

DARK, DARK WERE THE TUNNELS

BY GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

George R. R. Martin is the wildly popular author of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* epic fantasy series, as well as other novels, such as *Dying of the Light* and *The Armageddon Rag*. His short fiction—which has appeared in numerous anthologies and in most if not all of the genre's major magazines—has garnered him four Hugos, two Nebulas, the Stoker, and the World Fantasy Award. Martin is also known for editing the *Wild Cards* series of shared world superhero anthologies, and for his work as a screenwriter on such television projects as the 1980s version of *The Twilight Zone* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

Before Martin became the king of epic fantasy (or “The American Tolkien,” as *Time* magazine likes to call him), much of his fiction was science fictional in nature, such as the multiple award-winning “Sandkings” and the story included here.

In the story that follows, you'll meet Greel. He is a scout of the People. He's penetrated the Oldest Tunnels, where the taletellers said the People had come from a million years ago. He is no coward, but he is afraid, and with good reason. You see, he's very used to being in the dark, but some visitors have come to the tunnels, and they've brought with them light...

Greel was afraid.

He lay in the warm, rich darkness beyond the place where the tunnel curved, his thin body pressed against the strange metal bar that ran along the floor. His eyes were closed. He strained to remain perfectly still.

He was armed. A short barbed spear was clenched tightly in his right fist. But that did not lessen his fear.

He had come far, far. He had climbed higher and ranged further than any other scout of the People in long generations. He had fought his way through the Bad Levels, where the worm-things still hunted the People relentlessly. He had stalked and slain the glowing killer mole in the crumbling Middle Tunnels. He had

wiggled through dozens of unmapped and unnamed passages that hardly looked big enough for a man to pass.

And now he had penetrated to the Oldest Tunnels, the great tunnels and halls of legend, where the taletellers said the People had come from a million years ago.

He was no coward. He was a scout of the People, who dared to walk in tunnels where men had not trod in centuries.

But he was afraid, and was not ashamed for his fear. A good scout knows when to be afraid. And Greel was a very good scout. So he lay silent in the darkness, and clutched his spear, and thought.

Slowly the fear began to wane. Greel steeled himself, and opened his eyes. Quickly he shut them again.

The tunnel ahead was on fire.

He had never seen fire. But the taletellers had sung of it many times. Hot it was. And bright, so bright it hurt the eyes. Blindness was the lot of those who looked too long.

So Greel kept his eyes shut. A scout needed his eyes. He could not allow the fire ahead to blind him.

Back here, in the darkness beyond the bend of the tunnel, the fire was not so bad. It still hurt the eyes to look at it, as it hung upon the curving tunnel wall. But the pain was one that could be borne.

But earlier, when he had first seen the fire, Greel had been unwise. He had crept forward, squinting, to where the wall curved away. He had touched the fire that hung upon the stone. And then, foolishly, he had peered beyond the curve.

His eyes still ached. He had gotten only one quick glimpse before whirling and scrambling silently back to where he lay. But it was enough. Beyond the bend the fire had been brighter, much brighter, brighter than ever he could have imagined. Even with his eyes closed he could still see it, two dancing, aching spots of horrible intense brightness. They would not go away. The fire had burned part of his eyes, he thought.

But still, when he had touched the fire that hung upon the wall, it had not been like the fire of which the taletellers sing. The stone had felt like all other stone, cool and a little damp. Fire was hot, the taletellers said. But the fire on the stone had not been hot to the touch.

It was not fire, then, Greel decided after thought. What it was he did not know. But it could not be fire if it was not hot.

He stirred slightly from where he lay. Barely moving, he reached out and touched H'ssig in the darkness.

His mind-brother was several yards distant, near one of the other metal bars. Greel stroked him with his mind, and could feel H'ssig quiver in response. Thoughts and sensations mingled wordlessly.

H'ssig was afraid, too. The great hunting rat had no eyes. But his scent was keener than Greel's, and there was a strange smell in the tunnel. His ears were better, too. Through them Greel could pick up more of the odd noises that came from within the fire that was not a fire.

