

Science Fiction

# The Road to Nightfall

By Robert Silverberg



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The dog snarled, and ran on. Katterson watched the two lean, fiery-eyed men speeding in pursuit, while a mounting horror grew in him and rooted him to the spot. The dog suddenly bounded over a heap of rubble and was gone; its pursuers sank limply down, leaning on their clubs, and tried to catch their breath.

"It's going to get much worse than this," said a small, grubby-looking man who appeared from nowhere next to Katterson. "I've heard the official announcement's coming today, but the rumor's been around for a long time."

"So they say," answered Katterson slowly. The chase he had just witnessed still held him paralyzed. "We're all pretty hungry."

The two men who had chased the dog got up, still winded, and wandered off. Katterson and the little man watched their slow retreat.

"That's the first time I've ever seen people doing that," said Katterson. "Out in the open like that—"

"It won't be the last time," said the grubby man. "Better get used to it, now that the food's gone."

Katterson's stomach twinged. It was empty, and would stay that way till the evening's food dole. Without the doles, he would have no idea of where his next bite of food would come from. He and the small man walked on through the quiet street, stepping over the rubble, walking aimlessly with no particular goal in mind.

"My name's Paul Katterson," he said finally. "I live on 47th Street. I was discharged from the Army last year."

"Oh, one of those," said the little man. They turned down 15th Street. It was a street of complete desolation; not one pre-war house was standing, and a few shabby tents were pitched at the far end of the street. "Have you had any work since your discharge?"

Katterson laughed. "Good joke. Try another."

"I know. Things are tough. My name is Malory; I'm a merchandiser."

"What do you merchandise?"

"Oh ... useful products."

Katterson nodded. Obviously Malory didn't want him to pursue the topic, and he dropped it. They walked on silently, the big man and the little one, and Katterson could think of nothing but the emptiness in his stomach. Then his thoughts drifted to the scene of a few minutes before, the two hungry men chasing a dog. Had it come to that so soon? Katterson asked himself. What was going to happen, he wondered, as food became scarcer and scarcer and finally there was none at all?

But the little man was pointing ahead. "Look," he said. "Meeting at Union Square."

Katterson squinted and saw a crowd starting to form around the platform reserved for public announcements. He quickened his pace, forcing Malory to struggle to keep up with him.

A young man in military uniform had mounted the platform and was impassively facing the crowd. Katterson looked at the jeep nearby, automatically noting it was the 2036 model, the most recent one, eighteen years old. After a minute or so the soldier raised his hand for silence, and spoke in a quiet, restrained voice.

"Fellow New Yorkers, I have an official announcement from the Government. Word has just been received from Trenton Oasis—"

The crowd began to murmur. They seemed to know what was coming.

"Word has just been received from Trenton Oasis that, due to recent emergency conditions there, all food supplies for New York City and environs will be temporarily cut off. Repeat: due to recent emergency in the Trenton Oasis, all food supplies for New York and environs will temporarily be cut off."

The murmuring in the crowd grew to an angry, biting whisper as each man discussed this latest turn of events with the man next to him. This was hardly unexpected news; Trenton had long protested the burden of feeding helpless, bombed-out New York, and the

recent flood there had given them ample opportunity to squirm out of their responsibility. Katterson stood silent, towering over the people around him, finding himself unable to believe what he was hearing. He seemed aloof, almost detached, objectively criticizing the posture of the soldier on the platform, counting his insignia, thinking of everything but the implications of the announcement, and trying to fight back the growing hunger.

The uniformed man was speaking again. "I also have this message from the Governor of New York, General Holloway: he says that attempts at restoring New York's food supply are being made, and that messengers have been dispatched to the Baltimore Oasis to request food supplies. In the meantime the Government food doles are to be discontinued effective tonight, until further notice. That is all."

The soldier gingerly dismounted from the platform and made his way through the crowd to his jeep. He climbed quickly in and drove off. Obviously he was an important man, Katterson decided, because

jeeps and fuel were scarce items—, not used lightly by anyone and everyone.

Katterson remained where he was and turned his head slowly, looking at the people round him—thin, half-starved little skeletons, most of them, who secretly begrudged him his giant frame. An emaciated man with burning eyes and a beak of a nose had gathered a small group around himself and was shouting some sort of harangue. Katterson knew of him— his name was Emerich, and he was the leader of the colony living in the abandoned subway at 14th Street. Katterson instinctively moved closer to hear him, and Malory followed.

"It's all a plot!" the emaciated man was shouting. "They talk of an emergency in Trenton. What emergency? I ask you, what emergency? That flood didn't hurt them. They just want to get us off their necks by starving us out, that's all. And what can we do about it? Nothing. Trenton knows we'll never be able to rebuild New York, and they want to get rid of us, so they cut off our food."

By now the crowd had gathered round him. Emerich was popular; people were shouting their agreement, punctuating his speech with applause.

"But will we starve to death? We will not!"

"That's right, Emerich!" yelled a burly man with a beard.

"No," Emerich continued, "we'll show them what we can do. We'll scrape up every bit of food we can find, every blade of grass, every wild animal, every bit of shoe-leather. And we'll survive, just the way we survived the blockade and the famine of '47 and everything else. And one of these days we'll go out to Trenton and—and—roast them alive!"

Roars of approval filled the air. Katterson turned and shouldered his way through the crowd, thinking of the two men and the dog, and walked away without looking back. He headed down Fourth Avenue, until he could no longer hear the sounds of the meeting at Union Square, and sat down wearily on a pile of crushed girders that had once been the Carden Monument.

