeling, but I wasn’t sure. At least, I wasn’t sure before. But this evening I was certain.” Klaus rubbed his pistol butt nervously. “We’re lucky. Don’t you understand? Another hour and it might have killed all of us.”

“You were *certain*?” Tasso pushed past him and bent down, over the steaming remains on the floor. Her face became hard. “Major, see for yourself. Bones. Flesh.”

Hendricks bent down beside her. The remains were human remains. There was seared flesh, charred bone fragments, part of a skull, ligaments, viscera, and blood. The blood began forming a pool against the wall.

“There are no wheels,” Tasso said, agitated. She straightened up. “There are no wheels, no parts, no relays. There is not a single claw. This is not the Second Variety.” She folded her arms. “You must explain what you did to us.”

Klaus sat down at the table. All the color suddenly drained from his face. He put his head in his hands and rocked back and forth.

“Snap out of it.” Tasso’s fingers closed over his shoulder. “Why did you do it? Why did you kill him?”

“He was frightened,” Hendricks said. “All this, the whole thing, the building around us is creating fear.”

“Maybe,” Tasso said, firmly.

“What, then? What do you think?” Hendricks asked.

“I think he may have had a reason for killing Rudi. A good reason.”

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“What reason?” Hendricks asked.

“Maybe Rudi learned something,” Tasso said.

Hendricks studied her bleak face. “About what?” he asked.

“About him. About Klaus,” Tasso answered.

Klaus looked up quickly. “You can see what she’s trying to say. She thinks I’m the Second Variety. Don’t you see, Major? Now she wants you to believe I killed him on purpose. That I’m trying to deflect your understanding of what I am.”

“Why did you kill him, then?” Tasso asked.

“I told you.” Klaus shook his head wearily. “I thought he was a claw. I thought I knew.”

“Why?” Tasso persisted.

“Why?” answered Klaus. “I had been watching him. I was suspicious. I thought I had seen something. Heard something. I thought —” He stopped.

“Go on,” Tasso said.

Klaus attempted to explain why he shot Rudi.

“We were sitting at the table. Playing cards. You two were in the other room. It was silent. I thought I heard him — *whirr*.”

There was silence.

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“Do you believe that?” Tasso asked Hendricks.

“Yes. I believe what he says,” Hendricks said.

“I don’t. I think he killed Rudi for a good purpose.” Tasso touched the rifle resting in the corner of the room. “Major, you can’t believe what Klaus has told us?”

“Stop.” Hendricks shook his head. “Stop it right now. One death is enough. We’re all afraid, the way Klaus was. If we kill him, we’ll be doing what he did to Rudi.”

Klaus looked gratefully up at him. “Thank you, Major. I was afraid you would not understand my actions. You do understand, don’t you? Now Tasso’s afraid the way I was. She wants to kill me.”

“No more killing.” Hendricks moved toward the end of the ladder. “I’m going above and try the transmitter once more. If I can’t get them, we’re moving back toward my lines tomorrow morning.”

Klaus rose quickly. “I’ll come up with you and give you a hand.”

The night air was cold. The earth was cooling off. Klaus took a deep breath, filling his lungs. He and Hendricks stepped out of the tunnel and onto the ground. Klaus planted his feet wide apart, the rifle up, watching and listening. Hendricks crouched by the tunnel mouth, tuning the small transmitter.

“Any luck?” Klaus asked presently.

“Not yet,” Hendricks responded.

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“Keep trying. Tell them what happened,” Klaus chided.

Hendricks kept trying. Without success. Finally, he lowered the antenna. “It’s useless. They can’t hear me. Or they hear me and won’t answer. Or — ”

“Or they don’t exist,” Klaus said.

“I’ll try once more.” Hendricks raised the antenna. “Scott, can you hear me? Come in!”

He listened. There was only static. Then, still very faintly —

“This is Scott.”

His fingers tightened. “Scott! Is it you?” Hendricks asked.

“This is Scott.”

Klaus squatted down and asked. “Is it your command?”

“Scott, listen. Do you understand? About them, the claws. Did you get my message? Did you hear me?” Hendricks asked.

“Yes.” The answer came faintly over the speaker. Almost inaudible. He could hardly make out the word.

“You got my message? Is everything all right at the bunker? Have any of them got in?” Hendricks asked.

“Everything is all right,” was the response.

“Have they tried to get in?” Hendricks asked.

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The voice was weaker.

“No.”

Hendricks turned to Klaus. “They’re all right.”

“Have they been attacked?” asked Klaus.

“No.” Hendricks pressed the phone tighter to his ear. “Scott, I can hardly hear you. Have you notified the Moon Base? Do they know? Are they alerted?”

No answer.

“Scott! Can you hear me?” shouted Hendricks.

Silence.

Hendricks relaxed, sagging. “They faded out. It must be the radiation pools.”

Hendricks and Klaus looked at each other. Neither of them said anything. After a time, Klaus said, “Did it sound like any of your men? Could you identify the voice?”

“It was too faint,” Hendricks said.

“You couldn’t be certain?” asked Klaus.

“No,” Hendricks said.