Greel opened his eyes again. Slowly this time, not all at once. Squinting.

The holes the fire had burned in his vision were still there. But they were fading. And the dimmer fire that moved on the curving tunnel wall could be endured, if he did not look directly at it.

Still. He could not go forward. And he must not creep back. He was a scout. He had a duty.

He reached out to H'ssig again. The hunting rat had run with him since birth. He had never failed him. He would not fail him now. The rat had no eyes that could be burned, but his ears and his nose would tell Greel what he must know about the thing beyond the curve.

H'ssig felt the command more than he heard it. He crept forward slowly towards the fire.

"A treasurehouse!"

Ciffonetto's voice was thick with admiration. The layer of protective grease smeared onto his face could hardly hide the grin.

Von der Stadt looked doubtful. Not just his face, but his whole body radiated doubt. Both men were dressed alike, in featureless grey coveralls woven of a heavy metallic cloth. But they could never be mistaken. Von der Stadt was unique in his ability to express doubt while remaining absolutely still.

When he moved, or spoke, he underlined the impression. As he did now.

"Some treasurehouse," he said, simply.

It was enough to annoy Ciffonetto. He frowned slightly at his larger companion. "No, I mean it," he said. The beam from his heavy flashlight sliced through the thick darkness, and played up and down one of the rust-eaten steel pillars that stretched from the platform to the roof. "Look at that," Ciffonetto said.

Von der Stadt looked at it. Doubtfully. "I see it," he said. "So where's the treasure?"

Ciffonetto continued to move his beam up and down. "That's the treasure," he said. "This whole place is a major historical find. I knew this was the place to search. I told them so."

"What's so great about a steel beam, anyway?" Von der Stadt asked, letting his own flash brush against the pillar.

"The state of preservation," Ciffonetto said, moving closer. "Most everything above ground is radioactive slag, even now. But down here we've got some beautiful artifacts. It will give us a much better picture about what the old civilization was like, before the disaster."

"We know what the old civilization was like," Von der Stadt protested. "We've got tapes, books, films, everything. All sorts of things. The war didn't even touch Luna."

"Yes, yes, but this is different," Ciffonetto said. "This is reality." He ran his gloved hand lovingly along the pillar. "Look here," he said.

Von der Stadt moved closer.

There was writing carved into the metal. Scratched in, rather. It didn't go very

deep, but it could still be read, if but faintly.

Ciffonetto was grinning again. Von der Stadt looked doubtful. "Rodney loves Wanda," he said.

He shook his head. "Shit, Cliff," he said, "you can find the same thing in every public john in Luna City."

Ciffonetto rolled his eyes. "Von der Stadt," he said, "if we found the oldest cave painting in the world, you'd probably say it was a lousy picture of a buffalo." He jabbed at the writing with his free hand. "Don't you understand? This is old. It's history. It's the remains of a civilization and a nation and a planet that perished almost half a millennium ago."

Von der Stadt didn't reply, but he still looked doubtful. His flashlight wandered. "There's some more if that's what you're after," he said, holding his beam steady on another pillar a few feet distant.

This time it was Ciffonetto who read the inscription. "Repent or ye are doomed," he said, smiling, after his flash melted into Von der Stadt's.

He chuckled slightly. "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls," he said softly.

Von der Stadt frowned. "Some prophet," he said. "They must have had one hell of a weird religion."

"Oh, Christ," Ciffonetto groaned. "I didn't mean it literally. I was quoting. A mid-twentieth-century poet named Simon. He wrote that only fifty years or so before the great disaster."

Von der Stadt wasn't interested. He wandered away impatiently, his flash darting here and there amid the pitch-black ruins of the ancient subway station. "It's hot down here," he complained.

"Hotter up there," Ciffonetto said, already lost in a new inscription.

"Not the same kind of hot," Von der Stadt replied.