He put his head in his hands and sat there. The afternoon's events had numbed him. Food had been scarce as far back as he could remember—the twenty-four years of war with the Spherists had just about used up every resource of the country. The war had dragged on and on. After the first rash of preliminary bombing, it had become a war of attrition, slowly grinding the opposing spheres to rubble.

Somehow Katterson had grown big and powerful on hardly any food, and he stood out wherever he went. The generation of Americans to which he belonged was not one of size or strength—the children were born under-nourished old men, weak and wrinkled. But he had been big, and he had been one of the lucky ones chosen for the Army. At least there he had been fed regularly.

Katterson kicked away a twisted bit of slag, and saw little Malory coming down Fourth Avenue in his direction. Katterson laughed to himself, remembering his Army days. His whole adult life had been spent in a uniform, with soldier's privileges. But it had been too good to last; two years before, in 2052, the war had finally dragged to a

complete standstill, with the competing hemispheres both worn to shreds, and almost the entire Army had suddenly been mustered out into the cold civilian world. He had been dumped into New York, lost and alone.

"Let's go for a dog-hunt," Malory said, smiling, as he drew near.

"Watch your tongue, little man. I might just eat you if I get hungry enough."

"Eh? I thought you were so shocked by two men trying to catch a dog."

Katterson looked up. "I was," he said. "Sit down, or get moving, but don't play games," he growled. Malory flung himself down on the wreckage near Katterson.

"Looks pretty bad," Malory said.

"Check," said Katterson. "I haven't eaten anything all day."

"Why not? There was a regular dole last night, and there'll be one tonight."

"You hope," said Katterson. The day was drawing to a close, he saw, and evening shadows were falling fast. Ruined New York looked

weird in twilight; the gnarled girders and fallen buildings seemed ghosts of long-dead giants.

"You'll be even hungrier tomorrow," Malory said. "There isn't going to be any dole, any more."

"Don't remind me, little man."

"I'm in the food-supplying business, myself," said Malory, as a weak smile rippled over his lips.

Katterson picked up his head in a hurry.

"Playing games again?"

"No," Malory said hastily. He scribbled his address on a piece of paper and handed it to Katterson. "Here. Drop in on me any time you get really hungry. And— say, you're a pretty strong fellow, aren't you? I might even have some work for you, since you say you're unattached."

The shadow of an idea began to strike Katterson. He turned so he faced the little man, and stared at him.

"What kind of work?"

Malory paled. "Oh, I need some strong men to obtain food for me. *You* know," he whispered.

Katterson reached over and grasped the small man's thin shoulders. Malory winced. "Yes, I know," Katterson repeated slowly. "Tell me, Malory," he said carefully. "What sort of food do you sell?"

Malory squirmed. "Why—why—now look, I just wanted to help you, and—"

"Don't give me any of that." Slowly Katterson stood up, not releasing his grip on the small man. Malory found himself being dragged willy-nilly to his feet. "You're in the meat business, aren't you, Malory? *What kind of meat do you sell?*"

Malory tried to break away. Katterson shoved him with a contemptuous half-open fist and sent him sprawling back into the rubble-heap. Malory twisted away, his eyes wild with fear, and dashed off down 13th Street into the gloom. Katterson stood for a long time watching him retreat, breathing hard and not daring to think. Then he folded the paper with Malory's address on it and put it in his pocket, and walked numbly away.

\* \* \* \*

Barbara was waiting for him when he pressed his thumb against the doorplate of his apartment on 47th Street an hour later.

"I suppose you've heard the news," she said as he entered. "Some spic-and-span lieutenant came by and announced it down below. I've already picked up our dole for tonight, and that's the last one. Hey—anything the matter?" She looked at him anxiously as he sank wordlessly into a chair.

"Nothing, kid. I'm just hungry—and a little sick to my stomach."

"Where'd you go today? The Square again?"

"Yeah. My usual Thursday afternoon stroll, and a pleasant picnic that turned out to be. First I saw two men hunting a dog—they couldn't have been much hungrier than I am, but they were chasing this poor scrawny thing. Then your lieutenant made his

announcement about the food. And then a filthy meat peddler tried to sell me some 'merchandise' and give me a job."

The girl caught her breath. "A job? Meat? What happened? Oh, Paul—"

"Stow it," Katterson told her. "I knocked him sprawling and he ran away with his tail between his legs. You know what he was selling? You know what kind of meat he wanted me to eat?"

She lowered her eyes. "Yes, Paul."

"And the job he had for me—he saw I'm strong, so he would have made me his supplier. I would have gone out hunting in the evenings. Looking for stragglers to be knocked off and turned into tomorrow's steaks."

"But we're so hungry, Paul—when you're hungry that's the most important thing."

"*What?*" His voice was the bellow of an outraged bull. "What? You don't know what you are saying, woman. Eat before you go out of your mind completely. I'll find some other way of getting food, but I'm not going to turn into a bloody cannibal. No longpork for Paul Katterson."

She said nothing. The single light-glow in the ceiling flickered twice.

"Getting near shut-off time. Get the candles out, unless you're sleepy," he said. He had no chronometer, but the flickering was the signal that eight-thirty was approaching. At eight-thirty every night electricity was cut off in all residence apartments except those with permission to exceed normal quota.

Barbara lit a candle.

"Paul, Father Kennon was back here again today."

"I've told him not to show up here again," Katterson said from the darkness of his corner of the room.