“Then it could have been the claws,” Klaus said.

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“I don’t know. Now I’m not sure. Let’s go back down and get the lid closed.”

They climbed down the ladder slowly into the warm cellar. Klaus bolted the lid behind them. Tasso waited for them; her face expressionless.

“Any luck?” she asked.

Neither of them answered.

“Well?” Klaus said at last. “What do you think, Major? Was it your officer, or was it one of *them*?”

“I don’t know,” Hendricks answered.

“Then we’re just where we were before,” grunted Klaus.

Hendricks stared down at the floor, his jaw set. “We’ll have to go. We have to be sure.”

“Anyhow, we have food here for only a few days. We’ll have to go up after that happens in any case,” stated Klaus.

“Apparently so,” Hendricks said.

“What’s wrong?” Tasso demanded. “Did you get across to your bunker? What’s the matter?”

“It may have been one of my men,” Hendricks said slowly. “Or it may have been one of *them*. But we’ll never know standing here.” He examined his watch. “Let’s turn in and get some sleep. We want to be up early tomorrow morning.”

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“Early?” Tasso said.

“Our best chance to get through the claws should be early in the morning,” Hendricks said.

The next morning was crisp and clear. Major Hendricks studied the countryside through his field glasses.

“See anything?” asked Klaus.

“No,” Hendricks said.

“Can you make out our bunkers?” asked Klaus.

“Which way do I look?” Hendricks asked.

“Here.” Klaus took the glasses and adjusted them. “I know where to look.” He looked for a long time, silently.

Tasso climbed to the top of the tunnel and then stepped onto the ground. “Do you see anything?”

“No.” Klaus passed the glasses back to Hendricks. “They’re out of sight. Come on. Let’s not stay here any longer.”

The three of them made their way down the side of the ridge, sliding in the soft ash. Across a flat rock, a lizard scuttled. They stopped instantly, rigid.

“What was it?” Klaus muttered.

“A lizard,” Hendricks said.

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The lizard ran on, hurrying through the ash. It was exactly the same color as the ash-filled surface.

“Perfect adaptation,” Klaus said. “Proves we were right. Lysenko, I mean.”

They reached the bottom of the ridge and stopped, standing close together, looking around them.

“Let’s go,” commanded Hendricks and signaled to start. “It’s a long trip on foot.”

Klaus fell in beside him. Tasso walked behind them holding her pistol alertly.

“Major, I’ve been meaning to ask you something,” Klaus said. “How did you run across the David? The one that was tagging you.”

“I met it along the way. In some ruins,” Hendricks said.

“What did it say?” asked Klaus.

“Not much. It said it was alone. By itself,” Hendricks answered.

“You couldn’t tell it was a machine? It talked like a living person. You never suspected it?” asked Klaus.

“It didn’t say much. I noticed nothing unusual,” Hendricks responded.

“It’s strange, machines so much like people that you can be fooled. Almost alive. I wonder where it will end,” Klaus said.

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“They’re doing what you Yanks designed them to do,” Tasso said. “You designed them to hunt life and destroy it. Human life. Wherever they find it.”

Hendricks was watching Klaus intently. “Why did you ask me? What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing,” Klaus answered.

“Klaus thinks you’re the Second Variety,” Tasso said calmly from behind them. “Now he’s got his eye on you.”

Klaus flushed. “Why not? We sent a runner to the Yank lines, and *he* came back. Maybe he thought he’d find some good game here.”

Hendricks laughed harshly. “I came from the UN bunkers. There were human beings all around me.”

“Maybe you saw an opportunity to get into the Soviet lines. Maybe you saw your chance,” Klaus said.

“The Soviet lines had already been taken over. Your lines had been invaded before I left my command bunker. Don’t forget that,” Hendricks said.

Tasso came up beside him. “That proves nothing at all, Major.”

“Why not?” Hendricks asked.

Tasso responded, “There appears to be little communication between the varieties. Each one is made in a different factory. They don’t seem to work together. You might have started for the Soviet lines without knowing anything about the work of the other varieties. Or even what the other varieties were like.”

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“How do you know so much about the claws?” Hendricks asked.

“I’ve seen them. I’ve observed them. I observed them take over the Soviet bunkers,” responded Tasso.

“You know quite a lot,” Klaus said. “Actually, you saw very little. Strange that you should have been such an acute observer.”

Tasso laughed. “Do you suspect me, now?”

“Forget it,” Hendricks said. They walked on in silence.

“Are we going the whole way on foot?” Tasso said after a while. “I’m not used to walking.” She gazed around at the ash plain stretching out on all sides of them, as far as they could see. “How dreary.”

“It’s like this all the way,” Klaus said.

“In a way, I wish you had been in your bunker when the attack came,” Tasso said with a tone of sarcasm.

“Somebody else would have been with you if not me,” Klaus muttered.

Tasso laughed, putting her hands in her pockets. “I suppose so.”

They walked on, keeping their eyes on the vast plain of silent ash around them.

The sun was setting. Hendricks made his way forward slowly, waving Tasso and Klaus back. Klaus squatted down, resting his gun butt against the ground.