Ciffonetto didn't bother to answer. "This is the biggest find of the expedition," he said when he looked up at last. "We've got to get pictures. And get the others down here. We're wasting our time on the surface."

"We'll do better down here?" Von der Stadt said. Doubtfully, of course.

Ciffonetto nodded. "That's what I've said all along. The surface was plastered. It's still a radioactive hell up there, even after all these centuries. If anything survived, it was underground. That's where we should look. We should branch out and explore this whole system of tunnels." His hands swept out expansively.

"You and Nagel have been arguing about that the whole trip," Von der Stadt said. "All the way from Luna City. I don't see that it's done you much good."

"Doctor Nagel is a fool," Ciffonetto said carefully.

"I don't think so," Von der Stadt said. "I'm a soldier, not a scientist. But I've heard his side of the argument, and it makes sense. All this stuff down here is great, but it's not what Nagel wants. It's not what the expedition was sent to Earth to look for."

"I know, I know," Ciffonetto said. "Nagel wants life. Human life, especially. So every day he sends the flyers out further and further. And so far all he's come up

with is a few species of insects and a handful of mutated birds."

Von der Stadt shrugged.

"If he'd look down here, he'd find what he's after," Ciffonetto continued. "He doesn't realize how deep the cities had dug before the war. There are miles of tunnels under our feet. Level after level. That's where the survivors would be, if there are any survivors."

"How do you figure?" Von der Stadt asked.

"Look, when war hit, the only ones to live through it would be those down in deep shelters. Or in the tunnels beneath the cities. The radioactivity would have prevented them from coming up for years. Hell, the surface still isn't very attractive. They'd be trapped down there. They'd adjust. After a few generations they wouldn't want to come up."

But Von der Stadt's attention had wandered, and he was hardly listening any more. He had walked to the edge of the platform, and was staring down onto the tracks.

He stood there silently for a moment, then reached a decision. He stuffed his flashlight into his belt, and began to climb down. "Come on," he said. "Let's go look for some of these survivors of yours."

H'ssig stayed close to the metal bar as he edged forward. It helped to hide him, and kept away the fire, so he moved in a little band of almost darkness. Hugging it as best he could, he crept silently around the curve, and halted.

Through him Greel watched: watched with the rat's ears and with his nose.

The fire was talking.

There were two scents, alike but not the same. And there were two voices. Just as there had been two fires. The bright things that had burned Greel's eyes were living creatures of some sort.

Greel listened. The sounds H'ssig heard so clearly were words. A language of some sort. Greel was sure of that. He knew the difference between the roars and grunts of animals and the patterns of speech.

But the fire things were talking in a language he did not know. The sounds meant no more to him than to H'ssig who relayed them.

He concentrated on the scent. It was strange, unlike anything he had encountered before. But somehow it felt like a man-scent, though it could not be that.

Greel thought. An almost man-scent. And words. Could it be that the fire things were men? They would be strange men, much unlike the People. But the tale-tellers sung of men in ancient times that had strange powers and forms. Might not these be such men? Here, in the Oldest Tunnels, where the legends said the Old Ones had created the People—might not such men still dwell here?

Yes.

Greel stirred. He moved slowly from where he lay, raising himself to a crouching position to squint at the curve ahead. A silent snap brought H'ssig back to safety from the fiery tunnel beyond the curve.

There was one way to make sure, Greel thought. Trembling, he reached out cautiously with his mind.

Von der Stadt had adapted to Earth's gravity a lot more successfully than Ciffonetto. He reached the floor of the tunnel quickly, and waited impatiently while his companion climbed down from the platform.

Ciffonetto let himself drop the last foot or so, and landed with a thud. He looked up at the platform apprehensively. "I just hope I can make it back up," he said.

Von der Stadt shrugged. "You were the one who wanted to explore all the tunnels."

"Yes," said Ciffonetto, shifting his gaze from the platform to look around him. "And I still do. Down here, in these tunnels, are the answers we're seeking."

