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Were they cavemen, supermen, or both?

THE BEASTS OF KOHL

JOHN RACKHAM



First Book Publication

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ROUND TRIP TO A FAR PLANET

Kohl was the ancient, all-wise and entirely non-human master of a distant dark planet of a triple sun. And Kohl was also the master of Rang, a beast he had taken as an infant from a visit to a far world.

Kohl had raised Rang to hunt and assist him on his sea-swept stormy world. But there came a time when Rang, grown to full adulthood, became restless and lonely. And the all-wise Kohl knew that he must return his beast-servant to the world of his origin.

Rang shuddered at Kohl's mind-picture of his native species: they were dirty, quarrelsome, hairy men of caves and stone axes. Yet Kohl insisted, "We shall go back!"

But the Earth had spun many, many times in its orbit and a more fantastic world than even Kohl had imagined awaited their return.

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The Beasts of Kohl

by

JOHN RACKHAM

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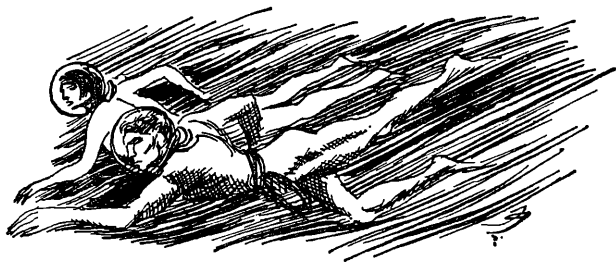
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A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

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I

RANG STOOD BRACED, left hand gripping one shuddering branch, his bare shoulder wedged between the fork of the branch and the gnarled trunk, his right hand hovering by his neurone-paralyzer, and his bare feet curled and digging into the soggy moss by the tree's roots. Rain sleeted into his face, driven by the never-ceasing wind, narrowing his eyes to slits. In the perpetual gloom there was little to see anyway. This particular quirk of the rainstorm was cold like ice-needles, stinging his hide. Another time, depending on the wild vagaries of the atmosphere, it might be almost scalding hot. He paid little heed to either. This constant screaming storm was the only weather this planetary surface knew or ever had known. Howling wind and raging storm, rolling thunderclouds and intermittent spears of crackling electricity constantly ripping them to spill their deluge on the land below; this was the only kind of land Rang knew. Jagged rock, hardy and struggling vegetation, and slinking, vicious life, as savage as its environment, it was all familiar to him, and, for short periods, endurable.

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All his attention now was in his senses, on the shrieking six-legged predator that was being harried and herded his way. He could feel its senseless, full-bodied rage, the only emotion it was capable of, other than hunger. He flicked a thought to the beast who was goading it, half a dozen yards away to the right. Gromal, ears cocked and nose keen, slinking through the wet and thrashing undergrowth, his sleek fur brushing aside the knotted creepers and wire-tough roots, was equally concentrated on his prey, on taunting it into one futile charge after another. Gromal was enjoying himself. Through his hunter-mind Rang shared and tasted the enjoyment, the while he read the wordless message, "Nearer, getting nearer."

Up above, his mighty pinions spread and twisting against the swirling flurries of the storm-wind, Virgal also had his attention on the snarling prey below, hawk-head thrusting out and down to peer through the wrack for every fractional sight and sign in the constant turmoil. He too was a hunter, and he too was an extra set of eyes and ears for Rang. Virgal was not happy, but then he never was at the best of times, and he hated to get his feathers wet. Rang knew it as just one quirk of his colleague's ways. After all the time these three had hunted together as a team, Virgal still cursed at getting wet, and Gromal could get sneeringly acid if the hunt was too easy. But they were a team, and they were on the forage for fresh meat, so personal quirks went by default in the face of common need.

The raging prey came still nearer, its tiny, screaming mind trying to pinpoint that four-legged snapper that tantalized it by coming close and then darting away again. Rang tensed, judging and gauging the moments, oblivious to the raging elements. High up above those roiling storm-clouds a triple-sun blazed down on this dark member of its brood, drenching it with radiation, keeping it constantly boiling. Rang knew about that sun, although he had never seen it. He knew because Kohl had told him of it, and he accepted the telling, as they all did whatever Kohl told them. These were the beasts of Kohl, the ancient and all-wise master.

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Now the prey was very close. It was time. Rang shook rain from his face, thrust away from the part-shelter of the stunted tree, and went two steps to meet it, into an open space, leaning against the sleet. Gromal ran and wheeled to halt by his side, his shaggy shoulder brushing Rang's. Virgal went into a plummeting dive. The raging six-legged one came thundering through the whipping undergrowth, its dim senses fixing on Rang with ferocious intent, its tusk-filled mouth agape. Rang braced his feet, gripped the paralyzer, and banished everything else from his mind. This had to be done right, with skill, speed and accuracy. The paralyzer did not kill, it simply canceled nerve impulses, or shut off a mind. But this thing's mind was diffuse, with little more authority than other nerve-ganglions in its body. To stop it he had to hit it in at least three places, and fast. The paralyzer was set to narrow-beam full-intensity close-range. It yelped thinly in his hand as he aimed at the dim mind, then leaped aside, evading a striking claw-foot. Whirling, he aimed again, at the spinal column just behind the first set of shoulders, and then again at the tail-junction. The insensible carcass skidded and ploughed into the moss, slammed into the tree and lay still.

All in one movement he tucked the paralyzer in his belt with one hand as he snatched out his fire-beamer with the other, running forward. In a beast as big and insensately ferocious as this the paralysis couldn't last more than a few seconds. Dangerously close to the limp body, he thumbed the beamer, and the blue-needle of energy from it sliced through thick scales, hide, flesh and the muscles and bone of the spinal column below the head, all in one precise, sweeping cut. Close-up work, but it had to be, because the beamer had only a short range. And precise because Kohl so ordered: "Kill only for food. Kill cleanly, without pain, without hate." That was what Kohl said, and Kohl was all-wise. Gromal came, growling happily in his throat. A big one. Meat for many meals. A good hunt. Virgal came swooping down, cursing at the branches, the rain, at everything, squawking his impatience. Rang snarled at him, sliced off a front

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claw-foot and nodded for him to take it. Gromal hung out his long tongue and woofed as Rang sliced off the other front foot for him. Beak and teeth got happily busy as Rang burned off a hefty slice for himself, set his back and haunches against the carcass and sank his teeth into the still-warm meat. Blood dripped over his chest and hands, filled his mouth with savor. He particularly liked the tang of the crisp surface where the beamer had cut. There was very little of it, but it had a different flavor from the rest. The rain slashed at him, spreading the red blood into a thin wash over his hide. It was good to taste fresh meat once more.

Kohl had been long gone, and the food in the room-which-was-always-cold was almost all eaten. Kohl had said it was right to go and catch more if need be, without waiting to be told. Rang mused on this as he ripped and chewed heartily. Kohl was the master, he gave orders, but sometimes he would ask, too. Or he would say "As you wish, Rang." Sometimes. Never to the others, only to Rang. It was a difference, and Rang was always alert and curious about things that were different. He was different from Gromal and Virgal, for instance. They thought only about food or sleep, or whatever they could see, hear or smell. And they obeyed him. But they never seemed to "think" at all, not the way he did. In a while, when the tasty morsel was all safely eaten and the enjoyment not so sharp, he stood up, casting his mind far out and around the howling murk. Small and savage minds lurked and scuttled, but nothing to cause any concern. Then, like a cool firm finger-touch came something to make his head lift and his mind leap. Kohl was returning! For a brief moment the interchange rippled between them.

"We are hunting. We have just caught much meat. We will return to home now."

"It is good. Make all ready to meet me. I shall be pleased to be in my own home again."

Rang licked his fingers clean, summoned his friends from their gluttony with an imperious thought and unhooked the coil of slim line from his belt. The triple-hooked end hummed as he flipped it and buried the barbs securely in

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the scaly carcass, giving a powerful yank to make sure they were fast. The beamer made short work of a mid-leg, which Virgal seized in his talons and bore aloft as he flew on ahead. Rang flipped and spun the cable to loop it round another leg to make a handhold, then slid the gripper along to the middle of the loop. On the unspoken word, Gromal sank his teeth into the tail where it began to taper, and heaved. Rang braced both hands on the gripper, without which the fine line would have cut his fingers to the bone, and he heaved also. The huge carcass shuddered and stirred, slithering over the soggy ground. That was the hardest part. Once it was moving it was easier to keep it going.

They heaved and struggled and grunted along the better part of a mile to where the ground fell away in a sheer cliff more than ten times Rang's own height, and where the choppy waves lashed and broke at the foot. Down there, perched precariously on a float, Virgal had already released the scramble net for the lashing surf to carry it up to the cliff-wall foot. Gromal woofed and went over in a springing leap. Rang unbelted his beamer again, slicing the meat into manageable hunks and heaving them over and down into the tossing water for Gromal to worry and steer into the net. With the last bleeding slab he went over himself in a clean dive and came up to swim strongly and grab the net-shrouds, gathering them into a handful. Scrambling up on to the float he made them fast, balanced himself for a moment while he heaved in a mighty breath, then plunged in and down, kicking furiously, down and down until he could duck under the entrance-lock and come up into darkness and air. With the anchor-cable to guide him, he ran to the machine, struck it into life with the heel of his hand and heard the grumble of power as the drum began to turn, winding in. Up above, Gromal and Virgal rode the float as it battered through the waves, keeping a sharp eye out for ambitious seagoing predators who might fancy a stolen bite.

The raft came closer, almost directly above, the cable

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began to sing, and Rang sent a warning thought to his friends. Gromal plunged off and swam down to the lock on his own, but Virgal swore, hunched his pinions, and dug in his talons to let the raft take him down. He hated this part bitterly, and cursed as the raft bobbed down under the entrance-lock and up so that he could breathe again. The dark cavern echoed the flap and rattle of his great wings as he fluttered them free of water and lent a handy beak to dragging the meat along to the storage-chamber. Kohl was near now. Rang sensed him surging fast and strong through the sea, almost home. Kohl had no shape, produced no visual image of his own, and never a sense of any emotion except keen pleasure, quick curiosity, or cool reason. Rang knew, with the top of his mind, that Kohl could change his shape to a certain extent, could produce extrusions to touch and operate the machinery controls in his own region of the undersea home, but he never thought of Kohl as a shape anyway, or a thing. He was just Kohl, who knew all things, who neither saw, smelled, heard or felt anything except through the mental rapport between himself and his beasts, who was at home in the sea, but shared life in all spheres with his servants.

"It is good to be home again," Kohl's thought came strongly now, "in my own sea. There is a subtle and pleasing familiarity about the way it presses on me. It is a pleasure to visit friends, but nothing is quite the same as my own place."

"It is good to have you back," Rang responded. "We all welcome you." The three were gathered in the lowest chamber, around the edge of the gently-lapping pool-surface of the room Kohl used when he wanted to be close to them. Rang had already tossed in a handful of wriggling small fish, tasty morsels.

"Only once have I known a sea I liked better than my own, and that was a young planet, a sea that had a tang and vigor that made me feel young. I may go back there sometime." For just a brief moment Rang caught a flash of the picture-image that went with the memory Kohl had called

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up. Kohl had a vast memory, most of which was within him, but quite a lot of it was stored away in special devices, strange semi-fluid tanks. Rang didn't understand these, but he was able, with careful concentration, to plunge his mind into them and probe through the contents for as much as he could understand. He could also dip into Kohl's many-layered mind, when the master permitted.

Now an enormous black-green shape poured itself into the pool through the submerged tunnel and the master was home. Gromal woofed loudly. Virgal ceased his preening long enough to squawk a welcome. Kohl touched them with an affectionate thought and dismissed them to go about their business. Rang lingered, squatting on the edge beside a box-instrument through which he and Kohl could talk to each other. He enjoyed moments like this, there being a subtle difference between the lightning-fast total exchange of mind to mind, and the spoken-out-loud way of exchanging thoughts that Kohl had taught him. It was done by means of a complex of devices which transformed Kohl's nerve impulses into sounds that Rang could hear, and Rang's talking back into nerve impulses that Kohl could understand. Rang knew how the devices worked, although not in words. He knew how all Kohl's many machines worked, the many and diverse constructions that had been made by many generations of previous beasts of all kinds, and which had their origin in the uncountable skills and secrets that Kohl had learned on a multitude of planets down the stretch of an immensely long lifetime. He saw nothing in any way odd in this, for Kohl was the master, the all-wise, and so it was right.

"Greetings, Rang. Is everything functioning well, as it should?" Kohl's voice through the machine was quiet and smooth, sounding the way Rang felt when he had killed and eaten and was happy. It was a feeling stronger in sound than in Kohl's thoughts, which were always clear and cool.

"The machines are all working well. The air-circulator made a small noise and smell because Virgal had shed some feathers into it, but I got them out and it goes properly again. Just before you came we caught a large six-legs-

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with-teeth, enough to give us many meals. You said we could hunt without waiting for your order."

"That's right. You have discretion, Rang. You're always free to ask questions or decide things that affect you directly. Be sure you keep your weapons charged, won't you? Anything else? Any problems?"

Impulsively, out of half-realized feelings that had been stirring him for some time, Rang asked. "Kohl, what is 'home'?" There was silence for a moment. He sensed Kohl's thought retreating into privacy, and then the voice came very quietly.

"You know what the word means, Rang."

"Not as you mean and say it. For you there is the sense of being safe, comfortable and secure. This is your home. It is mine also. But it is not the same for me. You live in the sea. I can swim in the sea but I can't live there. Nor can I live long on the land, because it is a violent and uncomfortable place. Here now I'm comfortable. In my chamber, too. But only because of your machines. What is *my* home?"

"Aren't you happy here?"

"It isn't that," Rang said quickly, detecting a tinge of emotion in Kohl's mind. "I don't mean anything wrong. I will say no more."

"But you must, now. Go on and tell me what you are trying to say in words which puzzle you so much."

There was no point in Rang trying to hide that he was puzzled, not from Kohl. Diffidently, he said, "This is not my home, the way it is yours. So mine must be somewhere else. Where? I am curious about this. Also I am not like you. Or Gromal. Or Virgal. Or the fish-without-names which serve you in the sea. They are all content to do your work without thinking much. I think a lot, much when you are away visiting your kind. And my thoughts bother me."

"They bother me, too." Kohl sighed. "For some time now, Rang, I have been disturbed about you. I am old, I have lived long, much longer than you can imagine, and my mind is full of memories. I have trained you, and come to ac-

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cept you as the cleverest beast I ever had, and all the time I have overlooked the meaning of this cleverness."

"If I have done wrong"—Rang was immediately contrite—"I am sorry. I meant nothing to upset you, Kohl."

"It's not your fault. Quite the reverse. I am to blame. I should have thought out this thing more carefully long ago. I must think now." The silence came again, and Rang had a rare moment of sharing in Kohl's whirling thought-stream as the master snared a wriggling morsel, engulfed it and digested it, the while his multi-layered mind sorted out and considered this new problem. Rang had been taught how to think about problems, but he could never be as good at it as this, because he just didn't have the immense resources that Kohl had. Now it was as if the master spun through a rapid succession of memories in his search for a similar case. Rang saw it as a flashing panorama of images.

Kohl was a Garl, one of the six who lived on this world, each one in his own sea, each one unthinkably old. Many and various forms of life had come to struggle a while for survival on the inhospitable surface of this world, and from their tortured struggles the Garl had learned much, had captured and enslaved those which were worth it, had used and adapted their skills and findings, and had gone on to survive where the others had perished. The Garl had nothing, originally, but intelligence, memory, and the power to impose their will on lesser creatures. Somewhere remotely back in their history they had achieved the power to build ships to hoist themselves from the planet. Their skills and wisdom had grown enormously thereby. With raw energies and powers at their command they went where they fancied, but always they came home. Here. Out of their great age and wisdom they had evolved a code. Rang could read it now as Kohl mused over it.

"A Garl inflicts no unnecessary pain, nor injury, fights no wars, desires no conquest, seeks only knowledge and skill, nor enslaves any creature capable of intelligent self-determination." That was the part Kohl now brought up and emphasized, reshaping and refining it.

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"You set me a severe problem, Rang," he said. "One for which I can find no precedent to guide me."

"I am a large nuisance. If I have spoiled the pleasure of your homecoming it would have been better if I'd said nothing!"

"That is foolish." Kohl's voice had that smile in it again now. "What is life without problems? Unfortunately this is not one, but many, and it will need much explaining. Go feed my beasts and see that all is well, then when you return I will have thought of the best way to analyze this."

Rang did his rounds thoroughly. Both Gromal and Virgal were asleep and fitfully dreaming. The machinery purred softly, circulating, warming and purifying water and air. The fish-enclosures were quietly rippling with food. He went back to squat by Kohl's talker. He had been thinking for himself. He had another question now, a double one, but decided to save it.

"Now," Kohl said, readily, "this may take a long time, and you will have to think hard. I will talk, and show you thought-pictures at the same time, and you must stop me if you do not understand. To begin with, I show you this world, a planet, one of many which circle the triple-star." Rang had seen this once before, not clearly, in one of Kohl's discursive moods. Now he saw the dark and roiling cloud-surface with a new interest, and then the fourteen other masses spinning in orbit. And then the mighty flaring brilliance of the three dazzling suns all close together. Before he had properly had enough of that glory, Kohl showed him an immensity of blackness dusted with pinpoints of colored fire.

"Stars beyond counting. More than may be visited even in a lifetime as long as mine. Every one a sun. Some single, some double, some complex even more than our own. Large, small, hot or dark, of all colors the mind can think of and of such distances from each other that you would not understand if I told you. But there are ways of eating up such distances, and ships to fly them. I have done this often, and all this is not to hurt your mind but just to prepare you, because on many of these worlds life is vastly different

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from the way you know it to be. And one of those worlds is yours."

Rang had expected it. He had understood it all, in a vague way. But he had a question. "If I came here from some other world, why don't I remember it now?"

"That is the proper question," Kohl approved. "That comes next. There have been so many planets that I had to consult my records before I could be sure of the correct one. You recall I said I had once known a sea more pleasant than my own? It was the same one. Now watch as I show you what I did." Rang knew the stomach-churning dizziness of a swooping descent, the spin and rip of white masses of vapor, the terrifying up-rush of a glittering sea-surface, and then the gentle subsiding on to the dark purple stillness and ooze of the bottom.

"This is my routine. If a planet has suitable sea space I go down and investigate, as I did this time. It was a rich and rewarding sea, with much to study and many interesting and quasi-intelligent forms. Then, to be thorough, I sent investigating devices up on to the surface to see what was there too."

Rang nodded. He knew about these semi-automatic machines that could see and hear and report. Kohl used them, but preferred the channels afforded by living beasts because of their greater range of apprehensions.

"To my surprise I found that the surface of this world was, if anything, more richly alive than the sea, which is unusual although not unique. There were many living things, from very small to very large and everything in between. And there were bipeds. That is the word for a creature that moves on two feet and keeps the others in the air. I have seen bipeds before, not often, but never before have I seen hairless ones. You are a biped, Rang."

"I have seen my reflection many times in the polished covers of the machines," Rang pointed out, a shade impatiently. "Very well, I am a biped. But if I came from this world you tell of, why don't I remember it?"

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"There were large numbers of your kind, some living on the edge of the sea—" Rang saw pictures of blue and green sea, white surf, masses of strange yellow stuff, and cliffs spotted with bushes and trees, more trees massively in the background, and something struck him as odd.

"Where is the rushing wind and the rain?"

"Not on this world, not as a steady thing. I saw rain, but not much. And wind only infrequently. I told you, worlds differ. Now, this is what happened next, when I sent my machines up onto the surface to investigate. The bipeds made immediate and loud noises to each other. They fled for a short distance, then halted to gather and make threatening sounds and movements, to throw small stones and sticks. Immediate hostility and threats, see?"

Rang saw and was both fascinated and repelled. They were bipeds, sure enough, but they were lumbering shaggy-haired things, screeching and gibbering and waving their arms. They were grotesque and unpleasing.

"They did this each time I attempted to make contact," Kohl pointed out. "A highly unusual reaction, this immediate and unthinking hostility, and very strongly resistant to all my efforts to achieve amity. Now, at one point the group which fled left behind a number of young, abandoned them. My machines, on my instructions, secured two and attempted to use them as a possible channel of friendly contact. Almost all beasts—creatures—are solicitous for their young. But this approach failed also. I didn't really want helpless young, but I was curious. Never before had I seen hairless bipeds like these. So, in the end I kept them, brought them into the ship and after studying them made arrangements for their care. And brought them home."

Rang was still bemused for a while by the vision of his own people. As Kohl had taught him, he broke up his generalized dislike into parts and studied each part. They were awkward. They were brownish, not a fresh pink like himself. They were dirty. They had tangled hair over their shoulders and eyes, and on their faces. That was particularly disagree-

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able. Kohl had taught him to keep clean, to cut and trim his hair so that it would be less of a bother in the water, and to scrape the hair from his face with a keen blade for the same reason. All in all he wasn't at all sure that he cared to know, now, that he was of this kind. Or of that world, where the sky was bright blue, and the trees were enormous, and there was neither wind nor rain. Then an answer came to him that was so simple he laughed at himself for missing it. Of course, these odd creatures had never known Kohl, had not had the great advantage of his training and wisdom. Rang felt better.

"I thank you, Kohl," he said, "for showing me these things and explaining so much. Now I understand."

"Not quite. Rang, there is still one more question in your mind. You must speak it."

Rang hesitated. It didn't seem all that important to him. Then, because Kohl wished it, he asked, "What am I?"

Kohl sighed and was silent for a while, his thoughts closed off now. "That is the question, Rang, isn't it? I don't know the answer, but that's a triviality. The question itself is equally slight. What matters is that you are of an intelligence to ask such a question at all. When a creature has a mind and the ability to think to *that* abstract extent, it is no longer a mere animal, a beast for hunting, or a slave to be kept, nor even a pet. It is a personality in its own right. No longer can you be my beast, Rang, although I hope you will continue to be my friend."

Rang scrambled up and away from the pool edge, stood stiffly in rejection and dismay.

"I don't know what you mean! I'm still your beast. I serve you, and learn from you. I don't want anything else but that!"

"Be easy," Kohl said, "there is no need for fear. I mean you no ill, Rang—quite the reverse. I have done you ill by keeping you servile so long. Now I must do what I can to put matters right. But there's nothing to fear."

"What are you going to do?" Rang demanded, his mind

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suddenly stiff with apprehension at any change in this mode of existence. "What?"

"The obvious thing, of course. I'm going to take you home!"

II

"MY PLACE IS HERE, with you," Rang argued. "Why should it be changed? Let me go on serving you as always. I won't ask any more questions, I promise!"

"Now you are being foolish," Kohl rebuked him. "Will you be able to put out of your mind all the wonderings and puzzlings, all the thinking? And this is no longer a fit place or life for you, confined to an undersea cage with only Virgal, Gromal and myself to share thoughts with. An intelligent mind needs the society and stimulus of its own kind. Even I find the need, from time to time, to visit my own kind and exchange thoughts. Have I not just returned from such a visit? A mind like yours is not for servility but for freedom."

"What would I do with freedom?"

"Aren't you curious about your own people and your world?"

"I thought them ugly and unpleasant. And dirty. I am more fortunate than they are, because I live with you!"

"Hmm!" Rang detected a note of amusement in Kohl's voice, sensed it on the outer surface of his mind. "How strangely perverse things can be, at times. If we had not had this long talk I could have said to you, 'Rang, I have an urge to travel among the stars again, and I shall take you with me.' And it would have been done, wouldn't it?"

Rang was baffled now. Kohl kept a careful screen over his

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thoughts, so that there was no way of telling whether his thinking was the same as his words, or not. "If you are really planning to go traveling" he said hesitantly, "then of course I would go with you, to serve as always whatever you order me. But if it is just to return me to that world, and leave me—"

"Listen to me." Kohl was firm, but kind. "I wish to revisit that planet. There's that wonderfully exciting sea, for one thing. It gives me pleasure just to remember it. And I have been planet-bound too long. My visit to Karl was a sign of restlessness in itself. The journey will please me. Look into my mind and see that this is so. And you will come with me. You, and I think also Virgal and Gromal, for they would fare badly if left alone for very long. But there won't be any question of making you do anything against your wishes. I am not your master any longer, Rang, but your friend. We will go together, observe together, and compare our thoughts and excitements. And then, if that world is pleasant for you—"

"It won't be!" Rang interrupted. "I will go with you gladly, but when I think of those bipeds you showed me I can't imagine ever wanting to stay on that world with them."

"We shall see. You shall do whatever you wish. Now, there is a lot to make ready—no, wait!" Kohl's voice took on an unusual note of tension. "My mind is so full of schemes and anticipations that I neglect sober thought, just as I neglected your problems so long. You remember I said I brought two small bipeds back with me, you and one other?"

"What happened to the other one?" Rang was instantly curious.

"I gave it to Karl, who had trained you. But Karl told me, on my recent visit, that in his feeling the biped is not a good servant at all. Intelligent, he admitted, and clever at times, but strangely moody and unreliable. And I understand why, now. Small wonder, if it is as intelligent and mentally developed as you are, Rang. Small wonder!"

The next swirl of thought was so plain that Rang didn't need the words to clarify them. Kohl said. "You will prepare the

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ship, Rang. You will find all the necessary information in the memory-tanks. I must go at once to Karl and explain, and bring the other biped back with me. It is only right that it should have freedom to choose for itself, on its own world."

Rang did what he had to do, and did it thoroughly and well, as he always did, but he was uneasy. He hated the very thought of being classified with those lumbering, dirty, brown-skinned beasts, or having to live on their half-dead world. For the first time in his life he felt a tinge of uncertainty about Kohl, too. But he did his job. He knew the ship from the outside quite well. It stood on the seabed not far from the caverns, securely cabled and held against the rush and press of water. He had long known, on the surface of his mind, that it was designed to lift up and fly, so that wasn't new. But it was a different matter to dig deliberately into the memory-banks with his mind and learn, bit by bit, the why and wherefore of all the different pieces of machinery.

It stood on end like a giant sea cucumber with short fat legs, and was more than twenty times taller than he was. It was in three distinct sections. The middle third was all engines and machinery, and the hardest part to learn. Here was the skill and learning that made it lift, and it had various names. Propulsion units, warp-field generators, pseudo-gravitics, power-chamber, auto-pilot, computer, and a host of robotic devices which were almost as wise as Kohl himself. The lower part was Kohl's own, constantly bathed in water at the proper temperature, salinity and oxygen-content, and replete with instruments by which Kohl could monitor everything, and see and hear what went on inside and out. Kohl's personal needs were slight. He had advised Rang before departing that he would almost certainly spend most of the journey in sleep, a death-like trance into which he could plunge himself at any time, keeping just enough of his mind alert to respond to any chance alarm from the watchful instruments.

That left the upper third for Rang and his friends, and the

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new biped. This space was very fine. There were six individual rooms, each with a couch, all leading into a central feeding-room where there were cabinets to keep the stores of food cold until wanted. Rang stocked them well, enlisting Gromal to help. Virgal was little use, being an indifferent swimmer, and he hated to get wet, but Gromal could be trusted to haul a netful of supplies, and could just manage to operate the sea-locks with his paws. They managed between them to haul large quantities of fish, crustaceans, some rare handfuls of roots that made a welcome change, even if they were tough, and huge slabs of frozen meat. Rang wondered a time or two about the other biped, and felt stirrings of curiosity, but he had long ago learned the futility of trying to imagine the unknown. That way you could get shakes in your legs and arms, a headful of nasty images, and be dangerously slow off the mark when the important moment came.