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Tasso found a concrete slab and sat down with a sigh. “It’s good to rest.”

“Be quiet,” Klaus said sharply.

Hendricks pushed to the top of the rise ahead of them. It was the same rise the Russian runner had come from the day before. Hendricks dropped stretching himself out, peering through his glasses at what lay beyond.

Nothing was visible. Only ash and occasional trees. But there, not more than fifty yards ahead, was the entrance of the forward command bunker. The bunker from which he had come. Hendricks watched silently. No motion. No sign of life. Nothing stirred.

Klaus slithered up beside him. “Where is it?”

“Down there.” Hendricks passed him the glasses. Clouds of ash rolled across the evening sky. The world was darkening. They had a couple of hours of light left, at the most. Probably not that much.

“I don’t see anything,” Klaus said.

“That tree there. The stump. By the pile of bricks. The entrance is to the right of the bricks,” Hendricks said.

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” Klaus said.

“You and Tasso cover me from here. You’ll be able to sight all the way to the bunker entrance,” Hendricks said.

“Are you going down alone?” asked Klaus.

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“With my wrist tab, I’ll be safe. The ground around the bunker is a living field of claws. They collect down in the ash like crabs. Without tabs, you wouldn’t have a chance.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Klaus said

“I’ll walk slowly all the way. As soon as I know for certain everything is safe, I will signal you,” Hendricks said.

“If they’re down inside the bunker you won’t be able to get back up here. They go fast. You don’t realize,” Klaus said.

“What do you suggest?” Hendricks asked.

Klaus considered. “I don’t know. Get them to come up to the surface. So you can see.”

Hendricks brought his transmitter from his belt, raising the antenna. “Let’s get started.”

Klaus signaled to Tasso. She crawled expertly up the side of the rise to where they were sitting.

“He’s going down alone,” Klaus said. “We’ll cover him from here. As soon as you see him start back, fire past him at once. They come quick.”

“You’re not very optimistic,” Tasso said.

“No, I’m not.”

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Hendricks opened the breech of his gun, checking it carefully. “Maybe things are all right.”

“You didn’t see them. Hundreds of them. All the same. Pouring out like ants,” Klaus said.

“I should be able to find out without going down all the way.” Hendricks locked his gun, gripping it in one hand, the transmitter in the other. “Well, wish me luck.”

Klaus put out his hand. “Don’t go down until you’re sure. Talk to them from up here. Make them show themselves.”

Hendricks stood up. He stepped down the side of the rise.

A moment later he was walking slowly toward the pile of bricks and debris beside the dead tree stump toward the entrance of the forward command bunker.

Nothing stirred. He raised the transmitter, clicking it on. “Scott? Can you hear me?”

Silence.

“Scott! This is Hendricks. Can you hear me? I’m standing outside the bunker. You should be able to see me in the view sight.”

He listened, gripping the transmitter tightly. No sound. Only static. He walked forward. A claw burrowed out of the ash and raced toward him. It halted a few feet away and then slunk off. A second claw appeared. It was one of the big ones with feelers. It moved toward him, studied him intently, and then fell in behind him, dogging respectfully after him a few paces away. A moment later a

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second big claw joined it. Silently, the claws trailed him as he walked slowly toward the bunker.

Hendricks stopped, and behind him the claws came to a halt. He was close, now. Almost to the bunker steps.

“Scott! Can you hear me? I’m standing right above you. Outside. On the surface. Are you picking me up?”

He waited, holding his gun against his side, the transmitter tightly to his ear. Time passed. He strained to hear, but there was only silence. Silence, and faint static.

Then, distantly, metallically he heard —

“This is Scott.”

The voice was neutral. Cold. He could not identify it. But the earphone was minute.

“Scott! Listen. I’m standing right above you. I’m on the surface, looking down into the bunker entrance.”

“Yes,” said Scott.

“Can you see me?” Hendricks asked.

“Yes.”

“Through the view sight? You have the sight trained on me?” Hendricks asked.

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“Yes.”

Hendricks pondered. A circle of claws waited quietly around him, gray-metal bodies on all sides of him. “Is everything all right in the bunker? Has anything unusual happened?”

“Everything is all right,” responded Scott.

“Will you come up to the surface? I want to see you for a moment.” Hendricks took a deep breath. “Come up here with me. I want to talk to you.”

“Come down,” said Scott.

“I’m giving you an order,” commanded Hendricks.

Silence.

“Are you coming?” Hendricks listened. There was no response. “I order you to come to the surface.”

“Come down,” said Scott.

Hendricks set his jaw. “Let me talk to Leone.”

There was a long pause. He listened to the static. Then a voice came, hard, thin, metallic. The same as the other.

“This is Leone.”

“I’m on the surface. At the bunker entrance. I want one of you to come up here,” ordered Hendricks.

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“Come down,” Leone said.

“Why come down? I’m giving you an order!” shouted Hendricks.

