

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ALONE

There was the sky. There was rock and ice. There was a mountain thrusting upward into blue emptiness—and at the foot of the mountain a tiny speck. This speck was the only thing that lived or moved in all that world of silent majesty.

Rudi climbed the white slope of the upper glacier. He did not hurry. He looked neither up at the peak nor down at the valley, but only at the ice flowing slowly past beneath his feet. In the ice were the marks of their boot nails from the previous day, and it was easy to follow the route. When the slope steepened, there were the steps cut by Winter and Saxo with their axes. He had only to step up, balance briefly, step up again—and again.

With the step-cutting, it had required two hours to reach the *Bergschrund*. Today it took him perhaps a third of that time. Coming out on the rim of the great crevasse, he approached the snow-bridge, tested it, and crossed without mishap. Then, still following the trail of the day before, he threaded his way through the steep maze of the icefall.

The seracs rose around him in frozen stillness. And Rudi's mind seemed frozen too. What he was doing was

not a result of conscious choice or decision; it was simply what he *had* to do. He had not lost his senses. He knew that alone, and without food or a tent, there was no chance on earth of his reaching the top of the Citadel. And it was not hope for the top that pushed him on. It was simply—well, he wasn't sure—perhaps simply the hope to set foot on the mountain. Or more than the hope. The need. The need of his body, his mind, his heart, to come at last to the place of which he had dreamed so long; to stand on the southeast ridge; to follow where his father had led; to climb, perhaps, even as high as the Fortress, which was as high as any man had gone. That was what he wanted; what he *had to have*. That much. Before it all ended. Before descending to the village; to his uncle's anger, his mother's tears, Klaus Wesselhoft's laughter; to the soap and mops and dishpans of the Beau Site Hotel.

He climbed on. The seracs slid past like tall hooded ghosts. And then they dropped away behind him and he came out at the base of the snowslope. Above him he could see a trail of zigzagging footprints, extending perhaps half-way to the ridge and disappearing into smooth drifts where the avalanche had erased them. The drifts were huge, billowing, dazzling in the sunlight; but he knew that they had frozen overnight and that the sun was not yet strong enough to dislodge them. He shuffled his boots in the snow, and it was firm and dry. As Winter had said, the slope was safe in the morning.

Even so, he was cautious as he climbed upward, testing every step before trusting his weight to it. And when he

came to the avalanche area he detoured to the left and kept as close as possible to the bordering rock-wall, so that he would have something to cling to, just in case. . . . But nothing happened. The snow stayed as motionless as the rock. In all that spreading wilderness there was no movement except that of his own two legs plodding slowly on through the drifts.

And then—he stopped—then there *was* a movement. He felt it rather than saw it: the merest flicker or shadow, not on the slope, but on the cliff high above. He tensed, peering upward. . . . A stonefall? . . . No. There was no sound. And then again there was the flicker: a moving speck of reddish brown against the tall grayness of the rock. Suddenly it leapt into focus. It was a chamois. For an instant it stood outlined on a crag, motionless, staring down at him; and Rudi, motionless too, stared back. Then the animal moved again—wheeled—vanished. It was as if the cliff had opened and swallowed it. And the stillness closed in again, even more absolute than before.

Rudi moved on. Through the stillness. Up the white slope. Kick—step, he went. Kick—step. Kick—step. And though the going through the deep drifts was slow, it was neither steep nor slippery, and his progress was steady. He looked back—and the icefall was far below; ahead—and the ridge loomed nearer. . . . Nearer. . . . And then at last the great moment came, and the slope was beneath him. There was no longer snow under his feet, but solid rock. He took a step up—a second—a third . . . and stood on the southeast ridge of the Citadel.

Here he sat down and rested. He pressed his hands against the cold stone, as if to convince himself that he was really there. Not on its glaciers; not on its approaches; but on the mountain itself. He looked down along the way he had come, and there, beyond glacier and snowfield, forest and pasture, tiny and remote, lay the green valley of Kurtal. On the far side of the ridge he could now see all the way to the village of Broli. It was as if he were already on a mountaintop, with all the world below him. . . . Until he looked up. And then everything changed. . . . Then he was no longer on a mountain's summit, but at a mountain's base, and there was the whole great mass of the Citadel still towering above him into the sky.

His eyes moved slowly upward across the slanting wilderness of rock and ice. To the right was the east face, to the left, the south: two monstrous, almost vertical precipices soaring up out of the bounds of sight. Between them, and joining them, was the twisting spine of the southeast ridge; and while this, too, was steep, it was not so steep as the faces, and was broken up into a maze of towers, clefts and ledges that at least offered the possibility of being climbed. From where Rudi sat he could not see to the summit of the Citadel, nor even to its high shoulder. Some two thousand feet above him the ridge flared up into the bold broad promontory that was called the Fortress, and what lay beyond it was hidden from view. There remained, Rudi knew, fully two-thirds of the mountain—another four thousand feet of savage rock thrusting up and up to the final pyramid. But, in practical terms, it was still

as remote from him as when he had stared up at it through the blue miles from the valley below. The Fortress was as far as he could see. And as far as he could go.

If he could go that far . . .

He looked at the sun and estimated it to be not quite noon. If he were to be down safely by dark, he could allow himself—what? Perhaps two hours for going up. That meant about another hour to get back where he was. Three o'clock. He figured the times down the snowslope, the icefall, the upper glacier. Yes—two hours up, and he could still be down to the hut by nightfall. Beyond the hut he did not figure. He could not force his mind to think of it.

He stood up. He grasped his ax.

Then he began the ascent of the ridge.

As he had judged from below, it was steep—but not too steep. Indeed, for the first few minutes the going was even easier than on the snowslope or glacier, and he was able to swing up from boulder to boulder with long easy strides.

This did not last long, however. Soon the gradient sharpened, the boulders gave way to solid rock, and, pausing, he slung his ax through his pack-straps to give himself the free use of both hands. From here on it would be real climbing. He worked up a series of slabs and gained fifty feet; along a shallow gully for another fifty. Then there was a bulge to be rounded and a wall to be scaled, but he chose his route carefully and negotiated both without trouble. Hand- and footholds were plentiful. The rock was

sound and firm. At the rate he was going, he thought, he would reach the Fortress in nearer one hour than two.

But the rate, of course, did not continue. Presently he came to a pitch of almost smooth rock, on which he had to search and grope for every stance. And above this, faced with two possible ways around a crag, he chose the wrong one, came out at the base of an unclimbable wall, and was forced to backtrack and try again. The angle of the ridge itself remained fairly constant, but the two faces of the mountain, on either side of it, fell away with ever-increasing steepness, until his route was no more than a thin slanting line between two gulfs of space. Sheer height, as such, did not bother him, as it would have bothered a lowlander. He could look down without dizziness or panic. But, nevertheless, he looked down no more than he had to. He concentrated on what lay ahead and made absolutely certain of the soundness of his holds before each upward move.

There was an easy stretch. Then a harder one. For a distance of some thirty feet the ridge narrowed to knife-edged thinness, and he was forced to straddle it and push himself up with his hands. Then came a series of towers, or *gendarmes*, blocking the ridge completely, so that he had to leave it and work his way out onto the south face. Here the going was by far the hardest he had yet encountered. Behind and below him was a thousand feet of emptiness, and often as much as a minute passed while he clung motionless, searching for holds in the smooth granite above. Once or twice he came close to despair. "It is

impossible," he thought. "I cannot do it." But no sooner had he thought it than he heard Winter's voice as he spoke to Saxo down in the hut. "It has been done before," Winter had said.

Rudi's lips tightened. His eyes narrowed. . . . Yes, he knew it had been done before. And he knew *who* had done it before. . . .

He found his hold, pulled himself up, climbed on. And on.

Beyond the *gendarmes* the going was again easier. The ridge broadened, buckled, and slanted skyward like a vast ruined staircase. He moved up through absolute stillness. There was no wind. Now and then a cold tide of air seemed to flow down from the heights above, pressing against his clothing and fingering through to the flesh. But the air made no sound. Earth and sky, mountain and valley—the whole world that spread above and beneath him—was as transfixed as the world of a dream, and in all of it only he, Rudi, was awake and moving and alive.

He moved on. The stillness deepened. The cold, too, seemed to deepen, creeping through his clothing, through his flesh, into his blood and bones.

Suddenly he stopped and turned. He had felt a shadow behind him. But when he looked back there was only the empty ridge slanting down into gray distance. . . . He looked up. Was it the sun? . . . No, the sun seemed the same as ever: yellow and flaming in the dark blue of the sky.

And yet—

His eyes searched the cliffs on the far side of the snow-field. Perhaps he could find the chamois again; find something—anything—that lived and moved. But there was only rock and ice, space and stillness. Only the shadow that still hovered about him, and the coldness that seemed to touch his very heart. Suddenly fear gripped him. Fear far worse than that of falling; fear such as he had never known before in his life. "I cannot go on," he thought wildly. "It is the warning of the mountain. Of the demons."

He crossed himself. He dropped to his knees and closed his eyes. "I do not believe in demons," he murmured, "but only in my Father Who is in Heaven. Only in Him—and in my other father, who has climbed on this mountain before me."

He waited, motionless. As motionless as the rocks around him. And slowly, blessedly, he felt the fear draining from his body and heart. When he stood up again, the coldness was gone. The shadow was gone. He studied the ridge above him, hitched up his pack, and began to climb. He climbed through the vast stillness, alone . . . and yet somehow, he knew, no longer alone. For now his two fathers climbed with him.

He stepped up, balanced himself. Stepped once more—and stopped. Before him the ridge flared out into a curving, almost level platform, and beyond the platform rose a sheer wall of granite. As Rudi stared up at it his heart was pounding. For he had reached the Fortress.

If he was tired he did not know it. If it was growing late he did not know it. All he knew, all that mattered, was that he had gained his goal; that he was standing now on the highest point of the Citadel that any man had reached before him. A wave of emotion filled him, different from any he had ever known. It brought no need to exult, to yodel, to shout in triumph, as had always happened on his other, lesser mountain victories. What he felt was too deep for that; too strong for that. A shout would have been a blasphemy in that high secret place to which he had come at last.

Slowly his eyes moved upward over the great battlement before him, and he saw that it was indeed like the wall of a fortress: smooth, vertical and impregnable. With a fifty-foot ladder based on the platform, a man could have topped it, but without the ladder it might as well have been a wall of glass. He looked to the right, where it merged into the east face of the mountain; then to the left where it joined the south face. And from that moment on he looked nowhere else, for he had seen what he was looking for. . . . "To the left," Captain Winter had said, "—that was Josef Matt's way. . . ." And it would be his, Rudi Matt's, way as well.

He moved toward where the platform curved out of sight above the south face, and in a moment he was standing on the edge of an abyss. The platform still continued—or, rather, a narrow sloping ledge that formed an extension of the platform—and he carefully followed it around. He took four steps—five—six. And stopped. The

ledge ended, petering out into the vertical walls of the Fortress. But from its farthest end he could see what he had hoped to see: the one break in the great cliff's defenses. No more than five yards beyond him, and starting at about the level at which he stood, a long cleft, or chimney, slanted upward through the otherwise unbroken rock.

This, he knew, was the way past the Fortress—the “key” to the upper mountain which his father had found fifteen years before. From where he stood he could not see the inside of the cleft, but its depth and angle were such that he was sure he could climb it. If—*if*—he could reach its base. . . .