"He thinks we ought to get married, Paul."

"I know. I don't."

"Paul, why are you—"

"Let's not go over that again. I've told you often enough that I didn't want the responsibility of two mouths to feed, when I can't even manage keeping my own belly full. This is the best—each of us on our own."

"But children, Paul—"

"Are you crazy tonight?" he retorted. "Would you dare to bring a child into this world? Especially now that we've even lost the food from Trenton Oasis? Would you enjoy watching him slowly starve to death in all this filth and rubble, or maybe growing up into a hollow-cheeked little skeleton? Maybe you would. I don't think I'd care to."

He was silent. She sat watching him, sobbing quietly.

"We're dead, you and I," she finally said. "We won't admit it, but we're dead. This whole world is dead—we've spent the last thirty years committing suicide. I don't remember as far back as you do, but I've read some of the old books, about how clean and new and shiny this city was before the war. The war! All my life, we've been at war, never knowing who we were fighting and why. Just eating the world apart for no reason at all."

"Cut it, Barbara," Katterson said. But she went on in a dead monotone. "They tell me America once went from coast to coast, instead of being cut up into little strips bordered by radioactive no-man's-lands. And there were farms, and food, and lakes and rivers, and men flew from place to place. Why did this have to happen? Why are we all dead? Where do we go now, Paul?"

"I don't know, Barbara. I don't think anyone does." Wearily, he snuffed out the candle, and the darkness flooded in and filled the room.

\* \* \* \*

Somehow he had wandered back to Union Square again, and he stood on 14th Street, rocking gently back and forth on his feet and feeling the light-headedness, which is the first sign of starvation. There were just a few people in the streets, morosely heading for whatever destinations claimed them. The sun was high overhead, and bright.

His reverie was interrupted by the sound of yells and an unaccustomed noise of running feet. His Army training stood him in good stead as he dove into a gaping trench and hid there, wondering what was happening.

After a moment he peeked out. Four men, each as big as Katterson himself, were roaming up and down the now deserted streets. One was carrying a sack.

"There's one," Katterson heard the man with the sack yell harshly. He watched without believing as the four men located a girl cowering near a fallen building.

She was a pale, thin, ragged-looking girl, perhaps twenty at the most, who might have been pretty in some other world. But her cheeks were sunken and coarse, her eyes dull and glassy, her arms bony and angular.

As they drew near she huddled back, cursing defiantly, and prepared to defend herself. *She doesn't understand*, Katterson thought. *She thinks she's going to be attacked.*

Perspiration streamed down his body, and he forced himself to watch, kept himself from leaping out of hiding. The four marauders closed in on the girl. She spat, struck out with her clawlike hand.

They chuckled and grabbed her clutching arm. Her scream was suddenly ear-piercing as they dragged her out into the open. A knife flashed; Katterson ground his teeth together, wincing, as the blade struck home.

"In the sack with her, Charlie," a rough voice said.

Katterson's eyes steamed with rage. It was his first view of Malory's butchers—at least, he suspected it was Malory's gang. Feeling the knife at his side, in its familiar sheath, he half-rose to attack the four meat-raiders, and then, regaining his sense, he sank back into the trench.

So soon? Katterson knew that cannibalism had been spreading slowly through starving New York for many years, and that few

bodies of the dead ever reached their graves intact—but this was the first time, so far as he knew, that raiders had dragged a living human being from the streets and killed her for food. He shuddered. The race for life was on, then.

The four raiders disappeared in the direction of Third Avenue, and Katterson cautiously eased himself from the trench, cast a wary eye in all directions, and edged into the open. He knew he would have to be careful; a man his size carried meat for many mouths.

Other people were coming out of the buildings now, all with much the same expression of horror on their faces. Katterson watched the marching skeletons walking dazedly, a few sobbing, most of them past the stage of tears. He clenched and unclenched his fists, angry, burning to stamp out this spreading sickness and knowing hopelessly that it could not be done.

A tall thin man with chiseled features was on the speaker's platform now. His voice was choked with anger.

"Brothers, it's out in the open now. Men have turned from the ways of God, and Satan has led them to destruction. Just now you witnessed four of His creatures destroy a fellow mortal for food—the most terrible sin of all."

"Brothers, our time on Earth is almost done. I'm an old man—I remember the days before the war, and, while some of you won't believe it, I remember the days when there was food for all, when everyone had a job, when these crumpled buildings were tall and shiny and streamlined, and the skies teemed with jets. In my youth I traveled all across this country, clear to the Pacific. But the War has ended all that, and it's God's hand upon us. Our day is done, and soon we'll all meet our reckoning."

"Go to God without blood on your hands, brothers. Those four men you saw today will burn forever for their crime. Whoever eats the unholy meat they butchered today will join them in Hell. But listen a moment, brothers, listen! Those of you who aren't lost yet, I beg you: save yourselves! Better to go without food at all, as most of you are doing, than to soil yourselves with this kind of new food, the most precious meat of all."

Katterson stared at the people around him. He wanted to end all this; he had a vision of a crusade for food, a campaign against cannibalism, banners waving, drums beating, himself leading the fight. Some of the people had stopped listening to the old preacher, and some had wandered off. A few were smiling and hurtling derisive remarks at the old man, but he ignored them.

"Hear me! Hear me, before you go. We're all doomed anyway; the Lord has made that clear. But think, people—this world will shortly

pass away, and there is the greater world to come. Don't sign away your chance for eternal life, brothers! Don't trade your immortal soul for a bite of tainted meat!"

