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MEN LIKE US

By David Drake

There was a toad crucified against them at the head of the pass. Decades of cooking in the blue haze from the east had left it withered but incorruptible. It remained, even now that the haze was only a memory. The three travelers squatted down before the talisman and stared back at it.

"The village can't be far from here," Smith said at last. "I'll go down tomorrow."

Ssu-ma shrugged and argued, "Why waste time? We can all go down together."

"Time we've got," said Kozinski, playing absently with his ribs as he eyed the toad. "A lot of the stories we've been told come from ignorance, from fear. There may be no more truth to this one than to many of the others. We have a duty, but we have a duty as well not to disrupt needlessly. We'll wait for you and watch."

Smith chuckled wryly. "What sort of men would there be in the world," he said, "if it weren't for men like us?"

All three of them laughed, but no one bothered to finish their old joke.

The trail was steep and narrow. The stream was now bubbling ten meters below, but in springtime it would fill its sharp gorge with a torrent as cold as the snows that spawned it. Coming down the valley, Smith had a good view of Moseby when he had eased around the last facet of rock above the town. It sprawled in the angle of the creek and the river into which the creek plunged. In a niche across the creek from the houses was a broad stone building, lighted by slit windows at second-story level. Its only entrance was an armored door. The building could have been a prison or a fortress were it not for the power lines running from it, mostly to the smelter at the riverside. A plume of vapor overhung its slate roof.

One of the pair of guards at the door of the power plant was morosely surveying the opposite side of the gorge for want of anything better to do. He was the first to notice Smith. His jaw dropped. The traveler waved to him. The guard blurted something to his companion and threw a switch beside the door.

What happened then frightened Smith as he thought nothing in the world could frighten him again: An air raid siren on the roof of the power plant sounded, rising into a wail that shook echoes from the gorge. Men and women darted into the streets, some of them armed, but Smith did not see the people, these people, and he did not fear anything they could do to him.

Then the traveler's mind was back in the present, a smile on his face and nothing in his hands but an oak staff worn by the miles of earth and rock it had butted against. He continued down into the village, past the fences and latrines of the nearest of the houses. Men with crossbows met him there, but they did not touch him, only motioned the traveler onward. The rest of the townsfolk gathered in

an open area in the center of the town. It separated the detached houses on the east side from the row of flimsier structures built along the river. The latter obviously served as barracks, taverns, and brothels for bargees and smelter workers. The row buildings had no windows facing east, and even their latrines must have been dug on the riverside. A few people joined the crowd from them and from the smelter itself, but only a few.

"That's close enough," said the foremost of those awaiting the traveler. The local was a big man with a pink scalp. It shone through the long wisps of white hair that he brushed carefully back over it. His jacket and trousers were of wool, dyed blue so that they nearly matched the shirt of ancient polyester he wore underneath. "Where have you come from?"

"Just about everywhere, one time or another," Smith answered with an engaging grin. "Dubuque, originally, but that was a long time ago."

"Don't play games with the chief," hissed a somewhat younger man with a cruel face and a similar uniform. "You came over the mountains, and nobody comes from the Hot Lands."

Chief of police, Smith marveled as he connected the title and the shirts now worn as regalia.

Aloud he said, "When's the last time anybody from here walked over the mountains? Ever?"

Bearded faces went hard. The traveler continued, "A hundred years ago, two hundred. It was too hot for you to go anywhere that side of the hills, but not now. Maybe I'll never sire children of my own, but I never needed that. I needed to see the world, and I have done that, friends."

"Strip him," the chief said flatly.

Smith did not wait for the grim-looking men to force him. He shrugged off his pack and handed it

to the nearest of the guards armed with crossbows and hand-forged swords. He said, "Gently with it, friend. There's some of it that's fragile, and I need it to trade for room and board the next while." He began to unhook his leather vest.

Six of the men besides the chief wore the remnants of police uniforms over their jackets. They were all older-not lean warriors like the crossbowmen-but they carried firearms. Five of them had M16 rifles. The anodized finish of the receivers had been polished down to the aluminum by ages of diligent ignorance. The sixth man had a disposable rocket launcher, certain proof that the villagers here had at some time looted an army base-or a guardroom.