Sidling to the very end of the ledge, he studied the gap beyond. There was no place to stand—he could see that at once; nor were there any cracks or knobs for handholds. But the wall, though vertical, was not altogether smooth. The rock between ledge and cleft protruded in a sort of wrinkled bulge, and if one could cling to the bulge for as much as a few seconds it would be possible to worm one's way across. For a long moment he remained where he was: gazing, measuring. Then suddenly he moved. Stepping out from the ledge, he inched out onto the bulge, using not only hands and feet, as in ordinary climbing, but all of his body that he could bring into play. He gripped the rock with arms and legs, pressed against it with chest and thighs, holding on not by any actual support but by the friction of his moving weight. Space wheeled beneath him. The remote glaciers glinted. But once committed, he

could not stop, or even hesitate, for such a maneuver had to be made quickly and in perfect rhythm, or it could not be made at all. His clothing scraped against the granite; his knees and elbows churned; his fingers clawed and kneaded. Once he slipped—and once more—but both times the friction of his body held him, and a moment later, with a final twist and thrust, he swung off of the bulge into the base of the cleft.

His shirt and trousers were torn. His fingers were bleeding. But he scarcely noticed them. All he had eyes for was the long slanting shaft that now rose directly above him up the sheer wall of the Fortress. And yes, he thought suddenly with a great lift of the heart—he had been right; his father had been right. The cleft extended all the way to the top of the precipice. It was climbable. It was the way past the Fortress!

Instinctively he started up. . . . And in the next instant stopped. . . . For in that instant, for the first time since he had begun the ascent of the ridge, he thought of the hour. He glanced at the sun and saw that it was halfway between the zenith and the western horizon. Obviously he had been climbing more than two hours, but how much more he could not be sure. "It is time to go back," he thought. "You *have* to go back." But it was one thing to think it and another to do it. A hundred feet above him, within easy reach, were the upper slopes of the Citadel, which no man had ever trod—or even seen. He could not go on up and explore them: that he knew. There was no choice but

soon to start down. But first he must have one glimpse, one moment's experience, of that high, hidden world above the Fortress.

He moved up again. Stopped again. . . . No, he thought—it was too late even for that. He must turn back here. He must start down. . . . But when he moved again it was still forward, still upward. The prudence that tried to hold him back was no match for the magic that drew him on.

— The lower third of the cleft presented no difficulties. Then followed a stretch where it became a sort of narrow smooth-walled shaft, which at first glance appeared impassable; but, after some trial and error, he managed it by bracing his back against one wall, his feet against the other, and levering himself upward. Above this, in turn, was a chockstone—a huge boulder wedged across the cleft—but this, too, he climbed successfully. And the last third of the way, like the first, was easy. Perhaps twenty minutes after entering the cleft, he emerged at its top onto a flat shelf above the cliff-face—the first human being to have passed the grim barrier of the Fortress.

Now, standing there in awe, Rudi Matt looked up at what no man's eyes had ever seen before. Starting directly in front of him, the southeast ridge, which had been blocked off by the Fortress, continued its upward progress, twisting on and on until it at last merged into the great bulge of the mountain's shoulder. So great was the distance that it seemed he was again back at the foot of

the peak, rather than a third of the way up its flank. But distance in itself was unimportant, compared to the other thing he saw—and this was that the ridge appeared climbable to its very end. How it would go from there to the top of the shoulder he was too far away to tell. Nor could he see beyond the shoulder, for the final summit was still hidden behind its jutting cliffs. But up the ridge, at least, the way was clear. There would be problems, of course. There would be obstacles. But no obstacles, so far as he could see, as formidable as the Fortress. Nothing that a skilled climber could not successfully surmount.

A deep, almost fierce joy welled in the boy's heart. Even though he must now turn back, he had already gone higher into the unknown than any man before him—including his father. He had proved that his father had been right: that there was a way past the Fortress, and that it was, indeed, the "key" to the mountain. With his own eyes he had seen the way ahead, leading upward and upward.

For another moment he stood there on the mountain-side. Alone in the emptiness. Alone in the stillness. . . . And then—then, suddenly—no longer in stillness. For he had become aware of a sound. . . . He listened; and where silence had been there was now a low, deep humming. He looked up; and the sky was gray, the sun shrunken and remote. The shadow had returned—the shadow that he felt behind him earlier, as he climbed the ridge below the Fortress—only now it was not behind, but all around him.

The coldness had returned: into his bones, into his blood. Moment by moment, it deepened. The shadow deepened. The humming deepened. From the shoulder of the Citadel, high above him, a plume of snow streamed out across the darkening sky.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A BOY AND A GHOST

The first blast of wind struck him as he made for the top of the cleft. It battered against his body and ripped at his clothing, and he had to cling to a projecting crag to keep from being flung from the mountainside. In the short lull that followed, however, he was able to lower himself into the cleft, and there he had some protection. The wind rose again, screaming through the upper air and moaning in the hollows of the rock. But only gusts and eddies penetrated the deep crack in the wall, and he was able to keep his hand- and footholds. In half the time it had taken him to go up, he worked his way down to the narrow ledge at its bottom.

Here he was again exposed to the gale. But fortunately it was blowing straight in against the mountainside, pinning him to it rather than pushing him away, and he was able to get across the bulge in the precipice with rather less difficulty than he had had before. That, however, was the end of his good luck. As he came around the curving shelf to the platform at the base of the Fortress, the storm struck him crosswise with such force that he had to throw

himself flat on the rocks. And now it was not only wind that it hurled at him, but snow as well.

On hands and knees he crept forward—and stopped. Somewhere ahead of him the platform ended and fell away into the long spine of the ridge, but where that somewhere was he could not tell. All he could see were the rocks directly in front of him, and beyond the rocks the driving snow. Each time he moved it might be toward the ridge—or toward the two-thousand foot precipice of the south and east faces.

He peered up into the gray churning of the sky. Then, lowering his head, he covered it with his arms and waited. But, minute by minute, the storm grew in intensity, and when he looked up again the snow lashed into his eyes in blinding horizontal waves. The voice of the wind rose from a moan to a wail, from a wail to a high insane shrieking. . . . And then, through the shrieking, there was another sound: a deep rumbling sound, high above, that brought Rudi half to his feet in sudden terror. It was a rock-fall, he thought. Here in this exact spot, fifteen years before, the fateful avalanche of boulders had roared down upon his father and his companions; and now the same thing was happening to him. . . . He struggled to his feet, only to be knocked flat again by the wind. He looked about, desperately, for some sort of shelter, but there was only the blinding snow, streaming like white needles into his eyes. In a moment now the hail of rocks would be upon him. He waited, crouched and tense. But the rumbling was gone. And now he realized it was not a rock-fall he had

heard, but thunder. In the next instant a fork of lightning split the sky, flooding the mountainside with a wild greenish glare. And the thunder rolled again . . . louder.

No—this time no rocks had fallen. But that did not mean he was safe from them. Any moment the lightning might strike on a crag above and send its splintered fragments plunging down; or, worse yet, might hit directly at the exposed ledge on which he was trapped. Again crawling on hands and knees, Rudi worked his way in toward the wall of the Fortress. Groping along its base, he searched for some sort of shelter. And at last he found it: a hollowed-out section of rock, with its sides and top projecting outward, so that they formed, in effect, a small shallow cave. He crept into it, wedged himself back in the farthest corner, and murmured a brief prayer of thanksgiving. For here he was protected not only from falling rock and lightning, but also from the full fury of the wind. He wiped the caked snow from his eyes and nose. He beat his chilled hands together. He waited.

How long the storm continued, he did not know. On that battered mountainside time had ceased to exist, and there was only the storm: only the wind and snow, the thunder and lightning, the wild roar of sound that grew and grew until it seemed to come no longer from the churning air but from the deep roots of the mountain itself. If any stones fell on the platform before him, he could neither see nor hear them. On three sides his world was bounded by black walls of rock, on the fourth by an opaque screen of streaming white.

The wind slackened slightly . . . and he waited.

It rose . . . and he waited.

Again and again.

And then once more it slackened, but this time did not rise, and he knew that at last the storm was blowing itself out. Minute by minute the shrieking faded. The snow no longer blew in horizontal waves, but fell in a long slant—and then straight down—and then not at all. Far in the distance the wind still moaned across crags and icefields, but on the high flanks of the Citadel there was no sound or movement. The peak stood up, vast and white-mantled, frozen in silence and space.

But still Rudi sat motionless. The passing of the storm brought no shout to his lips or lift to his heart; for now, suddenly, he was aware of something he had forgotten during the hours past. Time had *not* ceased to exist. The sun had not stopped in its course. It had moved on above the tempest—steadily, inexorably—until now only its last light was gleaming above the white ranges to the west. The storm was gone: yes. But in its place was oncoming night.

Creeping from the cave, he got to his feet, crossed to the outer edge of the platform, and looked down. The ridge, now snow-covered, slanted away into gray dusk, and, even as he watched, he could see the shadows thickening, as they flowed up over it from the gulfs below. The snow-slope, at the bottom, showed merely as a faint white gleaming. The icefall and glaciers, still farther down, were altogether hidden in darkness.

Sudden panic seized him. . . . He had to get down, he thought wildly. He had to get down, or die. . . . Lowering himself from the platform, he tried to follow the ridge. His eyes searched for invisible holds, and his feet slipped and stumbled on the snow-rimmed rocks. He lost his balance, fell and brought up with a thud against a heap of broken slag. Picking himself up, he went on—only to slip and fall again. On this second fall he landed only a few inches from the abyss of the south face, and the jolt was not only to his body but to his senses. Once more he pulled himself to his feet, but he descended no farther. To spend the night on the mountain was to die—perhaps. But to try to go on was to kill himself surely. It had been on this very ridge, at night, that Teo Zurbriggen, coming down from the Fortress, had fallen and become a cripple for life. And on that night the rocks had not even been slippery with snow.

A tremor passed through him. For several minutes he remained where he was, while the darkness thickened around him. Then, slowly he worked his way back to the platform beneath the Fortress. Crossing the platform, he reentered the shallow cave.

His body was bruised and aching. His head throbbed. He tried to force his mind to think, to plan, to decide what to do. But there was nothing to do—at least until morning. Nothing except to get through the night. To stay alive through the night. Fumbling in his pack, he got his extra sweater and put it on. He brought out a slice of bread and a small lump of chocolate, which was all the food he had

with him; but even though he had not eaten for almost twelve hours, he had no appetite.

He sat in the darkness. In the stillness. He listened, but the last sounds of the storm were gone. From his hollow in the mountainside he looked out and down, but there was only white snow and gray rock; only the ridge falling away into space. He strained his eyes downward for a flicker of light, but there was none. The hut was hidden beneath the bulge of the ridge (tonight it was empty, anyhow), and the valley and town of Kurtal were shut off by the intervening mass of the Dornelberg. . . . Kurtal. . . . For the first time since early that morning he thought of the world below. Of his mother and his uncle. Of his disobedience, his defiance, his wilfulness, and the pass to which they had brought him. Far from comforting him, the image of home served only to remind him of what he had done and where he was; to fill him with such loneliness and emptiness as he had never known in his life before.

He sat alone in the night—in the sky—high on the great mountain from which he might never come down. The darkness seemed to grow even thicker, the stillness even deeper. . . .

Then his head jerked up. His eyes opened. He realized that he must have slept, but for how long he didn't know. What he did know, however—instantly—was that something had changed. It was still night; but the night had changed. A thick mist had closed in. Beyond his hollow

in the rocks the night was no longer black and empty, but a ghostly gray. The world below was gone. Everything beyond the edge of the platform was gone. There were only the great banks of vapor, weaving like shrouds in the windless air.

And it was cold. Far colder than it had been even in the wind and snow of the storm. Shreds of mist licked his face as if with icy tongues, and a chill rose from the black rock and gripped his bones. He shifted his weight and began rubbing his hands together—and then suddenly his hands were still, as if frozen in midair. His body tensed. His eyes strained into the night, but there was only the mist. As he watched, the mist seemed to shift and thicken, to be forming itself into gray moving shapes.

Night and mist: that was all there was. . . . And at the same time not all, for something else was there too. . . . Something that could neither be seen nor heard, but that nevertheless existed. A part of the mountain; a part of the darkness. In all that wilderness of rock and ice, Rudi knew, there was no single other living thing. But he knew, too, that he was no longer alone.