The crowd was melting away, Katterson noted. It was dispersing hastily, people quickly edging away and disappearing. The preacher continued talking. Katterson stood on tip-toes and craned his neck past the crowd and stared down toward the east. His eyes searched for a moment, and then he paled. Four ominous figures were coming with deliberate tread down the deserted street.

Almost everyone had seen them now. They were walking four abreast down the center of the street, the tallest holding an empty sack. People were heading hastily in all directions, and as the four figures came to the corner of 14th Street and Fourth Avenue only Katterson and the preacher still stood at the platform.

"I see you're the only one left, young man. Have you defiled yourself, or are you still of the Kingdom of Heaven?"

Katterson ignored the question. "Old man, get down from there!" he snapped. "The raiders are coming back. Come on, let's get out of here before they come."

"No. I intend to talk to them when they come. But save yourself, young man, save yourself while you can."

"They'll kill you, you old fool," Katterson whispered harshly.

"We're all doomed anyway, son. If my day has come, I'm ready."

"You're crazy," Katterson said. The four men were within speaking distance now. Katterson looked at the old man for one last time and then dashed across the street and into a building. He glanced back and saw he was not being followed.

The four raiders were standing under the platform, listening to the old man. Katterson couldn't hear what the preacher was saying, but

he was waving his arms as he spoke. They seemed to be listening intently. Katterson stared. He saw one of the raiders say something to the old man, and then the tall one with the sack climbed up on the platform. One of the others tossed him an unsheathed knife.

The shriek was loud and piercing. When Katterson dared to look out again, the tall man was stuffing the preacher's body into the sack. Katterson bowed his head. The trumpets began to fade; he realized that resistance was impossible. Unstoppable currents were flowing.

\* \* \* \*

Katterson plodded uptown to his apartment. The blocks flew past as he methodically pulled one foot after another, walking the two miles through the rubble and deserted, ruined buildings. He kept one hand on his knife and darted glances from right to left, noting the

furtive scurryings in the side streets, the shadowy people who were not quite visible behind the ashes and the rubble. Those four figures, one with the sack, seemed to lurk behind every lamppost, waiting hungrily.

He cut out into Broadway, taking a shortcut through the stump of the Parker Building. Fifty years before, the Parker Building had been the tallest in the Western world; its truncated stump was all that remained. Katterson passed what had once been the most majestic lobby in the world, and stared in. A small boy sat on the step outside, gnawing a piece of meat. He was eight or ten; his stomach was drawn tight over his ribs, which showed through like a basket. Choking down his revulsion, Katterson wondered what sort of meat the boy was eating.

He continued on. As he passed 44th Street, a bony cat skittered past him and disappeared behind a pile of ashes. Katterson thought

of the stories he had heard of the Great Plains, where giant cats were said to roam unmolested, and his mouth watered.

The sun was sinking low again, and New York was turning dull gray and black. The sun never really shone in late afternoon any more; it sneaked its way through the piles of rubble and cast a ghostly glow on the ruins of New York. Katterson crossed 47th Street and turned down toward his building.

He made the long climb to his room—the elevator's shaft was still there, and the frozen elevator, but such luxuries were beyond dream—and stood outside for just a moment, searching in the darkness for the doorplate. There was the sound of laughter from within. A strange sound for ears not accustomed to it, and a food-smell crept out through the door and hit him squarely. His throat began to work convulsively, and he remembered the dull ball of pain that was his stomach.

Katterson opened the door. The food-odor filled the little room completely. He saw Barbara look up suddenly, white-faced, as he entered. In his chair was a man he had met once or twice, a scraggly-haired, heavily bearded man named Heydahl.

"What's going on?" Katterson demanded.

Barbara's voice was strangely hushed. "Paul, you know Olaf Heydahl, don't you? Olaf, Paul?"

"What's going on?" Katterson repeated.

"Barbara and I have just been having a little meal, Mr. Katterson," Heydahl said, in a rich voice. "We thought you'd be hungry, so we saved a little for you."

The smell was overpowering, and Katterson felt it was all he could do to keep from foaming at the lips. Barbara was wiping her face over and over again with the napkin; Heydahl sat contentedly in Katterson's chair.

In three quick steps Katterson crossed to the other side of the room and threw open the doors to the little enclosed kitchenette. On the stove a small piece of meat sizzled softly. Katterson looked at the meat, then at Barbara.

"Where did you get this?" he asked. "We have no money."

"|—|—"

"I bought it," Heydahl said quietly. "Barbara told me how little food you had, and since I had more than I wanted I brought over a little gift."

"I see. A gift. No strings attached?"

"Why, Mr. Katterson! Remember I'm Barbara's guest."

"Yes, but please remember this is my apartment, not hers. Tell me. Heydahl—what kind of payment do you expect for this—this gift? And how much payment have you had already?"

Heydahl half-rose in his chair. "Please, Paul," Barbara said hurriedly. "No trouble, Paul. Olaf was just trying to be friendly."

"Barbara's right, Mr. Katterson," Heydahl said, subsiding. "Go ahead, help yourself. You'll do yourself some good, and you'll make me happy too."

Katterson stared at him for a moment. The half-light from below trickled in over Heydahl's shoulder, illuminating his nearly bald head and his flowing beard. Katterson wondered just how Heydahl's cheeks managed to be quite so plump.

"Go ahead," Heydahl repeated. "We've had our fill."