"Just a boy from the Midwest," Smith continued pleasantly, pulling out the tails of his woolen shirt. "I wanted to see New York City, can you believe that? But we'll none of live forever, will we?"

He laid the shirt, folded from habit, on his vest and began unlacing his boots of caribou leather. "There's a crater there now, and the waves still glow blue if there's even an overcast to dim the sun. And your skin prickles."

The traveler grinned. "You won't go there, and I won't go there again, but I've seen it, where the observation deck of the World Trade Towers was just about the closest mortal man got to heaven with his feet on man's earth"

"We've heard the stories," the chief grunted. He carried a stainless-steel revolver in a holster of more recent vintage.

"Trousers?" Smith asked, cocking an eyebrow at the women in dull-colored dresses.

The chief nodded curtly. "When a man comes from the Hot Lands, he has no secrets from us," he said. "Any of us."

"Well, I might do the same in your case," the traveler

agreed, tugging loose the laces closing the woolen trousers, "but I can tell you there's little enough truth to the rumors of what walks the wastelands." He pulled the garment down and stepped out of it.

Smith's body was wiry, the muscles tight and thickly covered by hair. If he was unusual at all, it was in that he had been circumcised-no longer a common operation in a world that had better uses for a surgeon's time. Then a woman noticed Smith's left palm, never hidden but somehow never clearly seen until that moment. She screamed and pointed. Others leveled their weapons, buzzing as a hive does when a bear nears it.

Very carefully, his face as blank as the leather of his pack, Smith held his left hand toward the crowd and spread his fingers. Ridges of gnarled flesh stood out as if they had been paraffin refrozen a moment after being liquefied. "Yes, I burned it," the traveler said evenly, "getting too close to something the-something the Blast was too close to. And it'll never heal, no. But it hasn't gotten worse, either, and that was years ago. It's not the sort of world where I could complain to have lost so little, hey?"

"Put it down," the chief said abruptly. Then, to the guard who was searching the pack. "Weapons?"

"Only this," the guard said, holding up a sling and a dozen dense pebbles fitted to its leather pocket.

"There's a little folding knife in my pants pocket." Smith volunteered. "I use it to skin the rabbits I take."

"Then put your clothes on," the chief ordered, and the crowd's breath eased. "You can stay at the inn, since you've truck enough to pay for it"-he nodded toward the careful pile the guard had made of Smith's trading goods-"and perhaps you can find girls on Front Street to service you as well. There's none of that east of the Assembly here, I warn you. Before you do anything else, though, you talk to me and the boys in private at the station."

The traveler nodded and began dressing without embarrassment.

The police and their guards escorted Smith silently, acting as if they were still uncertain of his status. Their destination was a two-story building of native stone. It had probably been the town hall before the Blast. It was now the chiefs residence as well as the government's headquarters. Despite that, the building was far less comfortable than many of the newer structures that had been designed to be heated by the stoves and lighted by lamps and windows. In an office whose plywood paneling had been carefully preserved-despite its shoddy gloominess-the governing oligarchs of the town questioned Smith.

They were probing and businesslike. Smith answered honestly and as fully as he could. Weapons caches? Looted by survivors or rotted in the intervening centuries. Food depots? A myth, seeded by memories of supermarkets and brought to flower in the decades of famine and cold that slew ten times as many folk as the Blast had slain directly. Scrap metal for the furnaces? By the millions of tons, but there would be no way to transport it across the mountains. And, besides, metals were often hot even at this remove from the Blast.

"All right," said the chief at last, shutting the handbook of waxed boards on which he had been making notes. The room had become chilly about the time they had had to light the sooty naphtha lamp. "If we think of more during the night, we can ask in the morning." His eyes narrowed. "How long are you expecting to stay?"

Smith shrugged. "A few days. I just like to . . . wander. I really don't have any desire to do anything else." He raised his pack by the straps and added, "Can one of you direct me to your inn?"

Carter, the youngest of the six policemen, stood. He was a blocky man with black hair and a pepper-and-salt beard. He had conducted much of the questioning himself. "I'll take him," he said. Unlike his colleagues, he carried a heavy fighting knife in addition to his automatic rifle. He held the door open for Smith.