He shivered. Reaching into his pack, he brought out the one extra piece of clothing that it still contained: the old red flannel shirt. It was big enough to fit over his other clothing, and he pulled it on. Folding his arms, he held his hands tightly in the armpits and felt a slow stirring of blood in his frozen fingers. Yes, he thought—the shirt was old, but it was still warm. It might save him. His father's

shirt would save him. The same shirt that he had worn, fifteen years before, on the Citadel; that he had taken from his own body to give to Sir Edward Stephenson, when—

The faint warmth vanished; his blood froze. For in that instant it came to him. . . . The terrible knowledge. The terrible truth. . . . *The cave in which he was sitting was the one in which his father and Sir Edward Stephenson had died.*

He tried to leap to his feet, but couldn't move. A scream formed in his throat, but made no sound. . . . Yes, of course it was the cave—it had to be—it was the only cave in the walls of the Fortress. He should have known it all along. . . . He sat rigid. Peering around him, he could almost see the two bodies, lying frozen and stiff in the darkness. Staring out into the weaving mist, he knew now, with cold terror, what thing it was that hid behind it. He knew what the shadow had been—the invisible finger that touched him as he climbed the ridge—the thing, the presence, that had followed him all that day up the desolate mountainside. The old dark legends of the Citadel rose up before him: the ghosts, the demons of the forbidden mountain crowding down upon him from the haunted heights. And among them, leading them, one ghost—the most terrible ghost—its face white and hollow, ice sheathing its sightless eyes. A ghost with a red shirt, moving gaunt and frozen through the mist.

Rudi crouched, motionless. In an instant the scream

would burst from his lips. In an instant he would leap up and run, racing wildly from the cave, across the platform, down the ridge—stumbling, falling, plunging—over the rocks, over the cliffs, into the abyss—anywhere—so long as it was away from this accursed place. In an instant now. . . . But the instant did not come. Still he crouched, unmoving, still he crouched in silence, while the horror moved toward him out of the night and the mist; while the white face flickered and the dead eyes gleamed and the shirt hung from its bones like a bloody shroud. . . . And when at last a sound came from his lips it was not a scream but only a whisper:

“Father—Father—”

Then the strange thing happened: the incredible and wonderful thing. His heart was suddenly calm. His fear had vanished. And with it, the spectre vanished. There was only the mist and the night and himself alone in the night. And he thought: “Yes, of course—that is all it is—my father. My father who died here; who died proud and unafraid; who gave the shirt from his back to a man whose need was greater. As he has now given it to me. . . .”

He looked down at the shirt that covered him, and his body, beneath it, seemed no longer cold, but almost warm. He looked out past the walls of the cave, and the mist and darkness were still there, but the evil was gone from them. . . . “And I am not afraid either,” he thought. “My father is not here to harm me, but to watch over me. To

make me the guide that he was; the man that he was. My father—

*—who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name—”*

He prayed. Then he slept. In his father's shirt; in his father's cave; on his father's mountain.

At the first light he awoke and rose. Crossing the platform, he peered down along the ridge; and though it was still covered with snow and mist still filled the air, he could at least see the form and pattern of the rocks. For a moment, turning, he looked up at the Fortress and the gray nothingness above it. Then he began the descent of the ridge.

He moved slowly, testing each hold and stance before he used it and scraping the snow away carefully with his hands and feet. But even so, he slipped constantly. His body felt drained and strengthless, and his arms and legs were like bars of lead. He stumbled, slipped, caught himself, moved on—and slipped again. Soon the slip would come, he thought dully, when he would not catch himself; when he would fall, as Old Teo had fallen, plunging and twisting through space.

No!

He had stopped. He kicked his numb feet against a rock. He held his hands under the red shirt until again he felt the stirring of blood. He looked down into the mist—up into the mist—and beyond it, at last, the sky was brightening.

No! He would not fall. He would not fall.

As he moved down again his lips were tight and grim. He was Rudi Matt, the son of Josef Matt. And he would make it.

He would make it. . . .

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

—FOUR TO GO

A few minutes after noon, John Winter and Emil Saxo reached the head of the Broli Glacier and moved up onto the rocks beneath the hut. They moved slowly, for their backs were heavily laden. A corner of white bandage showed under the brim of Winter's hat.

Reaching the rocks, he paused and looked up at the mountain. "The mist is lifting," he said.

Saxo nodded. "*Ja*. If the sun comes out it should be all right for tomorrow."

The Englishman's glance moved to the hut. Its door was closed and no smoke came from the chimney. "It doesn't look as if the boy's back yet," he commented.

"Of course he is not back. Nor will he be."

"I think he will."

Saxo shook his head. "No. The boy himself—perhaps he would come. But his uncle, or the other Kurtalers, they would not. Nor would they let him. It is as I have told you. The Kurtalers are no mountaineers. They are afraid of the Citadel."

Silently they moved on up over the boulders. In five minutes they reached the hut, opened the door—and stopped, staring. No one was in it; but packs of food and

equipment lay ranged along the walls, and both table and fireplace showed obvious signs of recent use.

Winter glanced at the guide, and a smile touched his lips. "So they wouldn't come?" he said.

Saxo's narrowed eyes moved over the row of packs. "The boy and his uncle," he said, "could not have carried all this."

Winter shook his head.

"There are more. Many more."

The two men unslung their own packs. Then Winter went to the door and looked up and down the slope. "Rudi!" he called. "Rudi!" And then, "Franz! Franz!"

There was no answer, no sound at all; and he reentered the hut. Saxo was still staring at the row of packs.

"Six," he muttered. "There are at least six of them. But who? Why?" Suddenly he smashed fist into palm and almost shouted: "They have plotted something, these Kurtalers. There is scheming—trickery—"

"Trickery?" said Winter.

"That so many have come. And I ask you, why have they come? Not to climb the Citadel—no. The Kurtalers are afraid of the Citadel. I will tell you why. It is to keep *us* from climbing it!"

"Keep us—"

"Yes. They are afraid, but they are also jealous. What they cannot do themselves they do not want to be done by a man of Broli." Saxo was working himself into a dark rage. His huge hands opened and closed. "But I will show them," he went on. "They can bring six or sixty or their

whole village, and still they will not stop me. They will see what a man of Broli can do."

"Emil!" Winter's voice was sharp. "Stop this nonsense!"

"It is not nonsense. It is what I tell you. A scheme; a Kurtaler trick—"

The guide relapsed into sullen silence. Winter sat down at the table, rubbing his jaw meditatively, and when he spoke again it was more to himself than to Saxo. "So six have come," he said. "The boy, his uncle and four others. And I am not surprised—no—for if Franz Lerner would come, others would come too. In their hearts the Kurtalers want to climb the Citadel as much as we do. . . . Rudi goes down to the village and speaks to his uncle. His uncle speaks to the other guides. And this morning they come up. They start early and arrive before us, and when they see we are not yet here, they decide to—" He broke off, puzzling.

"To what?" demanded Saxo. "Climb the mountain? In new snow? Without their packs?"

"To reconnoitre, perhaps."

"What should they reconnoitre? When the boy has already been up past the icefall. No, it is trickery, I tell you. They are hiding from us. Lying in wait for us."

"Rot!"

Winter jumped to his feet. He paced up and down. He went to the door, looked out and came back again. Several times he was on the point of speaking, but each time changed his mind. The more he tried to think it out, the more his confusion deepened.

If Rudi had told them—

No.

Or if the six planned to—

No.

None of the *ifs* made sense.

“All we can do is wait,” he said.

Sitting down again, he opened his pack and sorted out its contents. Saxo stared moodily at the floor. Then, simultaneously, both men looked up. For from outside, at first faintly, then more and more plainly, came the sound of approaching footsteps. Once more Winter leapt up. “We won’t have to wait,” he exclaimed. “They’re here!”

The next instant the door opened and Franz Lerner appeared. Behind him was the guide Andreas Krickel, and behind him, in turn, the two Tauglich brothers and Klaus Wesselhoft. Last of all was old Teo Zurbriggen, and as he entered the hut he closed the door behind him.

Franz looked at Winter—at Saxo—then back at the Englishman. His chin was thrust forward and his face was grim. “Where is the boy?” he asked.

“The boy?” said Winter.

“My nephew, Rudi Matt. Where is he?”

“Isn’t he with *you*?”

“With us? How could he be with us?” Franz took a step forward. “Let us stop the pretense, my Captain. We know that the boy is up here. That he came to join you.”

“Yes, of course he joined me. But he left yesterday morning. He went down to Kurtal.”

"To Kurtal?"

"You mean—he didn't arrive?"

There was a pause. Franz looked at his companions and then back at Winter. "I do not know what you are talking about," he said. "Three nights ago the boy ran away—"

"Ran away?" repeated Winter.

"Yes, from his mother's house. And—"

"He didn't have permission?"

"Permission? To come here? Of course not." Franz's eyes narrowed. "That is what he told you, eh? That he had permission."

Winter nodded. "Why, the little faker—"

For a moment a smile touched his lips. But only a moment. As the guide went on, his face grew tense and troubled.

"He sneaked away," said Franz. "He left a note that made it plain he was going to the mountains, and when we heard that you were here we were sure that he had come to you. Yesterday morning we started up to find him. To bring him back. We reached this hut at noon, but there was no one here. All afternoon we searched—on the glacier, on the moraines, up to the icefall—but we found nothing; so we returned and spent the night here. Today we searched again and still found nothing—until we saw you, an hour ago, coming up the Broli Glacier."

"Are you sure," Winter asked, "that you couldn't have missed him on the trail?"

"The trail?"

“Coming up yesterday from Kurtal. While he was going down.”

Franz shook his head. “It is impossible. There is only the one way: along the glacier—along the path.” He took another step forward and his eyes were dark and angry. “No, the boy did not come down,” he said. “He is still here; you are hiding him from us; and I demand—”

Something in Winter’s face made him stop. Slowly his own face changed, and when he spoke again his voice was low and strained. “You mean he is not here, my Captain? You give me your word?”

“No, he is not here.”

“Where is he then?”

Winter sat down at one of the benches by the table and stared silently at the floor. Then, raising his head, he told quietly of what had happened the day before. The guides stood motionless, listening. And when Winter had finished there was, for a few moments, no sound or movement in the room.

Then Andreas Krickel said: “We must go back down the glacier.”

“And look in every crevasse,” said Paul Tauglich.

“It is all we can do—”

“The only hope—”

They looked at Franz, who stood as if he were carved of stone. And at last his lips moved. “His mother,” he murmured. “My sister. What shall I tell her? What will she do?” He spoke as if from the depths of a trance. His

eyes moved, dull and unseeing about the room. Then they fixed on Emil Saxo, standing alone to one side, and suddenly the tide of pain and anger welled up in him. "And you—" he shouted. "You—man of Broli. What do you say to all this?"

Saxo stared back at him. "I?" he said. "What have I to do with it?"

"You have everything to do with it. If it were not for you, the Englishman would not be here; the boy would not have come. You call yourself a guide, hey? You think you are better than the guides of Kurtal? So tell me what kind of a guide is it who cannot take care of his party—who looks out only for himself—who stands like a dumb ox while a boy is in danger—is lost—"

Saxo took a step forward. "Watch your tongue, man," he said. "I do not take such talk from a Kurtaler."

"You will take more than talk. It is because of you this thing has happened, and you will pay for it!"

The two men glowered at each other. Then Franz, too, stepped forward, and the other Kurtal guides moved up beside him.

"Yes, make him pay," said Peter Tauglich.

"We will show him," said Klaus Wesselhoft.

"The boaster from Broli—"

"The coward from Broli—"

"We'll see who's the coward," roared Saxo. "Come on, you Kurtal sheep, I'll take on the lot of you!"