Silence. Hendricks lowered the transmitter. He looked carefully around him. The entrance was just ahead almost at his feet. He lowered the antenna and fastened the transmitter to his belt. Carefully, he gripped his gun with both hands. He moved forward a step at a time. If they could see him, they knew he was starting toward the entrance. He closed his eyes for a moment.

Then he put his foot on the first step that led downward.

Two Davids came up at him, their faces identical and expressionless. He blasted them into particles. More came rushing silently up, a whole pack of them. They were all exactly the same.

Hendricks turned and raced back, away from the bunker, back toward the rise.

At the top of the rise, Tasso and Klaus were firing down. The small claws were already streaking up toward them, shining metal spheres racing frantically through the ash. But they had no time to think about that. They both knelt down, aiming at the bunker entrance, their guns aimed firmly at the approaching threat.

The Davids were coming out in groups, clutching their teddy bears, their thin knobby legs pumping as they ran up the steps to the surface. Hendricks fired into the main body of them. They burst apart, wheels and springs flying in all directions. He fired again through the mist of particles.

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A giant lumbering figure rose in the bunker entrance, tall and swaying. Hendricks paused, amazed. It was a man, a soldier with one leg, supporting himself with a crutch.

“Major!” Tasso’s voice came. More firing. The huge figure moved forward, Davids swarming around it. Hendricks broke out of his frozen state. It was the First Variety. The Wounded Soldier.

He aimed and fired. The soldier burst into bits, parts and relays flying. Now many Davids were out on the flat ground away from the bunker. He fired again and again, moving slowly back, half-crouching and aiming.

From the rise, Klaus fired down. The side of the rise was alive with claws making their way up. Hendricks retreated toward the rise, running and crouching. Tasso had left Klaus and was circling slowly to the right, moving away from the rise.

A David slipped toward him, its small white face expressionless, brown hair hanging down in its eyes. It bent over suddenly, opening its arms. Its teddy bear hurtled down and leaped across the ground, bounding toward him. Hendricks fired. The bear and the David both dissolved. He grinned, blinking. It was like a dream.

“Up here!” Tasso’s voice resounded from a distance. Hendricks made his way toward her. She was over by some columns of concrete, the walls of a ruined building. She was firing past him with the hand pistol Klaus had given her.

“Thanks,” Hendricks said. He joined her, grasping for breath. She pulled him back behind the concrete, fumbling at her belt.

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“Close your eyes!” She unfastened a globe from her waist. Rapidly, she unscrewed the cap, locking it into place. “Close your eyes and get down.”

She threw the bomb. It sailed in an arc, an expert toss, rolling and bouncing to the entrance of the bunker. Two Wounded Soldiers stood uncertainly by the brick pile. More Davids poured from behind them, out onto the plain. One of the Wounded Soldiers moved toward the bomb, stooping awkwardly down to pick it up.

The bomb went off. The concussion whirled Hendricks around, throwing him onto his face. A hot wind rolled over him. Dimly he saw Tasso standing behind the columns, firing slowly and methodically at the Davids, coming out of the raging clouds of white fire.

Back along the rise, Klaus struggled with a ring of claws circling around him. He retreated, blasting at them, and moving back, trying to break through the ring.

Hendricks struggled to his feet. His head ached. He could hardly see. Everything was hammering him, raging and whirling. His right arm would not move.

Tasso pulled back toward him. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“Klaus — He’s still up there,” Hendricks said.

“Come on!” Tasso dragged Hendricks back, away from the columns. Hendricks shook his head, trying to clear it. Tasso led him rapidly away, her eyes intense and bright, watching for claws that had escaped the blast.

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One David came out of the rolling clouds of flame. Tasso blasted it. No more appeared.

“But Klaus. What about him?” Hendricks stopped, standing unsteadily. “He’s still out there.”

“Come on!” barked Tasso.

They retreated, moving farther and farther away from the bunker. A few small claws followed them for a little while and then gave up, turning back and going back to where they came.

At last, Tasso stopped. “We can stop here and catch our breath.”

Hendricks sat down on some heaps of debris. He wiped his neck, gasping. “We left Klaus back there.”

Tasso said nothing. She opened her gun, sliding a fresh round of blast cartridges into place.

Hendricks stared at her, dazed. “You left him back there on purpose.”

Tasso snapped the gun together. She studied the heaps of rubble around them, her face expressionless, as if she were watching for something.

“What is it?” Hendricks demanded. “What are you looking for? Is something coming?” He shook his head, trying to understand. What was she doing? What was she waiting for? He could see nothing. Ash lay all around them, ash and ruins. Occasional stark tree trunks, without leaves or branches. “What are you doing?”

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Tasso cut him off. “Be still.” Her eyes narrowed. Suddenly her gun came up. Hendricks turned, following her gaze.

Back from the way they had come a figure appeared. The figure walked unsteadily toward them. Its clothes were torn. It limped as it made its way along, going very slowly and carefully. Stopping now and then, resting, and getting its strength. Once it almost fell. It stood for a moment, trying to steady itself. Then it continued forward.

It was Klaus.

Hendricks stood up. “Klaus!” He started going toward him. “How the hell did you make it through?”