Katterson turned back to the meat. He pulled a plate from the shelf and plopped the piece of meat on it, and unsheathed his knife. He was about to start carving when he turned to look at the two others.

Barbara was leaning forward in her chair. Her eyes were staring wide, and fear was shining deep in them. Heydahl, on the other hand, sat comfortably in Katterson's chair, with a complacent look on his face that Katterson had not seen on anyone's features since leaving the Army.

A thought hit him suddenly and turned him icy-cold. "Barbara," he said, controlling his voice, "what kind of meat is this? Roast beef or lamb?"

"I don't know, Paul," she said uncertainly. "Olaf didn't say what—"

"Maybe roast dog, perhaps? Filet of alley cat? Why didn't you ask Olaf what was on the menu. *Why don't you ask him now?*"

Barbara looked at Heydahl, then back at Katterson. "Eat it, Paul. It's good, believe me—and I know how hungry you are."

"I don't eat unlabeled goods, Barbara. Ask Mr. Heydahl what kind of meat it is, first."

She turned to Heydahl. "Olaf—"

"I don't think you should be so fussy these days, Mr. Katterson," Heydahl said. "After all, there are no more food doles, and you don't know when meat will be available again."

"I like to be fussy, Heydahl. What kind of meat is this?"

"Why are you so curious? You know what they say about looking gift-horses in the mouth, heh heh."

"I can't even be sure this is horse, Heydahl. What kind of meat is it?" Katterson's voice, usually carefully modulated, became a snarl. "A choice slice of fat little boy? Maybe a steak from some poor devil who was in the wrong neighborhood one evening?"

Heydahl turned white.

Katterson took the meat from the plate and hefted it for a moment in his hand. "You can't even spit the words out, either of you. They choke in your mouths. Here—cannibals!"

He hurled the meat hard at Barbara; it glanced off the side of her cheek and fell to the floor. His face was flaming with rage. He flung open the door, turned, and slammed it again, rushing blindly away. The last thing he saw before slamming the door was Barbara on her knees, scurrying to pick up the piece of meat.

\* \* \* \*

Night was dropping fast, and Katterson knew the streets were unsafe. His apartment, he felt, was polluted; he could not go back to it. The problem was to get food. He hadn't eaten in almost two days. He thrust his hands in his pocket and felt the folded slip of paper with Malory's address on it, and, with a wry grimace, realized that this was his only source of food and money. But not yet—not so long as he could hold up his head.

Without thinking he wandered toward the river, toward the huge crater where, Katterson had been told, there once had been the United Nations buildings. The crater was almost a thousand feet deep; the United Nations had been obliterated in the first bombing, back in 2028. Katterson had been just one year old then, the year the War began. The actual fighting and bombing had continued for the next five or six years, until both hemispheres were scarred and burned from combat, and then the long war of attrition had begun. Katterson had turned eighteen in 2045—nine long years ago, he reflected—and his giant frame made him a natural choice for a soft Army post. In the course of his Army career he had been all over the section of the world he considered his country—the patch of land bounded by the Appalachian radioactive belt on one side, by the Atlantic on the other. The enemy had carefully constructed walls of fire partitioning America into a dozen strips, each completely isolated

from the next. An airplane could cross from one to another, if there were any left. But science, industry, technology, was dead, Katterson thought wearily, as he stared without seeing at the river. He sat down on the edge of the crater and dangled his feet.

What had happened to the brave new world that had entered the twenty-first century with such proud hopes? Here he was, Paul Katterson, probably one of the strongest and tallest men in the country, swinging his legs over a great-devastated area, with a gnawing pain in the pit of his stomach. The world was dead, the shiny streamlined world of chrome plating and jet planes. Someday, perhaps, there would be new life. Someday.

Katterson stared at the waters beyond the crater. Somewhere across the seas there were other countries, broken like the rest. And somewhere in the other direction were rolling plains, grass, wheat, wild animals, fenced off by hundreds of miles of radioactive

mountains. The War had eaten up the fields and pastures and livestock, had ground all mankind under.

He got up and started to walk back through the lonely street. It was dark now, and the few gaslights cast a ghostly light, like little eclipsed moons. The fields were dead, and what was left of mankind huddled in the blasted cities, except for the lucky ones in the few Oases scattered by chance through the country. New York was a city of skeletons, each one scrabbling for food, cutting corners and hoping for tomorrow's bread.

A small man bumped into Katterson as he wandered unseeing. Katterson looked down at him and caught him by the arm. A family man, he guessed, hurrying home to his hungry children.

"Excuse me, sir," the little man said, nervously, straining to break Katterson's grip. The fear was obvious on his face; Katterson

wondered if the worried little man thought this giant was going to roast him on the spot.

"I won't hurt you," Katterson said. "I'm just looking for food, Citizen."

"I have none."

"But I'm starving," Katterson said. "You look like you have a job, some money. Give me some food and I'll be your bodyguard, your slave, anything you want."

"Look, fellow, I have no food to spare. Ouch! Let go of my arm!"

Katterson let go, and watched the little man go dashing away down the street. People always ran away from other people these days, he thought. Malory had made a similar escape.

The streets were dark and empty. Katterson wondered if he would be someone's steak by morning, and he didn't really care. His chest itched suddenly, and he thrust a grimy hand inside his shirt to

scratch. The flesh over his pectoral muscles had almost completely been absorbed, and his chest was bony to the touch. He felt his stubbly cheeks, noting how tight they were over his jaws.

He turned and headed, uptown, skirting around the craters, climbing over the piles of rubble. At 50th Street a Government jeep came coasting by and drew to a stop. Two soldiers with guns got out.