He doubled his hamlike fists. Franz lowered his head

like a bull. In another moment they would have been at each other, but John Winter leapt between them. "Stop it!" he commanded. Then he wheeled on the others. "Stop it—all of you!"

The guides looked at him sullenly, as with both hands he pushed Franz and Saxo away from each other. "I'm sick of this nonsense," he snapped. "Broli—Kurtal. Kurtal—Broli. One of you is as bad as the other; as stupid as the other. Fighting about your damned villages. Snarling like animals, while the boy is probably—"

His voice stopped, as if cut off by a knife. He was no longer looking at the men, but past them, at the door of the hut; and now, in the sudden stillness, the others turned and stared too.

"Mother of God!" someone murmured.

For in the doorway stood Rudi Matt.

His slight body was bent with tiredness. His clothing was in tatters. Dirt mixed with wet snow caked his face and hands, and streaks of blood showed on his fingers and cheeks. But as he faced the others he drew himself straight. His lips were smiling, and his eyes shone with the blue of the mountain sky. "I have found the way," he said to them. "*I have found the way!*"

Franz was the first to move. His anger forgotten—Saxo forgotten—he hurried forward and grasped the boy by the arm. "You are alive!" he exclaimed. "You are alive, and all right—"

"Yes, I am all right," said Rudi. "And I have found the way."

"The way?"

"Past the Fortress. To the top of the Citadel."

Franz gaped at him. The others gaped. "You mean—you have been on the Citadel?" his uncle asked incredulously.

"Yes. Since yesterday. I was caught in a storm, and then it got dark and I had to spend the night. . . . But it doesn't matter. . . ." Rudi's voice was almost shaking with excitement. "Because I found it—truly. The way around the Fortress, that Father looked for. I found it and climbed it—"

"Climbed it?"

"Yes. To the left there was a chimney, and I climbed to the top of it. Above the Fortress there is the ridge again, and it is easy. I could not go on. The storm came, and it was late. But I could see from where I stood—it was easy all the way to the shoulder."

There was silence. And eight pairs of staring eyes. In Franz Lerner's eyes was a turmoil of conflicting emotions: relief and bewilderment, anger and uncertainty, and beneath these—deeper than these—something that was close to awe.

But it was not Franz who spoke next. It was Teo Zurbruggen, who now suddenly limped forward, his old face shining with excitement. "So, you have done it, boy! You have shown them!" he cried. "And I am proud of you. Your father would be proud of you."

"I—I—" Rudi stammered—stopped. He had no more

words. He looked from Old Teo to Franz, trying to read the expression in his uncle's face.

Captain Winter came up and put an arm around him. "You're tired, son," he said. "Come, sit down. Rest." He turned to the others. "The boy must be starving. Get him some food."

He and Teo led Rudi to the table. They took off his pack, his boots, his wet outer clothing, and wrapped a blanket around him. Some of the guides started a fire. Others got food from their packs. Only Franz Lerner still stood motionless, watching—as if in a trance from which he could not rouse himself.

"Here, now—"

They brought him hot tea. They brought him porridge and bread and cheese. And while he ate he told them the story of his solitary adventure.

"And the whole night," said Andreas Krickel, "—all of it you stayed up there, alone?"

"Yes sir," said Rudi.

"You were not afraid?" asked Paul Tauglich.

"Yes, I was afraid."

"But nothing happened?"

"No."

"There were no spirits?" said Klaus Wesselhoft. "No ghosts or demons?"

There was a pause. The men's eyes were fixed on Rudi.

"No," he told them. "No ghosts. No demons."

Captain Winter began asking him about the details of

the route, and he described them as best he could. But his glance kept wandering to Franz Lerner, who still stood motionless and apart, until at last he could no longer bear the weight of his silence.

"Uncle—" he said.

"Yes?"

"You are angry?"

Franz shrugged. "What is the use of anger?"

"And—" He could scarcely speak the word. "And Mother—?"

"I had thought you had forgotten that you have a mother."

Rudi winced. "No," he murmured, "I have not forgotten."

"You simply do not care what you do to her?"

"Yes, I care. Only—only I—"

"Only you care more for your wild schemes. Yes, I know." Franz paused, and when he went on his voice was hard and flat. "It is because of your mother that I am here," he said. "For myself, it no longer matters what you do. You are crazy, like your father, and will probably kill yourself like your father. But if you do not think of your mother, I think of my sister. I said to her, I will come up after you. If you are still alive I will find you. . . . All right, you are alive. You have eaten and rested. Come on now—we shall go down."

Abruptly he turned and thumped across the hut to the doorway. The others watched him. Rudi did not move.

"Well?" said Franz, turning.

The boy hesitated. His eyes pleaded. Franz moved back into the room, as if to take him by the arm, but a small gnarled figure stepped quickly in front of him.

"No," said Teo Zurbriggen.

Franz looked at him without speaking.

"You cannot do this—no. You must not. It is not fair to him."

"Fair? What do you mean, not fair? The boy has disobeyed and defied me. He has defied his mother. He has thieved, connived, lied—"

"Yes, of course he has." Teo's voice was heated. "And do you know why? Because you have driven him to it, you and his mother. Because you have tried to make him into something he is not. . . . Of course he has done these things. And so would I, in his place. And so would anyone."

Franz's face was dark. "Keep out of this, old man," he said. "It is no business of yours."

"Yes, it is my business. I have climbed with Rudi's father on every mountain around Kurtal. And now I have climbed with the boy, on the Felsberg, and I know what he can do. To climb is in his blood, in his bones. Give him a chance, and he will become even a greater guide than his father."

Franz did not want to listen. He started to brush past. But now a new voice broke in—a quiet yet compelling voice—that made him stop and turn.

"He's right, Franz," said John Winter.

Franz was silent.

"He's right—and you know he's right." The Englishman came closer and stood before him. "You feel you owe loyalty to your sister, and I understand that," he said. "But there's also something you both owe to the boy, and that's the freedom to be himself. . . . He's a born mountaineer. For years now I've climbed all through the Alps, and I've never seen a better one. . . . Yes, he's young; he still has things to learn. But the most important things he doesn't need to learn, because he has them already. And most of all, he has the will to climb. He has the heart."

"Yes, he disobeyed you," Winter went on. "And he lied to me. But he meant no harm by it. As Teo says, he was only doing what he *had* to do. And on the Citadel: there, too, he was only doing what he had to, because he knew that if he went down to Kurtal he could not come up again. Yes, it was a risk. It was foolish and impetuous. But it was magnificent. He followed his father—went higher than his father—found what is probably the only way up the mountain. Don't make him go down now, Franz. Tomorrow we're-going to try for the top. Let him come with us; give him the chance. It's his birthright. And he's earned it."

There was a long silence. Franz looked at Winter, then at Teo, then back to Winter.

"Franz—" said the Englishman.

"Yes?"

"Why have you come up from Kurtal?"

"I have told you. Because the boy was here."

"Yes, I know. But is that the *only* reason?"

“I do not—”

“Wasn’t it also,” said Winter, “because Saxo and I were here? Because you knew we were here to climb the Citadel?”

Franz did not answer. He was staring at the floor. But the eyes of the other guides moved to the man from Broli, who was sitting alone near the fireplace, splicing two lengths of rope.

“Yes,” said Andreas Krickel suddenly. “Because of Saxo, too.”

“Because he has no business here,” said Paul Tauglich.

“This hut belongs to us of Kurtal.”

“The Citadel is the mountain of Kurtal.”

“And he is a trespasser.”

Saxo looked up at them. Then he put his ropes aside and got slowly to his feet. “The mountain of Kurtal?” he repeated. “Or perhaps you mean the mountain of Broli? For ten years I have come to this hut. I have circled the Citadel and explored the routes to it, and never once, up here, have I seen a Kurtaler. There has been no guide of Kurtal since Josef Matt who is not afraid even to look at it.”

A murmur of anger rose around him, but the giant from Broli paid no attention. “Yes, you are the great mountaineers,” he taunted them. “Captain Winter comes to Kurtal. For days he is there, trying to find a guide. And who will go with him? No one. So he comes then to Broli; he speaks to me; I say yes, I will go. And only then does it become *your* mountain. Because you are jealous. Because you do

not want to see a better man do what you cannot do yourselves."

The murmur grew louder. The men of Kurtal edged forward. Only Franz Lerner still stood motionless, with his eyes on the floor.

"Watch what you say, Saxo—"

"Boaster—"

"Liar—"

"Yes, liar," said Teo Zurbriggen. "With all your talk, what have you done? I at least have been on the Citadel—reached the Fortress—"

"You—yes," conceded Saxo. "For you alone, old man, I make an exception. But your day is done now. And the rest of you—" His eyes moved arrogantly from one to another. "You are sheep—chickens. You are afraid to come even as far as this hut, until you are shamed into it by a boy."

The Kurtalers glared. Their hands were clenched tight. Once again it appeared only a matter of seconds before fists would be flying.

Then once again, something stopped them. . . . But this time it was not Winter. . . . Franz had at last raised his head. He was looking steadily at the man from Broli. And now his voice, though low and controlled, seemed suddenly to fill the little room.

"You think we are cowards, Saxo?" he said.

"I think what I see."

"That we are afraid of the Citadel?"

“Well, aren’t you?”

“No, I am not,” said Franz. He paused. *“I have come here to climb it.”*

There was a sound as if of a sharply caught breath. Then silence. Then a babble of voices. And, among them, Old Teo’s was the first and the loudest.

“Yes! Yes!” he shouted, almost beside himself with excitement.

“Yes!” roared the others. “To climb it! To climb it!”

“That is why we have come—”

“The guides of Kurtal—”

“To the mountain of Kurtal—”

“For the glory of Kurtal—”

John Winter stepped forward and put his arm around Franz’s shoulder. A smile wreathed his lean face, and his eyes were shining. “Of course that’s why you’ve come,” he said. “And I knew you would. I’ve known it all along.”

Franz looked at him uncomprehendingly. He did not return the smile, and his expression was deeply troubled. “You are not angry, my Captain?”

“Angry? Good Lord, man, why should I be angry?”

“That we must do this. That I must be your rival.” Winter started to speak, but he went on quickly. “I am sorry, sir. Truly sorry. Many times you asked me to go with you, and I refused; and now I am here and must climb without you. I am sorry—but I cannot help it. We of Kurtal cannot help it. We cannot stand by while this man of Broli mocks us; while he sets off with you to try

to climb our mountain. . . . No. We have heard the challenge and we accept it. And it will be a guide of Kurtal, not of Broli, who will be the first to the top."

Again the men around him were shouting and cheering. Then, above their voices came an even louder voice—like the bellow of a bull. "The first, hey?" roared Saxo. "We will see about that. We will see how you like it when I am on the summit rolling stones down at you, and you are running and bleating like sheep."

"Boaster!" said Franz.

"Coward!" answered Saxo.

"We will show you!"

"You will be shown!"

In their anger, momentarily, Winter had been forgotten. But he still stood between them. He was no longer smiling. He had said no word while they shouted at each other. But now suddenly, as the two guides looked at him, something in his face made them stop.

"No," he said quietly. "No, Franz. No, Emil. It won't be like that."

They stared at him.

"It won't be like that at all," said John Winter. "Because we are going together."

There was a stunned silence.

"Together?"

"On the Citadel?"

"No!" said Saxo.

"No!" said Franz.

“We are going together,” Winter repeated. “Or I, for one, am not going at all.”

“You expect me to climb with a Kurtaler?”

“And me with a man from Broli?”

“That is exactly what I expect,” said the Englishman. “Here you stand—two of the best guides in Switzerland. Above you is the greatest mountain in Switzerland. For years, Emil, you say you’ve dreamed of climbing it. And you too, Franz: you’ve dreamed of it—in your heart. . . . Well, here you are now. Here’s your chance. Are you going to take it or throw it away?”