"That's your theory, anyway," Von der Stadt said. He looked in both directions, chose one at random, and moved forward, his flashlight beam spearing out before him. Ciffonetto followed a half-step behind.

The tunnel they entered was long, straight, and empty.

"Tell me," Von der Stadt said in an offhand manner as they walked, "even if your survivors did make it through the war in shelters, wouldn't they have been forced to surface eventually to survive? I mean—how could anyone actually live down here?" He looked around the tunnel with obvious distaste.

"Have you been taking lessons from Nagel or something?" Ciffonetto replied. "I've heard that so often I'm sick of it. I admit it would be difficult. But not impossible. At first, there would be access to large stores of canned goods. A lot of that stuff was kept in basements. You could get to it by tunneling. Later, you could raise food. There are plants that will grow without light. And there would be insects and boring animals too, I imagine."

"A diet of bugs and mushrooms. It doesn't sound too healthy to me."

Ciffonetto stopped suddenly, not bothering to reply. "Look there," he said, pointing with his flashlight.

The beam played over a jagged break in the tunnel wall. It looked as though someone had smashed through the stone a long time ago.

Von der Stadt's flash joined Ciffonetto's to light the area better. There was a passage descending from the break. Ciffonetto moved towards it with a start.

"What the hell do you say to this, Von der Stadt?" he asked, grinning. He stuck head and flashlight into the crude tunnel, but re-emerged quickly.

"Not much there," he said. "The passage is caved in after a few feet. But still, it confirms what I've been saying."

Von der Stadt looked vaguely uneasy. His free hand drifted to the holstered pistol at his side. "I don't know," he said.

"No, you don't," said Ciffonetto, triumphantly. "Neither does Nagel. Men have lived down here. They may still live here. We've got to organize a more efficient search of the whole underground system."

He paused, his mind flickering back to Von der Stadt's argument of a few seconds earlier. "As for your bugs and mushrooms, men can learn to live on a lot of things."

Men adapt. If men survived the war—and this says they did—then they survived the aftermath, I'll wager."

"Maybe," Von der Stadt said. "I can't see what you are so hot on discovering survivors for anyway, though. I mean, the expedition is important and all that. We've got to re-establish spaceflight, and this is a good test for our new hardware. And I guess you scientists can pick up some good stuff for the museums. But humans? What did Earth ever get us besides the Great Famine?"

Ciffonetto smiled tolerantly. "It's because of the Great Famine that we want to find humans," he said. He paused. "We've got enough to entice even Nagel now. Let's head back."

He started walking back in the direction they had come, and resumed talking. "The Great Famine was an unavoidable result of the war on Earth," he said. "When supplies stopped coming, there was absolutely no way to keep all the people in the lunar colony alive. Ninety per cent starved."

"Luna could be made self-sufficient, but only with a very small population. That's what happened. The population adjusted itself. But we recycled our air and our water, grew foods in hydroponic tanks. We struggled, but we survived. And began to rebuild."

"But we lost a lot. Too many people died. Our genetic pool was terribly small, and not too diverse. The colony had never had a lot of racial diversity to begin with."

"That hasn't helped. Population actually declined for a long time after we had the physical resources to support more people. The idea of in-breeding didn't go over. Now population's going up again, but slowly. We're stagnant, Von der Stadt. It's taken us nearly five centuries to get space travel going again, for example. And we still haven't duplicated many of the things they had back on Earth before the disaster."

Von der Stadt frowned. "Stagnant's a strong word," he said. "I think we've done pretty good."

Ciffonetto dismissed the comment with a wave of his flashlight. "Pretty good," he said. "Not good enough. We're not going anywhere. There's so damn few changes, so little in the way of new ideas. We need fresh viewpoints, fresh genetic stock. We need the stimulation of contact with a foreign culture."

"Survivors would give us that. After all Earth's been through, they'd have to have changed in some ways. And they'd be proof that human life can still flourish on Earth. That's crucial if we're going to establish a colony here."

The last point was tacked on almost as an afterthought, but caught Von der Stadt's approval. He nodded gravely.