The night sky was patchy. When the silver moon was clear, there was more light outside than the bud of naphtha cast within. The pall of steam above the power plant bulged and waned like the mantle of an octopus. Tiny azure sparks traced the power lines across the bridge and down into the smelter.

Smith thumbed at the plant. "They made light from electricity, you know? Before the Blast. You ever try that?"

His guide looked at him sharply. "Not like they did. Things glow, but they burn up when we can't keep all the air away from 'em. But you'd be smarter not to ask questions, boy. And maybe you'd be smarter to leave here a little sooner than you planned. Not to be unfriendly, but if you talk to us, you'll talk to others. And we don't much care for talk about Moseby. It has a way of spreading where it shouldn't."

The policeman turned through an open gate and up a graveled pathway. Rosy light leaked around the shutters of a large building on the edge of the Assembly. Sound and warm air bloomed into the night when he opened the door. In the mild weather the anteroom door was open within.

"Carter!" shouted a big man at the bar of the taproom. "Just in time to buy us a round!" Then he saw Smith and blinked, and the dozen or so men of the company grew quieter than the hiss of the fire.

"Friends, I don't bite," said Smith with a smile, "but I do drink and I will sleep. If I can come to an agreement with our host here, that is," he added, beaming toward the barman.

"Modell's the name," said the tall, knob-jointed local. Neither he nor the traveler offered to shake hands, but he returned the other's smile with a briefer, professional one of his own. "Let's see what you have to trade."

The men at the bar made room as Smith arranged his small stock on the mahogany. First the traveler set out an LP record, still sealed in plastic. Modell's lips moved silently as his finger hovered a millimeter above the title. "What's a 'Cher,'?" he finally asked.

"The lady's name," said Smith. "She pronounced it `share.'" Knowing grunts from the men around him chorused the explanation. "You've electricity here, I see. Perhaps there's a phonograph?"

"Naw, and the power's not trained enough yet anyhow," Modell said regretfully. His eyes were full of the jacket photograph. "It heats the smelters is all, and--"

"Modell, you're supposed to be trading, not running your mouth," the policeman interrupted. "Get on with it."

"Well, if not the record, then--" Smith said.

"I might make you an offer on the picture," one of the locals broke in.

"I won't separate them, I'm afraid," Smith rejoined, "and I won't have the record where it can't be used properly. These may be more useful, though I can't guarantee them after the time they've been sitting" And he laid a red-and-green box of .30-30 cartridges on the wood.

"The chief keeps all the guns in Moseby besides these," said Carter, patting the plastic stock of his M16. "It'll stay that way. And there's a righteous plenty of ammunition for them already."

"Fine, fine," said Smith, unperturbed, reaching again into his pack. He removed a plastic box that whirred until a tiny green hand reached out of the mechanism to shut itself off. It frightened the onlookers as much as Smith's own radiation scars had. The traveler thoughtfully hid the toy again in his pack before taking out his final item, a GI compass.

"It always shows north, unless you're too close to iron," Smith said as he demonstrated. "You can turn the base to any number of degrees and take a sighting through the slot there, but I'll want more than a night's lodging for it."

"Our tokens are good up and down the river," one of the locals suggested, ringing a small brass disk on the bar. It had been struck with a complex pattern of lightning bolts on one side and the number 50 on the other. "You can redeem 'em for iron ingots at dockside," he explained, thumbing toward the river. "Course, they discount 'em the farther away you get."

"I don't follow rivers a great deal," the traveler lied with a smile. "Let's say that I get room

and board-and all I, care to drink-for a week"

The chaffering was good-natured and brief, concluding with three days' room and board, or-and-here Smith nodded toward the stern-faced Carter-so much shorter a time as he actually stayed in the village. In addition, Smith would have all the provisions he requested for his journey and a round for the house now. When Modell took the traveler's hand, extended to seal the bargain, the whole room cheered. The demands for mugs of the sharp, potent beer drew the innkeeper when he would far rather have pored over his pre-Blast acquisition-marvelous, though of scant use to him. The dealing over, Smith carried his mug to one of the stools before the fire. Sausages, dried vegetables, and a

pair of lanterns hung from the roof joists. Deer and elk antlers were pegged to the pine paneling all around the room, and above the mantelpiece glowered the skull of a rat larger than a German shepherd.