His gray eyes fixed on one, then the other. “What are you?” he asked. “Men? Or children? Which means more to you: your stupid village prejudices—or climbing the Citadel? Together we can do it, I tell you. Together we’ll be the strongest team that has ever climbed in the Alps. But separately, there’s not a hope. Quarreling and competing—there’s not a hope. The Citadel is too great for that. It will have none of that. Those who get to the top will never do it by fighting each other; only by helping each other. By working together.”

He paused. There was not a sound in the hut.

“Franz—Emil—” he said. “I beg you. Forget about Kurtal and Broli. Forget your squabbles and your foolish pride. Here we are, ready to go. The weather is clearing, and tomorrow will be fine. In the morning we’ll start off—as a team—pulling together. And the rest of you will stay here in support. It’s the strongest possible combina-

tion. We'll have every chance of success. Take the chance—I beg you. Together. Together!"

He stood between them, motionless, waiting. His lean face, under its strip of bandage, was tense with emotion, and the flame of his spirit gleamed in his eyes.

"Will you?" he said.

There was another silence. It was now or never. In the minds of Franz Lerner and Emil Saxo the Englishman's appeal struggled with the pride and prejudices of generations.

Franz looked at the floor. He looked back at Winter. His very body seemed almost visibly to be swaying, and when at last he spoke his voice was no more than a whisper. "Of all the *Herren* I have ever had, my Captain," he said, "I respect you the most. As a climber, and as a man. For anyone else I would not do this—could not do this. No. But for you—"

Winter's eyes moved to Saxo.

"Emil?"

Again a pause. A wavering. The man from Broli drew in a long, slow breath. "If there is no other way—" he murmured.

Winter's face was shining. He shook Saxo's hand. Turning, he shook Franz's. "And now—" he said, standing between them.

The guides faced each other, motionless. The guide from Kurtal and the guide from Broli.

"Now, you—" said Winter.

Franz hesitated. Saxo hesitated. Then slowly their

hands rose and met. Simultaneously, the others pressed forward around them, and the hut shook with the hubbub of their excitement.

“So, it is settled!”

“Tomorrow is the day!”

“On to the Citadel!”

“To victory!”

“The three of you—”

“No, not three,” said Winter. “Four. . . .” In the sudden silence that followed he looked questioningly at Franz. “That is right, is it not?” he asked quietly. “There are *four* to go?”

Franz did not answer at once. For a moment he returned Winter’s gaze; then his eyes moved slowly past him to the corner of the room where Rudi had sat, forgotten, during the long wrangle between the men.

“You are feeling all right, boy?” he asked.

Rudi had risen to his feet.

“Yes, Uncle.”

“You think you could climb tomorrow?”

“Oh yes, Uncle.”

“Hmmm—” Franz shrugged and turned back to Winter. “For you, my Captain, I am doing strange things,” he said. “God grant I shall not live to regret it.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FIRST OF ALL MEN

They were up before dawn. By the light of a few candles they ate a quick breakfast and made their final preparations. Into the four packs went their food, extra clothing, blankets, camping gear. To the outside of Franz's and Saxo's packs were strapped the two tents that had been brought up from Broli.

For long hours the previous evening the two guides and Winter had discussed the plan of attack. It was their hope that they would have to spend only one night on the mountain; for the route to the base of the southeast ridge had now been established, and Rudi had pioneered the way to the top of the Fortress and reported no major obstacles on the ridge above. If all went well, they would be able to pitch camp near the shoulder, make their bid for the top the next morning and descend all the way before dark. As old mountain hands, however, they knew that all might *not* go well. The weather might break. There might be difficulties and mishaps. And they were therefore taking enough food for a possible second night out. This would allow them three full days on the mountain, and if it could not be climbed up and down in that time it probably could not be climbed at all.

Four to go. Five to remain behind.

Of the five, Krickel, Peter Tauglich, Wesselhoft and Old Teo were to spend that day and night at the hut, and the next day the first three would start up toward the base of the ridge, to meet and help the climbers on their way down. Teo (too old and crippled for this) would remain at the hut and have a hot meal awaiting their return. And Paul Tauglich would descend this morning to Kurtal, to bring word to the waiting village of what was happening.

At first it had been assumed that Old Teo would be the one to go down. But he had flatly refused. "Fifteen years ago I did what I could on this mountain," he told them. "And now again I shall do what I can."

"But your work—" someone pointed out. "Won't they expect you at the hotel?"

"Yes, they will expect me. And a certain dishwasher as well." A smile deepened the creases of his leathery face. "But for a few days the tourists can eat sandwiches—while I am chef to the conquerors of the Citadel."

No one wanted to go down, and finally Paul Tauglich had been chosen by lot. He would report to the mayor, the Guides' Central Committee, the whole town.

"But first—first of all," Franz told him, "you must speak to my sister. She has now been waiting two days and must be almost out of her mind. You will go to her right away—yes?—and tell her we have found the boy."

Tauglich nodded.

"But not that he is climbing the mountain. Only that we

have found him. That he is here at the hut and all right. For the love of God, *not* that he is on the mountain!"

"You need not worry," said Tauglich.

In a corner of the hut Rudi quietly packed his knapsack. He had slept long and well; the ordeal of his solitary climb seemed far behind him; he felt rested, strong and calm. . . . Yes, most of all—and most strangely—calm. For now at last the awful uncertainty had ended. The hoping and despairing had ended. The decision had been made, and there was a job to do. Gratitude filled his heart—to Captain Winter and Old Teo, who had championed him; to his uncle, who had finally accepted him—and, along with gratitude, a resolve as deep and inward as his very being. Whatever happened, he would not fail them. He would be worthy of their trust.

He packed his share of the food supply. It was not a full share; he had insisted he could carry more; but the men had said no, this was enough. He packed the utensils that had been assigned to him and a few items of clothing loaned by the guides (for his own had been hopelessly soaked and ripped during the two previous days). Snug in the middle of the sack he stowed the old red flannel shirt. And to its outer straps he lashed his four-foot pole.

There was a guffaw close beside him, and looking up, he saw Saxo. "Going fishing, boy?" asked the man from Broli.

"No. No sir. It is only—"

"Come on, take it off. It will make the climbing harder."

Saxo reached out for it, but Rudi stopped him. "No," he said. "No—please—I must take it."

Franz and Winter had come up. "Take it? Why?" said his uncle. "What use is such a stick? You have a fine new ax."

"Yes, I know. But—but this is for—" He couldn't say it. "But I use this sometimes, too."

"Nonsense. Take it off."

"Please, Uncle—"

"If he wants it so much, why not let him take it?" said Winter. "I've seen him climb with it. In fact, he once saved my life with it. Maybe it will be useful again."

Rudi looked at him gratefully. Franz seemed about to argue, but changed his mind, and Saxo turned away with a shrug. "If he gets stuck in a chimney," he said, "don't say we didn't warn you."

Now they were ready. They slung on their packs, hefted their axes, stamped with their stiff boots on the old plank flooring. The others were going to go with them as far as the top of the Blue Glacier, and from there Paul Tauglich would start down toward Kurtal and the rest would return to the hut. One by one they filed out the door.

It was still night as they descended through the boulders beneath the hut, but by the time they were out on the glacier the darkness had begun to pale. It was a perfect dawn: clear, windless and dry. The peaks, emerging slowly from obscurity, had received no new snow during the night, and their ridges rose sharp and bare against the

graying sky. Gazing up at the vast walls of the Citadel, the climbers knew, with a lift of their hearts, that if ever they could be scaled, it would be on a day like this.

In less than half an hour they reached the parting of the ways. Not a word had been spoken on the march. And now the farewells were brief. . . . A clasp of rough hands. "*Grüss Gott.*" "Go with God. . . ." Then Paul Tauglich was on his way down the Blue Glacier, and those who were to wait at the hut turned to go back.

But for a moment, before he left, Teo Zurbriggen stood close beside Rudi. "Remember what you've learned, boy," he said.

Rudi nodded.

"And remember this, too. If there is trouble—if there are problems to face and you are in doubt what to do—ask yourself only one question: '*What would my father have done?*' "

"I will," said Rudi.

The others had already started off, and Teo limped after them. But after a few paces he looked around and shouted: "And come down quickly, *Lausbube*, or our kitchen will be full of dirty dishes."

. . . And now again, for the third time, Rudi was ascending the steep tributary glacier that slanted up toward the base of the Citadel. They were all on one rope—Saxo, Captain Winter, his uncle and himself, in that order—and, using the steps that had already been cut, they moved easily and steadily. When he first turned and looked back,

the others were already out of sight below. And by sunrise they were at the crest of the glacier and crossing the snow-bridge over the *Bergschrund*.

They threaded the steep maze of the icefall and moved up the snowslope beyond—by now as familiar to Rudi as the forest paths six thousand feet below. All traces of the avalanche were gone, obliterated by the snowfall during the recent storm. But in the cool of the morning the new snow was firm and sound, and they climbed straight upward, without fear of another slide. Instinctively the boy's eyes went up to the cliffs on their left, where he had seen the chamois two days before; but this time there was no hint of movement on the gray walls of rock. He bent his head to the slope. . . . Kick—step. Kick—step. Kick—step. . . . And when he next looked up they were at the base of the ridge.

Here, for the first time, they rested. They had a slab of bread each and a swallow of tea. Then they were on their feet again, peering upward. "You take the lead now, Rudi," Captain Winter suggested. "You're the one who knows the way."

Rudi hesitated. He glanced at his uncle, who seemed about to protest; but in the end Franz said nothing, and he moved out in front. His uncle was now directly behind him on the rope, with Winter and Saxo in the third and fourth positions.

He was well aware of the honor and responsibility that had been conferred on him, and he climbed with the utmost care. For the first long stretch of the ridge, however,

the going was better than he had dared hope. Wind and sun had done their work well: blowing the snow away, melting the ice-patches, leaving the rock bare and dry. Even when they reached the steeper pitches, which had slowed him up on his first ascent, he now had no trouble at all. For, whereas before he had had to search for holds and stances, he now remembered them well and swung up surely and easily.

Best of all, he was no longer alone and afraid. He had confidence in himself. And the confidence of others.

There was no wind. The sun was brilliant. Soon they were sweating from their exertions and paused to take off their outer jackets. Then they were climbing again. Climbing. . . . Climbing. . . . Up the narrowing ridge, across the knife-edge, toward the towering *gendarmes*. Out onto the south face, past the *gendarmes*, back to the ridge. On and on, up the spine of the ridge, while the precipices on either side dropped away steeply and the glaciers and valleys receded slowly into distance.

An hour. . . . Two hours. . . .

Then at last the ridge broadened and flattened. They pulled themselves up onto the level platform of rock and stood facing the sheer wall of the Fortress. For a moment Rudi's eyes fixed on the shallow cave at its base. But for only a moment. Then he turned, moving along the platform toward the south face, and his uncle and Winter followed him.

Saxo, however, lingered behind, staring up at the granite battlements. "Wait!" he called after them.

The others looked back, and he gestured. "It can be climbed here," he said. "Here on the right."

"No, the way's around to the left," Winter said. "Josef Matt's way. The way Rudi climbed."

"If you come here to the ledge," said Rudi, "you will see the cleft and—"

"I do not need to see it," Saxo interrupted. "There is a route up the wall. It will go."

"But—"

"It will go, I tell you."

The three others returned to where he stood. "Perhaps it will," said Winter. "But since one way has already been found, why bother with—"

"Because I say there is a better way." Saxo's eyes were sullen and defiant. "You have employed me as guide, have you not, Herr Winter? That is what I am—a master guide of Broli. And I am getting tired of following these Kurtalers, as if I were some sort of tourist."

"But the boy's been here before—you know that. He's climbed the cleft and—"

"I do not care what the boy has done. As a guide, it is my professional opinion that this is the best route."