Kohl was away three tides and part of a fourth, ample time for Rang to ensure that all was done and ready. It was also time enough for Rang to realize that underneath all his uneasiness and doubt he was excited at the prospect of the trip. So long as he could believe what Kohl had said, that they would go, and observe, and then decide—that he could decide for himself—if he could be sure of that! When at last there came the cool clear thought to advise them that the master was returning, Rang hurried Virgal into a bubble-helmet, ignored his abuse, and he and Gromal plunged out of the cavern and across the seabed to the ship, to be ready for immediate departure.

"I am directing the other biped up the sea-lock now," Kohl advised, "and then you will wait for the couch-alarm before take-off. Is everything else ready?" Rang signaled that it was, moved to the inner door of the lock, and watched as the strange biped came through, discarding the bubble and staring around curiously. It stood stock-still in instant suspicion as it saw him, and he saw a swirl of chaotic thought-images in its mind.

"I am Rana," it said, and the words were cut off like

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pebbles. "Karl, my master, gave me to Kohl, who brought me here."

There was a stiff wall of sullen suspicion and resistance around its mind. Rang was puzzled, was about to reach out with a friendly feeling when the couch-alarm roared and there was no time.

"I am Rang," he said. "I tell you what to do. Go now into that room. There is a couch. Lie on it. Quickly!" That sullen resistance came even more strongly. Impatiently he strode close and the stranger crouched, fingers clawed and teeth bared instantly. He halted, made a swift decision, snapped an order to his friends. Gromal loped up, growling thunderously. Virgal stalked with his great beak snapping, to join his colleagues. Rang spread his arms to include the extra forces and repeated his order. "Go in there and lie on the couch. Now!" Rana snarled, eyed the threat, and went. Now Rang flashed the proper order to his friends, and leaped across the floor to plunge into his own room and throw himself on the couch, just in time to feel the savage down-drag of acceleration crush him to the pallet. This had been in the memory tanks, but the actual sensation was absolutely unlike anything he had expected, as if a mighty hand squeezed him flat, making it hard to breathe. Growling energies shivered the fabric of the ship. An outside noise grew from a moan to a howl to a thin scream and was gone. As he lay gasping he could imagine the huge double-helix of multi-megagauss energies growing out into a bubble round the ship from the warp-generator, making an enclosure inside which gravitation and inertia dwindled inversely as the speed of the ship developed. The pressure drew away. He sat up, gasping, then went back into the feeding-room to see the red alarm-lights winking off one at a time.

Now he frowned, remembered, and touched the controls to set a screen glowing into life. And gasped as he saw, in reality, the immensity of black, sea-bottom space that he had seen before in Kohl's mind. Again the reality was many times more magnificent than the thought-picture, the star-lights more beautiful, the emptiness more vast than his mind

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could bear. He reached out a thought to Kohl, aching to share this marvel with someone else.

"I am seeing the stars, and space. It is more wonderful than you told me, much more!"

"You are showing me, Rang, only one more reason why it is wrong for me to be your master. I have never seen the stars like this before. Your mind is finer and more perceptive than any I have used until this moment. I have felt this often before in my relationship with you. And now, if you know how to control the view-screens, take your last look at my planet, your home for so long, because we shall not see it again for a long time."

Rang fumbled with the switches, suddenly overcome by the thought. Another screen gave him a view of the rapidly shrinking storm-covered globe that had been the only world he had ever known. He was afraid, now. Down there were the caverns, the wonderful machines, the hurly-burly winds and rain, and the sea. That was his life, where he had grown. His home. And now he was leaving it. Kohl's confident touch soothed his mind, pushed away his panic, and he turned once more to the glorious spectacle of space and the stars. He was so moved that the strange biped touched him and spoke before he realized it was there beside him.

"What are stars?" it asked, "and where are we going?"

Rang whirled, but sensing a reluctant curiosity struggling through the sullenness he made a smile and began to explain as best he could. He had barely managed half a dozen difficult sentences when something else strange forced itself on his attention and he halted, sending a question to Kohl.

"There is something here I don't understand," he said, and Kohl's mind was instantly encouraging. "This new biped. Rana. Are you sure it is one of my kind, from the same planet?"

"Why do you doubt this?"

"It's a biped sure enough, and like me in many ways, but very different in others. It is not so big, and its shape is different."

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"Wait!" Kohl's thought was brisk, and as Rang waited a lens-eye slid out from a boss in the wall and angled on him, then on Rana. Rang was hurt.

"Why couldn't you do this through my eyes?"

"Because I must see both of you together, to compare. Turn round!" Rang turned, sensed Rana's instant defiance and glared, then turned sullenly round as instructed. The lens-eye withdrew again.

"Interesting. Yes, there are differences. Some are superficial. The hair is longer, not so well kept. The creature is dirty altogether. But the other differences are structural, and positive. The surface is more rounded, and the upper front is definitely much more developed. Other things also. I don't understand. I assure you, Rang, that this is indeed the other biped. I will study my records and see if I can find some reason for this otherness. In the meanwhile be kind but cautious. Karl said it was moody and unreliable. It may be that he didn't train it properly, because he didn't understand. On the other side, it may be that this one carries the instinctive hostility that I observed in your kind."

Kohl's thought withdrew and Rana scowled resentfully. Rang felt the sullen defiance, saw the dislike on its face as it said, "What did that mean? I am not like you. I'm Rana!"

"You are from the same planet as myself. You are of my kind." He explained the abduction in short words and thoughts, thrusting the mind-pictures at its mind, sensing its solid resistance to him, sensing that it didn't believe what he was saying. He found it hard to believe himself.

"I was Karl's beast," it said ungraciously. "Karl made me do many things. Get my food. Clean out the fish-pools. Attend to the machines. Learn how to operate a paralyzer and beamer. Go and hunt food for yourself. Be quick. Do not ask so many questions. Always Karl made me do things I didn't want to do. Now Kohl will do the same, will make me do things I don't want to do. What does it matter if I came from another place when I was small?"

Rang was puzzled by this new idea. It had never before

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occurred to him not to "want" to do what Kohl instructed nor that Kohl "made" him do things.

"What sort of things?" he demanded, and got a sudden flurry of mind-pictures of screaming winds and rain, savage beasts, darkness and fear. Fear? The emotion rocked him for a moment. He had known fear many times, but it was the alert and cautious kind, not this belly-chilling, utterly demoralizing feeling that he sensed now. And under the fear, always, that passionate resentment and resistance.

"That is foolish!" he said loudly. "You will do things here, for Kohl, because they are right and good. And there's nothing to be afraid of."

"I won't!" The defiance was instant and total. "I am not like you."

"That doesn't matter," he snapped, meeting resistance with determination. "Kohl will find out about that. While you are with us you will do what is right. I will tell you, or Kohl will tell you. And you will do it."

"I won't!" Rana snarled and turned sullenly away. Rang reached out an angry hand to grab and cuff, just as he would have done to Gromal in an obstructive mood, and the strange biped ducked, spun round and came for him savagely, fingers spread and clawing, teeth bared. In a moment the pair of them were on the glossy floor in a snarling struggling tangle. Although Rang was bigger and heavier he had his work cut out to match the savage speed and ruthless ferocity of this ill-tempered thing-like-himself. Teeth and fingernails, knees, elbows and head, kicking feet—it was a furiously wild thing that taxed his agility to the utmost to defend himself and somehow hold it safe without inflicting undue injury. He knew, with certainty, that he had to avoid that, or Kohl would be angry. But this strange creature had no such reserves, and he was smarting from a dozen bites and scratches as, all at once, Kohl's incisive command struck through his mind, through both of them with such sharp power that they both froze, then scrambled up and stood, panting.

"This is bad!" Rang felt the rare chill of Kohl's displeasure,

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and was shocked to find it directed at himself. "I told you Rana is a biped like yourself. To be treated as I have treated you, not ordered like a beast. Not a slave to be mastered. A personality." The focus shifted, the thought softened and became gentle as Kohl spoke to Rana. "You are free to do as you wish at all times within the confines of your part of the ship. When we reach your planet, and if you so decide, you will be free to stay there. Do you understand this?" Now Rang caught the bewilderment and suspicion in that other mind, and knew that it didn't understand any more than he had done at first. Kohl left it at that and went on in his more familiar instructive tone.

"Both of you. I have studied all the records I can find, of your kind, of other biped forms, of various surface-life forms, and I have a possible but not positive conclusion to offer. If you follow the characteristic patterns of most surface-life forms, then you are of two distinct kinds within the same type, male and female. You, Rang, are a male, a 'he,' and Rana is a female, a 'she.' From the insufficient records of your people this conclusion seems to hold good, but I cannot be sure."

"What's it for?" Rana asked apprehensively, and Kohl's thought came with gentle regret.

"This I do not know. There is a somewhat similar phenomenon among life-forms in the sea, but there are so many differences that I hesitate to push the comparison too far. In the sea it has to do with spawning and propagation, but it may be quite different with surface forms. Perhaps we will be able to learn more when we reach your planet. For now it should be enough to know that you are, after all, of the same kind. My records show that male and female are in equal numbers, but that they associate in pairs, and that the male is usually larger and more powerful than the female."

Rang heard all this with mixed feelings. He looked at Rana, and "she" looked back at him with a glacial blue glare. Feeling his aches and smarts, he growled, "You are free to do whatever you like, as Kohl said," and turned

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to go and stand by the screen, watching the vast spread of stars. Deliberately, he shut his mind to everything else, feeling a dull resentment for the fact that Kohl had scolded him. He started as she touched his arm.

"I'm sorry," she said awkwardly. "This is all strange to me, like nothing I've ever known before. Karl never said anything like this, about being free, or to do what I wanted. He taught me all sorts of things, but never explained anything. Kohl seems gentle and kind, not like Karl. I don't understand this."

"Kohl is wise and knows many things. When he tells me to do a thing I do it because it is right and good."

"Are you wise and kind also, like Kohl?"

"I am not so wise as Kohl." He turned to face her. "But I will be kind, if you want me to. We can be friends, all together, just like Virgal and Gromal, all helping each other, if you want that."

"I have never before been asked what I want." She seemed baffled, but no longer defiant or sullen. "I am sorry that I hurt you." Her fingers came to touch his scratches. He stood still, curious at this change.

"It is nothing. I have been hurt much more than this many times when hunting for food. And you?"

"Many times." She nodded, and rubbed her arm where his grip had made an angry bruise. "It is nothing. We will be friends now?"

"All right. But if you are to be friends with us, you must do as we do and all work together, each doing his part."

Suspicion flared in her mind for a breath, then died away. "Very well. What will we do first?"

Kohl's clear thought suddenly touched them both. "There is something else I have noticed, from studying the pictures of your kind. It seems their habit to make fire and burn their food before eating. Perhaps you might try this, just to see what happens?"

Rang snatched at this new notion avidly, then ran into confusion as he took the idea further. Long ingrained knowledge warred with new impulses.

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"We can't make fire here!"

"True," Kohl agreed. "But you can make heat another way, as you should know. And it is the heat which matters, as I have taught you. It changes things from one form to another."

Rang nodded, and pushed away other matters at once. This kind of thing was what he enjoyed most, experimenting with new ideas and structures. Rana caught some of his enthusiasm, and the mind-pictures that went with his intentions. In short order they were both engrossed in the task, seeking out spare thermal elements, rigging an enclosure of heat-proof slabs to contain them, a glittering spread of twisted wire to support the food, and a bowl to trap it when it melted. In the screens the glorious panorama of space, the starfields and streamers of radiation, all sped by unheeded as they crouched and frowned and contrived and studied just how to achieve their object. Kohl's attentive mind was there constantly, but only to observe and sense, not to interfere.

Rang worked with great care, studying every aspect he could think of, even to fashioning a piece of the glittering wire into a tool to grip the food when it became hot. Rana's mind was as inquisitive and speculative as his own, striking out along idea-paths that he might have overlooked.

"When I burn meat with my beamer," she said, "it makes a noise like this"—and she hissed—"and then there is vapor, a little, and a space. It burns away to nothing. Will this not be the same?"

"Perhaps that's because the beamer is too hot except on the edges, where it leaves a kind of scale. We'll soon see." He made a final check, then moved to the instrument-panel and switched on. The elements began to glow. He felt the heat on his face as he watched the slabs of frozen meat intently. He saw vapor, blisatings, and a drip of fluid. On inspiration he ran to the cabinet where he kept various quantities of chemicals that were to be added to Kohl's water from time to time, and came back with a scoop. "The heat drives out that water," he said, "so if we put it back,

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that may stop it from burning away into nothing but vapor."

Kohl murmured in his mind. "An interesting reaction. Do you detect anything else?"

Rang caught himself in the middle of a negative, sniffed and felt the juices suddenly spring out in his mouth. His nostrils approved. It was a "hungry" smell. All at once Gromal came sniffing from his room, his mind also full of the hungry smell and his stomach impatient to sample some. Rang grinned, fished out a lump from the searing heat and pitched it to the giant wolf-hound. Gromal snapped it out of the air, then let go of it fast and backed off. Rana laughed. It was a pleasant sound. Gromal sniffed again, more cautiously this time, and gathered the smoking meat into his jaws.

"This is good," Rang declared as he gingerly sampled a piece then passed the fork to Rana. Kohl's approval came clearly.

"A new and vivid sensation, Rang. You must try burning other kinds of food, and different intensities of heat. It seems your kind have skills of their own."

"It will be a task for you," Rang decided, smiling at Rana. "You will burn the food for us. If you want to," he added hastily. She shrugged where she squatted by the heat-box.

"It will help to pass away the time, as there is no hunting. I will get more meat. There is not enough here for all of us." And now Virgal came stalking and muttering at the strange smell, but he disdained the burned stuff, preferring to rip and tear at a raw lump gripped in his talons. Rang felt a lot easier in his mind as he squatted on the smooth floor beside Rana and chewed happily on a hunk of juicy meat. Perhaps this female would not be as much trouble as he had feared, after all. The other two had accepted her without question. Gromal was now sprawled beside her, growling over his meal and not caring that she leaned on him companionably. But there was a small cloud of questions in her mind, and she stared across at him now with one in her mouth.

"How long are we going to be in this ship, on the journey?"

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"I don't know," Rang admitted, and the more he turned the question over the more intriguing it grew. He sent a thought to Kohl. The master's mind was strangely dulled, almost asleep, but stirred as he reached it.

"How long? It is an easy question to ask, but difficult to answer properly. The ship moves more and more quickly constantly. Soon it will be traveling so fast that you will see the stars as twisted and curious lines of light, and time will change, will become two things."

"How can that be?" Rang wondered. "I don't understand!"

"It is complex," Kohl admitted. "The time inside our force-field will be different from the time outside. Perhaps I will be able to explain how this is so some other time, not now. For now it is enough for you to know this. I have taught you to count time-intervals between one tide and another. This is when our planet spins once on itself. Also when it moves once completely round our star it is three hundred tides, or one period. Judge by that. On that scale the journey will last about half a period, about one hundred and fifty tides. The robotic machinery will take care of everything, will alert us when it is time to land. You will find many things to occupy the time. I will now sleep, not to be disturbed until the time is right. Ask your questions, if you have any, of the memory-tanks."

And even as he still felt the cool clarity of that mind, it dwindled and faded into a murmuring stillness. Kohl slept.

III

THERE WAS much to do, even apart from experimenting with the new art of burning food. All his life Rang had been drilled into being thorough and meticulously conscientious

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with details. As Kohl had pointed out, thought and care saves life and limb. But Rana hadn't been taught in anything like so detailed a manner, and Rang realized for the first time that there were odd differences even between the ineffably wise Carl. He determined to repair her deficiencies. In hunting, which was always the first and most important thing, her sense of cooperation was poor, and the beasts she had worked with not nearly so understanding as the giant wolf-hound and the peevish but intelligent eagle-hawk. No wonder she carried the thought-patterns of fear and helplessness.

"You must learn," he told her, "how to make your mind go with mine, with Gromal and Virgal, all as one, all sharing and helping. We will show you how this is done, and then you won't be afraid any more."

She was reluctant at first, but Gromal was good at pretending to be any one of several ferocious beasts he had met, and Virgal, through all his never-ending complaints, was patient, and marvelously swift with that stabbing beak of his. She learned to freeze, and leap aside and fire, to wait until the very best moment, even into hazard, rather than waste a paralyzer-thrust. And she discovered, after a while, that Rang could have broken her a dozen times in that first mad conflict they'd had. It took a furious struggle or two, and some breath-jolting falls and bumps before she was convinced, but when that happened she was strangely humble.

"You are bigger than I am, and stronger," she said. "And quicker and cleverer. Yet you are kind. You are my master, and yet you do not make me do things for you. I don't understand."

"There is only one master," he said. "And that is Kohl. Look"—and he showed her something Kohl had told him long ago—"this is my hand. One finger is strong by itself. Like this"—and he prodded her in the belly—"or in other ways. But many fingers all working for each other are much more useful than if they were separate. We are four. To-

gether we can do many more things than if we were all apart."

He taught her something else too, something she found even more hard to understand at first, and highly unpleasant. "You must be clean," he said. "Dirt leaves a smell by which other beasts can follow and be dangerous. See how Gromal is always sleek, and Virgal always keeps his feathers smooth and clean? I will show you how to mix oil with water and wash away all grease and sticking smells." This oil was a foaming water-soluble stuff Kohl had helped him to devise. She objected to it strenuously, but he insisted and was rough with her until at last she was washed and clean. He discovered that she didn't grow hair on her face as he did but he was highly critical of the hair on her head, scorning the way it hung in masses almost halfway down her body.

"It must be a nuisance when you are swimming," he declared, "and it is all tangled like weeds. Also it takes a long time to dry. I will cut it."

To this she objected so violently that he temporized and was satisfied to slice it off at a level with her shoulders and clear of her eyes in front. She swore at him again when he introduced her to the toothed metal strip he had laboriously fashioned for pulling out the tangles in his own hair. Only his complete faith in the words and ideas of Kohl the all-wise kept him trying and persisting. And yet, strangely enough, once all the tangles and knots were pulled out and her hair smooth and orderly—and when she saw how it looked in the polished cover of an instrument cabinet, she was pleased, and he never had to urge her again to attend to it.

It never occurred to them to be bored. Apart from anything else there was always the virtually inexhaustible treasure-store of the memory-tanks. Rang taught her how to send her mind questing deep down into these to examine and marvel over the wealth of new and strange impressions, and data, and picture-thoughts. And then there were dreams. Rang delighted in telling her how they would perhaps return to their own kind and astonish them with great won-

ders and marvelous skills, and then teach them how to be clever and wise. Because he couldn't rid himself of the loathing and disgust that came to his mind every time he remembered those pictures Kohl had shown him, of those dirty shambling brown-skinned things, screeching and gibbering so hideously.

So the ship murmured to itself and sped on through the vast depths of space, threading the warp of hyper-speed, lashed by the radiation from a thousand suns and constantly abraded by the sparkling and diffuse micro-particles of cosmic dust which spread around it. And though Kohl slept the death-sleep of retarded animation secure in the knowledge that all was well, hazard crept into being by slow and steady increments. The ship was old. It had leaped the unthinkable distances between the stars many times, and even the most sophisticated devices must show wear and tear after a while. Rang noticed the signs of danger long before he realized what they were.

He was in the habit of prowling the ship as far as it was possible for him to go, and spent much time studying the many indicators and gauges and other manifestations of energies he understood only dimly. He knew, in a way, that so long as everything remained constant, all was in order, and it began to be a trouble to him that one certain complex of instruments showed a slow but relentless change. This particular part was responsible for Kohl's well-being, and was taken care of by semi-automatic devices which were very wise, so he was reluctant to interfere, but he worried, and kept an anxious eye on the signs.

And so it was that when a little more than half the journey-time had gone by, when the alarms suddenly blared and the ship snapped out of hyper-speed into hanging stillness, he was halfway to knowing what the trouble was before Kohl came awake to confirm it. The master's voice was as clear and crisp as ever.

"More than half my essential water has leaked away somehow, and that which is left is foul."

"What can I do?" Rang asked urgently.

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"Nothing. There is nothing to be done. Somewhere there is a leak in the hull, probably a meteor-puncture, but knowing that doesn't help. There is no way of restoring that which is lost."

"But there must be *some* way, something to be done!" Rang retorted. "I think I know where the hole must be." He studied the telltale gauges. "It is in one of the tubes which pass by the outer skin before entering the purifying plant."

"If the water is not circulated it will become even more foul and I shall die. If it is circulated more will ebb away and again I shall die."

"Can't I mend it somehow? I know how to melt metal and mend tubes!"

"It is impossible for you, Rang. To make a repair means going outside the ship, and there is neither air nor warmth out there. You would die."

"But you're going to die if I don't!" Rang was stricken.

"It is nothing to fear." Kohl was calm. "For one who has lived so long as I, death has no fears. And you will be all right, Rang. Your part of the ship seems to be sound. The machines will resume the flight. You know how to reset them for that."

Rana had come on flying feet, her face white and strained. "Make the machines go again, so that we will be safe," she said. "There isn't anything else we can do."

Rang flung off her clutching hand. "I am not going to let Kohl die if I can help it. Not while I can think." He felt the warm concern in Kohl's mind now, and the resignation.

"You can do nothing, my Rang. You mustn't think of it. Restart the machines. Save yourself, and Rana, and the other beasts. It would be foolish for you all to die because of me. Good-bye!" and the old Carl withdrew his mind and plunged back again into his death-sleep. Rang caught at the ragged edge of terror in his mind and smoothed it out grimly. Gromal and Virgal were no help now, their instincts bringing them only fear and the urge to live. Rana yelled at him, her fear not so instinctive but much more vivid.

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"The machines! Start the machines!"

"No! Not yet. It must be only a small hole, or the water would have wasted away much faster. There must be some way for me to stop just a little hole!"

"You must be mad!" She beat at him with her fists. "You heard Kohl say there was nothing to do. Are you wiser than he?"

"No, but I am here and he is down there. Be quiet!" Rang brushed her agitation roughly aside and scowled as he thought. There was no air outside, and Kohl had told him before of the elaborate precautions one had to take to actually move into space. But a hole is also inside. If he could be sure of the right tube. He studied the gauges closely, followed the thin pipelines by eye, checked again to be sure, then whirled on her.

"Come!" he ordered. When she backed off mulishly he reached for her arm with a strong hand. "Come with me and do what I tell you, or I will beat you harder than you have ever known!" Dragging her unwillingly with him he went down into the first chambers of the drive space, where there were various collections of tools. Disciplining himself to take care despite his driving urgency, he selected those he thought he would need, made her carry some, and went back to the critical area where the circulator pipes curled and bent before entering the purifiers. He traced one along until he found a manhole cover, an oval in the curving side, studded, about head-high above the deck. He commanded her to stay, just as he would have spoken to Gromal, and she snarled at him, but set down the tools and stayed. He shut valves, thinking carefully first, then came back to attack the studs with a wrench. When they were all off, the oval door still held. He gripped it, pulled, and heard the faint hiss of ingoing air. So far, all right.

"Now," he snapped, "I am going in there. When I am inside, pass me this heavy box with the cable and pointer, and this metal disc. Then replace the cover and press it firmly. And stay here until I knock three times. Then pull off the cover and let me out. Understand?"

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She was too wild with rage to speak, but her mind showed that she did understand, and he was too impatient to wait and force an issue. He heaved the cover off, ignoring a splatter of water, laid it down, grabbed the edges of the hole and heaved himself up and in, wriggling his shoulders through and then twisting to get the rest of himself in. There was very little room, and the inside was bitterly cold, wet and snagged with crystal deposits, but he made himself ignore such things. He got his head out, glared at her, and she heaved up the machine, thrust it in, then the disc of metal.

"Now put on the cover," he reminded her. "And stay there!"

"You will die in there!"

"You will know if I do."

"And then we will all die!"

That thought gave him pause for just one breath; then, for good or ill, he made his decision. "Put the cover on. You had better hope that I don't die. I don't intend to."

The cover came on with a clank like doom, and he was in absolute darkness. Groping for the machine, he switched it on, and a small pilot-bulb glowed into life, giving him a dim light. It was so bitterly cold in here that his flesh burned wherever it touched the crusted sides, and his breath vaped in clouds about his head. Then he observed that it was being sucked slowly away and back over his shoulders. The leak must be that way. Scrambling and scraping, he managed to reverse direction in the narrow space and set away to shove the heavy little machine in front of him through the crusted crystals. Now the cold was numbing his knees and elbows and toes as he struggled along. His breath roared in his throat, but he thought he heard a faint keening hiss ahead. In a while he blew out a breath and then stopped breathing, listening and watching the curling vapor.

He thought he saw the spot where it was vanishing. He investigated with a flat palm, and all at once the icy metal surface bit him. As he snatched his hand away there was a sucking sound. Blood dripped from his palm. He fixed his eyes on that vital spot, groped for the metal disc, and strug-

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gled to press and hold it over the leak. Stretched out on his side, he fought to get his arm and hand round to seize hold of the flexible cable and then slide his grip along until the spray-nozzle was in his hand. By now his fingers were almost too numb to feel and he had to stare at his hand and command those fingers to find the stud and be ready to press it. The hand and arm holding the disc were lost to him now, all sensation gone. Setting his teeth, he aimed the nozzle, pressed the stud, and a searing jet of molten metal spat out and over the edge of the disc. Fumes swelled and curled away, making him gasp and cough. Hunching himself, he pulled his arm away and the disc held fast, stuck by one small spot. He could now hear the air whistling round the edges of the disc.

He levered himself half to his knees, aimed the jet again, and again the blue and yellow flare of molten metal dazzled him, the choking fumes billowing up and stinking in his nostrils. Slitting his eyes and holding his breath he played the molten shower around the edge until it was all plastered down tight. He let go the stud and coughed rackingly until there was a sharp constricting pain in his chest. Reality seemed to slide away from him. There was a mad urge to relax and lie still, to forget about anything like moving. One leg was numb. His shoulder was dead. His hands were like stumps without feeling, and every breath was an agony. A frantic thought sliced through his daze, shocking him into sanity. "Come out!" it screamed. "Come out!" He heaved himself up on to his knees, began backing, hauling the dead weight of the machine. That wild thought came stronger, nearer, babbled something about a cover. A cover?

He peered stupidly around, saw a bright oval where the crusts had been broken. The cover. He pushed at it feebly. It was fast. The panic thought came again: "I can't get the cover off!" Shaking his head to clear it of the gray-white fumes that had somehow got inside it, he wriggled, got his shoulder to the oval and his feet braced against the opposite side, and grunted with the last gatherings of his strength. There was a loud hiss, the cover went away, and he lolled

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out his head into clean warm air, gasping hugely and blissfully. Strength surged back into his body. In a moment or two he stirred, sat back, hoisted out the machine for her to take, and then crawled head-first out, wet and dirty, cold and bleeding from a dozen angry scrapes and scratches.

"Never mind me"—he choked—"I'm all right. Get the cover on."

By the time she reached the last of the fastenings he was able to stand, unsteadily, and help her to wrench them up tight.

"I was afraid," she said. "I thought you would die in there."

"I'm afraid too," he admitted, "now that it's done. When there's something to do there's no time to be afraid, and afterwards it doesn't matter."

Aching and shaking, he readjusted the valves and then started up the circulating machinery, watching the all-important gauges very closely. She stood by him, holding his arm. In a while he nodded in relief.