"Pretty late for you to be strolling, Citizen," one soldier said.

"Looking for some fresh air."

"That all?"

"What's it to you?" Katterson said.

"Not hunting some game too, maybe?"

Katterson lunged at the soldier. "Why, you little punk—"

"Easy, big boy," the other soldier said, pulling him back. "We were just joking."

"Fine joke," Katterson said. "You can afford to joke all you have to do to get food is wear a monkey suit. I know how it is with you Army guys."

"Not any more," the second soldier said.

"Who are you kidding?" Katterson said. "I was a Regular Army man for seven years until they broke up our outfit in '52. I know what's happening."

"Hey—what regiment?"

"306th Exploratory, soldier."

"You're not Katterson, Paul Katterson?"

"Maybe I am," Katterson said slowly. He moved closer to the two soldiers. "What of it?"

"You know Mark Leswick?"

"Damned well I do," Katterson said. "But how do you know him?"

"My brother. Used to talk of you all the time—Katterson's the biggest man alive, he'd say. Appetite like an ox."

Katterson smiled. "What's he doing now?"

The other coughed. "Nothing. He and some friends built a raft and tried to float to South America. They were sunk by the Shore Patrol just outside the New York Harbor."

"Oh. Too bad. Fine man, Mark. But he was right about that appetite. I'm hungry."

"So are we, fellow," the soldier said. "They cut off the soldier's dole yesterday."

Katterson laughed, and the echoes rang in the silent street. "Damn them anyway! Good thing they didn't pull that when I was in the service; I'd have told them off."

"You can come with us, if you'd like. We'll be off-duty when this patrol is over, and we'll be heading downtown."

"Pretty late, isn't it? What time is it? Where are you going?"

"It's quarter to three," the soldier said, looking at his chronometer.

"We're looking for a fellow named Malory; there's a story he has some food for sale, and we just got paid yesterday." He patted his pocket smugly.

Katterson blinked. "You know what kind of stuff Malory's selling?"

"Yeah," the other said. "So what? When you're hungry, you're hungry, and it's better to eat than starve. I've seen some guys like you—too stubborn to go that low for a meal. But you'll give in, sooner or later, I suppose. I don't know—you look stubborn."

"Yeah," Katterson said, breathing a little harder than usual. "I guess I am stubborn. Or maybe I'm not hungry enough yet. Thanks for the lift, but I'm afraid I'm going uptown."

And he turned and trudged off into the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

There was only one friendly place to go. Hal North was a quiet, bookish man who had come in contact with Katterson fairly often, even though North lived almost four miles uptown, on 114th Street.

Katterson had a standing invitation to come to North at any time of day or night, and, having no place else to go, he headed there. North was one of the few scholars who still tried to pursue knowledge at Columbia, once a citadel of learning. They huddled together in the crumbling wreck of one of the halls, treasuring moldering books and exchanging ideas. North had a tiny apartment in an undamaged building on 114th Street, and he lived surrounded by books and a tiny circle of acquaintances.

Quarter to three, the soldier said. Katterson walked swiftly and easily, hardly noticing the blocks as they flew past. He reached

North's apartment just as the sun was beginning to come up, and he knocked cautiously on the door. One knock, two, then another a little harder.

Footsteps within. "Who's there?" in a tired, high-pitched voice.

"Paul Katterson," Katterson whispered. "You awake?"

North slid the door open. "Katterson! Come on in. What brings you up here?"

"You said I could come whenever I needed to. I need to."

Katterson sat down on the edge of North's bed. "I haven't eaten in two days, pretty near."

North chuckled. "You came to the right place, then. Wait—I'll fix you some bread and oleo. We still have some left."

"You sure you can spare it, Hal?"

North opened a cupboard and took out a loaf of bread, and Katterson's mouth began to water. "Of course, Paul. I don't eat

much anyway, and I've been storing most of my food doles. You're welcome to whatever's here."

A sudden feeling of love swept through Katterson, a strange, consuming emotion which seemed to enfold all mankind for a moment, then withered and died away. "Thanks, Hal. Thanks."

He turned and looked at the tattered, thumb stained book lying open on North's bed. Katterson let his eye wander down the tiny print and read softly aloud.

*"The emperor of the sorrowful realm was there, Out  
of the girding ice he stood breast-high And to his arm  
alone the giants were less comparable than to a giant  
I."*

North brought a little plate of food over to where Katterson was sitting. "I was reading that all night," he said. "Somehow I thought

of browsing through it again, and I started it last night and read till you came."

"Dante's *Inferno*," Katterson said. "Very appropriate. Someday I'd like to look through it again too. I've read so little, you know; soldiers don't get much education."

"Whenever you want to read, Paul, the books are still here." North smiled, a pale smile on his wan face. He pointed to the bookcase, where grubby, frayed books leaned at all angles. "Look, Paul: Rabelais, Joyce, Dante, Enright, Voltaire, Aeschylus, Homer, Shakespeare. They're all here, Paul, the most precious things of all. They're my old friends; those books have been my breakfasts and my lunches and my suppers many times when no food was to be had for any price."

"We may be depending on them alone, Hal. Have you been out much these days?"

"No," North said. "I haven't been outdoors in over a week. Henriks has been picking up my food doles and bringing them here, and borrowing books. He came by yesterday—no, two days ago—to

get my volume of Greek tragedies. He's writing a new opera, based on a play of Aeschylus."