"I wonder that a man has the courage to walk alone out there," suggested a heavy-set local who tamped his pipe with the ball of his thumb, "what with the muties and all."

Smith chuckled, swigged his beer, and gestured with the mug at the rat skull. "Like that, you mean? But that's old. The giant rats were nasty enough, I have no doubt, but they weren't any stronger than the wolves, and they were a good deal stupider. Maybe you'd find a colony now and again in ruins downwind of a Strike, but they'll not venture far into the light, and the ones that're left-not many-are nothing that a slingstone or arrow can't cure if needs be." He paused and smiled. "Besides, their meat's sweet enough, I'm told."

Despite the fire, the other faces in the circle went pale. Smith's eyes registered the reaction while he continued to smile. "Now travelers tell stories, you know," he said, "and there's an art to listening to them. There's little enough to joke about on the trail. So I have to do it here." His face went serious for a moment, and he added, "But I'll tell you this and swear to the truth of it: When I was near what may have been Cleveland, I thought I'd caught a mouse rummaging in my pack. And when I fetched it out, it was no bigger than a mouse, and its legs were folded under it so it could hop and scurry the way a mouse can. But its head-there was a horn just there"-the traveler touched the tip of his nose-"and another littler one just behind it. I figure some zoo keeper before the Blast would have called me a liar if I'd told him what his rhinos would breed to, don't you think?"

He drank deep. The company buzzed at the wonder and the easy fellowship of the man who had seen it.

"Scottie meant the half-men, didn't you, Scottie?" said a bulky man whose mustache and the beard fringing his mouth were dark with beer. He mimed an extra head with his clenched fist. "Monsters like that in the Hot Lands."

Smith's head bobbed sagely against the chorus of grim assent from the other men. "Sure, I know what you mean," he said. "Two-headed men? Girls with an extra pair of legs coming out of their bellies?"

Sounds of horror and agreement.

"You see," the traveler went on, "the Blast changed things, but you know as well as I do that it didn't change them to be easier for men. There've always been children born as . . . monsters, if you will. Maybe more born nowadays than there were before the Blast, but they were born, and I've seen books that were old at the Blast that talk of them. And they don't live now, my friends. Life everywhere is too hard, and those poor innocents remind folk of the Blast, and who would remember that?"

He looked around the room. The eyes that met his dropped swiftly. "There's been some born here in Moseby, haven't there?" Smith asked, his words thrusting like knife blades and no doubt in them.

"Where are they now?"

The man they had called Scottie bit through the reed stem of his pipe. He spluttered, and the front legs of his stool clacked on the puncheon floor.

"Say, now, I'm not here to pry," Smith continued swiftly. "What you do is your own business. For my own part, I'd appreciate another mug of this excellent beer."

Chairs scraped in agreement as all the men stood, stretched, and moved to the bar. Modell drew beer smoothly, chalking drinks on the board on the back wall everyone but Smith was a local. The innkeeper even broached a new cask without noticeable delay. Several of the company went out by the rear door and returned, lacing their trousers. There was a brief pause as everyone settled back around the fire. Then Scottie swallowed, scowled, and said belligerently, "All right, what about the Changelings?"

"Pardon?" The traveler's eyes were friendly above the rim of his mug, but there was no comprehension in them.

"Oh, come on!" the local said, flushing in embarrassment. "You know about the Changelings."

Everybody does. The Blast made them. They were men before, but now they glow blue and change their shapes and walk around like skeletons, all bones!" Scottie lowered his eyes and slurped his beer in the silence. At last he repeated. "Everybody knows."

Gently, as if the suggestion did not appear as absurd to him as it suddenly did to everyone else in the room, Smith said, "I've seen some of the Strike Zones. I guess I've said that. There's nothing there, friend. The destruction is total, everything. It isn't likely that anything was created by the Blast."

"The Blast changed things. We can all agree there," said Carter unexpectedly. Eyes turned toward the policeman seated at one corner of the heart. "Random change," Carter continued to muse aloud. "That'll generally mean destruction, yes. But there was a lot of power in the bombs, and a lot of bombs. So much power that . . .