"The water has stopped leaking. There's not much left, but enough to keep Kohl alive, and this way it will stay sweet. We can divert most of our own supply into these tanks too. That will help."

"Then what will we use?"

"We'll save just enough for drinking. We'll have to manage without washing, that's all. Just for the trip. Once we arrive we'll have all we want. Come on, I'll show you how to do all these things, and how to start the ship flying again."

To his surprise and dismay, in the middle of the delicate business of resetting the flight monitor and robot course-computer, moisture began to run from her eyes and she made choking sounds.

"What's all that for?" he demanded, and she sniffed and wiped the water away with her hand.

"I feel unhappy inside."

"I know that. But why?"

"Because I thought you were going to die and I would be all alone again."

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"I didn't die. I'm here! And it's not true"—as he caught a sharp-edged thought in her mind—"that I care only for the machines. We are four together and we all care for each other. But we would be nothing without Kohl, you know that. Everything I know, this ship and all the machines, my whole life, even this journey, couldn't happen without Kohl."

"If you feel like that, how can you ever be free?"

"That will be decided when we reach our planet. Now leave it at that, and go and burn some food for me. I'm hungry."

The ship leaped on its way, obeying the dictates of the inscrutable and imperturbable robotic machines. The four companions were reasonably comfortable—dirty and odorous, but managing. In his depleted tank Kohl slept on, hovering on the edge of dissolution but still living. From time to time Rang reached out an inquisitive thought just to make sure, and he worried constantly, but he kept those thoughts to himself. He was banking heavily on what Kohl had said about the invigorating qualities of the sea ahead of them. Eventually the alarms blared again, but on an acceptable note now, and the busy hum of the drive altered subtly in tone as the instrumental probes struck out to find and identify the planet of their destination. Rang and Rana stood by the screen to watch.

"This is a yellow-orange star," he said, remembering what he had learned out of the memory-tanks. "A small one. See, it has nine planets. I wonder which one is to be ours?"

"That one!" Rana caught her breath as the magnificent disc wheeled by in the screen. "Look at the glorious rings!" But that planet was ignored; the ship spiraled steadily inwards in a tighter orbital path. Rang snatched a quick glance at an instrument. They spun past another one that glowed a golden red.

"It's to be the third, I think," he said, in some disappointment. "A small one." They watched the tiny disc grow larger and more clear against the star-pricked blackness, and Rana put her head on one side critically.

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"It is small, but it has colors. White bits, and blue and gold."

"And much sea. It is almost all sea. That's good, anyway."

In a while the ship groaned and shuddered and Rang knew it was in orbit around the planet. This much he had anticipated, but when a high-toned bell began to ring at short intervals, and kept on ringing, he scowled and went to see what it was all about. After much head-scratching and thought he realized that this was as far as the robotic controls would go, by themselves. The ship was in orbit, but it waited now for precise instructions to go down—and needed someone to tell it where.

Rang had to confess to Rana: "Without Kohl I don't know how to instruct it. And I daren't disturb him, because his water and oxygen figures are dangerously low. Even in the death-sleep he uses up *something*, and when he is awake he needs so much more."

"Does it matter where we go down?" she wondered. "It's almost all sea."

"That's the least of the problems. I don't know *how* to make it go down." He stared at a complex of instruments and felt helpless for once. One small group in particular were surging and shivering as if touched by some external finger, and he didn't like that at all. In his characteristic manner, he made a move rather than fidget and dwell on bogeys until they grew too fearsome. He touched a switch or two, tentatively, and all at once the instrument room was swamped with sound from one of the noise-openings. It was so unexpected that he sprang back, and Rana clutched him tight. Then, when it was just noise and nothing else, he relaxed and went back to the panel.

"I have seen this kind of thing before," he said, more boldly than he felt. "Kohl uses such a device to speak aloud to me. It is a way of converting silent energies into noises, and thus hearing things from a long way off. These noises must be coming from the planet down there."

Rana came nervously close, put one arm round him for re-

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assurance, and listened. It was a tremendous mixture of gabblings and chitterings and other, strident sounds like nothing they could imagine.

"What beasts can make noises like that?" she whispered.

"It sounds like many at once. Perhaps if you could hear only one it would be better." Rang experimented with controls, growing more confident as he discovered how to make the noise great, and then tiny. Then another touch or two and it was like turning his head from one noise to another. A gabble came and went, then another slightly different, and Rang had a sudden chilly sensation along his spine. This gabble sounded extremely like the screeching and shouting that he didn't want to remember, from Kohl's picture-thoughts. He was still frowning over that thought when a chance twist of his fingers brought something totally and startlingly different.

This was a howling, and a squealing, and a groaning, and harsh snapping sounds, breaking noises, and over and through all that a steady and regular thumping and rattling. He held still a moment, then stared at Rana. She opened her blue eyes very wide. Gromal came to the doorway of the instrument room with his ears flattened and spine-fur stiff. He lifted his head and howled, then slunk away. Rang felt his feet begin to twitch and stir, as if they wanted to walk of themselves, and his whole body wanted to shift from side to side in time to that thumping and the weird interweaving of noises. He saw Rana's head sway one way then another, then her shoulders, and then her whole body was slowly shifting and writhing and curving. His feet lifted, his heels coming up and going down. It was pleasant. She had her eyes half-shut now, smiling.

"This is good. Make it louder!"

As he touched the control the web of sounds slowly hushed instead of growing as he had intended, but before he could alter the thing again another noise came, and this time it was a creature howling. After a moment of surprise he corrected that. A biped like himself, or something very similar, made that spine-rippling wail. Rana

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nodded, and he heard her trying hesitantly to make the same ullulating cries in her throat.

"Those are our kind," he declared, "making those sounds. We must go down there!" He reached a tentative thought to Kohl, but checked it as he sensed the deep retreat of sleep. There was only one other way. He went down through the drive room to be away from the fascination of those noises and also to be nearer the memory-tanks. Then he squatted and set himself grimly to the monumental task of combing through those vast records until he found the specific information he needed. Only desperation could have driven him to such a task, as always before he had been content just to wallow in the immensity of knowledge, with no real grasp of how it was arranged or organized.

At last, half-numbered with sitting still, and his head aching from the unremitting concentration, he stumbled on the stuff he wanted. Once he had the key thought the rest was simply a matter of going over it stage by careful stage, twice to make sure he had it correct. Then, aching, he went back to the instrument room. The noise was still going on, with a different pattern to the thumping, but Rana still stood there, twisting and swaying and enjoying it. He concentrated on his task, sharpened up a view of the surface down there, pinpointed a spot in the sea very close to a large land-mass, nodding to note that it was in shadow and would be for some time, and then set up the commands for the machines, checking carefully before closing the last key switch to start the sequence. It was done. There was nothing more now but the waiting. The shudder of power throbbed against his feet. The thumping noises kept on linking the squealing threads of sound into a pattern.

Rana shook herself dreamily. He watched, pumping one heel and slapping his thigh with a palm. And then, with mechanical indifference, the couch-alarms brayed and he snapped a mental command to his friends. They ran and scrambled up the ladder, into the feeding-room and then to their couches as the ship began to groan and strain against outside forces. Rang lay flat, gasping as a giant hand

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squeezed the breath out of him, as his body grew heavy and helpless, as a storm-wind screamed thinly outside, growing stronger and stronger until it hurt his ears. Then the pressure eased, the ship moved in a way that said "water," and then, at last, it lay still.

IV

THE SHIP SETTLED, and clicked, and cracked, and then became very quiet as switches opened themselves and machines droned into silence. Rang got to his feet, thrust away the nagging excitement of arrival, and made himself be coldly practical. Kohl came first. He hastened down through the drive-room to the complex of devices which served Kohl's needs, and set about opening the external vents. Now those all-important gauges began to shiver and lift back to where they ought to be. The temperatures were steady. The dissolved-oxygen count rose evenly. Satisfied that the process would run by itself now, he went back to his companions.

"I'm going to run out the stability-anchors," he said. "Rana, you and Gromal get out the breathing tube and take it up to the surface. We need fresh air in here. I have started the purifier machine. Soon there will be fresh water for us. I want this place thoroughly cleaned up. Keep a sharp lookout and paralyzer ready. Some fresh fish would be very welcome just now." He was first through the sea-lock and out to spread the anchor-cables and bed them in. He tried to sense in this sea the stimulation that Kohl had mentioned, and it was, truly, cleaner and saltier than that of the other world. But nothing, he thought, to get excited about.

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Back in through the sea-lock again he hurried down to see how Kohl was progressing. Thrusting ahead of him, his mind detected the strengthening pulse-surges of vigor spreading through Kohl's body, and he shivered with the relief. At the back of his mind, impossible to banish, had been the dreadful fear that perhaps Kohl would not "come back" despite the good water and stimulation. But now came the first quick stirrings of consciousness, that familiar and affectionate mind collecting itself and reaching out to touch him.

"Rang? Can it be that I live still, and that all is well again?"

"All is well, and better now that you are with me again, Kohl. I managed to stop the leak . . ." And in gratitude Rang laid his mind open so that Kohl could learn everything that had happened. The old Garl was silent, intuned for a long while. Then the clear thoughts came again, this time with a new sense, a warmth that made Rang feel uncomfortable inside and set water pushing at his eyes, just like Rana.

"This proves, if proof were needed, my Rang, that we could never be master and servant again. You hazarded your life for mine, not blindly as an inborn pattern, but deliberately and knowing what was involved. We are very different in many ways, but in this we are of one kind, you and I, and equal. And now"—the mental attitude quickened, became "smiling" again—"this is your world, beyond doubt. I recognize this wonderful water, and that by itself is enough to identify it. How do you like it?"

"So far I've seen it only distantly, from orbit. It's small and seems colorful, but since then I've been busy settling in the ship and attending to you. Other things can wait. There are strange things here, but we must first of all make sure that you are well, and then check the ship."

"I am well. In a little while I shall let myself out and go for a swim and investigation, and I will check the ship at the same time. What are the strange things you refer to?"

Rang told him of the noises and wailings from the instru-

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ments, and once again Kohl was silent and turned in on himself for a while.

"The sounds have stopped now?" he assumed, and Rang confirmed it. "Yes, that is the way with this kind of energy. It doesn't work well through seawater. But this bothers me, Rang. It is unexpected. You see, for our instruments to make sounds there must be other and similar instruments sending these impulses. In just the same way that you know, when you detect a clear thought-picture, that there must be a clear mind sending it. And this kind of device is built only by a reasonably advanced type of creature. There were no life-forms of that quality when I was last here. This is new. And there is something else." Kohl's mind swirled now into such a complex pattern that Rang was completely unable to follow it. He waited patiently, so long that he grew apprehensive and ventured to interrupt.

"Is there something wrong?"

"I fear so. It is my fault. I am old, and my mind so full of many things, so that the weight of learning obscures that which ought to be clear. I fear that I have brought you on a pointless journey."

"You mean this isn't my world after all?"

"No no, this is the right place. It is something much more difficult for you to understand. You remember that you asked me how long the journey would be, and that I explained in over-simple terms, because it was hard to explain properly? It is still hard, but I must now try, because you must see how foolish I have been, and judge me accordingly."

"I will always judge you to be wise," Rang said, instantly.

"We shall see. Remember how we measure time by the turn of the planet on itself, and the turn around the star? Let us do that now, with this world of yours, where there are no clouds and the light from the star comes brightly on one side and there is shadow on the other."

"I know about that. We are in the shadow side now."

"Good! It is obvious then that we can count one turn by the change from dark to light, and then to dark again. We

will give this interval a name. We will call it a day. And as the planet spins it moves in orbit. My machines measure and count these things for flight purposes, so I read them now and I see that there are three hundred and sixty five and a fraction of these days in one period. We will call that a year. And to make it more pointed for you, my studies and records show that you are a full-grown biped of your kind, and that by the standards of your world, as well as the comparison-calculations of my machines, you are about twenty-five years old."

Rang thought hard, grasping and using the new concepts readily. "This means that it is about twenty-five of these years since you were last here. It is a long time and things will have changed, yes?"

"Yes. And no." Kohl's thought was so heavy that Rang shivered as he waited for more. "With my kind, who live so very long, time matters very little. It is a way of measuring distance from one star to another. It is a quantity we need to know in order to plot a course. But when I travel, I sleep in the long intervals. And when I return to my own world—well, the sea changes very little."

"It's been a long time, longer than twenty-five years?"

"Much longer. You see, when the ship travels fast, its time runs slow, but the time outside the ship goes on as always. So what was a brief journey for us was a very long time for the rest of the universe outside."

"How long?" Rang demanded, thick-throated with fear.

"My machines have been working on it, as it is too difficult a problem to solve in the mind. In terms of this planet, it has been about one hundred thousand years since I took you from here as a young one. I'm sorry!"

The figure was too vast for Rang to feel anything other than stunned by it. He did begin to multiply—four times his own life-span to make one hundred, and then ten times that, and then—but reason broke down under the sheer size. It was just a long time. He found a question.

"How long will I live before it comes the time for me to die?"

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"I can't be sure. As I told you, I have no experience of bipeds like your kind. But judging from what I do know of land-life patterns and other creatures, I would suppose about one hundred years."

Even that didn't help to soften the blow. The thought that at least a thousand of his kind had grown to old age and died in the time since he was small just didn't make anything sensible to grasp at.

"There is one thing more," Kohl added, gently. "When last I was here I saw many different life-forms. The surface was rich in variations. There were many bipedal forms, some of which lived in trees, others in caves and burrows. And your kind, who were hairless, defenseless and seemed to live in no one spot. Now this is a thing I have observed before, that a certain type of creature will spring up and flourish for a short time, but unless it is a type that has survival advantages over the rest, it will just as quickly fall prey to the others and disappear again, becoming extinct. I, who have been wrong too often already, would hesitate to be positive in this, but I shall be surprised if your kind has survived this long. And there you have the extent of my folly. I'm sorry!"

Rang shook off the weight of huge numbers and unthinkable stretches of time, and stared round the dim-lit chamber, then into the glass-covered pool where Kohl lay. Nothing was changed.

"What is there to be sorry about? What have I lost? I was happy with you before. I am still with you. When everything is ready, perhaps I will go and look at this world that used to be mine, but only from curiosity. My home is with you, as it always has been." He declared it firmly, and if there was any lingering ache in his mind, he chose to ignore it.

In a while Kohl stirred and let himself out through the lower sea-lock into the open sea. Rang felt his pleasure-surge as the old Carl arrowed off through the water in search of a tasty morsel or two and to investigate generally.

A questing thought told him that Rana was almost to the

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sea-surface, extending the air-tube. Grabbing a bubble-helmet and buckling on his hunting-belt, Rang slid out through the upper sea-lock and went shooting up, tracing the tube with his fingertips until the water shaded into purple, then dark blue and brighter until it was green and turbulent, with fish flitting away at his bubbling surge. He surfaced by her side and flipped back his helmet to give her a hand in spreading the mushroom canopy that ensured only air would be gulped down the tube. Then he stood out of the water shoulder-high and took a look round in the starlit gloom. Surf-noise told him which way the land was. She came to bob beside him and peer.

"What do you think we'll find here?" she asked, and he told her the gist of what he had learned from Kohl. He sensed her immediate disagreement.

"I think those sounds we heard were made by creatures like us."

"Something like us," he admitted. "But different. We don't howl and shout that way."

"But I can," she retorted, and made an ullulating sound very like the one he had heard. It made him strangely uncomfortable. Now a wave greater than the others hoisted him so high that he caught a momentary glimpse of lights, in the direction of the land. Curious, he hoisted himself up to stand balancing on the rigid rim of the mushroom canopy and stare over there. She was curious too, and grabbed his hand to be hoisted up.

"There," he said. "Many little lights."

"It must be the creatures. You said they live on the surface."

"But why would there be lights one above the other to a great height?" he wondered. "Surely they wouldn't build homes one on top of the other like that?" And then a possible solution came to him. These could be caves in the steep side of a cliff. He shared the thought with her and said, "When it comes light, from the star, I will go and see."

"I'll go with you," she declared, but without much conviction. There were a *lot* of those lights. He sensed that

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uneasiness, shared it, and was on the point of deciding it was time to go down again when she gripped his arm suddenly and pointed off in another direction.

"There! Oh Rang, what can it be?"

The sight riveted him too, at first. More lights, and much closer, but these were set in rows and with colored patterns above and to the sides. And the whole cluster moved swiftly over the surface of the sea, making a bar of white foam at the front. It was huge! He flashed an urgent thought to Kohl and had an immediate and calm response.

"I am aware of it. I have been swimming alongside it for some time. Now that I see it with your eyes, I am confirmed in my estimate that it is a ship like ours, only where ours is designed to fly, this one is meant to float on the surface and be urged along by machines. There are many creatures in it, creatures with minds very like your own."

With that as a hint, Rang opened his mind wide and reached eagerly for contact. And instant later he staggered and almost fell from his perch into the water as a churning, seething torrent of mental energy burst in on him. It was like nothing he had ever met before, a scalding tide of violent and unthinking fears, hatreds, passions and angers all churning and boiling in a total abandonment of any control or restraint of any kind. The sheer mindless savagery of it made him sick and giddy, knotting his nerves into pain before his reflex defenses could act to shut out the bedlam. He crouched and then slid into the water, feeling Rana plunge in beside him.

"Those are no kin of ours," he mumbled, feeling the sick loathing that swirled in her mind, echoing his own. He gagged and spat as a physical reaction to the mental foulness. "Even the crawling carrion-eaters do not think like that. And there were many hundreds of the things in that ship! Think how many more there may be on the land over there!"

"I won't think of it," she gasped. "I won't believe that anything lives than can be so horrible. Let's go down again, quickly."

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"All right." He secured his helmet and repressed a shiver at the memory of that appalling multi-minded nightmare. "We will go down, and catch a fish or two on the way. Then we will burn food and think of other things. Perhaps, soon, we'll leave this place."

But Kohl had other plans. By the time they had eaten, with two nice raw fish for Virgal, they both felt the calm but insistent call from Kohl for them to go down to his living-pool for a discussion, in words. They were unwilling, but they went. The old Garl's voice was gentle, through the speaker.

"All things have reasons," he said, "even though we don't know them all. I perceive that you are shocked and horrified by what you saw up there. This is natural, but now you need to forget the horror and try to learn what caused it. Once you understand a thing, you're not afraid of it any longer."

"How can we possibly understand that meaningless and dreadful swarm of screeching minds?" Rang growled. "There was no more there to understand than there is in the raging wind and biting rain!"

"I swam by that ship a long while," Kohl said, "and studied the confusion of thought that came from it. My mind has many more levels than yours, and is not so easily disturbed. Perhaps I can explain enough to help you understand. Let's take Gromal as an example. He is a good hunter, a good companion and a friend. You understand him well. You have shared his mind and know how he thinks. You know that when he is hungry he thinks only of food; when he wants to do something, he does it, at once and without pausing to consider. He will stop, and wait, and be patient, only if you tell him to, and only then because he has learned to respect and obey you. Gromal is an animal. He thinks with his eyes, ears, nose and stomach."

Rang nodded thoughtfully. He could understand this much. But then Kohl went on to surprise him.

"You too are an animal. You think with eyes and ears, nose and stomach. You have feelings, just as Gromal has.

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But you have more. When Gromal feels hunger, he wants to eat; anger, and he attacks. If frightened he would turn and run. But you can feel hungry, and yet think about something else. You can be angry, and yet decide not to attack. You can be afraid, and yet decide to do something that will make you even more afraid—as when you repaired that hole in the tube—because you can think as well as feel. Do you understand this? Do you, Rana?”

She said, “It’s confusing. Sometimes I think this way, and feel that way at the same time, and I don’t know which to do.”

“That also happens to all creatures that can think, even to me,” Kohl replied, with just a touch of the “smile” sense. “We have to choose, often. Sometimes feeling and thinking both go the same way, sometimes they quarrel, and we have to choose. And sometimes we are wrong.”

“But what’s all this got to do with that ship, and those evil creatures we touched?” Rang demanded.

“In a moment,” Kohl checked him. “First think of this. Imagine Gromal as he is, but without ever having been trained by you, or anyone. Then go on to imagine yourself, how you would be if you had never been taught by me, or anyone. Or, if you like, remember how you fought with Rana, who had not been taught quite so carefully by Karl as you have been by me.”

That was a hard one. Rang puzzled over it carefully but he was absolutely unable to imagine what life would have been like without Kohl. He did call back to mind Rana’s sullen resentment and mulish resistance, but it didn’t help very much. He knew that Kohl was sitting at the back of his mind observing, and grew irritated.

“I can’t picture things like that!”

“Then I will help you. Remember now, there are two kinds of things. There are feelings, like anger, hate, fear, hunger, warmth, cold, weariness—and thoughts, which use these feelings and memories and reasons, and make decisions. And they often argue, but you and Rana have both been taught to let thought and reason come first. And you have

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strong and intelligent minds. I ask you now to think of a creature like you, with just as strong and intelligent a mind, but with no teaching. A mind in which feelings and thoughts are all fighting each other all the time with equal strength and no control at all."

It was an alarming picture. Rang scowled over it. "Such a creature would be mad!" he declared. "Quarreling with itself, and with everything else, all the time! It's impossible!"

"Unlikely," Kohl corrected, "but not impossible. I told you, I studied that ship a long time. I touched many of those minds. And, don't forget, these creatures made that ship, and the devices which made those noises you heard. So they have minds as good as yours, very like yours, and are clever and highly intelligent. And savage, uncontrolled and racked with animal feelings at the same time. Think now, doesn't that fit the picture you got from the ship?"

Rang went back, reluctantly, over his memories, shivering as he uncovered that nerve-knotting melee of screaming thought-patterns. In a while he had to admit that Kohl could possibly be right. As an explanation, it would do.

"But what do we do now?" he wondered. "Supposing you're right, we can't do any more here, not with these creatures abounding. There were hundreds on that ship, and if the lights from the land are anything to go by, there are many hundreds more there. I did say I would go, when it was light, and take a look, but I was a bit too hasty. I would sooner go on ten hunts on our own world than venture among those creatures just once."

"Me too!" Rana breathed. "I don't even want to think about it. They must be snarling and clawing at each other all the time, in hundreds!"

Kohl was silent for a while. "There is something inconsistent here," he said, at last. "Creatures constantly fighting each other can't have time to learn the skills necessary to build the things they obviously do. We need more facts. Perhaps there are several different kinds of similar creatures. Perhaps those on the ship were subordinates, pets of some kind, or hunting beasts. I can guess a dozen times. I need

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facts. But I admit there is hazard. So we will use caution. As soon as there is light enough, we will send Virgal to use his eyes and show us what is really there. And there is one other thing you can both practice on. You, Rang, you know how to screen out the animal feelings of another creature, when necessary, don't you?"

"Yes. I do it often when we hunt, especially when it comes to the kill. I've taught Gromal and Virgal that trick, too."

"Why?" Rana was intrigued.

"Because when you kill, for one moment there is the pain of death, and you feel it. But if you shut out the body-feeling, you miss it."

"Nobody ever taught *me* that!" she complained.

"All right, I'll teach you now."

"And then get some sleep," Kohl advised. "When Virgal flies we must all be alert to see what there is to be seen."

Virgal cursed solidly in his harsh acid way as Rang buckled him into a bubble-helmet, but it was no more than his habitual detestation for getting his feathers wet and nobody paid any attention. All four of them surged up to the surface together as soon as the canopy sensors indicated light. In the gray chill, Virgal squawked lustily, perched on the rigid frame and spread his wet pinions to shake them dry. Each wing was as long as Rang was tall, and the eagle-hawk was in no hurry to take off before he was satisfied that he had shed as much moisture as possible. Then, with a great leap, he vaulted into the chill air, spread his wings and went swooping and soaring for altitude. Rang impressed on him again the order, "Just look. See what is to be seen. No more than that. This is not a hunt, not yet!"

"This part is beautiful." Rana sighed as she secured her helmet under the canopy and stared at the dawn sky. "There is red and gold, and blue. And the white puffs of vapor. I like it better than the dark clouds and storms of our own world. Why must the creatures be so horrible?"

"This is our own world," Rang reminded her, "and as for

the creatures, we could be quite wrong about them. Even Kohl has said we are only guessing. Perhaps Virgal will show us the answers."

Virgal's first thought was for altitude, as was his habit. Through his eyes Rang saw a scene so utterly alien that he hurriedly abandoned any hope of understanding it on his own, and merged his mind with Kohl's to share the master's thought. Down there, from where the cream-white surf marked the edge of the sea, there was a strip of that vivid yellow stuff, and then a gray and green patchwork that had a peculiar kind of method to it.

"The green is vegetation, almost certainly," Kohl mused, "but the other is too regular to be random outcroppings of rock. It is structure of some kind."

"The lights we saw in the dark," Rang suggested. "Could they have come from those masses?"

"Most probably. Observe how there seems to be a series of groupings, and narrow black lines dividing the masses, like small veins merging into large ones. Also there are objects moving along those lines. They must be tracks or pathways, and this must be a vast concourse of creatures in structured dwellings. See how many of the creatures there are, and how the pathways extend in all directions, along the edge of the sea and also far back into the land as far as Virgal's vision carries."

"They are curious creatures," Rana murmured, overcoming her first giddiness at the swirling scene. "They are very like beetles!"

"I was just thinking the same thing," Kohl agreed. "They have the same sheen and color as wing cases. But I see no legs, at all."

"If those are nests," Rang hazarded, "then they have a regular pattern, all four-sided and stacked on top of each other to enormous heights. You'd expect the first wind-storm to blow them over."

"Only there is little wind here. Also they appear to be made of some stone-like material, with polished metal additions. Or glass. Or both."

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It was the sheer numbers of them that bothered Rang. As Virgal swooped and circled, thoroughly enjoying himself in the dry placid air, Rang tried to guess how many there might be, but there seemed to be no end to the stream of scuttling things along those tracks. And they were of all sizes and shapes, and many different colors. And not a sign of any bipeds, at all. Kohl caught that thought and gave a caution.

"It is possible that the bipeds are an inferior form here, Rang. I'm surprised that they have survived at all, but you must be prepared to find that they are inferior to the intelligence which is responsible for this enormous hive. The structural skills shown here are of a high order. Ah! Now what can Virgal have seen to cause that twitch of fear?" They all sharpened attention at once, because it would have to be something really fearsome to throw a scare into that predatory mind. They saw it and were astounded. At first Rang saw it as a monstrous fish-shaped bird with a gleaming eye in front, many more round eyes along its body, and slim wings stretched stiffly on either side—and it was many hundreds of times bigger than Virgal, and roared angrily. The eagle-hawk veered respectfully away and soared high to get above it, and then the breathless audience realized how fast this thing flew. In no more than three or four breaths it was far away and gliding down toward that huge hive.

"Unlikely as it seems," Kohl declared, "that, also, was a machine. A ship of a different kind, for flying through air, and with creatures inside. Those were not eyes, but openings covered with glass. A truly remarkable device. A pity Virgal is not able to sense the kind of creature inside that ship-of-the-air. I suspect I have made yet more errors here. Virgal! Go down! I must see these wonders much closer."

Rang felt the hairs prickle and lift at the nape of his neck as the scene spun and ballooned rapidly. No matter how many times he rode with Virgal's mind, that plummeting nose-dive effect always lifted his stomach and made him

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catch his breath. The light from this planet's sun was stronger and brighter now, picking out crisp shadows. The great uprights of gray stone leaped closer, showed varying shades of color and weren't rocks, after all, but box-like things with regular openings all glittering with glass. The line-tracks widened into dark gray strips, and the scurrying beetle-forms were seen to be big things, but still without legs.