Tasso fired. Hendricks swung back. She fired again, the blast passing him, a searing line of heat. The beam caught Klaus in the chest. He exploded, gears and wheels flying. For a moment he continued to walk. Then he swayed back and forth. He crashed to the ground; his arms flung out. A few more wheels rolled away.

Silence.

Tasso turned to Hendricks. “Now you understand why he killed Rudi.”

Hendricks sat down again slowly. He shook his head. He was numb. He could not think.

“Do you see?” Tasso said. “Do you understand?”

Hendricks said nothing. Everything was slipping away from him, faster and faster. Darkness, rolling and plucking at him.

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Hendricks closed his eyes and then after a moment opened them slowly. His body ached all over. He tried to sit up, but needles of pain shot through his arm and shoulder. He gasped.

“Don’t try to get up,” Tasso said. She bent down, putting her cold hand against his forehead.

It was night. A few stars glinted above, shining through the drifting clouds of ash. Hendricks lay back, his teeth locked. Tasso watched him impassively. She had built a fire with some wood and weeds. The fire licked feebly, hissing at a metal cup suspended over it. Everything was silent. Unmoving darkness, beyond the fire.

“So, *he* was the Second Variety,” Hendricks murmured.

“I had always thought so,” murmured Tasso.

“Why didn’t you destroy him sooner?” he wanted to know.

“You held me back.” Tasso crossed to the fire to look into the metal cup. “Coffee. It’ll be ready to drink in a while.”

She came back and sat down beside him. Presently she opened her pistol and began to disassemble the firing mechanism, studying it intently.

“This is a beautiful gun,” Tasso said, half-aloud. “The construction is superb.”

“What about them? The claws?” Hendricks asked.

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“The concussion from the bomb put most of them out of action. They’re delicate. Highly organized, I suppose,” Tasso answered.

“The Davids, too?” Hendricks asked.

“Yes.”

“How did you happen to have a bomb like that?” Hendricks asked.

Tasso shrugged. “We designed it. You shouldn’t underestimate our technology, Major. Without such a bomb you and I would no longer exist.”

“Very useful,” Hendricks said.

Tasso stretched out her legs, warming her feet in the heat of the fire. “It surprised me that you did not seem to understand the situation after Klaus killed Rudi. Why did you think he did it?”

“I told you. I thought he was afraid,” Hendricks said.

“Really? You know, Major, for a little while I suspected you. Because you wouldn’t let me kill him. I thought you might be protecting him.” She laughed.

“Are we safe here?” Hendricks asked presently.

“For a while. Until they get reinforcements from some other area.” Tasso began to clean the interior of the gun with a bit of rag. She finished and pushed the mechanism back into place. She closed the gun, running her finger along the barrel.

“We were lucky,” Hendricks murmured.

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“Yes. Very lucky,” Tasso said.

“Thanks for pulling me away,” Hendricks said appreciatively.

Tasso did not answer. She glanced up at him, her eyes bright in the firelight. Hendricks examined his arm. He could not move his fingers. His whole side seemed numb. Deep inside was a dull steady ache.

“How do you feel?” Tasso asked.

“My arm is damaged.”

“Anything else?” Tasso asked.

“Internal injuries,” Hendricks answered.

“You didn’t get down when the bomb went off.” Tasso walked away to check the coffee.

Hendricks said nothing. He watched Tasso pour the coffee from the cup into a flat metal pan. She brought it over to him.

“Thanks.” He struggled to straighten up enough to drink the coffee. It was hard to swallow. His insides turned over and he pushed the pan away. “That’s all I can drink now.”

Tasso drank the rest. Time passed. The clouds of ash moved across the dark sky above them. Hendricks rested, his mind blank. After a while he became aware that Tasso was standing over him, gazing down at him.

“What is it?” he murmured.

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“Do you feel any better?” asked Tasso.

“Some,” he answered.

“You know, Major, if I hadn’t dragged you away, they would have got you. You would be dead. Like Rudi,” Tasso said.

“I know,” Hendricks muttered.

“Do you want to know why I brought you out? I could have left you. I could have left you there.”

“Why did you bring me out?” he replied.

“Because we have to get away from here.” Tasso stirred the fire with a stick, peering calmly down into it. “No human being can live here. When their reinforcements come, we won’t have a chance. I’ve pondered about it while you were unconscious. We have perhaps three hours before they come.”

“And you expect me to get us away?” Hendricks asked.

“That’s right. I expect you to get us out of here,” Tasso answered.

“Why me?” Hendricks asked.

“Because I don’t know any other way to escape.” Her eyes shone at him in the half-light, bright and steady. “If you can’t get us out of here, they’ll kill us within three hours. I see nothing else ahead. Well, Major? What are you going to do? I’ve been waiting all night. While you were unconscious, I sat here, waiting and listening. It’s almost dawn. The night is almost over.”

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Hendricks considered. "It's curious," he said at last.

"Curious?" she said.

"That you should think I can get us out of here. I wonder what you think I can do," Hendricks said.

"Can you get us to the Moon Base?" she asked.

"The Moon Base? How?" replied Hendricks.

"There must be some way," she said.