There was a silence. Winter bit his lip. Since the previous day, when by main force of will he had brought them together, he had had no trouble with the guides. True, they had scarcely exchanged a word. But at least they had

worked together and come this far without argument, and he had hoped they could go the whole way in the same spirit. . . . Obviously, though, it had been too much to expect.

"I'm sorry, Emil," he said firmly, "but I think the boy's route would be better."

"You mean," said Saxo, "that you refuse to follow my advice?"

"In this case—yes. I promise you that later on you'll have plenty of chances to lead the way."

Saxo looked at the ground, scowling. Then he looked up at the Fortress, and made a move as if to untie himself from the rope. He didn't, though. Instead, he turned away with a shrug. "Yes, later perhaps we shall see," he muttered, as he followed the others across the platform.

Rudi still went first. Following the ledge that curved out over the south face, he reached its end and inched out onto the bulging cliff beyond. With Franz belaying the rope, he made the crossing without difficulty. Then he in turn belayed his uncle, and behind them came Saxo and Winter, safeguarding each other. In less than ten minutes they were all together at the foot of the great cleft.

Then up again. . . .

And, as on the ridge and the bulge, the going was far easier for Rudi, now that he knew the way and was no longer alone. Or at least it was easier until he reached the narrow shaftlike section, halfway up, and then suddenly there was a scraping noise at his back, and he stuck fast.

"It is that pole of yours," Franz called from below.

Rudi knew well enough what it was: the two ends of his staff had become wedged against the walls of the cleft. And now he was struggling desperately to free them and at the same time not lose his holds on the smooth vertical rock.

"Try to slip off your pack," Franz called. "Then you can untie the thing and leave it there."

But Rudi was not leaving the staff if there was any way to help it. He jerked and wriggled and thrust himself upwards and sideways—and at last its ends grated loose.

"All right, now untie it," called his uncle. "Get rid of it. Throw it away."

Rudi pretended not to hear. Reaching a hand back over his shoulder, he tugged at the staff, trying to shift it from a horizontal to a vertical position. The best he was able to do was to get it diagonal, like a slung rifle. But at least he could now move again; and, though Franz was still shouting at him to untie and drop it, he resumed climbing on up the cleft. Now and then there was an ominous scraping of wood on stone. At the great chockstone, which called for delicate climbing, there was a bad moment when it caught in a crevice overhead. But this time a mere dipping of his shoulders released it; and beyond the chockstone there were no further difficulties. In a few minutes they were out of the cleft and on the flat top of the Fortress. The four of them . . . and his pole.

To his relief, his uncle made no further mention of it. "Not bad. Not bad at all, boy," was his only comment,

and something very close to admiration showed in his eyes.

Winter grasped Rudi's hand and pressed it warmly. And even Saxo conceded, "*Ja*, it was all right. It went." Then, as an afterthought, he added: "Although straight up the wall would have been better."

They rested again, and ate and drank sparingly. The sun was now almost midway across the sky, and the mountain world around them glittered in the full brightness of noon. It was not around them that they looked, however, but only up and ahead: at the long, jagged slant of the upper ridge, the walls and crags tiering above it, the Citadel's shoulder jutting broad and white-rimmed against the blue depths of space. As Rudi had reported, there was no major obstacle. Or at least none was visible. But they knew that the mountain, before it was through with them, would exact the very last ounce of their strength and skill.

They rose. They started off again. Now their order of ascent was reversed, with Saxo and Winter going first, Franz and Rudi following. But Rudi did not mind being last. He had brought them safely this far; he had had his full share of leading; and now it was his turn to follow, while older, more experienced hands forged the way. He moved on steadily after his uncle, taking care to see that there was neither too much nor too little slack in the rope that joined them. He watched his holds and balance as carefully as when he had been out ahead. Not once, he was resolved, would he hamper or delay the others. Never

would he give them cause to regret that they had allowed him to come.

Up—up they went: the first of all men to enter that secret world above the world. The first of all living things, too, it seemed, in the vast stillness of rock and air . . . until suddenly Rudi realized that the men up ahead had stopped; Winter was pointing; and there above them, outlined on a crag, was a dark brooding shape. It was a *Lammergeier*, the great Alpine bird of prey. And it was staring at them, wings poised, as if in the next moment it would plunge down in savage attack. But its instinct, apparently, warned it that they were too big and too many; for when, abruptly, it took off, it was not down, but up. Its wings spread huge against the sky, as it arched out from the mountainside. It whirled and swooped and glided, no longer a hideous vulture with tearing beak and talons, but a thing of soaring beauty, wild and free. And as Rudi watched, his heart soared too—up and up with the great bird—along the crest of the ridge, above the walls and precipices, higher and higher, until it swooped over the mountain's shoulder into the blue beyond. For that was where they, too, were going. Not so swiftly as the *Lammergeier*. Not on wings. But still—where they were going. Where no man had ever been before.

A surge of joy rose within him, filled his body and burst, without his willing it, from his lips . . . YOOOOO-LEEEE-OOOOO-LAAAY-EEEEEE. YOOOOO-LEEEE-OOOOO-LAAAY-EEEEEE. . . . Wild and free as the bird, his yodel

rose into the mountain stillness. The three men above looked down at him. Winter waved a hand. Then they climbed on.

Through the long afternoon they climbed. Up—up—up. Along the spine of the ridge. Out on the bordering faces, when the spine grew too jagged. Over crags and slabs, through clefts and chimneys; balancing with their axes, belaying with the rope; inching on and on up a wilderness of rock, reaching always for the next hold, the next stance, that would bring them still higher. On the more difficult pitches they moved only one at a time. Sometimes there were long waits while they searched out a route, and sometimes they chose a wrong one and had to back down and try again. But each time they at last found a way and went on to the next pitch—and the next problem.

They were really high now. Many of the lesser summits of the range were already below them, and the jutting outline of the Fortress, far down the ridge, appeared as remote as the glaciers and valleys. The air was thinning. Rudi's breathing was more rapid. But it caused him no particular difficulty, and, though they had been climbing for almost twelve hours, he was still not tired. Up ahead, the others seemed to be all right too—moving slowly but steadily onward. Now and then Winter had a brief spell of coughing, but his pace remained the same as ever. The only other sound was the clinking of their axes and boot nails against the rock.

Hand up—foot up. Hand up—foot up. Then the climbing stopped; the rope connecting Rudi to Franz hung motionless, and there was another wait, longer than any before. After several minutes he climbed on up and found the three men standing together, with his uncle and Saxo in the midst of an argument. Directly ahead, the crest of the ridge flared up in a smooth, holdless pitch, and it was obviously necessary to work around it, either to one side or the other. Franz was for going to the right and Saxo to the left.

“The rock is sounder over here,” said one.

“But too steep,” said the other.

“The holds are good.”

“On the far side they are better.”

The two guides faced each other, unyielding. Then they looked at Winter. The Englishman peered up on one side, then the other, and rubbed the stubble along his jaw.

“Suppose we try the left,” he said.

Franz’s lips tightened. “But it is obvious, my Captain, that—”

“Either side looks possible. Down at the Fortress we took our way. Here let’s try Saxo’s.”

Franz hesitated. He seemed about to continue the argument. Then abruptly he turned away. With Saxo leading, they edged out to the left, above the south face, and within ten minutes had bypassed the obstacle and regained the ridge.

“So—you see?” said the man from Broli.

Franz said nothing. But Rudi noticed that, for a while thereafter, the rope joining him to his uncle jerked more often and more violently than it had before.

Up . . . still up . . . always up. . . .

And at last they were nearing the shoulder of the mountain. As it came closer it grew larger: a vast snow-topped battlement looming above them that blocked out half the sky. Thus far on the ascent, they had tried not to think, or look, too far ahead, concentrating on each problem as they encountered it. But now they could no longer keep their eyes from rising to that grim forbidding mass. For if the Fortress had been the first "key" to the mountain, the shoulder, they knew, would be the second; and they would either have to find a way up and over it or turn back in bitter defeat. That it was immense and formidable was plain at a glance. But if it was climbable—if it would "go"—they would not know until they reached it. From below, the perspective was too distorted for them to make out the details of its structure.

Also, the light was fading. The sun had long since slanted off behind the mass of the mountain, and the ridge lay in deepening shadow. Obviously they would not be able to reach even the base of the shoulder before dark.

They had done enough for the first day. On that even Franz and Saxo were agreed. Leaving the crest of the ridge, they found, after some search, a place level and sheltered enough for a campsite; and here they dropped their packs and pitched their two small tents. They rested. Then they ate their supper of dried meat, cheese and bread

and brewed tea on a small spirit stove that Winter had brought up from Broli. The warmth of the tea was welcome, for it was growing colder. The shades of evening closed, gray and solemn, about them. And when they had finished eating, it was night.

Still they sat for a while on the flat stones in front of the tents. The men smoked their pipes and talked desultorily, and Rudi, beside them, stared out across the gulf of darkness. In a vast arc around them the snowpeaks gleamed faintly, as if with an inner light of their own. Farther down were brooding rock-walls and ghostly glaciers, and, still farther, the dim outlines of forest and valleys. The valley of Kurtal was not visible—and would not be, until they came up over the shoulder—but yellow pricks of light winked up from even more distant villages, incredibly tiny and remote beyond the miles and the night. As he watched, it seemed to Rudi that he was no longer on the earth at all, but, rather, looking down upon it from an island in the sky.

There they were on their island: *the first of all men*.

He looked around him, and then slowly upward. His eyes fixed on the great shoulder rising black against the stars.

“*And tomorrow—*” he thought. “*Tomorrow—*”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE NEEDLE'S EYE

They slept two to a tent: Rudi with Franz, Winter with Saxo. It grew cold—bitter cold—and the stones under them were hard and thrusting. But for Rudi, at least, tiredness outweighed discomfort, and he was soon dropping off toward sleep. The last thing of which he was aware was his uncle's breathing, close beside him, and this warmed him more than either tent or blanket. After his ordeal during that solitary night beneath the Fortress, he felt as safe and snug as if he had been in his own bed at home.

Once he awakened. It seemed that someone was calling him. But then he realized that it was Winter coughing in the other tent. In a moment he was asleep again; and the next thing he knew Franz was shaking him by the shoulder.

It was still night. The men had agreed that by dawn they must actually be on their way, so as to make use of every moment of daylight. Fumbling in the darkness, Franz laced his boots and rolled up his blanket, and when he came from the tent Franz and Saxo were already preparing breakfast. . . . Tea again. Two biscuits apiece. A bit of cheese. . . . Sitting beside Winter, Rudi noticed that he

ate almost nothing and kept putting a hand to his still-bandaged head.

"It is hurting you, my Captain?" Franz asked.

Winter lowered his hand quickly. "No, it's nothing," he said. "It was only a bump."

"Perhaps with the altitude—"

But Winter did not want to talk about it. Rising, he began packing his knapsack, and the others followed suit. It had been decided that they would take everything on with them: tents and blankets as well as food and climbing gear. For, although they hoped to make the summit and back that same day, there was always the possibility of trouble, and it was far better to bear the extra loads than to risk a night without shelter on those savage heights.

"If the way is clear beyond the shoulder," said Saxo, "we can leave the things there and pick them up on the way down."

The pack-straps creaked as they slung them on. Their boots scuffed against cold stone. As they started off, the first band of gray showed in the sky above the ranges to the east.

Then they were climbing again. . . . Climbing. . . . Climbing. . . . The section of the ridge on which they now found themselves offered straightforward going, and they moved all at one time and at a steady pace. For a while there was barely enough light for them to grope their way, and they themselves were merely a dark file of shadows. But gradually the sky lightened, the mountain emerged into cold twilight, and they could see their surroundings—

and one another. Rudi was again last on the rope, with Winter directly ahead. Although the Englishman kept pace with the guides, it seemed to the boy, watching him, that his movements were somehow slower and heavier than on the previous day; and when he occasionally turned to look down, his face was drawn and strained. He had had a bad night, that was sure. With his headache and coughing, probably a sleepless night. But at least he had not coughed so far that morning. And whatever his pain or tiredness, he spoke no word of complaint.