Rang suspected it even as Kohl declared, "And these also are machines, not insects. Machines which run along the ground, machines which move on the sea, and machines which fly in the air. The common use of glass tells me that they have sight-senses like yours, but what sort of creatures can they be who are unable to move except by the aid of so many devices and mechanical aids?"

The cliffs of stone loomed hugely nearer and there was a sudden jerking. Then the scene steadied and they knew that Virgal had found a perch on the top of one of the structures. The scene moved in slow panoramic sweeps as Virgal swung his head.

"Smoothed stone, and metal, and much glass. I get the sense of great skills and immense numbers," Kohl mused. "Will you mind very much if we find that your kind are an inferior form here, Rang?"

"It's no concern of mine!"

Rana surprised them both. "It will depend, won't it, on what kind of masters they have?"

"Very true," Kohl approved. "And I would add this: Where intelligent creatures are gathered there is little place for the kind of thought which says 'this is no concern of mine!' On such a level, we must all be concerned for each other, just as I was for you. Why else would I have brought you here?"

Rang pondered that, and then cut through to the core of the problem. "If my mind is as good as you say, and if these creatures are of my kind, then why do you assume they must be subservient?"

"A good question. I didn't assume it, I simply suggested it. They may not be. Which simply means that we haven't

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yet got enough information to make a judgment. Now what's Virgal up to?"

The scene tilted and spun dizzily as a cloud of tiny chattering birds swept past, and the eagle-hawk fell victim to his instincts, darting and snapping at them. In short order he had gulped four, sending the rest screeching away, and only then would he attend the commands that went to him to perch once more, and behave. Now he was looking down into an enclosed space, an enclosure walled around at the top of one of the hive-towers. Small patches of green grew here, and were a vegetation unlike anything Rang had ever seen, with broad fragile leaves and brightly colored parts. The floor otherwise was in regular patterns of red and black. All this he saw in a glance, then forgot it as a door opened in one wall and a truly fearsome creature appeared.

Its hair was frizzy and grayish white, with vivid patches of brighter white. Its face resembled his own, or Rana's, in the arrangement of eyes, nose and mouth, but was of a weird chalky tint utterly unlike flesh. From that point down it was nightmare. The upper body was black and hideously pleated, with a white patch that extended all down the front. There was a semblance of a waist, but from there the black spread out and down, ended in a cross-cut edge, and there were two limbs from there to the ground. The limbs were black, with a claw-like point in front and a spike in the rear, for feet. The upper limbs were equally horrible, being pleated black almost to the ends, where they became hands just like his own. Now he began to realize just what Kohl might have meant by suggesting there could be bipeds something like himself, only different. And horrible. Rana's instant revulsion was as strong as his own. Only Kohl was unmoved, except by interest.

"Watch!" he said. "This is interesting!"

The peculiar biped held a mass of white stuff in its hands. It began to unfold the stuff. Then it saw Virgal, and halted to stare. Then it made a loud screech, waved the white stuff violently, and they could all share Virgal's impression of swift fear and equally swift hostility. The feelings were as

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distinct and vivid as physical blows. The creature shook the white stuff once more, then turned and vanished through the door again.

"That," Kohl sighed, "is the most remarkable creature I ever saw. And listen now as it cries!" They heard sounds from inside.

"Henry! HENRY! There's a horrible great vulture, or eagle, or something! Out there sitting on the wall!" There came a muttered response of some kind and then the screeching again. "Don't you shush me! I tell you it's out there. It glared at me with horrible red eyes. It's the biggest thing I ever saw. As big as a horse or something! I'm not going out there with that—"

"Not so loud!" This was a different creature, more of a growl. "You know what Mr. Carver is like if he gets woke up too early! What's to be scared of in a bird, anyway? Didn't you ever see a sea gull before?"

"Go on out there and take a look for yourself. That's no gull!"

"All right, all RIGHT! Only go easy on the yelling, can't you?" The growl came nearer. "Fool of a female, making all that hooraw about a bird!"

Now they saw another biped emerge into the light, and this one was even more grotesque than the first. It had no hair at all, but just pink skin all over the head. Its upper half was white and pleated, the lower half all black, and its two legs were thick and tubular, ending in front claws but without the rear spikes. But this one had recognizable hands and arms as far as the elbows. Rang felt dazed at so many hideous and meaningless deformities. Only in one way did it resemble the first and that was in the almost instantaneous surge of fear and hostility as it saw Virgal. It stood absolutely still for a space, then mumbled to itself.

"I don't believe it! Would you take a look at that beak? And those damn great claws! That's no bird, it's a—a monster!" The creature spun and scuttled inside, shutting the door violently after it. Rang made a valiant effort to be rational.

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"Both bipeds," he said, "and with similarities. Particularly the violent hostility and fear."

"We need to know, now, whether the hostility was provoked by Virgal in particular, or whether it is a common characteristic directed against all life-forms indiscriminately. I would tend to reject the second, as they seem to inhabit the same dwelling."

"Are they all different from each other, and all equally hideous?" Rana wondered, stifling her revulsion.

"Perhaps I can urge Virgal to hop down and look through once of those glass portions. If there are more inside—?"

Virgal got the suggestion dimly, flourished his wings and hopped down from the wall to stalk close to one of the glass-covered holes. Now they could see into an enclosed space where there were heavy-seeming objects covered in fur and skins and a strange purple moss on the floor. Stalking on to another opening, he looked in and they saw the first biped, the screeching one, in a space full of storage racks and shelves and oddly shaped glittering devices. It saw him looking in, screeched again and bolted from the scene. Virgal went on, stopping to peer into yet another opening. There was the second biped by a standing platform, holding an instrument to its head and shouting.

"I saw it with my own eyes, I tell you. A bird that big has got to be from a zoo or something. Not yours? That's all I want to know. No, I do not give a damn whether it belongs to somebody, I just want it away from here before Mr. Carver wakes up and fires me," and then the biped put down the instrument roughly. They saw it then go to a glass-covered storage cabinet on a wall and collect a long narrow device with a tubular end, turn a moment to stare into Virgal's curious gaze, and scurry away out of their range of vision.

"The hostility is still strong," Rang said. "And that thing looked as if it might be some kind of offensive machine. Virgal, get away from there!"

The view spun and dropped dizzily away as Virgal spread his wings and obeyed. Soaring in a tilted turn he stared

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down to see that door open again; the skin-head biped rushed out, aimed the rod-shaped object, there was a spit of fire and a puff of vapor, the angry hiss of small solids through the air, and a sharp cracking sound.

"We have about exhausted Virgal's powers of observation," Kohl decided, sending the command to "head for home." "And we have learned a little."

Not much, Rang thought, as he watched the view. Tall box-like towers swept by, all close-packed in rows and clusters, all sectioned and divided by the ribbons of runways for the scurrying beetle-like machines. The vastness of it depressed him, as did the thought that all this teeming hive was full of the hideously deformed bipeds. The bird-brain was fortunate, he decided, in that it was insensitive to anything but the simplest waves of feeling such as hostility or welcome, and then only weakly. He tried to imagine what the effect must be like at such close quarters to a wide-open mind, and shivered, firming up his own mental screens.

"So far," Kohl declared, "we are learning unrelated facts. Perhaps one more look into one of those dwellings may give us something useful. Virgal, go down." The command went along with a wordless picture of the sea-edge, and the great bird ducked its head and went into a long planing dive. Rang saw the sea again, and the yellow stuff. He felt Virgal's pleasure at the dry and warm comfort of the air in the now stronger light from the sun. Again the high tower-structures loomed close and wheeled as Virgal made a landing on the top of one of them, and peered over. Looking straight down, they saw a series of protruding ledges. Virgal pushed off and down in a hop and put his claws down on the first ledge, swung round to look, and they were once more seeing into an enclosure, a narrow one this time, with more vegetation growing from round containers.

"Everything is strange," Rang complained. "Why do they grow vegetation outside their nests? Do they eat it?" Before anyone could offer a reply, they saw that the bird was facing another opening, a large one, again covered with glass, and what they saw inside made them all silent and

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astonished. They saw a room, again with moss on the floor and various objects covered in hide and furs and white stuff, and with curiously patterned walls, but on the other side of this room was a door into yet another, and it was in this further room that they saw something to rivet their attention. Rain fell in a hissing sheet. To judge from the swirls of vapor, it was hot rain. The walls of this room were glossy white, as was the container on the floor where the rain fell. And there in the rain was the indistinct shape of a biped. Rang strained his senses to see through Virgal's eyes, but the swirling vapor made it difficult.

All at once that pouring rain ceased as if it had been shut off, and Rang gasped as he realized this was a device, for washing, very similar to the spray jets he used himself for the same purpose. And he gasped again as he saw that this, now, was a true biped like himself, pink-skinned and the proper shape. At least, he corrected hastily, like Rana. And he corrected again as he saw that this "she" had weirdly polished hair puffed out on the top of her head. As he watched he saw her step out of the container and reach for a handful of flexible white stuff, to begin rubbing her body.

"Washing," Kohl said, "and drying now, just as you do, Rang, yes? And this one is a true biped of your kind."

"Except for that hair," Rang admitted. The rubbing went on a while and then she reached up and pulled off the shining "hair," and he saw that it was a cover for her real hair, which was black and glossy. Rana sighed.

"A cover. A kind of helmet to keep her hair from getting wet. How simple and obvious!"

"Many things are simple and obvious once we are shown," Kohl murmured. "I think we are about to see several more simple and obvious things." As they watched, the female completed her drying, stepped out of the rain-room and put her feet into curious little covers of fur. "Observe how the floor is soft to walk on? That isn't moss, but some kind of short fur."

"She's a female like Rana. Not quite so tall, but the

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front muscles are more developed. And she moves somehow differently, as if soft and weak." Rang was so relieved to see something, at last, so truly like himself that he was keen to observe everything he could.

"Probably a favored pet," Kohl murmured. "This is obviously a highly comfortable environment."

"Her hair is wonderfully glossy." Rana sighed in envy, and went on to marvel and watch hungrily as the female crossed the room and perched on a fur-covered object in front of a ledge where there were many small devices and which had a large polished surface to look into. There she took up one small thing and began rubbing it over her hair with slow dragging motions. Rana was captivated by the result. "See how it glows and twists into beautiful shapes!" She sighed. "If only I could learn how to do that to my hair."

"Perhaps it will be possible. But watch, because I think we are now getting the clue which explains much. Ah yes, I thought so!" Kohl's thoughts carried a gentle overtone of satisfaction as they saw the female now stand up and move across the room to a long low object spread with white stuff, and sit.

A couch, Rang deduced, and agreed with Kohl's estimate that this must be a valued pet. That couch was luxuriously resilient. Then he marveled and berated himself for being stupid as he saw her take up pieces of stuff and draw them over her body, carefully and deliberately.

"Covers!" he exclaimed. "She is covering herself all over, just as she covered her hair in the rain. And—of course—those others we saw must have been covered too, and are true bipeds underneath!"

"But why would they do that?" Rana demanded.

"Follow your own thought," Kohl advised, calm and cool as always. "You saw that the head-covering was to keep the hair from getting wet. It would follow, then, that these coverings are also meant as protection of some kind."

"Against what?" Rang asked. "There is no rain here. You can feel how Virgal likes this warm, dry, quiet atmosphere."

"Virgal is a bird. Think. What's different here? You saw her

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with no coverings, inside her nest. The others were covered, and now she is covered in a similar manner—to go outside! There is something about outside which is injurious, obviously.”

“It must be the light from the sun.” Rang followed the reasoning, but objected to the conclusion. He was head and shoulders in the light right now, even if he was safe inside a bubble-helmet and the sea covering the rest of him. He felt nothing more than warmth from that light. But he let it go and brought his attention back to this intriguing female. She was now covered from shoulders to just above the knees in many-folded stuff that was blue and glossy. He had seen the complicated pieces which were underneath. It made no sense at all to go to all this trouble and yet leave arms and legs and face uncovered. But now she came directly towards the glass-protected opening. That fitted what Kohl had said. The glass was a protection of some kind. Or was it? Because now she raised a hand to push open one half of the glass wall. And then, for the first time, she saw Virgal perched there, watching. Rang felt Kohl’s suddenly acute interest, and shared it.

She stopped quite still, eyes and mouth opening wide. Brown eyes, very white teeth, red mouth—and instant fear. The feeling came vividly. And then it abated a little, became tinged with caution and curiosity, or at least that kind of thing, so far as Virgal’s senses could register. No screeching at all, not yet. And no hostility either. The moment drew out long, and then she went through with her movement to push open the glass wall, just a little way. She craned her head cautiously round and through the gap. The fear-caution was still there, but mixed in with it came a wave of tentative friendliness.

“Hello,” she said, “and where did you spring from, I wonder? And what are you, anyway? You look like a bird, what with that beak, those claws, and feathers too, but whoever saw a bird that big, except in a nightmare? Maybe it’s my imagination, but you look awfully wise, for a bird. A whole lot wiser than most of the birds I meet, and I don’t mean the

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feathered kind, either. You can't be a roc, because that's a myth. At least, that's what they all say. I bet Hector would be able to name you, right off. But then he's a genius, you know. He's smart. That's his trouble, he's too smart with everything except the things that count."

She pushed the glass-wall wider, coming halfway out and smiling in an uneasy way. "I wish there was something I could do. Perhaps you're hungry. I imagine you'd eat a lot, probably me if I gave you half a chance. With a beak almost as long as my arm that would be no effort, would it? Anyway, I can't stop here to talk to you much longer. I've a job to do and a living to earn, so I'll have to bid you a fond farewell, bird. You take my tip and hop off before somebody takes a shot at you." She drew back now, closing the glass protection, waved one hand and then went away out of sight. Kohl directed a "come back" thought, and caught Rang and Rana into close attention.

"We have learned many fragments, all interesting, but it is obvious that we can hope for little more from Virgal. The next move is for you two to venture onto the land and investigate. But only if you wish to."

"What else?" Rang retorted. "We can't stop now!"

"There will be many hazards, things we can't even guess at."

"That's nothing new. We'll take hunting gear, and be in touch with you all the time."

"Very well. Gromal goes with you. Meet Virgal as soon as you are out of the sea. Take care. Do nothing without thought. I shall be busy in ways of my own. For one thing I must run those sounds and noises through my instruments and analyze this communication system, because that is what it obviously is. With more instances I should be able to deduce the basic patterns so that you will be able to communicate with these bipeds when it becomes necessary."

Rang had very few worries about that as he made a last check of his and Rana's equipment. In a lifetime of scanning thought-pictures and associating them with snaps, snarls, grunts and howls, he anticipated no difficulty in understand-

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ing another mind and talking to it. What did bother him was the matter of coverings.

"There must be some good reason for them," he said to Rana. "And we have nothing in the least resembling such things."

"It could be the bright light," she agreed, "or the air, or something we haven't noticed so far. I am breathing the air. The light has been warming my face for some time. I feel no injury from them, so it must be something different."

Rang discarded his helmet, secured it safely, hoisted out of the water and stood up straight on the rim. In a while he said, "I feel nothing except warmth. Perhaps it will be different on land. We shall just have to be alert for it. Come!" And the three of them set away to swim in towards the land.

V

THIS SEA was different, Rang thought, as he surged steadily through it. More buoyant, for one thing. And there was wind, a breeze almost playful in its softness as it stirred the tops of the waves.

"It is pleasant," Rana echoed his thoughts. "I wonder why all the bipeds huddle together on the land, leaving all this sea deserted?"

"Not entirely deserted," he corrected. "See ahead of us?" She had seen as he spoke. In the distance the shoreline was a gray smudge rising up, but between it and them there was a large platform floating on the water. A raft almost exactly like the kind of thing Rang knew well as a safe place to stow prey before dragging it down to the under-sea entrance of his home caverns, only larger and brightly

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colored. They swam steadily on, watching the biped who lay on it. A male, he reasoned, with brownish-pink skin, short brown hair, and uncovered except for a piece of blue and white stuff round his hips. It wasn't any kind of belt, nor did it contain anything visibly useful. This at once destroyed all the guesses they had made about these weird coverings, and Rang grew intensely curious to discover what the mystery was. The biped sat up to look at them. Rang sensed only curiosity through his mental screens. No fear or hostility as yet. The biped smiled and nodded as they came close.

"Good morning to you! Taking the dog for a swim, eh?" Rang caught the swift flicker of thought-pictures, translated them as much as he could.

"Morning," he repeated. "Dog. Swim."

"He sure does, at that. Say, that's some dog you have there, mister. Kinda big, isn't he?"

Gromal, sensing friendly interest, put his paws on the raft-edge and lifted himself up to woof a greeting. The biped flung back instantly and a blast of panic-fear made Rang wince.

"Yeeow! Get back there, willya? Good dog! Good dog! Back!" the biped shouted. "Get him back into the water, willya, mister! Go on, boy, back!"

Rang gave the command to "hold" and Gromal snorted, slid back until his paws just rested on the edge. The biped huddled at the far edge and made a strained smile. "No offense, you understand? I like dogs myself but that's the biggest damn hound I ever saw any place. You folks must be strangers round here. I sure wouldn't ever forget seeing *that* before."

Rang rested his hands on the edge now, and Rana came alongside to do the same. The biped bobbed his head and struggled with the smile again.

"Some dog!" he repeated. "I didn't get your names, did I? I'm Sam Hamilton. Glad to know you." Rang juggled sounds and pictures swiftly. He could make sense of most of it, although there were overtones which puzzled him.

"Gladtoknowyou," he said. "Rang." He smiled and nodded. Rana caught the idea instantly.

"Rana," she said, and smiled. "Gladtoknowyou, Sam Hamilton."

"Strangers. Here," Rang said carefully, and the biped nodded again.

"That's what I figured. Foreign, too, I reckon. I don't get to see everybody in this area, naturally, but I do see most, I reckon. I'm a guard, sort of, over at the big house back there." He made a gesture towards the land. "You've seen it. The big one on the edge of the cliff. I'm security. You'll maybe have heard of Hector Raine, the genius? Raine the Brain?"

Rang struggled with this flow of novelty, felt Kohl's thoughts coming in to help. Concepts flew between them, clarifying much. Rang nodded.

"Genius," he echoed.

"That's the one. Strictly between us, he's not so hot. Only a long skinny guy with a big I.Q., a good memory, and a smart manager, is all. But he's all right to work for, I'll say that much. And he's kinda helpless, know what I mean? So he has to be protected. All the time, because he knows just about everything, people want to ask him questions. For free, naturally. And that is out, strictly. That's where his smart manager comes in. No talking except by appointment, and cash on the nail or nothing doing. And that's where I come in, me and five other guys. We keep a lookout, just to make sure nobody gets any free service."

"Lookout," Rang repeated, nodding.

"Right. It's slow, believe me. But the pay is good and I get plenty time off, so who's crying? But I do get to see just about everybody around, and that's how I know you folks have got to be strangers here. Smart, hey? All part of the job." The biped was growing easier with every moment. Now he managed to smile and nod to Gromal.

"That's some dog! Trained, you can tell." Rang thought that by now he had as much as he could manage in one lump, and nodded once more.

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"Good morning," he said. "Glad to know you, Sam Hamilton." This time he felt he had said it better than before.

He shoved away from the raft, sent a "come on" thought to the others, and they started away to swim on, hearing the biped mutter again, "That's some dog!"

Kohl's brisk thought came to both of them with a trial analysis of the sounds they had just heard and the general structure of the language became increasingly plain as they swam on. Kohl was particularly intrigued by the fact that Gromal had roused different reactions from those Virgal had met, and that the bipeds, so far, seemed not hostile at all to their own kind.

"You had better aim at finding the nest where we saw that female," he advised, "as she seemed less hostile to Virgal than the others."

Rang sent the thought out to the bird, making it a variation of a familiar command to "find and point," which Virgal could do very efficiently. Now they came to more turbulent water, and the sea-edge was near. Rang saw that there was a great amount of the yellow stuff, and back from that were steep-faced cliffs just here, the rocks patched with green. Up at the top of one rearing face stood a large nest-tower of gray stone, and he knew by Virgal's message that this was the place of the female biped.

Now they could touch bottom, and began cautiously to wade through the hissing surf up to the land. Rang surveyed the immediate scene. There were a few bipeds in evidence, small groupings of two or three, all at some distance and none very curious or hostile. They waded on until they were clear. The yellow stuff felt harsh and gritty to their feet. Rang caught up a handful of the stuff to examine, feeling Kohl staring through his eyes.

"Powdered rock," he reasoned. "Why don't we see this on our world?"

"Further on, see, it is dry like dust. There's your reason. In our turbulent atmosphere it is constantly swept away into the sea, to mingle with the bottom ooze."

Rang nodded, shook himself dry, called Gromal to take

his position between himself and Rana, and they started up the slope, using Virgal's thought as a pointer. Rang was pinpoint alert now, his hunter senses sweeping the scene continuously. He picked up stirrings of curiosity from the other bipeds, but no hostility or fear, as yet.

Kohl came into the back of his mind to murmur, "I was completely wrong about the coverings. See, the others here are no more wrapped up than you are. This is a vastly intriguing phenomenon. It must have some reason, however."

Rang agreed, but kept the major part of his attention on the scene. The bipeds were in pairs, he noticed. Or where there were three, one of them was a small one. And now they were beginning to evince strong curiosity, and to stare. His keen hearing caught muttered sounds from a pair somewhat nearer than the others.

"Herman. Herman! Will you just look at what's coming up the beach?"

"I can't see nothing to get excited about."

"Not over that way, you dope! Turn over! It's a man and a woman—and a dog!"

"So what did you expect, a flock of camels? Honest to God, Milly, I never saw anybody—Yike! That's no dog!"

"Of course it is!"

"When did you ever see a dog as big as a pony? With those teeth—that's a wolf! But the blonde dame is something else again! She really has got everything, and then some!"

"The feller's not so bad either, but Herman, hadn't they ought to be wearing something? Not that I mind! I'm broad-minded, I hope, but isn't there a law or something?"

"What do you care? Can't you just see the cops dashing up to arrest those—with that damn great hound-dog showing his teeth? You know what I reckon, Milly? This is a teevee stunt of some kind, I betcha. There'll be a camera or two looking at us right now—"

As they moved on out of hearing range, Rang analyzed what he had heard and sensed, and felt keen disappointment. Through his mental screens he sensed the growing stir of curiosity and alarm all along the beach, but that

bothered him very little. What distressed him was the quality of the minds he had made contact with, up to now. They were small, mumbling and confused things, not at all what he had expected. Their thought-pictures were blurred, ill-defined and often strangely distorted. It seemed as if Kohl had been right about the inferior status of these bipeds. They were getting close to the foot of the cliff now, with Virgal's thought still guiding them on. Rang swept a questing thought upwards. And froze as his probe touched a mind. A MIND! Even at the moment of contact he knew that this was a personality equal with his own, and as strongly clear. He opened eagerly to it and was instantly staggered by a chill gray flood of dark despair and futility. That mind up there was looking into the eye of death, welcoming it, seeking its own destruction.

Thought and action fused into one blur of furious movement. Up went the command to Virgal to interfere and distract, in any way possible. To Gromal the curt information, "I am going up there. Go, find another trail and join me," and before Gromal could yelp his understanding and turn away, Rang had hurled himself at the sheer rock-face. Another level of his mind knew that both Rana and Kohl had caught the wail of deathly despair, and were in instant agreement with him that it must be prevented at any cost. He sensed Rana hard on his heels and felt grateful, but spared no thought for anything else except the need to get up there and hold back that mind from its death-wish. The cliff itself was hardly a problem, simply an obstacle. To these two who had spent a lifetime battling the rugged storm-wracked environment of the Garl-world just to get food enough to eat, the cliff was nothing, and they went up it as easily as they might have run up a smooth slope.

Fingers reaching and gripping, eyes estimating, toes finding niches to stand on and thrust, Rang moved with sure and swift skill, almost without having to think. With all the power he could summon, he speared an urgent thought at that mind, urging it, driving it to hold back, to wait. And when he knew by the reaction that the mind was deaf to him, it

served simply to spur him on to more furious speed. Rana was no more than a yard or two after him. He caught her amazed thought.

"It doesn't hear you, or me. What manner of creature can it be?"

"We'll soon know. I think Virgal's taken a part now." Rang deduced as much from a sudden change in the tone of that hopeless despair. A touch of fear. And interest pushing its way through the gray chill. He scrambled on, reaching for ledges, surging upwards with lithe squirmings and heaves, clawing his way up furiously. Now, only a yard or two above, he saw that the natural rock came to a halt and the smooth gray-stone stuff rose from there another three or more yards, to an edge. Clinging with his left hand, he unbuckled his line, shook it free and swung the grapnels in a hissing circle, to let fly and send the hooks snaking up and over that ledge. His second cast struck firm. By this time Rana was casting too, but he didn't wait for her. Testing the grip of the hooks, he slid his handgrip into place, squeezed it firm and kicked off, setting his feet against the smooth stuff to walk up two paces and jerk in close. Quick as thought he slid the handgrip up high, squeezed and hung and walked up two more paces. From far below he caught swirling eddies of fear and wonder but ignored them. Growing stronger now was Virgal's ill-tempered squawking, and that cold death-wish had virtually vanished.

Two more steps and he had the edge, hooked his fingers over it, heaved and sprang over to land with feet apart and ready. And then he stood quite still, studying the scene. This was another enclosure, long and much wider than the one where they had seen the female. This floor was a pattern of gray and white, and Virgal stood there, great pinions half-furled, his menacing beak out and snapping. And backing fearfully away from that beak was a biped, a tall and awkward-seeming one, with reddish hair untidily on its head and gleaming pieces of glass in front of its eyes. The rest of it was wrapped in a covering of garish colors almost to its feet, which were covered in soft fur. Virgal made a

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click with his beak and squawked again as Rang called him back with a sharp word. The brightly colored biped shivered, raised his glance to Rang, and stared. There was fear, and bewilderment, but no hostility. And this was the mind Rang had hurried to save. As he stood, breathing deeply and automatically recoiling his line, Rana came over the edge with a leap and slap of bare feet, to stand alert and ready on the other side of Virgal.

The biped drew a shuddering breath, stared from one to the other in defeated bewilderment and then said, unsteadily, "Well, may I be everlastingly damned! Who—who are you? And where in sanity's name did you spring from?" Now the fear itself was second to a keen wonder and amazement as the biped flicked a glance at the edge.

Rang caught the familiar concept of "name" and said, steadily, "Rang." He moved a hand to his companion—"Rana." And then, "Virgal." Then he offered, "Good morning. Glad to know you."

The biped made a choking noise. "Uh? I'm Hector Raine—" "Genius!" Rang said, at once, as several bits of the puzzle fell into a coherent pattern.

"So everybody says. But—don't tell me you climbed up *there*?"

"Back!" Rang growled as the biped made a step towards the edge. "Back! Not good!" His tongue struggled to find the proper cautionary sounds. Somehow Hector seemed to understand, if only hazily.

"What d'you know," he mumbled. "I do believe you're trying to stop me from—how did you know I was going to jump off? You did know, didn't you?"

Rang nodded, coupling sounds and thought-pictures accurately, finding this mind transparently easy to follow. "Not jump off," he said firmly.