They had reached the station again. Ciffonetto headed straight for the platform. "C'mon," he said, "let's get back to base. I can't wait to see Nagel's face drop when I tell him what we've found."

They were men.

Greel was almost sure of it. The texture of their minds was curious, but man-like. Greel was a strong mind-mingler. He knew the coarse, dim feel of an animal's

mind, the obscene shadows that were the thoughts of the worm-things. And he knew the minds of men.

They were men.

Yet there was a strangeness. Mind-mingling was true communication only with a mind-brother. But always it was a sharing with other men. A dark and murky sharing, full of clouds and flavors and smells and emotions. But a sharing.

Here there was no sharing. Here it was like mind-mingling with a lower animal. Touch, feel, stroke, savor—all that a strong mind-mingler could do with an animal. But never would he feel a response. Men and mind-brothers responded; animals did not.

These men did not respond. These strange fire-men had minds that were silent and crippled.

In the darkness of the tunnel, Greel straightened from his crouch. The fire had faded suddenly from the wall. The men were going away, down the tunnel away from him. The fire went with them.

He edged forward slowly, H'sig at his side, spear in hand. Distance made mind-mingling difficult. He must keep them in range. He must find out more. He was a scout. He had a duty.

His mind crept out again, to taste the flavor of the other minds. He had to be sure.

Their thoughts moved around him, swirling chaos shot through with streaks of brightness and emotions and dancing, half-seen concepts. Greel understood little. But here he recognized something. And there something else came to him.

He lingered and tasted fully of their minds, and learned. But still it was like mind-mingling with an animal. He could not make himself felt. He could not get an answer.

Still they moved away, and their thoughts dimmed, and the mind-mingling became harder. Greel advanced. He hesitated when he got to the place where the tunnel curved. But he knew he must go on. He was a scout.

He lowered himself to the floor, squinted, and moved around the curve on hands and knees.

Beyond the curve, he started and gasped. He was in a great hall, an immense cavern with a vaulting roof and giant pillars that held up the sky. And the hall was bright with light, a strange, fiery light that danced over everything.

It was a place of legend. A hall of the Old Ones. It had to be. Never had Greel seen a chamber so vast. And he of all the People had wandered furthest and climbed highest.

The men were not in sight, but their fire danced around the mouth of the tunnel at the other end of the hall. It was intense, but not unbearable. The men had gone around another curve. Greel realized that he looked only at the dim reflection of their fire. So long as he did not see it direct, he was safe.

He moved out into the hall, the scout in him crying to climb the stone wall and explore the upper chamber from which the mighty pillars reared. But no. The fire-men were more important. The hall he could return to.

H'ssig rubbed up against his leg. He reached down and stroked the rat's soft fur reassuringly. His mind-brother could sense the turmoil of his thoughts.

Men, yes, he was sure of that. And more he knew. Their thoughts were not those of the People, but they were man-thoughts, and some he could understand. One of them burned, burned to find other men. They seek the People, Greel thought.

That he knew. He was a scout and a mind-mingler. He did not make mistakes. But what he must do he did not know.

They sought the People. That might be good. When first that concept had touched him, Greel had quivered with joy. These fire-men were like the Old Ones of legend. If they sought the People, he would lead them. There would be rewards, and glory, and the tale-tellers would sing his name for generations.

More, it was his duty. Things went not well with the People in recent generations. The time of good had ended with the coming of the worm-things, who had driven the People from tunnel after tunnel. Even now, below his feet, the fight went on still in the Bad Levels and the tunnels of the People.

And Greel knew the People were losing.

It was slow. But certain. The worm-things were new to the People. More than animal, but less, less than men. They needed not the tunnels. They stalked through the earth itself, and nowhere were men safe.

The People fought back. Mind-minglers could sense the worm-things, and spears could slay them, and the great hunting rats could rip them to shreds. But always the worm-things fled back into the earth itself. And there were many worm-things, and few People.