Hendricks shook his head. "No. There's no way that I know of."

Tasso said nothing. For a moment her steady gaze wavered. She ducked her head, turning abruptly away. She scrambled to her feet. "More coffee?"

"No."

"Suit yourself." Tasso drank silently. He could not see her face. He lay back against the ground, deep in thought, trying to concentrate. It was hard to think. His head still hurt. The numbing daze still hung over him.

"There might be one way," he said suddenly.

"Oh?" Tasso replied.

"How soon is dawn?" he asked.

"Two hours. The sun will be coming up shortly," Tasso said.

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“There’s supposed to be a ship near here. I’ve never seen it. But I know it exists,” he said.

“What kind of a ship?” Her voice was sharp.

“A rocket cruiser,” Hendricks said.

“Will it take us to the Moon Base?” she asked.

“It’s supposed to. In case of emergency.” He rubbed his forehead.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“My head. It’s hard to think. I can hardly concentrate. The bomb created too much damage.”

“Is the ship near here?” Tasso slid beside him, settling down on her haunches. “How far is it? Where is it?”

“I’m trying to think,” Hendricks said.

Her fingers dug into his arm. “Is it nearby?” Her voice was like iron. “Where would it be? Would they store it hidden underground?”

“Yes. In a storage locker.”

“How do we find it? Is it marked? Is there a code marker to identify it?”

Hendricks concentrated. “No. No markings. No code symbol.”

“What, then?” Tasso grew excited.

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“There’s a sign,” Hendricks said.

“What sort of sign?”

Hendricks did not answer. In the flickering light, his eyes were glazed, two sightless orbs. Tasso’s fingers dug into his arm.

“What sort of sign? What is it?”

“I — I can’t think. Let me rest.”

“All right.” She let go and stood up. Hendricks lay back against the ground, his eyes closed. Tasso walked away from him, her hands in her pockets. She kicked a rock out of her way and stood staring up at the sky. The night blackness was already beginning to fade into gray. The morning was coming.

Tasso gripped her pistol and walked around the fire in a circle, back and forth. On the ground Major Hendricks lay, his eyes closed, unmoving. The grayness rose in the sky, higher and higher. The landscape became visible, fields of ash stretching out in all directions. Ash and ruins of buildings, a wall here and there, heaps of concrete, the naked trunk of a tree.

The air was cold and sharp. Somewhere a long way off a bird made a few bleak sounds.

Hendricks stirred. He opened his eyes. “Is it dawn? Already?”

“Yes,” Tasso answered.

Hendricks sat up. “You wanted to know something. You were asking me.”

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“Do you remember now?” Tasso asked.

“Yes,” Hendricks answered.

“What is it?” She tensed. “What?” she repeated sharply.

“A well. A ruined well. It’s in a storage locker under a well,” Hendricks said.

“A well.” Tasso relaxed. “Then we’ll find a well.” She looked at her watch. “We have about an hour, Major. Do you think we can find it in an hour?”

“Give me a hand up,” Hendricks said.

Tasso put her pistol away and helped him to his feet. “This is going to be difficult.”

“Yes, it is.” Hendricks set his lips tightly. “I don’t think we’re going to go very far.”

They began to walk. The early sun cast a modest warmth upon them. The land was flat and barren, stretching out gray and lifeless as far as they could see. A few birds sailed silently, far above them, circling slowly.

“Do you see anything?” Hendricks asked. “Any claws?”

“No. Not yet,” Tasso replied.

They passed through some ruins, upright concrete, bricks, and a cement foundation. Rats scuttled away. Tasso jumped back warily.

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“This used to be a town,” Hendricks said. “A provincial village. Where we are now was once a world-renowned wine country.”

They came onto a ruined street, weeds and cracks crisscrossing it. Over to the right, a stone chimney stuck up.

“Be careful,” he warned her.

A pit yawned, exposing an open basement. Ragged ends of pipes jutted up, twisted and bent. They passed part of a house, with a bathtub turned on its side, a broken chair, and a few spoons and bits of China dishes. In the center of the street, the ground had sunk away. The depression was filled with weeds and debris and bones.

“Over here,” Hendricks murmured.

“This way?” asked Tasso.

“To the right,” Hendricks answered.

They passed the remains of a heavy-duty tank. Hendricks’ belt counter clicked ominously. The tank had been radiation blasted. A few feet from the tank a mummified body lay sprawled out, mouth open. Beyond the road was a flat field. Stones and weeds, and bits of broken glass.

“There,” Hendricks said.

A stone well jutted up, sagging and broken. A few boards lay across it. Most of the well had sunk into rubble. Hendricks walked unsteadily toward it, Tasso beside him.

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“Are you certain about this?” Tasso said. “This doesn’t look like anything.”

“I’m sure.” Hendricks sat down at the edge of the well, his teeth locked. His breath came quickly. He wiped the perspiration from his face. “This was arranged so the senior command officer could get away if anything happened. If the bunker fell.”

“That was you?” asked Tasso.

“Yes,” Hendricks said.

“Where is the ship? Is it here?” asked Tasso.