"That's all right, friend. Believe me, nothing is further from my mind now. Positively not now! Not until I find out how the blue blazes you knew!" His voice rose shrilly as the burning question flooded his mind. Then all at once he noticed more closely the full appearance of these strange

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arrivals, and Rang saw a flurry of quick picture-thoughts boil through his mind, curiously highlighting certain areas of the body. There was also a sense of delicate uneasiness, a mental cringing away.

"I would also like to know how you managed to get this far without being arrested. You're not exactly dressed for visiting, are you?" Thoughts rushed in hurried confusion and he added, "I guess you didn't have time to stop on ceremony, at that."

At that moment another biped came from a side-door into the light. This one was small, black-haired, covered in a black and white design very like the one who had made the crack-noise at Virgal, except that this one was of a brownish color skin.

"Mr. Rainel" it said, in obvious agitation. "Your breakfast is getting cold, sir. It—eeek!"

"Ah, Yoshil! Just the man I want. Zip along to the bathroom, would you, and grab a few towels. For my guests."

"Towels, hah?"

"Right. Hurry it up now!"

"Yessir, Mr. Raine, sir!" The newcomer scuttled away and Hector Raine suddenly smiled. The change in his mind was amazing. Fear, despair, agitation and uneasiness were all gone completely. All that remained was cordial friendship and cool but intense curiosity. Rang was powerfully reminded of his master, Kohl, and that thought brought an instant response.

"He is one like us, Rang. There is no danger here, at least."

"You'll stay to breakfast, of course," Raine declared. "I owe you that much, at least. You're the most interesting thing that's happened to me in far too long. Please?"

Rang nodded, turned to Rana. "We will learn about their eating habits, at least. And he is curious about us, which is a good sign. We stay?"

"Why not? Did you notice the curious male-female thoughts? It seems to be their habit to use coverings to con-

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ceal the differences between them, and not for protection, after all."

Rang nodded. He had caught that impression too. He spoke to Virgal to supplement the thought-command: "Go now, but stay close by." Virgal complained bitterly and Rang grinned as he added, "Very well, catch food, but don't go too far away!" The great eagle-hawk sprang up on to the ledge, stretched out his pinions and leaped off to soar away. Rang turned back to Hector Raine.

"Breakfast. Good. We stay."

"Curiouser and curiouser. I can claim to know most of the commoner languages fairly well, and to recognize almost all the rest, but I never heard anything remotely resembling yours. Nor have I ever even heard of that species of bird you were just talking to. Talking to! Dear Lord, if this is but a dream, don't let me wake up yet a while. Aha! The towels. Thank you, Yoshi. And we will be plus two for breakfast. Here! Primitive, I'm afraid, but the best I could think of, off hand. And you, miss—"

Rang had never felt anything with quite this texture, but he knew what it was at once. The female had dried herself on one just like it. Did this Hector Raine mean they were to dry themselves? No. That thought didn't show, at all. Rang frowned, and then shrugged and wrapped the towel around his waist in the way the thought-pictures indicated, being careful to keep his belt and equipment clear and handy. Not that he anticipated danger, but the habit was too deeply established to be cast off. Rana, copying him, was puzzled.

"This is not at all like the coverings the female had," she said.

"They seem to have many different kinds and colors. Perhaps there is some special purpose for each kind." Rang tucked in the ends, and then stood quite still as Hector Raine's curiosity got the better of his caution and he put out a hand to investigate the looped line that hung at Rang's belt.

"I have to assume that you climbed up here with that, somehow, but I find it hard to believe." Rang watched the

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thought-pictures rippling in his mind as he took a double-hold on the line and tried it for strength. "It's tough, all right. But how could you throw your weight on it without cutting your hands to ribbons? It's no thicker than string!"

Rang grinned, grasped the handgrip and slid it along into a bight so that it was free, then held it up.

Raine stared, frowned, and then nodded. "That is quite a trick. And so simple. A vee-notched bore big enough to let the cord slide"—Rang squeezed hard—"but under pressure it closes and bites on the cord firmly, and you hold on to it. Simple. But that kind of simplicity comes, unless I'm all wrong, at the tail end of a lot of hard brain work. You're a mystery man, Rang. And your lovely lady too. I don't care where you came from, just so long as you stay and let me ask you a million questions. And breakfast is getting cold. Come on. I guess Rana ought to have another towel, but she doesn't seem to mind, and I'm sure I don't. This way."

Rang followed him to the door where Yoshi had vanished. He felt sure of this biped's good intentions, but kept himself alert just the same, sensing Kohl's observing presence at the back of his mind. The room had a noisy glossy floor, patterned walls, and was lit by hanging globes, unlike the ship, where the lights were flush with the walls. There were many shelves all round where stood a host of strange devices in all shapes, so many that Rang could barely take time to glance and then go on into another room. This one was larger, had fur on the floor and big openings in one side which were filled with glass. The light from the sun came brightly here, and warm. Prominent in this room was a flat-topped stand covered with white stuff and laden with many things, some of which looked like tools, because they were of polished metal and had handles and edges. Others were containers of various shapes, some shallow, others deep.

Hector Raine made a gesture. "Won't you have a chair?"

"Chair." Rang identified the relation between sound and object, but the function baffled him. Raine's eyes blazed behind their glass coverings.

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"Be damned!" he breathed. "Never saw a chair before, eh? All right, we'll suspend the finer points of decorum for the moment. This way, see?"

Rang got it with a nod. So did Rana. Brief moments later they were all perched on chairs around the flat-topped object.

Rang said, thoughtfully, "There is logic here. This thing is cleverly designed, and much more comfortable than squatting on the floor."

"Amazing!" Hector gloated. "Absolutely amazing! Now, let's see what you do with coffee!" The black-haired brown-skinned one came on unwilling feet, reeking of fear, to put down a metal disc on which were more containers, one of highly polished metal, a gleaming thing that was a delight to the eye. Rang put out his hand to touch, and checked the movement as he felt heat.

"Fast reaction time," Hector noted. "Here we go with some words first. Table. Saucer. Cup. Tray. Coffeepot. And coffee." Rang watched him pour a dark brown liquid into a cup. Vapor corroborated the heat. And this was to drink? Then common sense demanded "why not?" Burned food was hot, and better tasting as a result, so why not burned drink? "This is black, as it comes." Hector took a delicate sip, then passed it across for Rang to try. Rang was prepared for the heat, but not the acrid sharpness of it. He passed the cup to Rana, who made a face. Hector shrugged.

"That's all right. I prefer it with cream and sugar myself. Like this." And when he had mixed the new preparation he offered it again. This time Rang let the liquid roll in his mouth and it was good. Rana gave her approval too. Hector was delighted. He introduced them to other things, naming each one in turn, apparently unconscious of the fact that along with each new item went a sparkling display of associated thought-pictures all clearly realized, so that Rang and Rana learned at least ten times as much as he actually told them. And they enjoyed the food too. It seemed that there was a whole spectrum of entertaining new taste sensations that they hadn't even dreamed of.

"You are a fantastic pair," Hector conceded, at last. "Absolutely fantastic. I would never have believed anybody could catch on so fast as you do. And that only makes it worse, because how can anybody be so damned smart, and yet so utterly ignorant? It is just not possible that two people like you could just materialize on my balcony out of thin air. If you weren't sitting right there in front of me, I wouldn't believe it. I'm not sure that I believe it anyway. Where in the world are you from, and who *are* you?"

Rang caught almost all of his bewilderment and curiosity and thought it was time to make a try at explaining. Kohl had kept up a constant murmur of helpful suggestions and hints on the various words, so he had something of a vocabulary to choose from.

"I am Rang," he said carefully. "She is Rana. We were of this world before. We went away. Now we have come back. We were small. Now we are much bigger." He halted there, frowningly aware of the inadequacies of his effort.

"Wait!" Hector implored. "*Wait!* You're trying to go too fast. Walk first, then run, old man. Dammit, I'm supposed to be a genius, but I'd hate to have to explain my origins with only a handful of random words to choose from."

"Genius." Rang nodded and smiled. "You," and because he thought it was about time he asked a question, he added, "It means?"

"Now there's a question!" Hector groaned. "I don't even know the answer to that in the fanciest vocabulary. Wish I did. Lord! If ever a man was more frustrated!" He leaped to his feet and began to pace to and fro agitatedly, the thought-pictures flashing through his mind in frantic haste, his garishly colored coverings flapping. "We'll just have to start over, Rang. I've been doing this all wrong. You don't want the everyday small-change of idle chat, the stuff that we've been fooling about with—" He broke off and wheeled round as one more biped came hurrying into the room.

This one rubbed its eyes and mumbled. It was covered in colors just as vivid as Hector, but there were two separate pieces, the upper one loose and gaping in front. Over one

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shoulder there was a thong that supported a strange instrument. Rang noted that with instant tension.

"What happened?" it mumbled fretfully. "What goes on so early in the morning, hey? What are you trying to do to me, Raine? Already I have tried to tell you a routine is a routine! How can I get all of you in a 'life' for my public when you suddenly decided you want to get up in the middle of the night? Eccentric is all right, but this is crazy! Half-past eight only! And you didn't even call me. Treason, that's what—yahow! Where did they come from? Why don't you *tell* me you got friends coming, eh?"

Watching keenly, Rang saw the shambling newcomer suddenly become full of purpose, saw a scurry of utterly novel and baffling pictures seethe through its mind. It fell on one knee and grasped the dangling instrument with a hand, to swing it up and aim it. There were stubby tubes and glass covers that shone, studs to press, and a bewildering kaleidoscope of mental images that Rang didn't waste time trying to decipher. With the speed and efficiency of long practice and the urgency of survival he drew his paralyzer, setting it for range and power as he leveled it. It yelped once, and the mumbling biped dropped, lifeless.

VI

THE SILENT TENSION stretched out into a long thin thread and snapped as Hector moved, let out a whistling breath and went to kneel by the slumped body. He didn't touch, just looked, and then screwed his head round to stare at Rang.

"What—what did you do that for? Is he—dead?"

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"No!" Rang was shocked at the thought-picture. Death seemed to be ever-present here in this mind. "Not dead." He moved now to go and crouch and take hold of the strange device with the tubes and studs.

"This is what?"

"That? It's a telecamera, one of the latest portable jobs. It records pictures and sounds on tape. Hey wait! You've never seen one of those before either, and he aimed it at you, didn't he? I think I understand—and I don't altogether blame you for being quick on the trigger. But it's harmless." Rang understood. The same pictures that had been a jostling confusion before were now crisp and sequential, even to a sketched rendering of how this thing worked. That was a fascination in itself, but Rang had to let it go and bring his concern back to the fact that he had made an error.

"Solly never moves a step without his camera." Hector sighed. "Even takes it to bed with him. Solly Shublik, used to be a big name in the telefilm world not so long ago, and now"—he shrugged—"he was trying to make a big come-back by doing a 'life' of me, Raine the Brain. 'Inside the world of a genius.' You know the kind of thing? No, of course you don't. Lord, what did you do to him? You say he isn't dead, but it looks a first-class impersonation to me!"

Rang put up his hand in a gesture of apology. "Mistake," he said. "I did wrong. This thing, telecamera, for pictures, I have not before seen."

"I said that. I appreciate it. But he's still lying there!"

"Wait." Rang adjusted the paralyzer delicately, setting it to a mild stimulus-intensity. Then he aimed and pressed, and it hummed softly, just for a moment. The Shublik bipped shivered, drew a deep breath and then groaned and sat up, staring dimly around.

"It is well now." Rang stood. "Sorry. A mistake."

"That's a relief. Solly, are you all right?"

Shublik groaned again, shook his head, then his eyes

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focused on those present and he quickened, grabbed for his camera.

"Stop right there!" Hector shouted. "Hold it! You and that damned goggle-box of yours! You'll never know how many times I've felt like grabbing the thing out of your hand and clobbering you with it, these past weeks. And now somebody did even better. Whatever it was. Just what is that thing anyway, and what does it do?" He turned with renewed curiosity, and Rang set the weapon to safety and handed it to him, watching the pictures come and go in that keen mind, searching his meager vocabulary for some way of describing its effect, and failing utterly.

"Handgrip," Hector mused, "and this stud for the thumb presumably operates it?" Rang nodded. "Power-source in the handle? And this knurled ring is free to slide to and fro, and turn, is range and focus, or something like that, eh? But what comes out? I didn't see a thing!"

Rang took back the weapon, gestured for Hector to extend his hand, and Hector backed away a step, then hunched his shoulders resignedly.

"I may be crazy. I guess I just have to trust you, old man. I hope it isn't going to hurt!"

"Not hurt." Rang grinned, setting the beam to fine, low-power, close. He aimed for the wrist and saw Hector's hand fall limp and lifeless, saw the blue eyes blaze behind their glass covers as the genius investigated with his other hand, touching and pinching.

"I can't feel a damned thing. Total anesthesia! I hope it's not permanent!" Rang shook his head, altered the setting again, and Hector gasped as the paralysis vanished as quickly as it had come.

"Oh brother! Some kind of radiant energy? Affects the nerves? Puts them out of action?"

"That is right." Rang nodded excitedly, seeing the quick pictures of a body nerve-net. "Makes nerves out of action."

"Yes." Hector stood a moment absently rubbing his hand, and now for the first time his mind seemed to cloud over

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and become obscure. Rang wondered why. He saw Hector frown and turn to Shublik.

"How d'you feel, Solly? All right? It didn't hurt, did it?"

Shublik climbed to his feet and stuck out his jaw in complaint. "How would I know?" he demanded. "I'm just getting a focus, a good angle—and then nothing! Somebody kills the light. It's black. And then—there I am on the carpet trying to get up. And you ask me how do I feel! I'll tell you how I feel. See here, Raine, we have an agreement. I don't ask any questions. I don't interfere. I don't even talk to you, only for good morning, good night, such lovely weather it is again, or pass the bread if you don't mind. And all is fine. But I take pictures all the time. I see everything you do, how you live, what kind of a human being you are, just like everybody else. Right? Right! And didn't you swear bible-stacks to me that you have no friends? Is that my theme, or ain't it? You are a lonely man, a brain, a genius, isn't that the way I'm playing it?"

"That's the way you suggested, certainly."

"Suggestion, shoo! It was an agreement by mouth, between gentlemen. So now what happens. I turn my back for one minute. I'm fast asleep. And you sneak up out of bed early, you smuggle in your friends past the guards, you are having breakfast with them. Not a word to me. Is this right? Is this how a gentleman should act?" Shublik became vehement, threw out a gesture.

"Why didn't you say you have friends like these? Such visual people, such shapes! Why didn't I know about them before? Who are they?"

"Believe me, Solly, I don't know. I'm just trying to find out!"

"Don't be mad if I say I don't believe you, Raine. All right, if you want it should be a secret, I don't mind. But tell me first. I have feelings. I wouldn't shoot anything you don't want, you know that. You can trust me."

"I'm not trying to hide anything from you, dammit!"

"So all right! Then maybe I can take pictures now, eh? Only, Raine"—Shublik lowered his voice—"the drapes are no

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good. Towels, shoo! Where they come from—Scandinavia or somewhere—that may be fine. But not here. Not in this background!”

“Now wait.” Hector grew stern. “All right, take your pictures. Do what you like so long as you don’t get in the way. Only, get this one hard fact into your horrible little mind. This is Rang, and Rana. They just dropped in on me about half an hour or so ago. I never saw either of them before in my life. And that is the cold truth. Don’t ask me to explain, just get this: If you do anything, just one thing, to scare them off—so help me, I’ll heave you over the balcony wall!”

Rang caught that last vivid image, and growled deep in his throat. Hector spun round, staring.

“Steady on, old man,” he jerked. “I didn’t—God in Heaven, you were reading my mind!”

“I know what you think, yes.” Rang was surprised, and suddenly very enlightened. “You do not know what I think?”

“I wish I did.” Hector sighed. “I’m only a genius, not a superman.”

“Hoy!” Shublik caught himself in mid-step on the way to the table, and swung round. “*That’s* where I’ve seen him before. Old movies. The celluloids! Superman.”

“You’re crazy. That was all of fifty years ago. And fiction in any case. Whoever they are, these two are real.”

“Sol” Shublik elevated his shoulders. “Who cares? I still think the drapes are lousy. For primitives maybe we could scrape past the scissors with it. Primitives are O.K. just now. With sandals and maybe a flower or two, is just possibly O.K. But not towels. Make it sarongs and I’m with you, but in a background like this, never! They have to have a wardrobe. Don’t tell me how it’s a shame to cover up shapes like those. I know. I am an artist. But that’s how the scissors snip, and what can you do?”

“Something you *can* do, if only to keep you quiet,” Hector snapped. “If you can fix these two with suitable clothes, then get on with it. Only don’t shout the word around. Keep it quiet. And in sanity’s name, shut up!” He turned back to Rang. “I wish I *could* read your mind, old man. I’d give a

lot just to believe that such a thing is really possible. Common sense tells me it is the only solution to the fact that you're so incredibly fast at catching on to things. But there are times when common sense gets a fit of the staggers. And you don't say much, do you?" He turned his gaze to Rana and smiled. She, sensing his candid and friendly interest, returned his smile and feelings with a vigor that made him gasp, swallow audibly, and turn red in the face.

To Shublik he muttered, "Get going on that wardrobe, Solly. I'm beginning to get all sorts of wrong ideas."

Rang caught the fringes of that interchange and was intrigued. He was cautiously open to "friendship" feelings, but this was subtly different. He widened his reception a shade to find out just what this was that so disturbed Hector and was immediately engulfed by an echo of that dreadful miasma that had come from the ship-on-the-sea. He shut his mind as reflexly as an eye will blink at a flash of light, then eased it open again, staggered by the sheer crude violence of this feeling. And he realized now that it wasn't quite the same as the yelling clamor from the ship. This was fervent and powerful, but not at all horrible. Nor was it friendship, but something fractionally different, a disturbingly different tone altogether. It was all done in the fraction of a moment, in the time it took Rana to draw a breath and ask:

"What is the name for a room-which-moves from one world to another?" It was a good question. Rang wished, enviously, that he'd thought of it. The reaction in Hector was tremendous. His thought-pictures erupted in a boiling confusion, completely erasing that strange "fervent" feeling and sharpening his curiosity to a flame.

"It *has* to be!" he breathed. "I'd suspected it already but didn't dare believe it. Now—there can be no possible, probable shadow of doubt, no possible doubt whatever, as Gilbert put it. All the same, let's not jump at this. Let's make absolutely sure. A room-which-moves—there are all kinds. If it moves over the ground from here to there we call it a train, or an automobile, a coach, a bus. No good?" He was watching their faces now, very intently. He went on,

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"If it moves on the surface of water we call it a boat, or a ship. If it moves through the air, like a bird, we call it an airplane. And they fly a long way. Over the sea, from one country to another. Here to Australia, or Europe. Yes?"

Rang caught the mental image of a slowly turning globe, and ships soaring from one land-mass to another. He also sensed the concept of caution and checking-up, and understood that perfectly. He shook his head.

"Not round"—he made a gesture—"like that. A room—which-moves away from the world, a long way, to another world. That is?"

Hector sighed, turned and went to settle in a chair. "Jackpot! It's happened at last. And to me! A spaceship, that's the word you want, Rang. And you're from another world, another planet. It all fits, all of it! Look, don't mind me for a bit. Just leave it, give me a chance to breathe and think. This is the most gloriously crazy thing that ever happened to anybody!"

Rang watched the spinning chaos in his mind and grinned at Rana. She nodded and thought at him, "This one is good. He understands much."

"I agree," Kohl's thought came echoing. "Perhaps this is the underlying significance of the term 'genius.' But don't you get the sense that this is also rare and unusual? That there are not many of this quality?"

In the hush of the room they could hear Shublik, in another room, in vehement argument with someone.

"I mean right now or sooner! Already you're keeping me waiting! For just once more I give it the details to you. One sweater, white, the biggest size you got, because this man is six foot and a half, with more muscles than Hercules. And pants, any old pants so long as they're white. Dacron, cotton, hopsack—who cares? For the dame you bring another sweater, also white, make it a forty-four. And a skirt, make it a half-length wrap-around, because this dame has legs like you never saw before. Call it a thirty-eight maybe. And bring a measure-tape! What are you waiting for? What are

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you trying to do to me? Already you should be halfway here! Good-bye!"

Rang "saw" him take the instrument away from his ear and bang it down. Almost instantly it jangled an alarm and Shublik snatched it up again.

"Didn't I tell you not to argue? Huh? Who is that, please? Oh! Yes, sure, I'll tell him right away." In a moment Shublik came into the room and spoke to Hector. "On the telephone. For you. Hiram Carver. Everybody is up early this morning!"

"Hah?" Hector stirred, looked round and scowled. "Now what the blazes does he want? Today of all days! Excuse me." He levered up out of the chair and went away mumbling. Rang watched him out of the door, saw him almost collide with someone else coming in. "Hi, Merry! Good morning. 'Scuse me!" He dodged and went on, leaving the newcomer to make three quick steps into the room and then stop in astonishment. Rang recognized her instantly, and smiled. This was the female he had seen through Virgal's eyes, the friendly one. He recalled now that she had spoken of Hector, and Virgal had pointed them here, quite accurately. Smile and strong "friendship" feelings went out to her impulsively, and as her big brown eyes met his she returned the smile automatically. And the "feel," but with that curious difference to modulate it. Then, as she took in more closely the details of his appearance her smile dwindled into a wide-eyed stare. For a momentary flash the oddly-disturbing "friend-plus" feeling stung him, and then her gaze switched to Rana. Simultaneously, something else switched, and for one tense breath there was a crackling interchange between the two females. The Shublik snapped the tension without noticing it.

"This morning everybody is crazy," he declared, seating himself at the table. "Don't ask me who these two characters are. According to Raine the Brain they just called in for a chat. You want to believe that? Me, I don't know, I'm no genius like him. All I know is whoever saw people like this? No clothes, nothing! I have to get 'wardrobe' to supply drapes

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for them! Such a liberty! But when I argue, what does he say? Shut up! Me! Don't frighten them away, he tells me. Me! All right, so it's his 'life' I'm trying to make, but I'm telling you I wish I had never even started this project. A musical, that's what I should have tried. I bet you I could have crashed the big-time with a musical. Any time now they are due for a big comeback, what with multi-channel sound, and stereo-vision, and radiphonics. But no, I had to choose a 'life,' and what a life I picked! This one is a lulu, I'm telling you. Nobody is going to believe one bit of it, nobody!"

The black-haired female paid him very little attention. Rang saw that her thoughts and feelings, although still jumbled, were carefully restrained now.

"I'm Meryl Martin," she said, and held out her hand. The gesture was a new one, but the picture in her mind was plain. Rang took her fingers, and for one quick moment there came again that "fervent" feeling, with a reddening of her face.

"I'm Rang," he said, "and this is Rana." The hand-holding was repeated.

"I'm Mr. Raine's confidential secretary." She made an unsteady smile. "He hasn't said anything to me about friends, but that's nothing unusual. He has such a lot on his mind, you know."

Rana extended her hand slowly to touch that glossy black hair and say, "Smooth." Then she shook her head. That wasn't the right word. "Polished," she tried, still not satisfied, then fell back on a flat question. "How?"

"Oh!" The female registered surprise and then dawning comprehension. "You're foreign! Not speak English?"

"Not very good." Rang nodded. "What is the word for this?" And he also touched her head, very gently.

"My hair, you mean?"

"Hair. Not like ours."

"Scandinavian," Shublik offered, through a full mouth. "They just came over on a ship."

"Spaceship," Rang corrected. "Not Scandinavian. From

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another world." This was a good mind too, perhaps not quite as agile and razor-edged as Hector's but lively. He looked for the same excited reaction, and was shocked at the sudden savage rejection that struck at him.

"Every Friday!" she snapped, with glacial irony. "Try tugging the other one, it plays violins." She whirled to glare at Shublik. "I suppose this is some screwball stunt of yours, Solly? If it is, I warn you, better get Joe Muscles out of here along with his gallon-bosomed girl friend before Mr. Carver gets to hear about it. And hear about it he will, if I have to tell him myself! You curdled-brained spectacle-spinner, haven't you got it through your solid bone head yet that Mr. Raine is a brain, a genius—not a carney freak?"

"Mel?" Shublik cried. "Blur my focus, what did I do? Why is everybody trying to ruin me?" He shot an appealing look to Rang. "Did I bring you here? Did I? Have I ever seen you before from anywhere?" He scrambled up from the table urgently, approached her. "How can you even think such a thing? Am I a dope? Me, Solly Shublik the 'eye,' would I be such an idiot? For sixteen weeks now I have been tippy-toe all round Mr. Raine, like a shadow. I see him as a soft sweet guy, not much to look at maybe, but kind. All right, a brain, but just a plain simple ordinary guy underneath. And lonely. I hold my breath for him like a mother with a child. I love him. I want the television audience should feel for him like I do. It has to be delicate, just right, and I can do it. With this boy I am going to be right back up there at the top, where I should always be, and everyone saying 'That Solly Shublik, he's a master!' And it's just the simple truth. So would I bring in a superman and an amazon? Do I want him to look a skinny little miserable runt? Answer me that and say which one of us is crazy. Not even do I want glamour, except maybe when he talks to you in the evenings about how tired and lonely he is, with candles and some delicately blurred focus shots." She made a grimace, and Shublik ducked his head.

"I know. I know! You told me already that with you and Mr. Raine it's strictly business, so all right. I remember you

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from not so long ago and I can't see what's so terrible about just a little bit of leg and some cleavage—not too much—everything delicate, with Viennese music—but all right! That's out. But do me a favor, please. I am an artist. Would I want those? On a Viking ship, maybe, but here? I *told* you, they came this morning before I was even awake!"

"But I don't understand," she muttered. "How could they have got past the guards? And why on Earth are they wearing our towels?"

Hector came striding in, wearing a dark frown, and she accosted him at once. "Mr. Raine! Who are these people?"

Rang had followed this intriguing cross fire of words and feelings with great interest. Now he saw a sudden and curious reaction in Hector, like a defensive cringing in the mind and a stiffening in his attitude.

"Eh? Oh, just a couple of friends of mine. Miss Meryl Martin, my secretary. Rang. Rana."

"We've met!" she snapped, and Rang was puzzled at something indefinable in her attitude too. Not quite hostility but very like it. "It's quite bad enough having to keep track of all the involved and complicated matters people bring to you over the telephone, without having absolute strangers sprung on—"

"Wait! Hold on there a moment. Just for one thing, the daily work bit is off for today. Carver just informed me on the phone. Canceled. So you can relax. The store is closed. Nothing doing. Have some breakfast."

"I have already had mine, thank you." She spoke very deliberately. "You still have not explained what you're doing out of bed so early, or who these people are, or anything."

He smiled awkwardly, ran fingers through his red hair and said, "I just told you. They're a couple of friends who called in to talk to me."

"They flew through the window, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact you're very nearly right, Merry. At any rate, they climbed up the cliff. At least, I *think* they did. And they had a bird with them. An enormous creature,

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looking like a cross between an eagle and a hawk but about ten times as big as any bird has a right to be."

She put her hand to her mouth in sudden consternation. "The roc! And I thought I was having a dream. I saw it this morning, on my balcony."

"Hardly a roc. Fiction-myth, from the *Arabian Nights*. But I'd hate to put a name to it that would fit any better."

"That was Virgal," Rang said, catching the flow of images. "He is with us. All together."

"Christmas!" Meryl breathed, her brown eyes very wide. "Then it's true, what he said. About a spaceship. Are they really from another world, like on the teevee shows?"