Who knows what they could have done?"

Smith looked at the policeman. He nodded again. "Power, yes. But the chance that the changes, cell by cell, atom by atom, would be . . . not destructive. That's a billion to one against, Mr. Carter."

"Well, the books say there were billions of men in the world before the Blast," the policeman said, spreading the fingers of his left hand, palm upward.

The traveler's scarred left hand mirrored the policeman's. "It's a wide world," he said, "as you must know and I surely do." He drank, smiled again, and said, "You're familiar with bombs, it would seem, friend. I've heard talk in my travels that there was a stockpile of bombs in the mountains around here. Do you know that story?"

Carter looked at Smith with an expression that was terrible in its stillness. "Modell," he said in the silence, "it's time to throw another log on the fire." He paused. The innkeeper scurried to do as directed. "And it's time," the policeman continued, "to talk of other things than the Blast. What sort of game do you find in the Hot Lands, for instance?"

"Well, I snare more than I knock on the head with my sling." Smith began easily, and the room relaxed a little.

They talked and drank late into the night. Smith told of gnarly woods and of following miles of trails worn no higher than a hog's shoulder. The locals replied with tales of their farms in the river bottoms, managed for them by hirelings, and the wealth they drew from shares in the smelter's profits. Few of them actually did any of the heavy, dangerous work of steel production themselves. Moseby was a feudal state, but its basis was the power plant, not land.

When Carter finally left, only Scottie and another local remained in company with Smith and Modell, and the talk grew looser. Finally Scottie wheezed, "They drift in here to Moseby, up the river and down. You're the first across the mountains, boy, I'll tell the world. We put 'em to work in the fields or the smelter, or they crew the barges for us. But they're not Moseby; they're not the Assembly. It's us who've got the power, under the chief and the police, that is. We keep the Light, and then--"

Modell touched the line of Scottie's jaw, silencing him. Scottie's surprise bloomed into awakened fright. "You've had enough tonight, old man," the innkeeper said. "Pook, you, too. Time for you both to get home and for me to get to bed."

"And me," Smith agreed. Modell had already brought out blankets and opened a side bench into a cot. "Though, first I'll take a leak and, say, a walk to settle my head. If you leave the door on the latch?"

Modell nodded dourly. "You've been listening to that fool Howes and his talk of the girls across the Assembly. Him with a wife and six children, too! Well, don't try to bring one back here with you. They should know better, but if one didn't, it'd be the worse for both of you." The innkeeper blew out one of the lamps and moved toward the other.

Smith urinated in the open ditch behind the building, letting his eyes readjust to the moonglow. Then he began to walk along the sewer with a deceptive purposelessness. In the shadow of the house nearest the creek he paused, eyeing the nodding guards across the gorge. The traveler took off his boots. He ducked into the ditch and used its cover to crawl down onto the creek bank.

The rock was steep, but it was limestone and weathered into irregularity enough for Smith's practiced fingers to grip. Smoothly, but without haste, the traveler slipped along below the line of sight on the guards at the power plant. When he reached the bridge trestles, he paused again, breathing carefully. His hands examined the nearest of the handsawn oak timbers, tracing it from where it butted into the rock to where it crossed another beam halfway to the stringers. Smith swung onto the trestle and

began to negotiate the gorge like an ant in a clump of heavy grass.

Any sounds the traveler might have made were muffled by the creek. Smith edged left toward the west corner of the building. The wall there was built almost to the rim of the gorge. Smith's

clothing matched the color of the wet stone so that his outline was at least blurred for a potential watcher from the village, but lack of alertness of the guards' part was his real defense.

Smith raised his head. Both guards were nodding in their chairs, crossbows leaning against the doorposts beside them. The traveler swung up lithely. A step later he -was hugging the power plant's west wall. The stone hummed.

The building was as massive a construction as anything Smith had seen created after the Blast. The walls were dry stone, using the natural layering of limestone and their one-meter thickness to attain an adequate seal without mortar. Their weathered seams made it easy for someone of Smith's strength and condition to mount the five meters of blank wall to the lighted slits just below the roof. The interior was much as the traveler had expected it to be, much as he had seen it before here and there across the face of the world.