“We’re standing on it.” Hendricks ran his hands over the surface of the well’s stones. “The eye-lock responds to me, not to anybody else. It’s my ship. Or it was supposed to be.”

There was a sharp click. Presently they heard a low grating sound from below them.

“Step back,” Hendricks said. He and Tasso moved away from the well.

A section of the ground slid back. A metal frame pushed slowly up through the ash, shoving bricks and weeds out of the way. The action ceased as the ship nosed into view.

“There it is,” Hendricks said.

The ship was small. It rested quietly, suspended in its mesh frame, like a blunt needle. A rain of ash sifted down into the dark cavity from which the ship had been raised. Hendricks made his way over to it. He mounted the mesh and

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unscrewed the hatch, pulling it back. Inside the ship the control banks and the pressure seat were visible.

Tasso came and stood beside him, gazing into the ship. "I'm not accustomed to rocket piloting," she said, after a while.

Hendricks glanced at her. "I'll do the piloting."

"Will you? There's only one seat, Major. I can see it's built to carry only a single person."

Hendricks' breathing changed. He studied the interior of the ship intently. Tasso was right. There was only one seat. The ship was built to carry only one person. "I see," he said slowly. "And I suppose that the one person is you."

She nodded, "Of course."

"Why?" Hendricks asked.

"Because *you* can't go. You might not live through the trip. You're injured. You probably wouldn't get there."

"An interesting point. But you see, I know where the Moon Base is. And you don't. You might fly around for months and not find it without knowing what to look for. It's well hidden."

"I'll have to take my chances. Maybe I won't find it. Not by myself. But I think you'll give me all the information I need. Your life depends on it," Tasso said.

"How?" Hendricks asked.

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“If I find the Moon Base in time, perhaps I can get them to send a ship back to pick you up. *If* I find the Base in time. If not, then you do not have a chance. I imagine there are supplies on the ship. They will last me long enough to get there I assume.”

Hendricks moved quickly. But his injured arm betrayed him. Tasso ducked, sliding lithely aside. Her hand came up, lightning fast. Hendricks saw the gun butt coming. He tried to ward off the blow, but she was too fast. The metal butt struck against the side of his head, just above his ear. Numbing pain rushed through him. Pain and rolling clouds of blackness. He sank down, sliding to the ground.

Dimly, he was aware that Tasso was standing over him, kicking him with her toe.

“Major! Wake up,” she said.

He opened his eyes, groaning.

“Listen to me.” She bent down, the gun pointed at his face. “I have to hurry. There isn’t much time left. The ship is ready to go, but you must tell me the information I need before I leave.”

Hendricks shook his head, trying to clear it.

“Hurry up! Where is the Moon Base? How do I find it? What do I look for?” asked Tasso.

Hendricks said nothing.

“Answer me!” screamed Tasso.

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“Sorry,” whispered Hendricks.

“Major, the ship is loaded with provisions. I can coast for weeks. I’ll find the Base eventually. And in a half hour, you’ll be dead. Your only chance of survival is to tell me where the Moon Base is.” She broke off.

Along the slope, by some crumbling ruins, something moved. Something in the ash. Tasso turned quickly, aiming. She fired. A puff of flame leaped out of the ash. Something scuttled away, rolling across the ashen floor. She fired again. The claw burst apart, wheels flying.

“See?” Tasso said. “A scout. It won’t be long.”

“When you get there, you’ll send them back here to get me?” he asked.

“Yes. As soon as possible,” she answered.

Hendricks looked up at her. He studied her intently. “You’re telling me the truth?” A strange expression had come over his face, an avid hunger. “You *will* come back for me? You *will* get me back to the Moon Base?”

“I’ll get you to the Moon Base. But tell me where it is! There’s only a little time left.”

“All right.” Hendricks picked up a piece of rock, pulling himself to a sitting position. “Watch.”

Hendricks began to scratch in the ash. Tasso stood by him, watching the motion of the rock. Hendricks was sketching a crude lunar map.

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“This is the Appenine range. Here is the Crater of Archimedes. The Moon Base is beyond the end of the Appenine, about two hundred miles. I don’t know exactly where. No one on Terra knows. But when you’re over the Appenine, signal with one red flare and a green flare, followed by two red flares in quick succession. The Base monitor will record your signal. The Base is under the surface, of course. They’ll guide you down with magnetic grapples.”

“And the controls? Can I operate them?” asked Tasso.

“The controls are virtually automatic. All you have to do is give the right signal at the right time.”

“I will,” she said.

“The seat absorbs most of the take-off shock. Air and temperature are automatically controlled. The ship will leave Terra and travel into free space. It will line itself up with the moon, falling into an orbit around it, about a hundred miles above the surface. The orbit will carry you over the Base. When you’re in the region of the Appenine, release the signal rockets.”

Tasso slid into the ship and lowered herself into the pressure seat. The arm locks folded automatically around her. She fingered the controls. “Too bad you’re not going, Major. All this put here for you, and you can’t make the trip.”

“Leave me the pistol,” he said.