"Well now"—Hector chuckled, suddenly losing his awkwardness and getting back the fine edge of curiosity—"that's what I was just finding out about when all the shanani-gans began. Something to hope on. A godsend." All at once he wheeled round to where Shublik was still munching at the table.

"Isn't it about time you got moving, Solly?"

"To do what? I should take immortal pictures with them in towels and you in a dressing-gown?"

"Not pictures! Don't you ever think of anything else? Down to the gate, and hurry!"

"The gate? Out front, you mean? Whoffor?"

"To let him in past the guards, of course."

"Huh? Who?"

"The person who is bringing the wardrobe, the clothing you were shouting about just now!"

Shublik gulped and got up. "That's right! I'm on my way right now." He went scuttling out, and Hector watched him go, then turned to Rang with a grin, hunching his shoulders.

"What a demonstration. You're going to think we're all raving mad at this rate. My humble apologies."

"Are they really from Mars, or Venus, or something like that?" Meryl wondered, and Hector shook his head slowly.

"I doubt it, very much."

Rang read the images in his mind and frowned over them

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for a moment. "Not," he said, "from those worlds," and then he was stuck, feeling the need for some number symbols to use. Trying the simplest of all, he spread one hand and touched the thumb with his other finger. "This?"

"Thumb," Hector said. "Finger—no, dammit, that's not what you want, is it. You're asking for numbers. Like this!" and he used his own fingers in quick pantomime. "One, two, three, four, five—"

Rang nodded, watching closely, and Hector fidgeted, almost dancing with impatience, waving his hand to Meryl. "Notebook. Pencil. Something, dammit!"

"Oh!" she gasped. And then, "Look, Mr. Raine, wouldn't it be easier in the day room? I mean, if we're not going to work today—?"

"You're absolutely right, Merry, why didn't I think of that. Come on!" and he led the way out with long eager strides, Rang and Rana following into a narrow high-roofed tunnel that led into yet another room, bigger than the last. This one also had large glass-covered openings—Rang puzzled a moment over Meryl's image of "flying through a window" and decided there was something not quite right about it—and it was bright with warm light from the sun. There were chairs of a slightly different design, a large table in the middle of the fur-floor, and glass-protected storage-cabinets round the walls, all full with boxes of many colors and sizes. Hector went to the table, pulled at the side of it and revealed a concealed shallow container which held sheets of white stuff and rods that were pointed at one end.

Rang felt Kohl's gentle thought: "This suggests picture-making techniques of some kind. We should now learn much. Watch closely."

It turned out to be astonishingly simple and ingenious. Hector put a white piece on the table. "Paper," he said, distinctly. "Pencil." He took a rod and scraped the pointed end over the paper and it left a black mark. He murmured to himself, "I should have thought of this sooner. I'm supposed to be smart." He drew a small, tight circle in the middle of the white, made short lines stick out from it in all

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directions and said, "Star. Our star we call the Sun. You with me?"

Rang thought a moment, then stepped into the warm light through the glass and spread his hand to catch some of it.

"Sun?"

"Right. And that's sunlight. Oh brother, I'm going to have to *work* to keep up with you, I can see that. Now we'll shove in the planets. Planets! Another name for worlds," and he drew a series of sweeping ellipses, not too accurately, around that center spot, making a little circle on each line. Rang put a finger on the third one.

"This world," he said, and Hector chuckled.

"You're ahead of me. Right, that's our world. We call it Earth."

"Venus." Rang indicated the second curve and circle, picking the image out of Hector's mind. "Mars," he concluded, as the shaky ellipses went on and on.

Meryl looked up at him wonderingly, exuding faint fear. "And you're not from those two? Where then?"

Rang brushed his hand over the paper. "Not there. Another world."

"I very much fancy we are now up a tree." Hector sighed. "We can but try, I suppose." He lifted the paper, turned it over to show a clean side, and held out the pencil to Rang. "Go on," he invited. "Show me. Where are you from?"

Rang took a deliberate moment to grasp the novel implement and settle it in his hand, the while he appealed to Kohl for help with images. The picture came clear enough in his mind, but translating it into marks on paper was a much harder task. He settled the point in the middle of the paper and drew several random little loops and spirals, gradually extending them wider and wider until they were almost to the edge. That didn't look right at all. He hammered the surface gently with the point to make many small dots about the center, and that was more like it. Then he carefully stroked a series of sweeping lines in spirals out from the center, and sensed a sudden spark of recognition in

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Hector's mind. It grew into a picture very like that which Kohl was showing him.

"A galaxy? Are you trying to draw the Galaxy?"

"Right!" Rang nodded eagerly. "Galaxy. Many stars, like this. You know this?"

"Show me"—Hector was cautious now—"this world—on there!"

Rang moved the pencil out toward the edge, along one of the spirals, and made a dot, pressing hard enough to make it plain.

"Check!" Hector muttered. "And now, where's yours?"

"This is here. The other world is here," and Rang made another heavy dot close in to the center, where the scribble was thick.

"Simple, straightforward—and I just do not believe it!" Hector said.

"Why not?" Meryl demanded. "You've believed all the other crazy things. Why not this?"

"Because, my dear Merry, our galaxy is about eighty thousand light-years across, and even on a conservative estimate, that means these two claim to have traveled something like thirty thousand or more light-years. And I am not prepared to throw Einstein into the discard without some kind of hard proof."

Rang itched with excitement. He caught indefinite but intriguing concepts of time and distance. Kohl pressed just as eagerly at the back of his mind. "This is highly important," he urged. "We need a time-distance base that we can share."

Rang harried his memory, dredged up a word or two. "Time," he said. "Light-years? How?" And then, hopefully, he stepped again into the light from the sun, facing it. Watching Hector, he turned until the light was on his back, and then completed a full turn. "Like this?"

Meryl got it first. "Mr. Raine, he's trying to work out our day and night values! Isn't he?"

"Right!" Rang nodded, smiling at her. "Day. Night. Many days, what?"

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"I'm a fool," Hector muttered bitterly. "Merry, don't ever let me hear you call me a genius again. I'm a slow-witted fumbler. These two can read our thoughts, so what in the name of sanity am I doing fooling about with bits of scribble on paper? All I have to do is talk, and think, and that's it!"

"They can't!" She was aghast all at once. "Can they? Are you sure?"

"Good question. Let's nail that down, at least. Let's get just one thing at a time settled. All right, Rang? I'll fold my arms like this, so no give-away gestures. And shut my eyes. And you tell me what I'm thinking."

Rang shrugged at the pointless exercise. The images were childishly simple. Cup. Knife. Window. Paper. Sun. Galaxy. Many suns. And then a shaky image of Virgal. Camera. Solly Shublik. Rana. Meryl Martin . . .

"Whoa there!" Hector stirred suddenly. "That's enough bull's-eyes for me. Convinced, Merry?"

"Oh dear! Can—can she do it too?"

Rana smiled and nodded. "Hector," she said at once. "Hair. Towel. Gallon-bosom. Feet. Hector. Glass-on-eyes. Arms holding. Touching faces together . . ."

"Stop it!" Meryl snatched her hands to her head. "Get out of my mind, you—you freak!"

The sudden fierce stab of fear and hostility made Rang wince inside and tighten his defensive mind-screens. Rana had felt it too. Kohl's urgent thought whispered a warning. "Danger. These creatures don't exchange thoughts as we do. The concept frightens them. Be careful."

"Easy there!" Hector muttered. "I know it's scary, but they don't mean us any harm, Merry."

"How do you know?" she blazed. "You don't know *what* they may be able to do to us! They're monsters!"

Rana was distressed. "It is wrong to see what you think? I mean not to harm. I see your thoughts. They are good, warm clear sunlight. Other thoughts are not good like that."

Rang followed her with careful words of his own. "We have seen other thoughts. Many. Like scribble on paper,

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Shublik. Like scary, Yoshi. Some hurt like bad-in-mouth coffee. Not good to see. Your thoughts are smooth, like friends, hold hands and shake. Are good!"

Hector managed a shaky smile. "I think you're paying us a compliment, old man. I know you mean well, but it's a bit hard for us to take—"

Rang lost him as an urgent message snatched his attention. He tensed as picture-images spun through his mind. Gromal! A flat and green expanse, with high bushes and a wall surrounding, topped with metal spikes. An uproar of angry thoughts and shoutings. Directly ahead was a smooth-stone wall with openings—windows—and a doorway, darkly open, with two bipeds rushing and struggling through. Pursuit. One of the bipeds looked like Shublik, the other a strange one carrying a large brown object.

"What's up?" Hector demanded, and Rang checked him with a hand, sent an urgent command to Gromal to follow, but without menace. No hunting!

"Another friend comes," he said, "making fear and shenanigans! Also Shublik and one more, with noises."

"I can hear 'em now. Not another of your king-sized pigeons, I hope?" Rang shook his head. A few seconds later Shublik rushed into the room with the strange one at his heels, both exuding panic-terror.

"A wolf!" Shublik panted. "A wolf! After us! It got through the gate right after Miss Stevens here. It's coming after us!" and he raced across the room, round the table, and cowered behind it.

"It is all right!" Rang snapped, striding towards the door. Miss Stevens staggered to a halt, stared up at him, and then emitted a high-pitched ullulation and collapsed on the floor.

Gromal came padding in, tongue lolling. He woofed cheerfully to Rang, saying in his direct way and simple mind-pictures, "It was a long run, with hard ground and many growling things running fast, also bipeds shouting and angry. And no food!"

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Rang cuffed him affectionately, and then cringed as he felt the boiling wave of dread that came from the bipeds in the room.

VII

IT WAS ANOTHER of those moments when time hung and drew out in slow quivering threads. Rang turned, made a gesture to Rana, who came across to stand on the other side of Gromal. The three faced the flood of panic warily but with bewilderment. Shublik peered glassy-eyed over the table. Meryl had her arms tight around Hector and her face hidden against his chest. Hector himself peered in dismay over her shoulder, the glass things over his eyes tilted askew and his red hair bristling. On the floor, Miss Stevens was inert. Kohl came in with incisive speed.

"No time to wonder *why* these creatures are so full of fears. We can trace that later. For now, make 'friend' feelings towards them as strongly as possible, all of you."

"But they don't sense thoughts, ours or anyone else's!" Rana objected.

"It is our only hope. For some reason they are insensitive to thoughts, but they have animal feelings and emotions. If we don't beat this terror they may act with some form of violence. All together now, and I will help!" The interchange flew as fast as only thought can fly, taking less than the blink of an eyelid. Rang meshed with Rana and Gromal, felt Kohl blending in powerfully. Together they "felt" great and warm friendship and cordiality towards the three who cowered from them. As a team they had done this when out hunting. It worked, sometimes, just enough to lure a preda-

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tor into relaxing and missing the crucial moment of danger. If it would work with mindless beasts, it ought to work now. Rang opened his mind strongly, felt the others doing the same.

Shublik straighted up on the far side of the table and looked foolish. Meryl stopped shivering, pushed away from Hector's embrace and turned. Hector manufactured an unsteady grin, took off the glass covers and began to wipe them.

"You really had us coming and going, there," he admitted. "We weren't expecting anything that big. What's his name?"

"This is Gromal." Rang smiled and Gromal pricked his ears, snorted and Shublik took a cautious step to come round the table.

"A dog!" he said. "That's all he is. So he's a big one, who cares? One look and you can see how he is well-trained. Say!" He paused as inspiration struck him. "You know they used to make dog movies once? A fact! But never did they have a dog-star like this one. He's a natural!"

"Yes." Hector drew the word out thoughtfully, watching Meryl go round the other side of the table and right up to stroke him. "That's fine. You're a man. She's a woman. That other creature was a monstrous eagle. This is a dog, even if it does stand five feet tall at the shoulder. And you are all friends, that's obvious. It's just great. But we were all scared stiff a moment ago, and now we're buddy-buddy. It's all far too slick. Unless I get some very good answers very soon, I am about to go stark raving mad!"

Rang appreciated the bursting curiosity that Hector felt, and grinned in sympathy until a nudge from Gromal reminded him of more practical matters.

"Our friend here is hungry," he said. "Needs food."

"My apologies." Hector shook his head. "I am being considerably less than the perfect host this morning. Yoshi!"

Instantly the three reached and "took" Yoshi's mind with that same "friend" feeling, so that the man came with smiles to conduct Gromal away to another room. Hardly had they gone from sight, with Rang grinning at the wolf-hound's mind-picture "This is better than hunting!" when they all heard

the heavy clatter of running feet and Rang, curious, picked up a mind-pattern that was familiar. It took him a moment to place it, but he was in time to greet the new arrival as he came galloping into the room, red-faced and breathless.

"Again, good morning, Sam Hamilton!"

"Whup!?" The guard jarred to a halt, stared hard, and Rang saw the thoughts twist and uncurl in his mind, until recognition came. "Mr. Rang! And your good lady!" The eyes swiveled, saw how Rana was dressed, and immediately became elevated. "Now I'm getting it. I *thought* I'd seen that dog before, someplace!" He stiffened suddenly, turned to Hector. "Mr. Raine, sir, there's a damn great—begging your pardon, ladies—a helluva big dog just come in here. It shot through the gate just as I was opening it to let Miss Stevens in. Her and Mr. Shublik went running—and it went after—" And Hamilton dragged to a halt as he saw Shublik and then Miss Stevens still unconscious on the floor. "I guess you already know about it, sir!"

"It's perfectly all right, Sam," Hector assured him. "All being taken care of. Miss Stevens has fainted, but we'll deal with her right away. No need to worry about the dog. He's a friend of ours."

"Just as you say, Mr. Raine." Hamilton shrugged and was half-turned to leave when something came to bother him. "Don't want to cause any trouble," he said. "A professional matter, you might say. You mind telling me who let those two in here? I came on duty at ten this morning and nobody so much as said a word to me about guests!"

"Hmml" Hector scratched his chin thoughtfully. "If you don't mind I'd rather not explain that just now. Some other time. But I would like you to tell me where you met these two, and the dog, before."

"That was this morning, early on. About eightish. I was out there on the raft. Nothing like a swim, first thing, that's what I always say. And I saw them come swimming in. Stopped to pass the time of day and then went on inshore. You don't often see people taking the dog for a swim, but why not? I didn't know they were friends of yours." Hamil-

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ton went away back to his guard duties, and Hector grew a gleam in his eye to match the furious working of his mind. He stared at Rang hard.

"Sol" he murmured. "That's why you hadn't any clothes. You swam in. Because your ship came down in the sea, eh?"

"Our ship is in the sea, yes," Rang agreed, but puzzling over certain odd aspects of the thought-pictures. "It is there now. But not wrong. We live in the sea always. It is good there. On the surface—" He was about to make the point that the surface was uncongenial, until it struck him that this wasn't true here. He chose fresh words. "On my world the surface is not good to live."

"You're getting me more mixed up every minute. You're none of you fish, not from where I'm standing. But this won't do at all. We have a body. Merry, lend a hand here. And you, Solly. Miss Stevens, I think you said? All right, let's get ourselves organized. Merry, you and Miss Rana take the swooner away somewhere and minister to her." Shublik ripped open the brown object to reveal folded coverings, some of which he handed to Meryl.

"Best I could think of, right off like that. Stevie will measure her up for something better, soon as she comes round."

"That's fine." Hector nodded. "I'll take the other things. Rang, you and me to my room. It's about time I got myself dressed anyway. Solly, what can you be doing? Ah, I've got it. You go see those guards and stop their mouths. Nobody, but *nobody* is to know anything about my guests until I give the word. Make sure they understand that. Make sure you understand it, too!"

"I should talk!" Shublik sneered. "You think I want everybody should believe I'm crazy? Already I have all the troubles I ever want. What about the drapes for him? You want the measuring-tape?"

"I have one of my own, in a drawer somewhere. I know how to measure a man, dammit! I've had it done to me

enough times. You get going. Come on with me, Rang. I've got bones to pick with you."

This time the tunnel was longer, with turns, and the room they came to was smaller, with a couch, and chairs, and more of the wall-cabinets full of boxes. This was Hector's own room. Rang made a strong mental note to find out about this fur-floor stuff for *his* room. Hector gestured to a chair, closed the door, and there was accusation in his mind.

"You did something to us back there, when the dog showed up. We were all shaking with fright one minute, and it was all over the next. So it was you. Something you did. Right?"

"Yes. We made the fear go away, and friendly feelings come. Was it a wrong thing to do?"

"I dunno! I don't even know what it was you did! Or how! You've got me so confused I don't know where to start first."

"Need more words. Many more words."

"How right you are. And I was just working round to the idea—when things went haywire just now—that if I just talk, and talk, and you listen, we'll get on a lot faster. Right?"

"You talk." Rang nodded. "I listen, and know."

"Right. And we can be doing other things simultaneously. Somehow I don't think that's going to confuse *you*. Now, where's that blasted tape of mine?"

Rang submitted to having the flexible strip compared with his dimensions, not quite grasping why until Hector started to dress himself. These coverings were different from the female ones. The sweater felt odd, but comfortable, the pants most peculiar, and insecure until he buckled his belt round them at the waist. Hector's thoughts streamed in a steady torrent, and he talked almost as fast and as randomly, his whole lean awkwardness jerking and jumping with the intensity of his excitement.

"You're big, but you're as human as I am, yet you say you live in the sea, that you come from a world in towards the Hub, and your best friends are a giant dog and an

equally giant eagle. If there's sense to that, it will take a better brain than mine to see it. I'd better talk about me.

"No, don't tuck it inside, that's for shirts. Pull it down over—that's the way! Now, where do I start? Very simply, my father and mother were gifted people. I.Q.s up in the two hundred bracket. As a rule, the offspring tend to drop a little below the parents in cases like that; nobody knows why. But in my case it was the opposite. Cumulative. It shouldn't happen to a dog, believe me. I was an *enfant terrible*. My I.Q. is so far up there it's out of sight. A genius—me. I went to special schools, had tutors, learning machines, all the encouragements, everything. I also had problems that I didn't even know about until I was old enough, and then it was too late. I graduated in fifteen major subjects before I was sixteen. I could write a three-foot shelf on the subject of Institutes for Advanced Learning, of which our fair state of California has not a few. I spent a few agonized years shuttling from one to another trying to find someone who could teach me how to learn."

He paused to laugh wryly at himself. "If that sounds like Greek to you, don't worry; it sounds the same to other people too. Think of a man who has never learned anything else but laborious longhand—and hand him an electric typewriter! That's how I was fixed. I had nowhere to go but up, and already I was at the top! So I had to find out my own methods, after I'd tried all the others I could find. Sleep-learning, various mnemonic devices, hypnosis, a few drugs, unconscious assimilation—the lot! And I learned; oh yes, I learned. I ate facts and figures, theories and concepts, philosophies and hypotheses, the way other people munch candy. Couldn't get it fast enough!"

He came to a halt before a window, staring out. Rang said, "Knowing many things and able to think quickly and clearly, that is a genius?"

"That's what some people want from it, yes. But that also defines a good computer. It took me a long time to realize that much, Rang, that I was turning myself into a machine. A brain, yes, but with no motivation, no aims, no purpose in

life. And no real friends. Mind you, I'm not blaming other people for that. Who can be sociable with a character who knows all the answers to everything, right down to the last decimal place, just as soon as you have finished pronouncing the question? I'm a freak. I know all the answers—my subconscious is loaded with them—but I have nothing to talk about."

"You are alone," Rang said, grasping that point very clearly.

"That's it, exactly. Had it not been for Hiram Carver—you'll meet him this afternoon—I don't know what I would have done. I don't think you'll like him. I don't. But he saved me. My parents died in a plane smash five years ago, and that wasn't so terrible, since we didn't get along all that well. But I needed somebody to take care of the financial side, while I went slowly mad trying to figure why I am, what am I for, who I am, anyway? Carver's a corporation lawyer, and a good one. He saw something I had missed. He brought me to this house, set me up in luxury, cut me off from the world, gave me a secretary and staff—and people pay money just to talk to me, to ask me questions. I thought he was crazy. 'What,' I asked him, 'can anybody get from me that he can't get from a machine, or a good reference book?' And he gave me the answer in one word: Opinions. Sure, you can ask a computer questions, but by the time you've converted your problem into FORTRAN, it's not the same question at all. Nor is it the same thing to get an opinion from somebody connected with some big enterprise. You suspect bias. But me, I don't work for anybody but myself. Two hours every day I answer the phone. Merry transcribes everything, just for the record. Carver has already vetted the people who call, has collected the fee from them. My take, clear of everything, is one thousand dollars a day. I don't know what he makes out of it, but it must be considerable. And that's it. Two hours. The rest of the time I am absolutely free to do whatever I want."

He sagged into a chair and laughed, without any humor at all. "That's me. Do whatever I like, except live. Because

I don't know how. That's why I was all set to jump off. Not the first time I've contemplated it, either. But you stopped me, and I'm glad you did now. I wonder how much of that you've understood?"

"Much," Rang told him. "I also asked the question 'who am I?' and that is why I am here now, on this world. Tell me about time and numbers now."

"All right, that shouldn't be too hard. Let me get a scratch-pad—"

Rang felt very close to this man, sensing in him several fellow-feelings: the breathless curiosity and itch to know, the feeling of being alone, and also the way in which he could organize his thinking to lay out an idea in logical form. The system of numbers was simple and familiar, tens of tens, just as Rang had long ago worked out on his fingers and then been taught by Kohl to extend into larger quantities. The time system, too, was exactly as Kohl had guessed, by planetary rotation and orbital period. With an occasional fumble, and questions, and with Kohl sitting at the back of his mind to observe and help, he followed Hector's agile mind closely. Even with the difficult concept of two kinds of time at super-light speeds, Rang understood immediately.

"That's an accepted postulate," Hector said. "There's a respectable body of math from particle-accelerator physics to back it up, too. But if your true origin is Earth a hundred thousand years ago, you must be one of our old Cro-Magnon ancestors. I have a picture of one of your kind right here!"

He went to one of the wall-cabinets and drew out a box; only it wasn't a box, Rang now saw, but a fascinating thing in itself. Many pieces of paper had been joined by their edges to form a series, and then protected by hard covers. And the pieces of paper carried pictures and word-symbols. Hector called it a book, and seemed astonished that Rang had never met the idea before. He was even more astonished when Rang managed, by dint of gesture and word, to convey to him the impression of a memory-tank as a way of storing knowledge.

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"I suppose it's logical for somebody who can toss thoughts and feelings about the way you do. No good to us. We just don't have that talent."

"All humans are like this?"

"Well—" Hector drawled, "perhaps not, at that. There have been all sorts of wild tales about telepathy and such like things. It could be a recessive gene. You have it. We've lost it, most of us."

"I disagree!" Kohl's thought came instantly in Rang's mind. "That intellect is the equal of yours. I see nothing prohibitive there except the handicap of fear, an emotional block."

"He has done much for us, has been kind. I will offer to do this for him in return, if you will help?"

"I will, gladly. It will be interesting to see how he reacts."

"Perhaps," Rang said aloud, "you have the power just as I have."

"Who, me? Read minds? I wish I could!"

"I will teach you. You have done many things for me, have been very kind. This way I can repay something perhaps."

"You don't owe me a thing, Rang. You saved my life, remember? As for teaching me—" And now Rang saw a curious ambivalence, a desire to learn this new thing, but a dark inchoate fear of it. The emotional block, as Kohl said.

"When you brought me in here," he said, choosing his words with care because this was delicate ground, "you said I had done something to you. I made you stop being afraid, and gave you friendly feelings. That was the wrong way, but necessary, just as I might hold you with my hand to stop you from running away. But this much is proved. You can't detect my thoughts, but you do respond to feelings, and this is the same kind of thing. As you said to me, walk first, then run afterwards."

"I don't know," Hector mumbled, struggling with the clouds in his mind. "You heap honors on me that I don't deserve. I have a kind of intellectual courage, I suppose, but that's all. I'm a coward. The very idea scares the pants

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off me. I wouldn't dare say that to anybody else, but it's the truth, and you know it."

"The body fears, and it tells the mind to fear also. " Rang was now on easier ground. Kohl had drilled him this way long ago. "If it's a small mind, like a beast, it believes and fears. But your mind *knows*. It can be separate from the body. Let me show you how."

Hector was still uneasy, but the little fire of curiosity burned and grew. And Rang showed him, by careful stages, how to disentangle physical and emotional reactions from rational thinking, how to be aware of fear, and pain, and hunger and weariness, to isolate and analyze one by one the animal responses and understand them. And then, in a hesitant inexperienced way, to control and project them. Once he had grasped the first essential, and tremendously difficult, knack of non-effort, Hector made progress swiftly. Kohl, putting all his skill and experience behind Rang's persuasion, was impressed.

"These creatures have enormous potential," he said. "I see now how they have achieved their advances in technology. They fight hard, even their own fears!" And Hector did fight hard. He was aglow with gentle sweat by the time he was able to accept and block a fear-thrust that Rang threw at him, or to put out a reasonably strong "friend" emotion-wave.

"That is very good," Rang told him. "Soon, when you have the emotions clear and controlled, you'll be able to go on to detecting thoughts."

At that moment, somewhere in the distance, someone struck a metal sheet so that it roared, and Rang frowned in wonder.

"A gong!" Hector explained, chuckling. "Genuine Chinese. Means lunch is almost ready. I don't know about you, but I can certainly do with mine. I could eat a horse! I haven't worked this hard in years!"

Rang let him lead the way back to the room where they had eaten before. He had a fair appetite himself. He spent

a thought on Virgal and got an instant and peevish response. Apparently the local small prey was sparse and wary.

"Virgal is hungry, too," he told Hector. "Can you feed him?"

"Why not? Call him down. What's his fancy?" Yoshi was called and instructed to find some cold raw meat from the refrigerator and to place it handy on the balcony. Rang thought a small warning was appropriate just now.

"You must be careful of one thing, when making emotional feelings to anybody else. As I've told you, it's done not by squeezing and straining, but by opening out, by reaching to touch. But if I reach out and touch you, like this, you're also touching me. It works both ways."

"Get you." Hector nodded. "If I throw hate at somebody, I leave myself wide open to getting a smack in the puss myself. That's fair."

Rang heard footsteps, and turned. In at the door came Meryl Martin, with a curiously masked smile and confused thoughts. He beamed warm friendship at her and felt Hector doing the same. She stepped aside, seeming to falter, and pink came into her face. Then Rana appeared. He knew it was Rana. There could be no mistaking that familiar mental pattern. But his eyes saw something so new and startling that he couldn't accept it for a moment. This was a female with shimmering yellow-metal hair clouding about her face, with bigger, brighter and bluer eyes than he remembered, and with a different, somehow powdery texture to her face. The sweater molded to her shape, altering it in a subtle and disturbing way. The skirt, ending abruptly at half-thigh, threw emphasis on the shape of her legs, and they were different too, with a peculiar dull gloss on them. He scanned the whole in one comprehensive glance, then caught her timid thought.

"Is it good?"

He was so confused he couldn't answer yes or no, and while he was still struggling to collect his feelings, he felt a blaze of response from Hector directly to her. This was the "friend" feeling, but with those violent and oddly up-

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setting overtones strongly included. Rana apparently had no such doubts about her reactions. He sensed her immediate and duplicating echo back to Hector, with equal gusto. It was still disturbing, but he decided he liked it. The interchange was so swift and certain that the others noticed nothing of a delay.

Meryl made a shaky laugh and said, "There you are. Isn't she lovely, now?"