"He will make it," thought Rudi. "He *must* make it. Because, of all of us, he most deserves to make it." Watching the lean, bent figure ahead of him, he felt a glow of admiration, and of gratitude. For without Winter, where would they be now? Down in the valley, all of them. He himself at his dishpans in the Beau Site Hotel. It had been Winter, and Winter alone, who had given him his chance; who had brought them all together; who had planned and organized, pleaded and persuaded; who had led them this far up the Citadel by the sheer will and drive of his spirit. And that spirit, Rudi was sure, could not now be denied. He would make the top.

They would all make it. . . .

As they climbed, the sun rose. Its rays thawed the cold stiffness from their bodies; and, looking up at the cloudless sky, they knew they were to be blessed with another perfect day. But also, when they raised their eyes, they saw something else—and this was a different story. For the shoulder of the mountain was now close above them, and

the more clearly they saw it, the more clearly they realized that it was to be a truly formidable obstacle. Perhaps a half-hour's climb above them the ridge ended. It was not merely interrupted, as had been the case at the Fortress, but ended—for good—and beyond it the mountain soared up in what, from below, seemed an absolutely perpendicular wall. Rudi tried to estimate its height, from its base, where the ridge stopped, to where its top, the shoulder proper, loomed like a white-rimmed battlement against the sky. Two hundred feet, it might be; or three hundred; foreshortening made it hard to tell. But height alone, steepness alone, did not matter. What mattered was that there be a way.

Rudi bent his head. He concentrated on the next step, and the next. A half-hour passed; and in one thing, at least, his judgment had been right, for presently the men up ahead stopped and waited. Coming up beside them, he stopped too. They had reached the end of the ridge.

And now four pairs of eyes searched the mountainside above them. The first thing they saw was encouraging; for it was not quite so steep as it had appeared from farther down, and it was not smooth, but broken up into hundreds of ribs and buttresses, clefts and gullies. So far, so good. But what was good was at the same time bad, or at least utterly perplexing, for the very number of these turned the wall into a formless maze. On the ridge, except for a few short stretches, the route had been clear. There had been only one way to go. Whereas here there was a whole labyrinth of ways—or, rather, possible ways—each of

which *might* bring them to the shoulder, but might also, and far more likely, be merely a false trail, leading nowhere. They peered upward. They pointed. Franz favored one route, Saxo another, and another argument would have ensued if Winter had not stopped them. It was useless to argue, he pointed out. It was useless even to theorize. No human eye, looking up from below, could thread the maze of that mountain wall; and besides, its whole upper half was hidden behind great bulges and overhangs, and it was impossible to tell which routes did, or did not, lead to climbable sections above.

There was only one way: trial and error.

First they selected a route to the left, above the south face—not because it seemed more promising than any other, but because a broad ledge curving out beneath it gave some measure of protection from the mile-high drop below. They had not climbed fifty feet, however, before they reached a blank holdless wall and had to return to their starting place. They tried again, to the right, and again the holds petered out; in between, and were stopped by an overhang. Franz pointed out a way, Saxo a second, Winter a third; and they tried them all. But with the same result. It would have saved much time, of course, if they had been able to unrope and reconnoitre separately, but the going was far too steep and dangerous for solitary climbing. Even on the rope, the man up ahead was in a precarious position, for the others could have done little to hold him up if he slipped or fell.

The three men took turns in the lead, and each time

they had to back down, defeated, their faces were tense from exertion and strain. Now for the first time they were all breathing hoarsely, and their fingertips were bloody from clawing at the rock. Even Rudi, who only followed where the others led, began to feel the effect of the struggle in his lungs and legs. For the first time his pack felt heavy and cumbersome, and its straps bit savagely into his shoulders.

They advanced—retreated. Advanced—retreated. Back at the bottom for perhaps the tenth time, Winter was overcome by a sudden coughing fit, his first of the day, and for several minutes sat with his head to his knees, while paroxysms wracked his body. The others waited, watching him with troubled eyes. And the sun, as if to mock them, shone more brightly than ever, glinting gaily on the steel of their axes and the mica in the rocks.

When Winter arose his face was pinched and gray. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"You are all right now, my Captain?"

"Yes, all right. Let's go."

Then they tried again.

And this time, at last, they were able to keep going. Starting up a narrow chimney, they came out at its top onto a ledge which, though tiny, was yet wide enough to hold them. Beyond it were other ledges, and these in turn led to a second chimney, a belt of slabs, more ledges, a jutting crag. Not that there was anything easy about their progress. At almost every step they had to stop and plan the next one, and often they followed a wrong lead and

had to backtrack. But at least they did not have to descend all the way. Each time they found another route that "went." And slowly they moved higher and higher.

They were now all on one rope; Franz first, Saxo second, Winter third, Rudi last. And whereas, on the ridge, they had often been able to climb simultaneously, it was now always a matter of one at a time. On each new pitch there was first a long wait, while Franz explored and tested, with the others perhaps offering advice from below. Then Franz began to climb, the rope gliding behind him—ten feet, twenty feet, thirty feet—before it stopped. Another wait, while he found a stance and braced himself. At last his voice calling, "Come on!" The other three following in order, with Franz belaying Saxo, Saxo Winter, Winter Rudi, until that particular stretch was behind them. And then the whole performance began again for the next one.

The steepness was unrelenting, the holds tiny and widely spaced. Often, the toe of one boot and a finger of one hand were all that held them to the mountainside. And, although they kept trying to bear to the left, or at least straight up, the contours of the wall forced them steadily to the right. Here there was no ledge beneath them, as on the other side, but only the east face of the mountain plunging sheer to the glaciers; and Rudi, accustomed though he was to height, tried not to look down at the blue emptiness beneath his feet. For almost an hour now they had been out on the face of the rock, clinging like insects. He wished they would come to another cleft

or chimney that would give at least the illusion of holding them in.

Then they did. Clambering up onto a narrow shelf, he saw, to the left, a long chimney slanting upward; and, though steep, it was cut deeply into the rock, and with protecting sides that made it almost like a funnel. The men ahead, however, had not taken it, but were still moving up the face, to the right. Thinking it had escaped their notice, Rudi called and pointed, but when Winter, who was next above him, turned, it was only to shake his head. . . . Why? the boy wondered. But he was not to wonder long. . . . A few minutes later the stillness was broken by a rumbling overhead; the rumbling rose to a roar; and, looking back, he saw a cascade of loose rocks pouring wildly down the chimney.

At least he had been right in one thing, he thought grimly. It was indeed a funnel.

On they went: over bulges, crags, buttresses. Often the rock above them actually overhung, but each time they were able to find a way up and around. The top of one of the overhangs proved to be a fairly wide shelf, and for the first time since leaving the ridge they were able to sit down and rest. When they rose to go on again, Franz and Saxo changed places on the rope. Rudi had never before seen his uncle give up the lead without reluctance.

It was not long before Saxo was put to the test, for, a few minutes later, they reached a second shelf and stood peering up at a vertical wall. There was no way to work around it—that was obvious. Its surface was smooth and

holdless. But up its center ran a long crack, a few inches wide, that seemed to lead to another level place, high above. If, that is—if—it was climbable.

“Ja,” said the man from Broli, *“it will go.”*

And while the others watched, he started up. There were no holds in the crack, any more than in the outer wall, nor was it anywhere wide enough to hold a man's body. Saxo climbed by jamming a knee into it, then an elbow, then a knee again and again an elbow, levering himself up not by any grip on the stone, but by the stone's grip on himself. It was an exhausting process. Every few moments he had to rest, and those below could hear his hoarse breathing as he held himself on by the wedge of his flesh and bone. But always he moved up again—knee and elbow, knee and elbow—until he disappeared over the top of the wall and a shout came down to them that he had reached the platform above. *“Well done!”* called Winter. And even Franz's face showed his admiration. For it had been a magnificent exhibition of strength and skill.

Then they, too, went up—first Franz, then Winter—and, with the rope from above to hold them, they made it without difficulty. But when it came Rudi's turn he was in trouble from the start. For his knees and elbows, smaller than the men's, did not wedge properly into the crack, and, try as he would, he could get neither friction nor leverage. He slipped—and caught himself. Slipped again—and dangled. He was not afraid of falling; he knew the rope would hold him. But even worse than fear was

his frustration and shame, for this was the first time on the whole climb that he needed help from the others. He struggled, strained, twisted, clawed the rock. But it was no use. The crack would not hold him. Slipping and dangling, he was hauled up the wall—like a despised “bundle of firewood”—until at last he stood, breathless and humiliated, beside the three men on the top.

“All right, son?” asked Winter.

“Yes, all right,” he answered, his eyes averted.

But once they were moving again there was little time to brood over what was past. For now they were really high on the shoulder, the climbing was more exposed than ever, and every step required the utmost concentration. More and more, though they still fought against it, they were being forced out to the extreme right of the wall. Below them were only chasms of space. And above—very near now—the farthestmost tip of the shoulder projected in a sharp, almost needlelike point against the sky. Here was where they would come out: of that there was no longer any doubt. At the farthest point—at the Needle—poised like a pointing finger above the precipice of the east face. Above it, sweeping on to the left, was the broad, snow-covered flat of the shoulder. Once there, they would be both on easier ground and within striking distance of the summit. It was still only midmorning, and with luck . . .

Yes, with luck . . .

But would they have it? Would they be able to find a

way around—or over, or under—that Needle in the sky? Staring up at it, their faces were drawn and grim, for they knew that here was the second “key” to the Citadel.

Five minutes. . . . Ten minutes. . . . Another ten. . . . And there they were. There at the extreme upper corner of the monstrous wall; on a tiny platform in a sea of space, with the top of the wall curving out in a cornice above them and the Needle thrusting up diagonally to the right. Their eyes moved slowly, almost inch by inch, over the rock around them. To the left was a sheer cliff—unclimbable. Overhead the cornice—equally so. That left the Needle. As they had expected—the Needle. In spite of its thinness they knew it to be solid; otherwise it would never have weathered the winds and storms of the centuries. Its rock was sound. It would hold them. But the question was, could they hold on to *it*?

There seemed to be two possible ways of climbing: one up and around, on the outside, almost to its very tip; the other through a sort of cleft, farther in, where the base of the Needle joined the main mass of the shoulder. Neither offered much in the way of holds or stances, but the second was far less exposed than the first, and after a short discussion, Saxo, who was still in the lead, moved up to try it. For the first ten feet or so he climbed directly above them. Then the cleft deepened and bent, and he disappeared. By advance agreement, the others did not follow, but stayed where they were, so as to be in a better position to belay the rope if anything went wrong. For several minutes, however, nothing did. The rope glided up, stopped, glided

again, stopped again. Finally it stopped and stayed motionless for a long time.

"What is it?" Winter called.

There was no answer.

"Doesn't it go?"

Still no answer. But after a few moments the rope began to move slowly downward. Then Saxo reappeared, maneuvering carefully down the cleft, and soon he was beside them again on the platform.

"No, it does not go," he said.

"Why? Where does it lead to?"

"Beyond the turn it cuts deeper into the mountain. There are holds; it is not difficult. But it gets darker and narrower, like a tunnel—and at last so narrow that a man cannot pass. Even when I took off my pack I could not get through. It is no good. It does not go."

"How far up does the tunnel go?" asked Winter.

"I could not tell."

"Could you see light above you?"

"No."

"Perhaps if you had gone a little farther—" Franz put in.

"If you think you can do better," Saxo told him, "—go ahead."