Tasso pulled the pistol from her belt. She held it in her hand, weighing it thoughtfully. “Don’t go too far from this location. It’ll be hard to find you, as it is.”

“No, I won’t move. I’ll stay here by the well.”

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Tasso gripped the take-off switch, running her fingers over the smooth metal. “A beautiful ship, Major. Well built. I admire your workmanship. You people have always done clever work. You build fine things. Your work, your creations, are your greatest achievement.”

“Give me the pistol,” Hendricks said impatiently, holding out his hand. He struggled to his feet.

“Goodbye, Major.” Tasso tossed the pistol past Hendricks. The pistol clattered against the ground, bouncing, and rolling away. Hendricks hurried after it. He bent down, snatching it up.

The hatch of the ship clanged shut. The bolts fell into place. Hendricks made his way back. The inner door was being sealed. He raised the pistol unsteadily.

There was a shattering roar. The ship burst up from its metal cage, fusing the mesh behind it. Hendricks cringed, pulling back. The ship shot up into the rolling clouds of ash, disappearing into the sky.

Hendricks stood watching a long time until even the streamer had dissipated. Nothing stirred. The morning air was chilled and silent. He began to walk aimlessly back the way they had come. Better to keep moving around. It would be a long time before help came — if it came at all.

He searched his pockets until he found a package of cigarettes. He lit one grimly. They had all wanted cigarettes from him. But cigarettes were scarce.

SECOND VARIETY

A lizard slithered by him, through the ash. He halted, rigid. The lizard disappeared. Above, the sun rose higher in the sky. Some flies landed on a flat rock to one side of him. Hendricks kicked at them with his foot.

It was getting hot. Sweat trickled down his face, into his collar. His mouth was dry.

Presently he stopped walking and sat down on some debris. He unfastened his medicine kit and swallowed a few narcotic capsules. He looked around him. Where was he?

Something lay ahead. Stretched out on the ground. Silent and unmoving.

Hendricks drew his gun quickly. It looked like a man. Then he remembered. It was the remains of Klaus. The Second Variety. It lay where Tasso had blasted him. He could see wheels and relays and metal parts strewn around on the ash. Glittering and sparkling in the sunlight.

Hendricks got to his feet and walked over. He nudged the inert form with his foot, turning it over a little. He could see the metal hull, the aluminum ribs, and struts. More wiring fell out. Like viscera. Heaps of wiring, switches, and relays. Endless motors and rods.

He bent down. The brain cage had been smashed by the fall. The artificial brain was visible. He gazed at it. A maze of circuits. Miniature tubes. Wires as fine as hair. He touched the brain cage. It swung aside. The type plate was visible. Hendricks studied the plate. He blanched when he saw it.

IV — IV.

SECOND VARIETY

For a long time, he stared at the plate. Fourth Variety. Not the Second. They had been wrong. There were more types. Not just three. Many more, perhaps. At least four. Then Klaus wasn't the Second Variety.

But if Klaus wasn't the Second Variety —

Suddenly he tensed. Something was coming, walking through the ash beyond the hill. What was it? He strained to see. Figures. The figures were slowly approaching, making their way through the ash.

They were coming toward him.

Hendricks crouched quickly, raising his gun. Sweat dripped into his eyes. He fought the panic rising inside him, as the figures neared.

The first was a David. The David saw him and increased its pace. The others hurried behind it. A second David. A third. Three Davids, all alike, coming toward him silently, without expression, their thin legs rising and falling. Clutching their teddy bears.

He aimed and fired. The first two Davids dissolved into particles. The third came into view. And then the figure behind it. Climbing silently toward him across the gray ash. A Wounded Soldier, towering over the David.

And behind the Wounded Soldier came two Tassos, walking side by side. Heavy belt, Russian army pants, shirt, long hair. The same figure he had seen only moments before sitting in the pressure seat of the ship. Two slim, silent figures, both identical Tassos.

SECOND VARIETY

They were rapidly approaching. The David bent down suddenly, dropping its teddy bear. The bear raced across the ground. Automatically, Hendricks' fingers tightened around the trigger. The bear was gone, dissolved into mist. The two Tasso Types moved on, expressionless, walking side by side, through the gray ash.

When they were almost upon him, Hendricks raised the pistol waist high and fired.

The two Tassos dissolved. But already a new group was coming up the rise, five or six Tassos, all identical, a line of them coming rapidly toward him.

He sadly realized he had given her the ship and the signal code. Because of him, she was on her way to the moon, to the Moon Base. He had made it possible.

He had been right about the bomb, after all. It had been designed with knowledge of the other types, the David Type, the Wounded Soldier Type, and the Klaus Type. They were not designed by human beings. They had been designed by one of the underground factories, apart from all human contact.

The line of Tassos came up to him. Hendricks braced himself, watching them calmly. The familiar face, the belt, the heavy shirt, the bomb carefully in place.

The bomb —aimed at the other types.

As the Tassos reached for him, a last ironic thought drifted through Hendricks' mind. He felt better, thinking about it. The bomb. Made by the Second Variety to destroy the other varieties. Made for that end alone.

They were already beginning to design weapons to use against each other.