Hector was in her mind, but her eyes appealed to Rang for his opinion, so he sent her that pleasant new feeling with vehemence, because she had somehow made this change in Rana. With just a brief flicker of hesitation she glowed and responded to him with total sympathy. It *was* a pleasant feeling. A fervor.

"Lord!" Hector breathed. "What *have* you done, Merry? She was magnificent before, but now—I"

"It's very good!" Rang endorsed, catching the ardent glow in Rana's mind and matching it generously. "But how?" He brought his attention, and the feelings, back to Meryl. Her face was rosy now, but her voice shrank to a confused murmur.

"It wasn't anything, really, Just a shampoo, and a good brushing. And a little foundation—powder—nothing much. But it makes a difference. You look different too, now that you're dressed up." The fervent feeling oscillated oddly in her mind, as if she wasn't sure of it. She gestured uncertainly towards the table. "Hadn't we better eat, now?"

For a while there was the pleasant distraction of food, new smells and tastes, more names and ideas, and then Hector frowned over a puzzle.

"Tell me about your world," he said. "It must be an odd place, by our standards, that is. There are so many things you don't seem to have!"

"This world seems strange to us in the same way. You live on the surface always, not in the sea. On our world the surface is dark and dim except when there is a bright light—electricity—from the storm. And it is always blowing with hard winds, and rain all the time, sometimes hot, some-

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times cold. This is because we have three suns at once. So we live always in rooms under the sea. Not so fine as these, but cut from rock. We go on the surface only when we need to hunt for food."

"You poor things!" Meryl put an impulsive hand on his wrist, and now her ardent feeling was steady and strong, a complete and cordial sharing with him. "Imagine having to live underwater all the time! No wonder Rana's hair was thick with salt. And no wonder you're so big and strong!"

"That explains something else, too," Hector exclaimed. "That's why you put down into the sea, and why you swam in, without clothing. Who needs clothes, in the sea? Even with us, with all our stupid neuroses about exhibitionism, it's accepted that one wears only the minimum when swimming, or on the beach. And it's one of the oldest beliefs in biology that we all came from the sea in the first instance!"

Rang saw an opportunity he had been waiting for, to ask about these strange and inexplicable habits of covering the body, but before he could select the proper words his mind warned him of an interruption at hand. Shublik came trotting in with Gromal, obviously on the best of terms, but puzzled.

"This is the smartest dog you ever heard of," he declared. "It's like he was reading my mind. But all of a sudden he wants to move, to come in here, and I get the feeling he's trying to tell me something!"

"Perhaps he's hungry," Meryl suggested.

"Not him. We've had ours, in the kitchen."

"He wants you to meet a friend of ours," Rang explained. Gromal was taking seriously the command to be friendly. "Out on the balcony, soon."

"Huh? O.K., mister, just as you say. Come on, boy, this way."

"It's Virgal," Rang explained, as he caught the momentary bewilderment in Meryl's mind. "The big bird that you saw on your balcony this morning, just after you had washed."

As an explanation, it went too far. He felt the immediate

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constriction of her thoughts, and the return of that fearful suspicion.

"How did you know that? That I'd just had a bath?"

"What the bird saw, we saw," Rana explained, with massive simplicity. "That is how we are, all together."

Coincident with Meryl's startled gasp came a shriek from outside, and Rang leaped to his feet. Virgal wasn't exactly the friendly type at the best of times, and Shublik needed help here.

"I'll go," he said, and went away with long hurried steps, to find the pop-eyed cameraman backed flat against a wall and trying to melt into it as Virgal ferociously defended his dinner. Gromal sat off to one side, his tongue lolling, enjoying the performance. Rang snapped a command to Virgal, got between the beak and the petrified Shublik, and offered an apology. "Not to fear," he said. "Virgal is stupid, has only a little brain which thinks of food all the time. He'll be calm enough if you don't go too near his meal."

"On my life, I don't even want to watch it," Shublik quavered, peering past Rang in tremulous fascination. "Such a beak would rip a man's guts out—snap—like that! I need a drink!" He edged away to the door and scuttled in, almost bumping into Meryl.

"Second time today," she said, with desperate calm. "And what a day! First you—" and she offered a restrained wave to Virgal, who squawked his recognition. "You come and perch on my window-ledge and stare with your beady eyes, you traitor! And I thought you were a friend!" This was a novel sense-mixture for Rang, this flippant humor overlaying a bottled-up tension. She turned on him now with indignation. "You were watching me while I was taking a bath!"

"Somehow this is wrong," Rang admitted. "But I don't understand why." He saw a cluster of wood-strip chairs and a table in the far corner of the balcony, and waved her to them. "Can we talk, please? There's still a lot I don't understand, and Hector talks all the time about large and difficult things, and misses the easier ones." Her mind, as he

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saw now, was almost as crisply ordered as Hector's, although quite different in general tone.

Kohl touched him with a clarifying concept. "This is a difference between male and female, Rang. I suspect there is a form of polarity here. Perhaps you can get her to talk about it, so that we can learn more."

"When Virgal flew," Rang began, as soon as they were settled, "I watched through his eyes. That's how we work, and that's what he's for. I saw a new and strange world. I saw creatures that went on two feet, but were hideously deformed and weirdly colored. Then I saw you, the first one I had seen that looked normal. And then you put on those coverings, clothes, and I knew that I had seen the others all wrong. Because I'd never seen clothes before."

Her bubbling pink confusion gradually ebbed away. "I think I understand, and I don't really mind all that much. Christmas, I've been stared at before! It's knowing that you can read my mind that shatters me. It scares the pants off me, honestly."

"I don't understand. I can see your face, your hands, your movements. I hear what you say. So what's different about seeing what you think?"

"Of course it's different!" she retorted. "It means I can't hide a thing from you, and that's even worse than having you see me with no clothes on!"

"You are very beautiful," he said. "Why should you want to hide?"

"Christmas! You ask awkward questions, don't you? It's nice to know you think I'm beautiful, of course. I mean—alongside Rana—but, can't you understand, it means that you just take one look at me and you know all my—my secrets! For instance, you know now that I was once a telestar—"

"I don't know that," he contradicted instantly. "I don't even know what that is. I can only see what you are thinking—now—as you think." He frowned as he searched for a way of expressing it so that she would understand, and the memory of Hector's book came back to him. "Like a book," he said, "that you hold. There are pictures and word-symbols on

all the pages, but I can't see any of them until you show me the page."

She puzzled over that for a while, then nodded. "It's like talking, only without saying anything?"

"Perhaps a bit more. When you think, it makes pictures. When you talk, I hear words, and understand what you mean."

"That's why you're so easy to talk to." She smiled. "You are, you know. I get the feeling that you're kind, and that you understand every word, and is that silly! Because, of course, you do!"

"You were saying about being a telestar?"

"Oh that! I suppose that's silly too, but don't you dare tell Hector. Not that it means much. Toss a rock in any direction from here and you'd hit a Madonna with an overblown bust. This region is stiff with them. And I was one, once. I guess I was luckier than the rest. I made it. Big name, star billing, stills in all the best magazines, everything. And nothing. I was a figure, a shape for men to drool over. Talent they didn't want from me. And I had not a friend in the world. Any men who came my way wanted yum-yum, the old message, the Meryl Martin bit, the sense of conquest, and something they could brag about afterwards. Other women? All they ever wanted to do was get the knife in my back while they hogged the nearest camera. For me myself—nobody gave one split damn."

She leveled her big brown eyes at him with a savage grin. "My trouble was I couldn't stop being a person. They made an error in the assembly by giving me a brain and feelings."

"I know." Rang nodded.

"You do, sure, but nobody else ever did. So the day came when I added up all the nothing and decided I'd had it. I pulled the cork. Everything. All over. It's not so hard to do, in that game. You have to run like hell just to stay in the same place. In a month you can be forgotten, dead in a year. And Hector helped, without knowing it. He's a genius all right, but absolutely hopeless in some things.

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Somebody got the cock-eyed notion that he ought to be able to crank out a surefire jackpot of script. A whole series even. I met him while he was working on it. For me it was love at first sight. The first man I ever met who bothered to talk to me about something, something other than me or himself. Treated me like a person. And never even *saw* me, damn him!"

The words didn't match the ardor in her mind. "Of course, the script was a flop. It was brilliant maybe, but it died the death. And I was hooked. I fled the spotlights, got me some secretarial training, and managed to wangle this job. I'm with him every day, and still he doesn't even *see* me!"

"That," said Rang with impeccable logic, "is because you cover yourself up." And she blazed at him instantly.

"You just look here! Either Hector sees me as I am, as a human being with a brain and feelings, or nothing. I am not going to wave my dimensions at him, so there! Not that he would notice, even if I did. Why did I have to fall in love with a guy who has his head so full of other things?"

"Love?" Rang murmured, fitting several things together in his mind to go with this new word. "Is it this?" and he touched her with that fervent feeling, the way she had touched him when she had put her hand on his wrist. The effect was dramatic now that there were just the two of them. Her brown eyes widened into glowing pools of fire; color rose to her cheeks; she moved very slowly to come close, her lips parting, the counterpart of his feeling flooding lavishly from her. And this was something absolutely new, a mutual response, as if his "feeling" had been turned inside out and merged with her own into a complete new rapport.

"You're pretty wonderful yourself," she breathed, her mouth very close to his, the invitation burningly clear in her mind. They clung, very gently, for a long-drawn breath, and for the very first time Rang felt Kohl's clear thought in his mind as an intrusion.

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"Polarity!" the master declared, with mild triumph, and Rang brushed him away with almost-irritation.

"Whatever you call it, this is exceedingly pleasant!" Rang thought back.

"This is love?" he murmured, as they parted enough to breathe.

"Who's asking questions, honey? Let's try that once more, huh?"

Virgal's alert squawk stirred them into separation as foot-steps came, and then Hector and Rana, both looking rather pleased with themselves. On their heels came Yoshi, not a bit happy, with the coffee. Rana, of course, merely saw Virgal, with no more than a brushing thought of recognition, but Hector paused to take advantage of his new-found power of projection on the bird.

"We've met." He smiled. "Good friends now, eh?" and he waved an incautious hand, to snatch back hurriedly as Virgal snapped his beak. Rang had to grin at the puzzled expression, and explained.

"Virgal is difficult, is bad-tempered even at the best times. You're not strong enough yet to break down his suspicious nature."

"A toughie, eh? All right," He leveled a cautious finger at the bird. "I'll get you yet, my fine-feathered friend, you'll see!" He came to sit by Rana and chuckled. "Thank the Lord, some people are easier than that to get on with." With that seemingly innocent remark, Rang felt the other end of the spectrum of that ardent feeling he had just experienced with such pleasure. It came from Meryl, and it scalded his senses like hot acid, even though he knew she was trying her best to contain it. As he cringed, and blocked it out defensively, he felt Kohl's thought again, quietly triumphant.

"As I guessed; not only is this polarity, but also personality-involvement. This explains a great deal!"

Before Rang could hurl back an indignant question, there came interruption of hard-treading feet heralding the arrival of a mind that Rang couldn't touch at all. The biped associated

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with it strode onto the balcony, halted one step beyond the door to glare at Virgal, then shifted a bleak gray gaze on the group at the table.

"Raine!" it snapped. "Whoever these people are—and I don't want to know—get them out! You hear me? Out! Out!"

VIII

MALE, COMPLETELY hairless, tall; covered in gray material that failed to camouflage a bulge at the waistline—Rang snapped up the visible details as incidentals while his mind pushed at the chill barrier of solid suspicion that walled this man around. He had never imagined anything like it. It was as if this man distrusted his own thoughts to the extent that he locked them away in some crevice, and covered them with a surface film of pretense.

"Folks,"—Hector's voice sounded flat—"meet Hiram Carver, my manager. Hiram, this is Rang, and Rana, a couple of friends."

"I don't want to know who they are. Didn't you hear me? I said 'out!' " Carver shifted his baleful gaze back to Virgal and snorted. "And will you get this bird out of here at the same time? I want to pass." Now Gromal rose from the floor by the table and cocked his ears at the harsh noise. Carver's head swiveled. "What is this, a zoo? Raine, don't just sit there!"

"Now take it easy, Hiram. I should have said *four* friends, including the dog and the bird. Let me explain—"

Carver scowled. "That bird! So Henry wasn't off his trolley after all! Raine, that bird scared the daylights out of my butler this morning. The damn fool took a shot at it

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with an antique fowling piece of mine. He shot fifty bucks worth of value off it, the clown. Same bird. Must be. There can't be two that big." Hector hunched baffled shoulders at Rang, who nodded.

"It is the same. I am sorry that he frightened your butler, and the woman. He was just looking."

"You seem to know a lot about it. Will you shift the damned thing so I can pass and get sat down?"

Rang shafted a brisk order to Virgal, who had virtually finished gobbling anyway, and was just being perverse. The bird squawked peevishly, snatched a last morsel in his beak and hopped up to the edge of the balcony. Carver snorted, marched past, sat himself down angrily in a chair and placed a brown flat pouch across his knees. Emotions and thought-pictures shimmered over the steely surface of his mind as if he were trying them for something to fit the situation. Rang could feel Hector's efforts to stir a "friend" response meeting with cold indifference.

"Explain, eh? I'll explain this, Raine. I spent a lot of time and trouble organizing this setup for you. I gave instructions you were not to talk to anybody—anybody—without my say-so. And what do I find? Here you are talking to a couple of people I never even heard of, and for free! Now let me hear you explain away that!"

"Can't you forget dollars and cents for just once? Look, have a cup of coffee; relax, and be human just for a while!"

"For a brain, you can be awfully dumb sometimes," Carver growled. "You say 'human.' Do you have any idea what it costs to be human these days?" He switched readily to a placatory value. "I'm only thinking of you, my boy. Why do you think I provided all this, with guards, a secretary, and servants who can't handle English too well? It's all for your best. Think now, does a doctor examine you and tell you it will get better in a week or two if you take these pills—for free? No! Does a dentist do it, or a garage mechanic even—or a lawyer, like me? No! Knowledge is money. You have knowledge. It's that simple. So what are you doing giving it away? And how did these people get in here?"

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"Skip that for the moment. Let me set your mind at rest on one thing. So far as knowledge is concerned, these two have given me armfuls of stuff I never knew before, also for free."

"Is that so?" Carver's suspicion abated fractionally. "They don't look like professors to me. From Europe, perhaps?"

"Further away than that. Never mind. What about this big new deal you hinted at over the phone? That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"Now that is strictly private." Carver hardened his suspicion again. Rang was finding the whole concept of "privacy" a little difficult to accept in logic, but he was willing to concede it as a behavior pattern; so he made a move to rise, and Rana stirred with him, but Hector raised a hand.

"Hold it. Stay right there. These two are in on it, Hiram."

"You must be crazy, Raine. You don't even know what it is yet. Unless you're trying to pull a switch on me. Selling out to the competition?"

"Oh, for sanity's sake! When do I ever get a chance to contact any competition? Look, these two people are strongly interested in our ways of life, and I want them in on whatever deal you have lined up, just to see how it's done. They positively will not talk to anybody else about it, nor are they in any way financially interested. And I trust both of them absolutely."

"You do? I don't trust anybody at all."

"It's about time you started, then." Rang gathered from Meryl's silent reaction that this bold defiance was something new in Hector, and that she approved. But Carver's mind was a wonderful thing, yielding absolutely nothing. Probing it by force would have been hard work, had Rang wanted to do it. He listened with great interest as Hector tackled the problem another way.

"This whole business setup depends on the fact that people trust my judgment and opinions. If they didn't we wouldn't be in business at all, right? So why can't *you* trust me?"

"Of course, I trust you," Carver retorted. "It's just—well—this is a big deal, the biggest yet."

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"All right. Tell me about it. Now!"

Rang sensed a feeling akin to pain as Carver submitted to pressure and unfolded just a corner of his thoughts. "Two big men flew in this morning from Washington. Two very big men. To see me. They want you. I have you. It's that simple."

"And I'm all signed, sealed and delivered, just like a computer!"

"Now, now!" Carver patted the air soothingly, switching his values again. "Nothing is signed at all. Not yet. That comes tonight. These men aren't about to buy a pig in a poke. They want to meet you first and talk to you, just to be satisfied. That's fair, isn't it? I've arranged it so that I call for you around eight tonight. If anybody asks or gets curious, you're going to a premiere and party, right?"

"And where am I going?"

"To a premiere and party. Smart, eh? At the Milton."

"Hey?" Shublik jolted them all with a strangled complaint. He had appeared just in time to hear the last few words. "What are you trying to do to me? All this time he is a lonely dedicated man—and now he's a party-goer? What kind of a 'life' is that? What about my project?"

"You shut up!" Carver chilled him with a bleak eye. "You and your damned project. A 'life,' you call it? You wouldn't know about life if it came and spat in your lenses!" He turned back to Hector. "The party is genuine. There's always some kind of shindig going on at the Milton, so nobody will ever know the difference. You just mingle. You'll be met. You'll talk. And then we'll all find a quiet little corner somewhere and close the deal. And get this. You have got to be satisfied. I made that point hard. The terms to suit you, or it's off. There, can you ask anything fairer?"

Hector scowled in thought, with Meryl watching him worshipfully. Rang wasn't reading now. He was following the words pure and simple, finding them much more fascinating than he had ever before imagined. No wonder Meryl was shocked when she realized he could see what she was

thinking, as against the things she actually said. Hector stirred, made a face.

"I don't like it. However you gild it, a cage is still a cage. Why exchange this one for a new kind?"

"This"—Carver made a throwaway gesture—"is peanuts compared with what you can ask for. These men are in the big league, Raine." He craned forward to add, "There's this, too. I hesitate to stress it, but we do have a contract, you and me. As I said, I don't want to lean on it, but it might not be very clever of you to play funny—"

"Don't try to con me, Hiram. You don't own me. And in this instance don't try any of that legal guff, either. Raine the Brain, remember? I can read. Every relevant clause in that contract is modified by the phrase 'Subject to the consultation and mutual agreement of both parties.' I wouldn't have signed it otherwise. I tell you, I don't like this deal. Since when has Washington been free-spending to buy advice from an independent operator?"

"Well now"—Carver switched once more, and Rang marveled at the way the sheen played over the surface of that mind, leaving the hard core completely untouched—"I said 'from' Washington, but not necessarily 'of' that city. If you take my meaning?"

"Well, I will be everlastingly damned! You are human, after all. You have it planned to sell me to the Soviets!"

"Knowledge is international," Carver declaimed. "I read other things than contracts, Raine. You're not the only one with imagination. Wasn't it Dr. Johnson who said, 'Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel'? Do you care who appreciates you so long as it's somebody?"

"I'll make a deal with you." Hector grinned suddenly. "I'll play along just to see what gives—no promises, mind—so long as it is O.K. for my two friends to come, too. Suit?"

"I'm ruined!" Shublik moaned. "All my work wasted. Raine the Brain, just a nice simple guy, just folks—and now he defects to Moscow. Ruined!"

Carver turned on him savagely. "You never had anything in the first place, you shambling camera-carrier. You invented

this project because you couldn't think of anything better. And with you I have a contract that I drew up personally, myself. You let just so much as one inch of telefilm out of your hands without my say-so and I will have your eyeballs for shirt buttons! And something like that goes for you two. Raine may trust you, that's his funeral; but I don't. You say you want to see the way we do business in this country, and that's all right. Just take care you don't see what we do to people who interfere, that's all!"

He surged to his feet and strode off with his shoulders hunched and his jaw thrust out in unconscious mimicry of Virgal's favorite pose.

"For him a 'life' would never get past the scissors," Shublik muttered. "As a Shylock he would have remembered the blood, and the bones and skin and even the screams!"

"And then what would Shakespeare have done?" Hector chuckled. "Never mind, Solly, I haven't defected yet. Something you can do, as a favor to me. How about some real fancy clothes for my guests, something fit for a party, eh? Put it on my bill, if that helps."

"Forget it." Shublik turned over a hand. "Already I am in debt up to my ears, so what's a little more? You want costumes? It's no trouble. How would you like to do a favor for me another way, eh? Like this. When I ring up about the costumes I would also like to ask they should send over a lead, a big leather one with silver ornaments. And a silver chain. And then, tonight, when you are at the dance and everybody is stretching a neck to see who, I can be strolling around with my friend there, in all the bright lights and people, and they will look at me, and maybe some of them will say, 'You know who that is? That's Solly Shublik, the famous telefilm producer!' Is it a deal?"

Rang hid a smile as he followed Shublik's pathetically grandiose anticipations. It wouldn't do any harm, and it would be an experience for Gromal. He caught Hector's eye and nodded fractionally. Shublik was delighted. Rang suddenly spotted an omission in the grand design, caught Meryl's eye.

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"Will you come to this dance, also?"

"Of course she's coming!" Hector exclaimed. "I'm sorry, I just assumed you'd count yourself as included, Merry. Just took it for granted. Of course you'll come. Where would I be without my amanuensis? Er, are you all right for glad rags, or do you want Solly to fix something for you?"

"I think I can manage," she said, icily polite. "Am I there as an observer, a secretary, or am I expected to take part in the festivities?"

"That's another thing." Hector completely missed her sarcasm in his excitement at another thought. "A whole new range of things—experiences like music and dancing—will be totally new to you two. Come on, we have a ploy for the rest of the afternoon, at least!"

Rang was having his first headache. Throughout the conflict of ideas and interests between Carver and Raine, he had been gradually getting a better grasp on the enormity of numbers involved. Virgal's first panoramic view of the city had created the impression of size, but now that the details were filling in, Rang realized that this vast nest was but a small fraction of the whole, and the whole, only one country among many on this teeming world. Intellectually, he had been able to accept stars in uncountable numbers, and distances beyond any measurement that made sense, but this actual immersion in "people by the million," individuals like himself, was overwhelming to one who had lived the whole of his life hitherto entirely alone.

Back in the big room, while Meryl busied herself with a large cabinet over in one corner, Hector said, "I can lay out the whole international situation for you very simply, old man. Details would take months, but in essence, it is simple. Ever since we began being human we have tried to settle our differences by force. It never did work. You can stop a problem that way, but you can't solve it, and sooner or later it comes right back at you. As nations, we've carried on the same stupid mistake, only bigger. Until now, because one man is the same as all men when it comes to modern war. And now we are struggling to adjust to the

fact that there has to be another way of doing it. We're getting there, but very slowly. Paradoxically, what made it possible was science, only nobody will admit it. Conflict is essentially a two-valued thing. You on that side, me on this. Individuals or nations—it doesn't matter. But once you drag in a third party, it starts to fog up. And that's what happened."

He sketched a gesture and Rang saw in his mind the symbols of two vast collections of people sternly opposed to each other. "Fifty years ago it was all clear cut. East versus West. Us and them. The whole world was divided right down the middle between two opposing ways of life that had taken generations to develop into ideologies. That was the bad time. And then, almost overnight, up came a contender for top place: Red China. Organized science, you see, makes it possible for things to happen fast! The three-way split had hardly become a reality when, lo and behold, up came a fourth. The whole continent of Africa came to the boil and erupted into a brand-new nation, with energies and resources that make the U.S. look poor! By all the signs, South America is on the point of doing the same thing. And India. And five people just cannot fight each other all at once. It's ludicrous, but a fact just the same, that we have finally learned our lesson. Thou shalt not kill—because it doesn't solve anything! All the same, though, I don't fancy putting my talents, such as they are, at the disposal of the Soviets. Hah!" He broke off to exclaim, "How about that, then?"

"That" was a sudden rush of sound that filled the room, the same kind of rhythmic-thumping scrape-wailing sound Rang had heard from the ship's instruments. Hector beckoned him across to the source. Kohl looked through Rang's eyes and marveled at the method. Incredibly delicate vibration-patterns carved on the surface of a flat disc! This was another of those things he could grasp intellectually as fast as Hector thought through the mechanics of it, but which was still a marvel when sensed in reality. The explanation didn't account for the strange itch-to-move that the "music"

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induced in his body. Then Hector looked round and laughed at what he saw.

"The anthropologists would love this. Rhythm is a natural instinct, after all. It's going to be very little trouble teaching *her* how to dance."

Rana had her eyes half-closed and was moving and swaying exactly as she had before. As Hector went across to her she saw the thought-picture in his mind and slid into his arms as if she had been doing it all her life. Rang looked at Meryl, and smiled.

"Am I to learn this strange walking, too?"

"Why not? At least *you* don't take me for granted, do you?" It turned out to be a very pleasant way to spend the afternoon.

Carver was prompt to time. With considerable effort and a quite remarkable degree of discomfort the oddly assorted four were ready for him. Rang had never felt so constricted in all his life, and it was little consolation to be assured that he looked fine. He didn't know which he hated most, the stiff strangulation at his neck or the clumsy bindings on his feet. Crouching in the dim-lit rear compartment of one of those wheeled beetle-machines was unpleasant, too. Carver sat up front, with another man beside him to control the course of the machine. Even Kohl was startled by the fact that there was no kind of sensitive instrument to plot a course and avoid collisions, and wanted Rang to pay close attention, but Rang was almost unable to think. He felt stifled. Hector had explained that this kind of dress was customary for adult men at formal occasions, and Rang thought he was beginning to see why these people, for the most part, were so muddle-headed.

What made it just that little bit more outrageous was that Rana had nothing like so bad a problem. For her Shublik had provided a covering of some stretching material that looked like liquid metal, almost the color of her hair. While it clung to her like a skin it didn't constrict in the least, and it didn't even begin until halfway down her front. Meryl

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had put on a similar kind of cover, but in dark blue shimmering stuff. He eyed the pair of them in the dim light, saw how free they were to breathe and expand, and felt aggrieved at the unfairness of it.

At his back, following the car, came another with the two duty guards. That thought added to the sense of confinement. Virgal was off somewhere roosting. Gromal was out walking with Shublik. But he, Rang, was swathed and bound and handicapped, and all at once Meryl leaned across to whisper, "Don't look so grim; you're supposed to be enjoying this!"

"That is not possible for me."

"I can imagine. It must be awful for you. Never mind. You stick with me and we'll find a quiet corner somewhere while Hector gets on with his intrigue. You can tell me all about what it's like on your world."

Her words, idle though they were, made Rang shift his perspective a little. After all, he thought, this was no worse than going to hunt for food in a screaming rainstorm. Different, yes, but no worse. That philosophical decision was badly shaken when the car eventually halted and they were decanted into the harsh glare of lights outside the hotel. Stunned by the sheer weight of yammering human minds, he squeezed his faculties down to a crack and blundered his way through jostling crowds into a cramped little room which promptly and vertiginously hoisted him upwards.

"Elevator," Hector murmured, as he started in momentary fright. "Sorry, I should have warned you. We go right up to the roof. Penthouse."

Eventually the doors hissed and clashed open again and they were let out into more glare and noise, on to a smooth floor and then into a huge room where the floor was so smooth it was treacherous to the feet. There was more of that music here, and many people all moving aimlessly. Rang saw several men sharing his discomfort, and women who were even less encumbered than Rana or Meryl. He marveled again at the unfair difference between the sexes. He began to despair of ever making sense of these people. They were

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scientifically rational and logical at one moment and bafflingly incomprehensible at another. The tremendous range of mind-quality was itself enough to make it hard to believe they were all of one kind. He nodded to and shook the limp hand of one man who had nothing in his mind but scrambled fragments and the dull urge to stay upright. He cringed from a hot wave of animal-feeling shafted his way by a woman with her hair like fire and blood on her mouth. There was blood on her claws too, and then he realized it was paint, in both places.