But these new men, these fire-men, they could change the war. Legends said the Old Ones had fought with fire and stranger weapons, and these men lived in fire. They could aid the People. They could give mighty weapons to drive the worm-things back into the darkness from which they came.

But.

But these men were not quite men. Their minds were crippled, and much, much of their thought was alien to Greel. Only glimpses of it could he catch. He could not know them as he could know another of the People when they mingled minds.

He could lead them to the People. He knew the way. Back and down, a turn here, a twist there. Through the Middle Tunnels and the Bad Levels.

But what if he led them, and they were enemy to the People? What if they turned on the People with their fire? He feared for what they might do.

Without him, they would never find the People. Greel was certain of that. Only he, in long generations, had come this far. And only with stealth and mind-mingling and H'ssig alongside him. They would never find the ways he had come, the twisting tunnels that led deep, deep into the earth.

So the People were safe if he did not act. But then the worm-things would win, eventually. It might take many generations. But the People could not hold out.

His decision. No mind-mingler could reach a small part of the distance that separated him from the tunnels of the People. He alone must decide.

And he must decide soon. For he realized, with a shock, that the fire-men were

coming back. Their odd thoughts grew stronger, and the light in the hall grew more and more intense.

He hesitated, then moved slowly backwards towards the tunnel from which he had come.

"Wait a minute," Von der Stadt said when Cliftonetto was a quarter of the way up the wall. "Let's try the other directions."

Cliftonetto craned his head around awkwardly to look at his companion, gave it up as a bad job, and dropped back to the tunnel floor. He looked disgruntled. "We should get back," he said. "We've got enough."

Von der Stadt shrugged. "C'mon. You're the one wanted to explore down here. So we might as well do a thorough job of it. Maybe we're only a few feet away from another one of your big finds."

"All right," said Cliftonetto, pulling his flashlight from his belt where he had stashed it for his intended assault on the platform. "I suppose you have a point. It would be tragic if we got Nagel down here and he tripped over something we had missed."

Von der Stadt nodded assent. Their flashlight beams melted together, and they strode quickly towards the deeper darkness of the tunnel mouth.

They were coming. Fear and indecision tumbled in Greel's thoughts. He hugged the tunnel wall. Back he moved, fast and silent. He must keep away from their fire until he could decide what he must do.

But after the first turn, the tunnel ran long and straight. Greel was fast. But not fast enough. And his eyes were incautiously wide when the fire appeared suddenly in full fury.

His eyes burned. He squealed in sudden pain, and threw himself to the ground. The fire refused to go away. It danced before him even with his eyes closed, shifting colors horribly.

Greel fought for control. Still there was distance between them. Still he was armed. He reached out to H'ssig, nearby in the tunnel. The eyeless rat again would be his eyes.

Eyes still shut, Greel began to crawl back, away from the fire. H'ssig remained.

"What the hell was that?"

Von der Stadt's whispered question hung in the air for an instant. He was frozen where he had rounded the curve. Cliftonetto, by his side, had also stopped dead at the sound.

The scientist looked puzzled. "I don't know," he said. "It was—odd. Sounded like some sort of animal in pain. A scream, sort of. But as if the screamer were trying to remain silent, almost."

His flashlight darted this way and that, slicing ribbons of light from the velvet darkness, but revealing little. Von der Stadt's beam pointed straight ahead, unmoving.

"I don't like it," Von der Stadt stated doubtfully. "Maybe there is something down here. But that doesn't mean it's friendly." He shifted his flash to his left hand, and drew his pistol. "We'll see," he said.

Ciffonetto frowned, but said nothing. They started forward again.

They were big, and they moved fast. Greel realized with a sick despair that they would catch him. His choice had been made for him.

But perhaps it was right. They were men. Men like the Old Ones. They would help the People against the worm-things. A new age would dawn. The time of fear would pass. The horror would fade. The old glories of which the tale-tellers sing would return, and once again the People would build great halls and mighty tunnels.