"Poor crazy Henriks," Katterson said. "Why does he keep on writing music when there's no orchestras, no records, no concerts? He can't even hear the stuff he writes."

North opened the window and the morning air edged in. "Oh, but he does, Paul. He hears the music in his mind, and that satisfies him. It doesn't really matter; he'll never live to hear it played."

"The doles have been cut off," Katterson said.

"I know."

"The people out there are eating each other. I saw a woman killed for food yesterday—butchered just like a cow."

North shook his head and straightened a tangled, whitened lock. "So soon? I thought it would take longer than that, once the food ran out."

"They're hungry, Hal."

"Yes, they're hungry. So are you. In a day or so my supply up here will be gone, and I'll be hungry too. But it takes more than

hunger to break down the taboo against eating flesh. Those people out there have given up their last shred of humanity now; they've suffered every degradation there is, and they can't sink any lower. Sooner or later we'll come to realize that, you and I, and then we'll be out there hunting for meat too."

"Hal!"

"Don't look so shocked, Paul." North smiled patiently. "Wait a couple of days, till we've eaten the bindings of my books, till we're finished chewing our shoes. The thought turns my stomach, too, but it's inevitable. Society's doomed; the last restraints are breaking now. We're more stubborn than the rest, or maybe we're just fussier about our meals. But our day will come too."

"I don't believe it," Katterson said, rising.

"Sit down. You're tired, and you're just a skeleton yourself now. What happened to my big, muscular friend Katterson? Where are his muscles now?" North reached up and squeezed the big man's biceps. "Skin, bones, what else? You're burning down, Paul, and when the spark is finally out you'll give in too."

"Maybe you're right, Hal. As soon as I stop thinking of myself as human, as soon as I get hungry enough and dead enough, I'll be out there hunting like the rest. But I'll hold out as long as I can."

He sank back on the bed and slowly turned the yellowing pages of Dante.

\* \* \* \*

Henriks came back the next day, wild-eyed and haggard, to return the book of Greek plays, saying the times were not ripe for Aeschylus. He borrowed a slim volume of poems by Ezra Pound. North forced some food on Henriks, who took it gratefully and without any show of diffidence. Then he left, staring oddly at Katterson.

Others came during the day—Komar, Goldman, de Metz—all men who, like Henriks and North, remembered the old days before the long war. They were pitiful skeletons, but the flame of knowledge

burned brightly in each of them. North introduced Katterson to them, and they looked wonderingly at his still-powerful frame before pouncing avidly on the books.

But soon they stopped coming. Katterson would stand at the window and watch below for hours, and the empty streets remained empty. It was now four days since the last food had arrived from Trenton Oasis. Time was running out.

A light snowfall began the next day, and continued throughout the long afternoon. At the evening meal North pulled his chair over to the cupboard, balanced precariously on its arm and searched around in the cupboard for a few moments. Then he turned to Katterson.

"I'm even worse off than Mother Hubbard," he said. "At least she had a dog."

"Huh?"

"I was referring to an incident in a children's book," North said.

"What I meant was we have no more food."

"None?" Katterson asked dully.

"Nothing at all." North smiled faintly. Katterson felt the emptiness stirring in his stomach, and leaned back, closing his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Neither of them ate at all the next day. The snow continued to filter lightly down. Katterson spent most of the time staring out the little window, and he saw a light, clean blanket of snow covering everything in sight. The snow was unbroken.

The next morning Katterson arose and found North busily tearing the binding from his copy of the Greek plays. With a sort of amazement Katterson watched North put the soiled red binding into a pot of boiling water.

"Oh, you're up? I'm just preparing breakfast." The binding was hardly palatable, but they chewed it to a soft pulp anyway, and swallowed the pulp just to give their tortured stomachs something to work on. Katterson retched as he swallowed his final mouthful.

One day of eating book bindings.

"The city is dead," Katterson said from the window without turning around. "I haven't seen anyone come down this street yet. The snow is everywhere."

North said nothing.

"This is crazy, Hal," Katterson said suddenly. "I'm going out to get some food."

"Where?"

"I'll walk down Broadway and see what I can find. Maybe there'll be a stray dog. I'll look. We can't hold out forever up here."

"Don't go, Paul."

Katterson turned savagely. "Why? Is it better to starve up here without trying than to go down and hunt? You're a little man; you don't need food as much as I do. I'll go down to Broadway; maybe there'll be something. At least we can't be any worse off than now."

North smiled. "Go ahead, then."

"I'm going."

He buckled on his knife, put on all the warm clothes he could find, and made his way down the stairs. He seemed to float down, so lightheaded was he from hunger. His stomach was a tight hard knot.

The streets were deserted. A light blanket of snow lay everywhere, mantling the twisted ruins of the city. Katterson headed for Broadway, leaving tracks in the unbroken snow, and began to walk downtown.

At 96th Street and Broadway he saw his first sign of life, some people at the following corner. With mounting excitement he headed for 95th Street, but pulled up short.

There was a body sprawled over the snow, newly dead. And two boys of about twelve were having a duel to the death for its possession, while a third circled warily around them. Katterson watched them for a moment, and then crossed the street and walked on.

He no longer minded the snow and the solitude of the empty city. He maintained a steady, even pace, almost the tread of a machine. The world was crumbling fast around him, and his recourse lay in his solitary trek.

He turned back for a moment and looked behind him. There were his footsteps, the long trail stretching back and out of sight, the only marks breaking the even whiteness. He ticked off the empty blocks.