Franz did. Climbing up the cleft, he disappeared for a full ten minutes. But in the end, like Saxo, he returned defeated. "No," he conceded. "It is too narrow. One cannot get through."

There was a silence. No one moved. Then slowly their

eyes turned to the other route—to the point of the Needle—to the tiny cracks and wrinkles that formed its only holds, slanting up to its tip above the terrible abyss.

“It’s my turn now,” said Winter quietly.

“No, my Captain—”

“Yes, mine.”

Winter laid down his ax and unslung his pack. Changing positions with Saxo, so that he was now first on the rope, he moved out toward the edge of the platform. Behind him, the two guides wrapped the rope around their bodies and braced themselves as best they could. But it was an almost useless belay; for, once out on the Needle, Winter would be both above them and off to one side, and, if he fell, he would drop so far before the rope caught him that it would either crush his ribs or—more likely—break. The guides knew it. Winter knew it. Rudi knew it. And he knew, too, that that was *why* the Englishman was going first. Not because he considered himself the best climber; but because the risk was so great and he was resolved that it be his.

Winter stood poised on the rim of nothingness. He rubbed his hands slowly against his trousers. Then he swung up and out. His first hold was a tiny crevice into which he managed to insert two fingers of his right hand; the second a shallow notch which held just the toe of his right foot. For several moments he clung to these, while his eyes searched the rock ahead. Then slowly—so slowly that it scarcely seemed motion at all—his left hand moved to where his right had been and the right to another hold,

farther on. At the same moment his feet shifted; they, too, were farther on, and higher. Again there was a wait. Again the groping, creeping movement. He was farther out on the Needle. Then still farther. . . .

It was a miracle of climbing. Of nerve and balance. To those watching from the platform the holds were no longer visible, and it seemed that Winter was held to the rock by the mere touch of toe and fingertip. Sometimes his body was arched out, straining, against the sky; sometimes flattened in, as if he were trying to press it into the solid stone. Once, for what seemed an eternity, he hung spreadeagled and motionless, seemingly unable to shift either a hand or a foot. But at last there was again the slow groping—the creeping—the grasping. And he moved higher. And higher.

His line of ascent was diagonally up the side of the Needle and, if he were able to continue it, would bring him out at a point just to the left of its tip. From here on in to the main mass of the mountain the snow-covered upper surface of the Needle was almost level against the sky. Indeed, as far as could be seen from below, it was simply an extension of the broad shoulder, and, once it was reached, there would be no further difficulty. . . . But the question still remained: could Winter reach it? . . . For a time the answer seemed to be yes. He was perhaps ten feet from the top. Then eight feet. Then five feet. His hand was reaching up again, and two more holds, two more movements, would bring him to the white rim of snow. But this time he found no holds. He reached to the right, to the

left—and there was nothing. He reached straight upward—and there was nothing. The minutes passed, as he tried and tried again: groping, straining and struggling against the sheer rock, clinging by finger and boot tip above the gulf of space. . . . And still there was nothing.

Throughout his ascent no word had been spoken. The guides below had stood braced and tense, as they paid out the rope. But now Franz could keep silence no longer.

“Come down!” he called. “Come down!”

Winter was trying again.

“It is no good. You are tired. Come down!”

The Englishman made one last desperate effort, but it was as futile as the others. Then slowly he began the descent. Coming down took him as long as going up, and was even more hazardous, because of the difficulty in seeing the holds below. Twice he slipped, and caught himself just in time. And once it took almost ten minutes of maneuvering merely to lower himself from one stance to the next. But gradually the gap between him and the platform lessened, until it was a matter of only a few feet. Then once again he slipped—and this time could not catch himself. His body lurched out from the rock; he began to fall. But luckily he was now so close to the guides that they were able to brake almost immediately. For one sickening moment he swung like a pendulum over the abyss. Then they were pulling strongly at the rope, and in a few seconds he was beside them on the platform.

He had been out on the Needle for a full hour—every instant of it one of the utmost exertion and danger. Sweat

beaded his forehead; and his face, always thin, now seemed as hollow as a skeleton's. One of his sleeves was ripped and his elbow bloody; both legs were trembling from the strain to which they had been subjected; and his breath came in quick sharp gasps that soon turned into a wracking cough. "I'm all right. I'm all right," he kept murmuring between paroxysms. But several minutes passed before he could speak or move normally.

Winter had had his ordeal. Now came Franz's and Saxo's.

Franz went first, following Winter's route for a way and then angling off to the left, in the hope of finding better holds. But, like the Englishman, he got to within a few feet of the top—and no farther. All his efforts, all his skill and resolution, were of no avail against that last merciless pitch of rock, and eventually he too returned to the platform: grim, panting and defeated.

Then Saxo. Big and powerful as a tiger. Unlike the others, he carried his ax with him, slung through his belt; and when he neared the top he reached up with it, above the white rim, hoping that the prong would catch and give him the means of pulling himself higher. But this, too, met only with failure. Time and again the ax went up, dug in—and slipped away. Apparently there was no ice above, but only loose snow over smooth rock; for not once did the prong catch and hold. And eventually Saxo like the others before him had to acknowledge defeat and climb down.

Defeat. . . . It hung over them now like a gray shadow. It was in their voices, their eyes, their worn bodies. For

three hours they had done battle with the pinnacle of rock that rose before them. They had struggled, risked their lives, called on every resource of flesh and blood, brain and will—and still it rose, unconquered and unconquerable. It was they who were beaten. For there was no more that they could do. Dully, bitterly, they stared up at the hateful thing that had put an end to their hopes and dreams.

“Please—”

The voice was Rudi's. And it was the first time in hours that he had spoken. Throughout the long struggle he had remained on the platform, helping when he could, trying to keep out of the way when he was not needed. As each man in turn had made the attempt, he had hoped and striven with him, suffered and despaired with him, no less than if he had been climbing himself; and now that it was over—and they were beaten—his despair was perhaps the deepest of all.

Still there was one thing he must say before they turned to go down.

“Please—”

The men looked at him.

“Please, may I try—”

“No, of course not,” Franz cut him off. “If we three could not make it, how could you?”

“I don't mean that way, Uncle. I mean inside.”

“Inside?”

Rudi pointed to the opening at the base of the Needle. “That way,” he said. “Where you tried first.”

“But it was no good. We could not get through.”

"Perhaps I could. I am smaller."

The men looked at him for another moment; then at one another.

"It is a slim chance," said Franz.

"It would take a marmot to get through," added Saxo.

"And also it probably does not lead anywhere."

"Even if you can squeeze through," said Winter to Rudi, "—and even if it does come out on the shoulder—what good will it do? The rest of us can't get up."

"I will be on the rope," Rudi said. "If I get to the shoulder I will pull it up. Then I will go around and let it down over the Needle. With a rope from the top you can climb it easily."

There was a silence.

"Please," he said. "Let me look. Let me try."

For a moment the old light kindled in Winter's eyes, and as he looked down at the boy, a smile touched his worn face. He glanced at the guides, but they said nothing.

"All right, son," he said. "Go on."

Rudi dropped his pack, staff, and ax and tied himself onto one end of the rope. At the same time the others untied themselves, and Franz took the slack in his hands, ready to pay it out to its full length behind them.

"Good luck, boy," said Winter. "And don't take any chances."

Then he was on his way. Up the cleft . . . around the turning . . . up a steeper, narrower part above. For some thirty feet the climbing was easy, there were holds aplenty, and his only concern was that the rope should not foul on

some projection beneath him. But then, as Saxo and his uncle had reported, the walls began to close in; soon there was one behind him, as well as in front and on both sides; and he was, in effect, crawling upward through an all-but-vertical tunnel. Rocks nudged his shoulders, chest and back, as he wormed his way past them. Then they were pressing in on all sides at once, and he knew that this must be the point at which the men had turned back, because he himself was barely able to squeeze through. As he climbed, the light had gradually faded: from bright sunshine to gray twilight, and now almost to darkness. He could no longer see his holds, but had to grope for them blindly.

Also—and worse—the rock was now wet. And the wetness made it slippery. Several times he lost his footing, and once actually began sliding downward, until he brought up with a jolt on a knob below. Soon whole streams of water were pouring down the walls, into his face and eyes and down the collar of his shirt. But if the wetness meant discomfort, and a certain danger, it also had its compensations. For one thing, it enabled him several times to squirm past narrow places which might well have stopped him, had the rock been dry and rough. For another, he realized that the reason for the wetness was that the shaft was a sort of drainage pipe for the snow on the shoulder above, and he was sure now that it went all the way to the top. If the melted snow could come down, there was at least a chance that he could get up.

The walls contracted to a bottleneck, little more than a

foot in diameter. He twisted, writhed. . . . And suddenly stuck. . . . Wet or not, the rock held his shoulders as if in a vise, and the more he struggled the tighter its grip became. For a moment panic seized him. His arms and legs jerked convulsively. He tried to cry out. But the only sound that came from his lips was the quick rasp of his breath. For the first time on the long climb he was fighting for air. In that dark tunnel there was no air at all. And no light. He was caught, trapped, suffocating, in a black grave in the rock.

Coward! Fool!

He stopped his wild and senseless thrashing. His breathing was still labored, his heart pounding; but the panic was gone. He was a mountaineer again—not a frightened child—and with slow deliberation he set about finding a way to release himself. His shoulders were wedged tight. A strong push with either hands or feet would probably have released them, but they could find nothing to push against. What he was able to do, however, was to work his arms gradually upward. Inch by inch he forced them along against the walls, bending them, contorting them, trying to work them into a position above his head. Long minutes seemed to pass. Often he had to pause to rest his aching muscles. During one of the pauses he heard a distant muffled sound, and he realized that the men were calling him from below. But he hadn't the breath to answer. He concentrated on the job at hand. On the slow painful maneuvering of his arms. And at last what he had been hoping for, struggling for, happened. His right arm

was above his head. Then his left. They were no longer pinioned, but reaching up, grasping. His shoulders were free, and he pulled himself on.

And still on. . . .

Up the black walls; over the wet rocks; on and on through the long twisting tunnel. The rope still dragged behind him. By now it must have been almost at its full length, and its weight pulled heavily at his waist. But at least it had not got caught. And he himself did not get caught again. The shaft had widened slightly. It bent to the left and leveled off; steepened again and bent to the right. And then, suddenly, he had stopped, he was staring upward, and this time it was neither fear nor exertion that made his heart beat faster. For the shaft was no longer dark, but filled with a grayish light, and straight above, framed by a rim of rock, was a patch of blue gleaming sky. Now at last he *could* shout. And did. And the sound of it echoed wild and free in the core of the mountain. Then he was climbing again—faster now—up, up, as fast as his strength would take him. He was lunging, grasping, pulling, shoving. He was halfway—two thirds of the way—almost there. Then he *was* there. He was crawling up onto the rim. Coming out of the shaft. He was standing in snow, in bright sunlight, on the shoulder of the Citadel. He had climbed up past the Needle . . . through the Needle's Eye.

The world seemed to spin around him, vast and dazzling. The whole other side of the mountain, that before had been hidden, was now revealed: the north face plunging away into space; the northeast and northwest ridges;

beneath them, the snowfields and boulder-slopes, and, still farther down—remote and tiny, but visible at last—the valley and village of Kurtal. All this was below. And above—yes, there it was—*the summit*. Rising before him: huge and gleaming. And close now. Very close. . . .

He tore his eyes away. There were still things to be done, and even the summit must wait. Turning, he pulled the rope up out of the shaft. He coiled it around him. Then he was moving across the shoulder, toward the Needle, out onto the flat upper surface of the Needle. He was waving and calling. He was tying one end of the rope around a knob of rock and lowering the other down the wall below. The men tied on the packs, and he hauled them up. Then they themselves were coming: one . . . two . . . three. . . . They were all up, all standing together on the shoulder of the Citadel, and his uncle had put his arms around him and was holding him tight.