Yes. They had decided for him, but the decision was right. It was the only decision. Man must meet man, and together they would face the worm-things.

He kept his eyes closed. But he stood.

And spoke.

Again they froze in mid-step. This time the sound was no muffled scream. It was soft, almost hissing, but it was too clear to be misunderstood.

Both flash beams swung wildly now, for seconds. Then one froze. The other hesitated, then joined it.

Together they formed a pool of light against a distant part of the tunnel wall.

And in the pool stood—what?

"My God," said Von der Stadt. "Cliff, tell me what it is quick, before I shoot it."

"Don't," Ciffonetto replied. "It isn't moving."

"But—what?"

"I don't know." The scientist's voice had a strange, uncertain quiver in it.

The creature in the pool of light was small, barely over four feet. Small and sickening. There was something vaguely manlike about it, but the proportions of the limbs were all wrong, and the hands and feet were grotesquely malformed. And the skin, the skin was a sickly, maggoty white.

But the face was the worst. Large, all out of proportion to the body, yet the mouth and nose could hardly be seen. The head was all eyes. Two great, immense, grotesque eyes, now safely hidden by lids of dead white skin.

Von der Stadt was rock steady, but Ciffonetto shook a bit as he looked at it. Yet he spoke first.

"Look," he said, his voice soft. "In its hand, I think—I think that's a tool."

Silence. Long, strained silence. Then Ciffonetto spoke again. His voice was hoarse.

"I think that's a man."

Greel burned.

The fire had caught him. Even shut tight, his eyes ached, and he knew the horror that lurked outside if he opened them. And the fire had caught him. His skin

itched strangely, and hurt. Worse and worse it hurt.

Yet he did not stir. He was a scout. He had a duty. He endured, while his mind mingled with those of the others.

And there, in their minds, he saw fear, but checked fear. In a distorted, blurry way he saw himself through their eyes, He tasted the awe and the revulsion that warred in one. And the unmixed revulsion that churned inside the other.

He angered, but he checked his anger. He must reach them. He must take them to the People. They were blind and crippled and could not help their feelings. But if they understood, they would aid. Yes.

He did not move. He waited. His skin burned, but he waited.

"That," said Von der Stadt. "That thing is a man?"

Ciffonetto nodded. "It must be. It carries tools. It spoke." He hesitated. "But—God, I never envisioned anything like this. The tunnels, Von der Stadt. The dark. For long centuries only the dark. I never thought—so much evolution in so little time."

"A man?" Still Von der Stadt doubted. "You're crazy. No man could become something like that."

Ciffonetto scarcely heard him. "I should have realized," he mumbled. "Should have guessed. The radiation, of course. It would speed up mutation. Shorter life-spans, probably. You were right, Von der Stadt. Men can't live on bugs and mushrooms. Not men like us. So they adapted. Adapted to the darkness, and the tunnels. It—"

Suddenly he started. "Those eyes," he said. He clicked off his flashlight, and the walls seemed to move closer. "He must be sensitive. We're hurting him. Divert your flash, Von der Stadt."

Von der Stadt gave him a doubtful sidelong glance. "It's dark enough down here already," he said. But he obeyed. His beam swung away.

"History," Ciffonetto said. "A moment that will live in—"

He never finished. Von der Stadt was tense, trigger-edged. As his beam swung away from the figure down the tunnel, he caught another flicker of movement in the darkness. He swung back and forth, found the thing again, pinned it against the tracks with a beam of light.

Almost he had shot before. But he had hesitated, because the manlike figure had been still and unfamiliar.

This new thing was not still. It squealed and scurried. Nor was it unfamiliar. This time Von der Stadt did not hesitate.

There was a roar, a flash. Then a second.

"Got it," said Von der Stadt. "A damn rat."

And Greel screamed.

After the long burning, there had come an instant of relief. But only an instant. Then, suddenly, pain flooded him. Wave after wave after wave. Rolled over him, blotting out the thoughts of the fire-men, blotting out their fear, blotting out his anger.