Six huge electric motors were ranked below him. They were being used as generators, driven by a complex pattern of shafts and broad leather belts. Only one of them was turning at the moment. When the smelters were working at full capacity and called in turn for the maximum output of the plant, the room would be a bedlam of machines and their attendants. Now one man and a woman were sufficient. The light of the naphtha lanterns illuminating the chamber may have exaggerated the attendants' pallor, but they certainly saw less of the sun than the villagers across the stream did. It was hard to believe that control of this apparatus was left to slaves, yet it was even more unlikely that freemen who knew what they were doing would enter the chamber below. In the center of the north wall, built against the living rock of the mountainside, was the reactor.

Its genesis was evident, for the black hulls of ten fusion bombs were ranged along the partition wall to the east. Smith, his head framed in the narrow window, licked his lips when he saw the bombs. They would no longer be weapons; the plutonium of their fission cores would have decayed beyond the capacity to form critical mass when compacted. But those cores, taken from their cocoons of lithium hydride and the inner baths of deuterium, could still fuel a reactor. The latter was an ugly mass of stone blocks, overshadowed by a mantis like derrick. Steam from the reactor drove the pistons of a crude engine. Unlike the pre-Blast electric motors, the steam engine had been manufactured for its present purpose. Inefficient, it leaked vapor through seams and rope gaskets, but the power to create steam from water was virtually inexhaustible on the scale required here.

Manufacturing skill and not theoretical knowledge had frequently been the brake on human progress. Leonardo da Vinci could design a workable aircraft, but no one for four hundred years could build an engine to drive it. Nuclear-power technology was so simple, given the refined fuel and expendable humans to work it, that an age that could not manufacture smokeless powder could nonetheless build a fission plant. All it would have taken was a weapons stockpile and a technician or two from Oak Ridge, vacationing in the mountains at the time of the Blast. It was what Smith had come to learn.

There was a new sound in the night. A score or more of men were thudding across the bridge to the power plant. Smith ducked his head beneath the sill of the window. As he did so, the siren on the roof hooted ferally. Knowing that there was no escape downward if he had been seen, the traveler slipped sideways and began to clamber up between a pair of the windows. As his fingers touched the edge of the slates, a voice from below shouted, "There he is!"

Smith gathered himself to swing onto the gently sloped roof; something tapped his knuckles. He looked up. The muzzle of Carter's M16 stared back at him. The policeman smiled over the sights. "I saw something block one of the plant windows," the local man said. "Thought it might be worth waking the guards for. Now, friend, you just climb down easy to where the people are waiting, or me and the boys here won't wait for the ceremony."

The pair of guards flanking Carter had faces as tense as their cocked crossbows. Smith shook his head ruefully and descended into the waiting manacles.

The siren gave three long cries as the guards marched Smith back across the bridge. Citizens, warned by the initial signal, began walking out of their houses, the men armed, the women bleak as gray steel. They drifted toward the shrouded platform across the long axis of the Assembly from the bridge. None of the citizens seemed to want to be the first to reach the common destination. They dawdled in pairs and trios, turning aside as Smith and his captors passed among them. The chief and the remaining policemen had hurried up the steps to what was clearly a covered altar by the time

Smith reached it. Cords fluttered as the canvas roof was gathered within the screen of hoardings built on a base of stone blocks. Something mechanical purred and paused. Sparks hissed about the power line strung to the platform along a line of low posts on the western edge of the Assembly.

"On up," Carter said, smiling. He tweaked Smith's manacles toward the steps. The guards were taking position at the base of the altar, facing out toward the Assembly. Despite the siren calls, there was no sign of life or movement from the smelter and its associated buildings. Their blank walls were more than a physical reminder of the grip the freeholders of Moseby held on the minds and lives of those who would work in their village. The business tonight was no business of a bargee or a factory hand.

Smith mounted the steps. Two policemen received him, holding their rifles by the pistol grips as if they were still functional weapons. Well, perhaps they were.

There were other improbable things in this place.