90th. 87th. 85th. At 84th he saw a blotch of color on the next block, and quickened his pace. When he got to close range, he saw it was a man lying on the snow. Katterson trotted lightly to him and stood over him.

He was lying face-down. Katterson bent and carefully rolled him over. His cheeks were still red; evidently he had rounded the corner and died just a few minutes before. Katterson stood up and looked around. In the window of the house nearest him, two pale faces were pressed against the pane, watching greedily.

He whirled suddenly to face a small, swarthy man standing on the other side of the corpse. They stared for a moment, the little man and the giant. Katterson noted dimly the other's burning eyes and set expression. Two more people appeared, a ragged woman and a boy of eight or nine. Katterson moved closer to the corpse and made

a show of examining it for identification, keeping a wary eye on the little tableau facing him.

Another man joined the group, and another. Now there were five, all standing silently in a semi-circle. The first man beckoned, and from the nearest house came two women and still another man. Katterson frowned; something unpleasant was going to happen.

A trickle of snow fluttered down. The hunger bit into Katterson like a red-hot knife as he stood there uneasily waiting for something to happen. The body lay fence-like between them.

The tableau dissolved into action in an instant. The small swarthy man made a gesture and reached for the corpse; Katterson quickly bent and scooped the dead man up. Then they were all around him, screaming and pulling at the body.

The swarthy man grabbed the corpse's arm and started to tug, and a woman reached up for Katterson's hair. Katterson drew up his

arm and swung as hard as he could, and the small man left the ground and flew a few feet, collapsing into a huddled heap in the snow.

All of them were around him now, snatching at the corpse and at Katterson. He fought them off with his one free hand, with his feet, with his shoulders. Weak as he was and outnumbered, his size remained as a powerful factor. His fist connected with someone's jaw and there was a rewarding crack; at the same time he lashed back with his foot and felt contact with breaking ribs.

"Get away!" he shouted. "Get away! This is mine! Away!" The first woman leaped at him, and he kicked at her and sent her reeling into the snowdrifts. "Mine! This is mine!"

They were even more weakened by hunger than he was. In a few moments all of them were scattered in the snow except the little

boy, who came at Katterson determinedly, made a sudden dash, and leaped on Katterson's back.

He hung there, unable to do anything more than cling. Katterson ignored him and took a few steps, carrying both the corpse and the boy, while the heat of the battle slowly cooled inside him. He would take the corpse back uptown to North; they could cut it in pieces without much trouble. They would live on it for days, he thought. They would—

He realized what had happened. He dropped the corpse and staggered a few steps away, and sank down into the snow, bowing his head. The boy slipped off his back, and the little knot of people timidly converged on the corpse and bore it off triumphantly, leaving Katterson alone.

"Forgive me," he muttered hoarsely. He licked his lips nervously, shaking his head. He remained there kneeling for a long time, unable to get up.

"No, no forgiveness. I can't fool myself; I'm one of them now," he said. He arose and stared at his hands, and then began to walk. Slowly, methodically, he trudged along, fumbling with the folded piece of paper in his pocket, knowing now that he had lost everything.

The snow had frozen in his hair, and he knew his head was white from snow—the head of an old man. His face was white too. He followed Broadway for a while, then cut to Central Park West. The snow was unbroken before him. It lay covering everything, a sign of the long winter setting in.

"North was right," he said quietly to the ocean of white that was Central Park. He looked at the heaps of rubble seeking cover

beneath the snow. "I can't hold out any longer." He looked at the address—Malory, 218 West 42nd Street—and continued onward, almost numb with the cold.

His eyes were narrowed to slits, and lashes and head were frosted and white. Katterson's throat throbbed in his mouth, and his lips were clamped together by hunger. 70th Street, 65th. He zigzagged and wandered, following Columbus Avenue, Amsterdam Avenue for a while. Columbus, Amsterdam—the names were echoes from a past that had never been.

What must have been an hour passed, and another. The streets were empty. Those who were left stayed safe and starving inside, and watched from their windows the strange giant stalking alone through the snow. The sun had almost dropped from the sky as he reached 50th Street. His hunger had all but abated now; he felt

nothing, knew just that his goal lay ahead. He faced forward, unable to go anywhere but ahead.

Finally 42nd Street, and he turned down toward where he knew Malory was to be found. He came to the building. Up the stairs, now, as the darkness of night came to flood the streets. Up the stairs, up another flight, another. Each step was a mountain, but he pulled himself higher and higher.

At the fifth floor Katterson reeled and sat down on the edge of the steps, gasping. A liveried footman passed, his nose in the air, his green coat shimmering in the half-light. He was carrying a roasted pig with an apple in its mouth on a silver tray. Katterson lurched forward to seize the pig. His groping hands passed through it, and pig and footman exploded like bubbles and drifted off through the silent halls.

Just one more flight. Sizzling meat on a stove, hot, juicy, tender meat filling the hole where his stomach once had been. He picked up his legs carefully and set them down, and came to the top at last. He balanced for a moment at the top of the stairs, nearly toppled backwards but seized the banister at the last second, and then pressed forward.

There was the door. He saw it, heard loud noises coming from behind it. A feast was going on, a banquet, and he ached to join in. Down the hall, turn left, pound on the door.

Noise growing louder.

"Malory! Malory! It's me, Katterson, big Katterson! I've come to you! Open up, Malory!"

The handle began to turn.

"Malory! Malory!"

Katterson sank to his knees in the hall and fell forward on his face when the door opened at last.

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