H'ssig died. His mind-brother died.

The fire-men had killed his mind-brother.

He shrieked in pain. He darted forward, swung up his spear.

He opened his eyes. There was a flash of vision, then more pain and blindness. But the flash was enough. He struck. And struck again. Wildly, madly, blow after blow, thrust after thrust.

Then, again, the universe turned red with pain, and then again sounded that awful roar that had come when H'ssig died. Something threw him to the tunnel floor, and his eyes opened again, and fire, fire was everywhere.

But only for a while. Only for a while. Then, shortly, it was darkness again for Grael of the People.

The gun still smoked. The hand was still steady. But Von der Stadt's mouth hung open as he looked, unbelieving, from the thing he had blasted across the tunnel, to the blood dripping from his uniform, then back again.

Then the gun dropped, and he clutched at his stomach, clutched at the wounds. His hand came away wet with blood. He stared at it. Then stared at Ciffonetto.

"The rat," he said. There was pain in his voice. "I only shot a rat. It was going for him. Why, Cliff? I—?"

And he fell. Heavily. His flashlight shattered and went dark.

There was a long fumbling in the blackness. Then, at last, Ciffonetto's light winked on, and the ashen scientist knelt beside his companion.

"Von," he said, tugging at the uniform. "Are you all right?" He ripped away the fabric to expose the torn flesh.

Von der Stadt was mumbling. "I didn't even see him coming. I took my light away, like you said, Cliff. Why? I wasn't going to shoot him. Not if he was a man. I only shot a rat. Only a rat. It was going for him, too."

Ciffonetto, who had stood paralyzed through everything, nodded. "It wasn't your fault, Von. But you must have scared him. You need treating, now, though. He hurt you bad. Can you make it back to camp?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He slipped his arm under Von der Stadt's, and lifted him to his feet, and began to walk him down the tunnel, praying they could make it back to the platform.

"I only shot a rat," Von der Stadt kept saying, over and over, in a dazed voice.

"Don't worry," said Ciffonetto. "It won't matter. We'll find others. We'll search the whole subway system if we have to. We'll find them."

"Only a rat. Only a rat."

They reached the platform. Ciffonetto lowered Von der Stadt back to the ground. "I can't make the climb carrying you, Von," he said. "I'll have to leave you here. Go for help." He straightened, hung the flash from his belt.

"Only a rat," Von der Stadt said again.

"Don't worry," said Ciffonetto. "Even if we don't find them, nothing will be lost. They were clearly sub-human. Men once, maybe. But no more. Degenerated. There was nothing they could have taught us, anyway."

But Von der Stadt was past listening, past hearing. He just sat against the wall, clutching his stomach and feeling the blood ooze from between his fingers, mumbling the same words over and over.

Ciffonetto turned to the wall. A few short feet to the platform, then the old, rusty escalator, and the basement ruins, and daylight. He had to hurry. Von der Stadt wouldn't last long.

He grabbed the rock, pulled himself up, hung on desperately as his other hand scrambled and found a hold. He pulled up again.

He was almost there, almost at the platform level, when his weak lunar muscles gave out on him. There was a sudden spasm, his hand slipped loose, his other hand couldn't take the weight.

He fell. On the flashlight.

The darkness was like nothing he had ever seen. Too thick, too complete. He fought to keep from screaming.

When he tried to rise again, he did scream. More than the flashlight had broken in the fall.

His scream echoed and re-echoed through the long, black tunnel he could not see. It was a long time dying. When it finally faded, he screamed again. And again.

Finally, hoarse, he stopped. "Von," he said. "Von, can you hear me?" There was no answer. He tried again. Talk, he must talk to hold his sanity. The darkness was all around him, and he could almost hear soft movements a few feet away.

Von der Stadt giggled, sounding infinitely far away.

"It was only a rat," he said. "Only a rat."

Silence. Then, softly, Ciffonetto. "Yes, Von, yes."

"It was only a rat."

"It was only a rat."

"It was only a rat."