The moonlight was shadowed by the flimsy walls. It gave only hints of the enclosed area: the policemen in their ragged uniforms; two large, vertical cylinders, the one mounted somewhat higher than the other; and, at the front of the platform, a wooden block the height of a man's knee.

"There," muttered one of the policemen, guiding the traveler's neck onto the block. No force was necessary. Smith was as docile as a babe at its mother's breast. Carter took a quick lashing from Smith's right wrist to a staple set for the purpose in the flooring. "If it wasn't that you know too much," the policeman said conversationally, "we'd let you spend the rest of your life inside the plant. But somebody who's traveled as you have, seen what you have . . . we don't want to be like Samson, chaining you

in the temple so you can bring it down on us, hey?"

"Tie him, and we'll get this over with," the chief growled.

Carter unlocked the manacles and bound Smith's left wrist to another staple. "It was a good idea when they chopped muties here every week," he said. "It's a good idea now. The ceremony reminds us all that it's us against the world and all of us together. I'll take the ax if you like."

Smith, facing the panels, could not see the exchange. The air licked his neck and cheek as something passed from hand to hand between the men. "Drop the walls," the chief ordered, "and turn on the light."

The pins locking together the corners of the hoardings slipped out. The panels arced down simultaneously in a rush of air and a collective sigh from the Assembly. The purring of an electric motor awoke under the platform, rising and becoming sibilant in the absence of competing sound. A taut drive belt moaned; then the moan was buried in a sudden crackle, and white light played like terror across the upturned faces.

Smith twisted his head. The policemen stood in a line across the width of the platform. Carter, in the middle, gripped the haft of a fire ax. Its head was still darkened by flecks of red paint. He grinned at the traveler. Behind the rulers of the village glared another burst of lightning between the static generator's heads: the polished casings of a pair of fusion bombs. No objects could have been more fittingly symbolic of Moseby's power. The Van de Graaff generator provided a crude but effective way of converting electricity to light. Its DC motor pulled a belt from which electrons were combed into one bomb casing. The static discharges to the grounded casing were all the more spectacular for being intermittent.

"You still have a chance to save yourselves if you let me go," said Smith, shouting over the ripping arcs. "There is no punishment too terrible for men who would use atomic power again, but you still have time to flee!"

Carter's smile broadened, his teeth flickering in light reflected onto his face. He roared, "We dedicate this victim to the power that preserves us all!" and he raised his ax.

"You fool," the traveler said quietly. He did not try to slide back from the block, even as he watched a multiple discharge strobe the edge of the descending ax. The hungry steel caught him squarely, shearing like a shard of ice through his flesh. His vertebrae popped louder in his ears than the hollow report of the blade against the wood. The ax head quivered, separating all but a finger's breadth of the traveler's neck. He blinked at Carter.

The policeman rocked his blade free. Static discharges sizzled behind him at three-second intervals. Smith felt a line of warmth as his Blast-changed flesh knitted together again while the steel withdrew.

Still kneeling, the Changeling turned toward the crowd. "People!" he shouted. "Whatever it costs men today, men tomorrow must know that nuclear power is death! It made this world what it is. It is the one evil that cannot be tolerated, ever again! For Man's sake, for the world's-

Screaming, Carter slammed the ax down on the traveler's temple. The blade bit to the helve. Smith reached up with his right hand, tearing the staple from the flooring. He gripped the wood, and it splintered as he drew the ax from where it was lodged in his bone. The Changeling stood, his head flowing together like wax in a mold. His left wrist re-formed as the rawhide lashing cut through it.

Sparks like shards of sunlight clawed through the high windows of the power plan. That gush of

light died. The siren began to wind, higher and higher. The motor of the Van de Graaf generator was speeding also, the current that drove it no longer controlled. The arcs were a constant white sheet between the bomb casings. Someone-two figures-crossed the bridge from the power plant. The blue glow from the building back lighted them.

"Flee!" Smith cried, lifting to the crowd the scarred hand he had thrown up two centuries before to the flare of a hundred-megaton bomb. "Flee this abomination before it devours you-as it surely will, as it did the world before this world!"

Carter screamed again and struck with his rifle butt, hurling the Changeling off the platform. Smith picked himself up. The guards backed away from him, their eyes wide, their cocked bows advanced as talismans and not threats.

The two figures on the bridge threw back their cloaks. The lapping arcs played across the half of Kozinski's face and torso that was naked bone. The bare organs pulsed within, and his one eye darted like a black jewel. The Blast had sometimes preserved and had sometimes destroyed; this once it had done both in near equality.

Ssu-ma would have stood out without the artificial lighting. She had the same trim, beautiful figure as the girl she had been the night she stared into the sky above Lop Nor and saw dawn blaze three hours early. Now that figure shone blue, brighter even than the spreading fire that ate through the wall of the power plant behind her.

The crowd was scattering toward homes and toward the river. No one approached the platform except the two Changelings walking toward their fellow.

The chief threw up his revolver and snapped it three times, four, and at the fifth attempt an orange flash and the thump of a shot in the open air. Five of the policemen were triggering their automatic weapons and tugging at the cocking pieces to spill misfired rounds on the platform. But the old guns could still fire. Shots slapped and tore at the night in short bursts that pattered over the flesh of the Changelings like raindrops on thick dust. And still they came, walking toward Smith and the platform.

Incredibly, the antitank rocket ignited when the sixth policeman tugged its lanyard. In ignorance he was holding the tube against his shoulder like a conventional weapon. The back-blast burned away the man's arm and chest in a ghastly simulacrum of Kozinski's mutilation. The rocket corkscrewed, but chance slammed it into Ssu-ma's chest. The red blast momentarily covered the Changeling's own fell glow. Her body splattered like the pulp of a grapefruit struck by a maul. Simultaneously the front wall of the power plant tore apart, snuffing the arcs dancing madly between the bomb casings.

Then, evident in the sudden darkness, the bits of Ssuma's glowing protoplasm began to draw together like droplets of mercury sliding in the bowl of a spoon. Her head had not been damaged. The waiting eyes smiled up at the platform.

Only Carter still stood before the casings. He had thrust the muzzle of his M16 into his mouth and was trying to fire the weapon with his outstretched finger. The round under the hammer misfired. The power plant exploded again, a gout of lava that loosened the hillside beneath it and sprayed the village. Wood and cloth began to burn in a pale imitation of what was happening across the creek. In slagging down, the reactor was fusing the rock and the hulls of the remaining bombs. Plutonium flowed white-hot with its own internal reactions, but it was spread too thin to self-trigger another Blast. The creek roared and boiled away as the rain of rock and molten metal spewed into it. The vapor that had been a plume over the power plant was now a shroud to wrap the burning village.

"I hadn't called you yet," Smith said, shouting over the tumult as he clasped Kozinski's hand with his own left hand. He extended his right to the smiling Ssu-ma.

"We heard the siren," the Ukrainian said, his voice strange for coming from a mouth that was half bone-the half that had been turned away from the Strike that vaporized his infantry company, he had once explained.

"We could all tell they weren't burning coal, couldn't we?" Susu-ma added.

The three travelers began groping through the night, through the smoke and the screaming. "I don't think we've ever checked whether the Oconee plant was still operable," Smith said. "It'd be a good time to see."

Kozinski shrugged. "We ought to get back to England some time. It's been too long since we were there."

"No, there's time for that." Smith argued. "Nobody there is going to build a fission plant as long as there's one man left to tell what we did when we found the one at Harewell."

A pair of burning buildings lighted their path, sweeping the air clear with an angry updraft. Kozinski squinted, then reached out his hand to halt Ssu-ma. "Your birthmark," he said, pointing

to the star-shaped blotch beneath the girl's left breast. "It used to be on the right side."
She shrugged. "The rocket just now, I suppose."
Kozinski frowned. "Don't you see? If we can change at all, we can die someday."
"Sure," Smith agreed. "I've got some white hairs on my temples. My hair was solid brown the . . .
when I went to New York."
"We'll live as long as the world needs us," Ssu-ma said quietly, touching each of the men and
guiding them onward toward the trail back through the mountains. The steam and the night wrapped
them, muffled them. Through it her words came: "After all, what sort of men would there be in the
world if it weren't for men like us?"
And all three of them spoke the final line of the joke, their voices bright with remembered humor:
"Men like us!"