Meryl steered him to a small table off to one side, and he was glad to sit. He wanted to ask her why it was distressing for a woman to think that a man was looking at her, and yet she wanted him to—and why it was not right for the man to look, yet enjoyable. Forbidden and encouraged—it couldn't be right—he must be missing some vital clue—but no sooner had they sat than she bounced to her feet again.

“Oh, come on, let's dance. It's the only way to deal with a bedlam like this. You can't ignore it, so join in with it. Come on!”

The center of the floor was very slippery but not dangerously so, provided they held close together and moved cautiously. A few circlings, with minor collisions, brought him within speaking distance of Hector and Rana, who were also dancing. Hector grinned cheerily.

“How's it going? Plenty of reading-matter here, eh?”

He had circled away before Rang could think up a fitting retort. He had touched Rana's mind but she was completely and blissfully immersed in the music and movement. He felt hot. The sense of being trapped grew in him. His feet hurt. Even his hunting belt, which he had insisted on wearing, sat too tightly about his waist. Now they circled close to the raised platform where the music was being made, and that distracted him for a while as he studied the mechanisms for banging and plucking, blowing and scraping. Meryl named the various instruments for him as the performers halted, but she clung to his arm until the noise started again.

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"You dance very well," she said. "I could go on like this all night!" That prospect dismayed him so much and so obviously that she giggled and held him tighter. "One thing you're not very good at is concealing your feelings. Poor man. Just this one dance then, and we'll go and sit for a while."

Back at their small table he was profoundly glad to be able to take the weight off his feet. "Do you people really enjoy doing this?" he wondered, and she laughed again.

"I've often wondered, myself. I don't think we do. You know, you're awfully like Hector in many ways. He's a misfit in this world, just like you."

Put like that, the idea made Rang frown. This was his world, or had once been. The idea of being an alien came to him as a blow, and a new twist. He had adjusted to the notion that he would look this world over and decide if he liked it. It wasn't so easy to adjust to the other notion, that he had no choice of a decision at all. He sent a questing thought in search of Rana, who would be with Hector, wondering if he might find a moment to discuss this with someone in a similar mess. He located her somewhere on the other side of the room, still dreamily engrossed in the music and novelty of this crush of pretty colors and decorated people. At his irritable touch her mind sharpened.

"We are meeting and talking with the men Hector came to see. You should be here to observe," she told him, with just a touch of sarcasm.

"I can see and hear through your eyes," he retorted. "Pay attention." Now he was virtually at their table, with Hector by his side, Carver opposite, and two dark-faced, cold-thinking men who had just been conversing with Hector. That much was visible in the echoes of their thoughts. But these two, like the lawyers, were good at shielding their thoughts with superficial words, and he couldn't have probed, even if he had wanted to, at second-hand.

One of the strangers nodded to his companion. "I think we have enough. This is the man we want."

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"Good!" said the other, glancing at his wrist. "It is all arranged. We take him."

"That's fine!" Carver declared. "If you're satisfied, Raine, we can talk terms. You want to do it here?"

"We also take the woman," the second stranger added, as if no one else had spoken. "She will be useful. Now"—and he moved his hand across the table to hold it and open the palm in front of Hector—"did you ever see anything like that before?"

Hector looked down. Rang felt Rana's head move to look also. He saw a small glittering thing like a ball, heard a sharp "pop!" There came a little puff of vapor—and then—he was staring at Meryl, across their small table. And Rana's mind was gone, completely!

"What's happened?" Meryl gasped, seeing his face. "What's wrong?"

"Wait!" He brushed aside her fears, collected his shattered thoughts, and sent a powerful searching probe for Rana. To his horror he reached and touched, positively, her physical presence—the life-force and energies that were her existence—but of her mind-patterns, her personality: nothing!

"Something's happened to Rana!" he said, up on his feet and pointing his face in that direction instinctively. Then, heedless of the throng between, he headed that way, charging through the dancers, shouldering them aside with no ceremony whatever. After a few steps he realized Meryl was on his heels and calling to him but he paid her no other attention at all. It was a big room, and the floor was well-crowded with dancers who objected strenuously to being forcibly disturbed. Rang set his jaw and ploughed on. Now that he had his aim, he let go the hard-to-maintain link with just that body-image, and concentrated on getting through the human jungle. The music makers played louder, the uproar grew, red faces and abuse broke over him from all angles, but he forged on. He burst through the far edge, to come upon a small alcove, dim-lit and with half-curtains to add to the sense of privacy. There, with a three-inch raw gash in his bald head that dripped blood over the polished

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tabletop, was Hiram Carver. But of Rana, or Hector, or the two dark-faced strangers, there was no sign at all.

Meryl came up to his shoulder and stared. And then screamed. Rang felt sudden rage, and the fury of a trapped animal. In that same instant Kohl's mind whipped him with cold reproof. "You are not an animal, but a personality, with a brain. Use it! Rana has been taken. Find her!"

IX

NEVER BEFORE had Kohl lashed him so acidly, and never before had he so desperately needed the shock, and the chill of reason. He choked back his emotions into a hard cold lump and spun on Meryl. "Rana and Hector were here and have been taken away. You must help me. How could they have gone?"

Her scream had killed the music and much of the clamor. White and staring faces came to peer. She seemed stunned for the moment, then caught her breath. "Kidnapped! Hector. My God!"

"But how?" he snarled, and she gazed wildly around, then pointed. The elevator gates were only a step away. Rang leaped for the recess which held the gates, searching furiously for controls.

"That's on the way down!" Meryl pulled him away, "and this one—" Her voice failed as they both saw how it stood open, the control-box a smoking ruin, and the attendant limp on the floor with a furrow in his scalp to match Carver's. Shaking with the need to keep calm in the face of bafflement, Rang wheeled away, caught at a white-coated man close by.

"There's some other way to go down?" he demanded,

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and Meryl rephrased it urgently as the man stared at them.

"Where are the stairs?"

"That way"—he pointed away to their left—"or over there"—and this time his arm indicated the other side of the room. Rang sprinted for the door, smelled hot metal before he reached it. Someone had fused the lock solid, and the door itself was massive. His anger gave way now to icy determination at this evidence of careful planning.

"The other door will also be useless," he predicted to Meryl. "I must find some other way down."

"It's impossible!" she muttered. He rejected that without wasting a thought on it. There had to be a way.

"Outside," he snapped. "How can I get outside, into the fresh air?"

"There's a balcony—over that way!" He didn't wait for more. Once again he hunched his shoulders and bore down on the muttering murmuring mob on the dance-floor. This time they stirred themselves hastily to give room. And again Meryl was hot on his heels.

"What are you going to do?" she shrilled, as he broke out of the dance crowd, crossed a strip of carpet and plunged through a wide doorway to come out on a dim-lit balcony. He went straight to the edge and looked over and down, studying the proposition with a swift inclusive glance. Straight down, no obstacles, and balconies like this all the way down. It was enough. He ripped off the strangulation at his neck, and his jacket, kicked off the leather boxes that crushed his feet so cruelly, and dragged off the inner covers as he unhitched his line from his belt.

Meryl repeated her question. "What are you going to do?"

"I am going down there. Two men have taken Rana and Hector down, by a puff of gas which made them sleep. I will catch them at the bottom if I am quick enough. Or I will follow and catch them anyway."

"Down there? Down the outside of the building? You'll be killed!"

"I think not. There is plenty of light to see, and no hard winds or rain to bother me. It will be easy." He threw away

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the second sock and leaped up on the edge, swinging the short end of the line, hooks glittering, while he estimated the first drop.

"Don't leave me!" she implored. "That's my Hector they've got. Isn't there something I can do?"

"Come with me," he invited. "Perhaps you'll be able to help me."

"Down there?! Are you crazy?"

"You will be quite safe. Come!" He extended his arm, the while he beamed out an urgent call to Gromal and Virgal to home in on him fast. Meryl stared up at him, her face chalk-white, then she took his hand. He hoisted her up by his side easily.

"Just hold on to me tight, and don't worry. I have done this before many times." He caught the hooks firmly under the edge, holding the sliding handgrip loosely in his right hand, put his left arm round her, and sprang out and down into the night. The thin line whined in his hand as he checked it dexterously and took the strain to bring himself in towards the side of the building in a swinging curve. He had spoken no more than the plain truth in saying that it was simple. Many a hundred times had he come pell-mell down a sheer cliff, in almost dark, amid screeching winds and driving rain, with the carcass of a quarry often heavier than himself safely clutched under one arm. And had thought little of it at the time. He swooped in towards a gray-white balcony-wall some fifteen floors down, taking the impact with his feet and a lithe twist to settle on the edge.

"Oh my God!" she choked. "I thought you were going to CLIMB down, not dive off!"

"It's quicker this way. Hold on while I coil the line again." She clung to him like a leech, not daring to look down. Within seconds he had hooked on again, wrapped his arm round her, and leaped out in another great swooping dive. On the fifth swing and swoop, his feet met a stuccoed wall and then he dropped no more than a foot or two into cool green grass, to put Meryl down on her feet. A flick of his

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wrist brought the line snaking down, to be coiled mechanically as he probed around for a trace of Rana. It was difficult. Never before had he tried to find a body with no mind, had never even conceived such a thing. He had described it as "sleep" to Meryl, but even in sleep a mind is active and alive. Lifting his head, he cast about as he had seen Gromal do, and there it was. Body-image quite clear, walking, not far away. He also got a keen touch from Gromal, coming on the run, also not far away. And Virgal, very faint and high up.

Slapping the coiled line back into its snaps, he ran along the line of the wall, still on grass. Now he came to bushes, with flowers, and a low and meaningless wall with looped chains. Leaping that, he caught a vivid flash from Gromal, somewhere ahead and round a corner, coming the other way. Through the wolf-hound's eyes, he saw Rana and Hector, bright-lit and walking like machines, saw them stoop and enter a large black car. And he sensed, vividly, Gromal's shocked bewilderment at seeing and smelling Rana, but not being able to reach her thoughts. Running hard, he cast a reassurance to the wolf-hound. He heard Meryl panting and gasping at his heels. All at once he was on hard footing, and then round a corner into dazzling lights. There was Gromal, silver chain dragging, peering after a moving car. One or two people passing by paused to stare, first at the giant dog, then at Rang in bare feet and shirt-sleeves as he tore up to his friend. Instant and agonizing decisions had to be made. It was out of the question to chase after a car on foot.

As Meryl came clattering in high heels and out of breath, he said, "They drove away in a car. We must follow somehow. Help me."

Help came by itself, in the shape of a black-uniformed man who came hurrying out of the foyer of the hotel. "It's that damn dog again—and Miss Martin! What's going on here? I just saw Mr. Raine leave, along with the blonde lady, and a couple of strangers! I don't get it. Mr. Carver told us to wait—"

"They've been kidnapped!" Meryl gasped. "Those two men

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knocked out Mr. Carver, and drugged Mr. Raine. We've got to get after them!"

Sam Hamilton struggled to take in this information. "You know," he muttered, "I thought they were walking queer, kind of as if they were smashed. But—well, Mr. Carver's the one who gives our orders, and he said—"

"Hey, Sam!" Another guard came hurrying out of the foyer. "There's something crazy going on upstairs. One of the elevators is on the blink, and a waiter just phoned down with some wild story about a buy being bashed over the head, and two more jumping offa the balcony. They've all gone nuts up there. Seems all the exits are jammed up." Hamilton made up his mind fast.

"That's good enough for me," he said. "Howie, that's old Carver who's been bashed, and our boy has been kidnapped, right under our noses. Come on!" He ran off into the gloom, and Rang was after him, into a huddle of parked cars. "Hop in the back, folks!" was the invitation. "They can't have got far. Anybody see the number?"

Rang understood the question as Hamilton thought it. He leafed back over the mind-pictures he had seen through Gromal's eyes, deciphered letters and figures and recited them carefully.

"That's fine! Howie, ring the cops and give them the picture. We're going to need help on this. The nerve of those guys, walking out right under our noses! Now, which way'd they go?"

In this kind of quest Gromal's senses were sharper than any human's. Rang slid his arm round the wolf-hound's shoulders, blended his mind with the animal one and reached out for Rana's body-image. Meryl peered at him in the gloom.

"Can you tell?" she whispered, and he nodded, made a gesture with his other hand. She leaned forward to Hamilton.

"They're away to the left somewhere," she said; and as he craned his head to stare incredulously, she added, "The dog is pointing for us. You just do as I say, it's all right."

"O.K., miss. That sure is a smart dog." He put the car

into a squealing left turn and then Rang nodded and gestured "straight ahead." The other traffic went by with savage sweeps of sound. That curiously indefinite body-image shifted gradually away to the left again as this road led them on. Rang made another signal, and once more the car stormed into a turn.

"Can you tell if they are all right?" Meryl whispered.

"Rana is alive. And Hector. But I get nothing from their minds at all. Are you familiar with this gas which takes away thought?"

"Not to name any special one. There are hundreds of drugs and dopes and ways of knocking people out with chemicals."

He was about to ask her why such a thing would be necessary when there came a fitful flash of consciousness from Rana. And then another. Gromal made a growl deep in his throat. Rang fastened on the image grimly, and caught her as she came suddenly and completely conscious.

"Be still," he warned. "Make no move. Pretend to sleep, and let me learn what the situation is. I am following closely after you."

With just one start of surprise Rana obeyed the thought-command, keeping motionless. Now he heard harsh male voices, but to his chagrin he couldn't understand their words. Rana, on the spot, managed to translate from what she was reading in their minds into halting words of her own:

"They are talking about flying—*samolyoti*, that is. *Karoshoya pagoda*—that is fine weather."

Rang repeated the sounds aloud, and Meryl gasped as she heard. "That's Russian. I understand it a little. Fine weather for flying?"

"Now they are thinking about a machine with long wings which spin in a circle," he relayed, as Rana fed him the information.

The man called Howie craned back to grunt, "Sounds like a helicopter. Makes sense, too. We're on Marine Drive, and this road ends up at the beach. Bit of a headland there.

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Can't we go any faster, Sam? If they get airborne in a chopper, we've had it!"

"Got my foot on the floor now! And that looks like the chopper, all right. Ahead, about three miles or so, see?"

Rang caught the images and stiffened. Truly, if they could take to the air he would have no way of following them at all. That had to be stopped somehow. He relayed the situation to Rana urgently.

"The machine will take you and Hector away up where we can't follow. You must try to stop them. Use your paralyzer."

"I haven't got my belt. I couldn't wear it with this dress!"

Rang abandoned the blistering retort that came to mind. No time for recriminations now. "You will have to delay them somehow. Wait until the car stops, then try to hold them until we get there!"

He peered forward through the glass. Ahead and rising gradually, the road was like a ribbon of gray steel glinting in the lamplight. Far ahead he could just see red tail-lights, and one other light in the sky, bobbing as it sank down. The spin-wing machine.

"We are not going to make it!" Hamilton growled. "They've a three-mile lead on us, damn them. Howie, what are we going to do?"

Rang shot his attention ahead, blending with Rana. He felt the car she was in brake fiercely to a halt. Hector stirred, mumblingly, by her side. She opened her eyes and Rang saw one stranger sitting beyond Hector, and two more in front. The car door opened and yet another man stuck his head in.

"Out!" he ordered "Quickly!" She slid out and he could now see that there was another car already waiting, with three more men. There was a bucketing uproar from the machine overhead, and a fierce downdraft striking her head and shoulders. The man by the door said, "Walk!" She took two steps and then whipped round. Rang's muscles twitched in sympathy as she hit out, a hammer-blow accurately at the nape of the neck, smashing the man face down. She

shot forward, picked him up bodily, whirled and threw him at the two who ran at her from the other car. Pausing for balance, she leaped after her missile and threw herself tigerishly on the struggling mass of bodies, smashing out at anything she saw with savage hammer blows of her clenched hands.

Gromal growled and twitched, and Rang felt sympathy, wishing he were in there and fighting too. Then there came to his ears the whip-crack of an explosion, then another, and now Hector's frantic shout.

"Rana. Rana! Stop it. For your life, stop it!" His desperate concern cut through her anger. Rang felt it also, and heard his words. "They've got guns, Rana. Stop it, or they'll shoot you dead!"

"Guns!" Rang snarled, and Meryl blanched. Up front, Howie nodded his head. "I thought I heard that, too. They really have us sewed up!"

Rana ceased her valiant efforts, got to her feet and walked back to be beside Hector. She exchanged quick understanding with Rang, and hardly needed Hector's abjectly apologetic explanation.

"You were magnificent, honey, but even you can be killed. They can have me, and welcome, but I'd hate myself if anything happened to you on my account. Better give up. You haven't a chance against guns."

Now Rang snatched his attention back to his own predicament as Hamilton braked furiously and swung the car from the road onto grass. Up there and ahead they saw another spit of fire from the flying machine, and heard the whine and scream of a shot ricocheting from the gravel of the roadside.

"That's it!" Hamilton said, as the car jolted to a stop. "So long as the smart guy in the chopper stays up there where he can see us, we're bollixed. Tell it to the law, Howie. They might be able to get fly-boys, but I doubt if they'll be anything like in time."

Rang couldn't accept it like that, not even while he saw plainly in the guard's mind the futile picture in all its de-

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tail. Their pistols, in this light and at that range, would have been a waste of time, just as useless as his own paralyzer, which had an effective range of no more than fifteen feet. But the instinctive urge to go on was too great. He flung open the car door and went on onto grass, staring up at the bobbing light of the flying machine. Gromal padded at his heels. Ahead lay half a mile of open flat ground with only a few scattered bushes for cover, but he began to run nevertheless. There came one more spit of fire from the machine up there, and something that whined angrily and plucked a hole in his shirt just under his armpit. Rang went down flat in instant reaction, lay dead still, his eyes squinting up at the machine. Gromal had flattened too, needing no command. He had heard that whining thing hit the ground just as Rang had, and both knew, positively, that death was very close. Hamilton had called the situation absolutely accurately. Rang lay still. He arrowed a thought to Virgal as a desperate hope, but the bird's response told him that the hope was futile. Fly as fast as he might, Virgal was too far away to be in time for anything except frustration.

Throwing his mind forward, Rang shared with Rana the nauseating feel of being hoisted into the air in a fragile-seeming metal basket, along with a man who held a cold and hard weapon-muzzle against her side. He shared her hot sense of helplessness as she was ordered out of the basket and made to sit, and wait, while Hector was hauled up equally helpless. Then the rest of the men, by twos at a time, two of them unconscious, one the worse for wear, but all quite unmistakably ready to kill at the slightest provocation. The machine began to lift and spin away urgently before the last pair were properly inside. Rang reached to urge Rana into the same kind of icy calm he now felt himself.

"Look out through the glass. See which way they are taking you. Listen to everything that is said. I will get to you *somehow!*"

And then, stiffly, he moved, stood up, and walked back to the car. He heard Meryl's shaking cry of relief.

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"Rang! Dear God, I thought you were hit!"

"They are all gone," he said to her. "They have left their ground-machines empty and are flying away. You must help me. What can I do now?"

The cessation of all noise and movement, the sense of coming to a stop, brought home with great force his awareness of being one all alone against a whole world of aliens.

Hamilton restarted the car, and muttered, "You folks stay here while me and Howie go and check. If they *are* all gone, there's no danger; but let's not chance that. Keep your eye peeled, Howie. We might be able to pick up a lead of some kind from those cars—"

Meryl put her hand on Rang's arm. "My Hector!" she whispered. "It just doesn't seem possible that he's gone. It's like an awful dream, the sort of thing you read in the newspapers!" He walled off the crushing weight of her despair and cast his thoughts up there to Rana again. Through her eyes he saw the sea down there, the black surface streaked with lacy foam. He heard talk.

"You'll never get away with it." That was Hector, clinging to sanity and common sense.

"We have got so far according to plan." The retort was coldly confident. "There is no reason why the rest should fail. It has all been worked out very carefully. Your Mr. Carver's passion for secrecy helped a great deal."

"You've had luck, that's all. It can't last. You have got to come down sometime soon. This thing has a range of something less than two hundred miles, to my knowledge, and where can you get to, in that distance?"

"Planning, not luck, Mr. Raine. All has been taken care of. You shall see, soon. Speed is our secret. By the time your authorities wake up, it will be all over for you." The confident voice was interrupted by another, in that different language.

"*Katoriy chas?*" Answered by a distant growl, "*Byez dyesyvaty dyesyat!*"

"Hah! Good! In ten minutes we are arrived."

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"Where?" Hector demanded. Rana's downward gaze showed only open sea.

"Our submarine. I told you it was all planned."

Now Rana sent picture-thoughts which made Rang grow tense and call out for someone he had almost forgotten in the pressure of emergency.

"I am attending," Kohl's thought came through as crisply as ever. "I am intrigued by the image of a machine that swims through the sea. In our own elements we should be able to gain some advantage."

"What d'you want me to do?" Rang asked.

"You are near the shore. Come down to the water edge and I will meet you. Hurry!"

Rang started to move the instant the thought formed in his mind, with Gromal loping beside him, but he had to halt as Meryl called. "Rang! Where are you going? Wait for me!" He halted, sent a query.

"Bring the female," Kohl replied, "if she is willing. She may be able to help us with knowledge."

So Rang spun round to watch her come running over the grass. He sensed her fear and urgency, but most of all she worried for the man Hector. He put the decision to her flatly. "I'm going down to the sea, to follow. Do you want to come?"

"I've got to. You're my only link with Hector."

"All right." He took her arm and started again, following Gromal and holding his urgency back to a speed she could keep up to. The wolf-hound ahead disappeared suddenly over a ragged edge. Reaching it, Rang found that it was steep but sandy, with odd straggles of roots and bushes to hold it together. He let go her arm and plunged down in a long running skid, diagonally to where he saw a narrow spit of rock sticking out into the surf. Kohl was too bulky to get close inshore, but that spit would give him reasonably deep water. At his back he sensed Meryl stumbling and slithering down the slope, and much further back still he heard the faint scream of a siren. Reaching the bottom amid small stones, he raced for the first rocks only a

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few steps after Gromal, but distress from the rear made him halt and turn back.

He saw Meryl miss a step and fall, to come rolling and bumping down the last eight or ten yards and wind up breathless at the foot, sand patching her clothes and her hair streaming into her eyes. He went back, helped her up with scant grace, caught her in his arms and ran back across the shingle to a rock to put her down. He pointed to where Gromal had bounded on ahead, leaping from one rock to another, to poise on the last one and then spring into the surf.

"We go that way," he said. "Can you swim?"

"Not in this dress," she panted and began fiddling at the fastenings. He gripped her shoulder with one hand, hooked his finger in the edge and ripped the covering away, tossing it aside.

"Now come!" he ordered, and went ahead, over the rocks to the far end. She came after him, slithering and squeaking, arms flailing to keep balance, her shoes long since discarded. The sense of Kohl was very strong. Rang waited for her to reach him and then, as a wave rose to greet him, he plunged in. It was good to be in the water again. He sensed Meryl entering the water only a gasp behind him, and blowing vigorously as they both surfaced at the same time.

"Come!" he said again and began urging himself through the water to where Kohl waited.

Kohl's instructions were brisk and simple: "Hold the female securely with one arm, Gromal with the other, and I will draw you along. We must hurry. The flying machine travels fast." This too was something he had done often before. As Meryl came splashing up to him, he told her to roll over on her back and float. Gromal was already in position. He hooked long arms about both of them, felt Kohl reach out with two tentacles and take hold—and they began to travel. Within seconds the old Garl was hauling them through the water at a furious pace, and Rang could see a great vee-shaped bow-wave of creamy surf chattering away from them in the gloom. He flicked a thought to

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Rana, who was still watching the sea, another much higher up and further away to Virgal, who was now in sight of the helicopter but far behind it, and then back to Kohl.

"The pattern of this creature's social life is strangely uneven," the old Garl mused, as discursively as if he were quietly resting in his home pool. "A chemical which steals the mind, a tremendous respect and value for the mind itself, complex machines for movement, many other highly advanced things, and yet they all seem to have close at hand this curiously crude 'gun' device, which discharges solid projectiles by the violent expansion of gases. You will recall they shot at Virgal?"

"What puzzles me most," Rang offered, "is why they took Rana anyway. Hector, yes; but why drag her into it?"

"A problem I can't answer. We must deal with the fact, however."

Now they both caught a tingle of warning from Rana. Through her eyes Rang saw, far down there, the vee-wake in the sea. He heard sharp comments and then a decisive voice said, "It must be some imprudent fools in a power-boat, trying to follow us. Discourage them!"

"They are going to use the gun-thing again!" Rana flashed, and with that came the clatter of a gun firing rapidly. Rang felt stinging pain, and an immediate cessation of movement.

"Crudel!" Kohl sounded wry. "But effective. I am hit in two places, not vital, fortunately, but it's clear warning."

"Now what do we do?"

"Wait here!" Kohl instructed, withdrawing his tentacles. "Keep below the surface as much as possible. I will return with your bubble-helmets. They aren't far from here."

Meryl thrashed about in the water for a moment as the old Garl sped off. "What happened?" she gasped, perilously close to panic. "What was pulling us along so fast?"

"A friend of mine," Rang said, with tact. "He'll be back soon. Can you keep under water for very long?"

"Not too long. They were shooting at us, weren't they?"

"Right. We'll have to try another method. Hold on to Gromal a bit."

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"Where are you going?" She was instantly shrill and fearful.

"Nowhere. I just want to get the rest of these clothes off. They're a nuisance to me." He gulped a deep breath and went under to kick and squirm out of the clinging pants and then to secure his precious belt in place again. He sensed that she was doing something similar, peeling out of a thing which held her round the middle. He came up, shook water from his face and asked, "Can I help you?"

"All right now! Just my garter-belt. Women's clothes must be a million laughs to you, I guess. . . . Who's your friend?"

"I'll tell you about him later. Meryl, why do they want Rana? I can see how Hector would be valuable to them, but why her?"

"That's simple." She bobbed in the water and shook her head. "Oldest lever in the world. They want Hector to work for them. Knowing him, I guess he would refuse. And they won't want to hurt him, because he's valuable as is—and how do you force a man to be brilliant?"

Rang got the message. "You mean they would injure Rana—or threaten to—in order to make him do what they want?"

"That's the kind of music those boys play; yes."

Now Rang knew a rage that boiled so savagely it blurred all his senses, brought a snarl to his throat. Rana taken away, that was bad enough, but the thought of her being hurt, mutilated, made him seethe. Kohl lashed at him.

"That is not the way! All you do is upset your intelligence and make yourself useless. You will infect Gromal, Rana, too. And you make yourself unpleasant for me to touch." But there was cordial understanding underneath the stern rebuke. Rang made a tremendous effort, became savagely calm. Kohl came discreetly from below with the helmets, and Rang caught them as they surfaced. He nudged one to Gromal, who was able to wriggle it over his head and shoulders unaided. Meryl stared at hers.

"Where did this come from?"

"My friend brought it for you. Don't ask so many questions just now; we haven't time! Pay attention, because I

won't be able to talk to you once you have this on. This part goes over the head. The flexible sheath fits your shoulders and chest, front and back. These units go under each armpit, so that as you breathe in-and-out, you power them to extract stale air and provide a fresh supply. The strap goes round your waist. This catch releases the top of the helmet for temporary purposes, and it hinges back here, see?"

"I'll never be able to manage all that myself. You'll have to help."

"That's all right. I'll have to help Gromal with the straps too. You should see the struggle we have, sometimes, with Virgal—but never mind that—down under, now!" She drew a breath and submerged, to bob up inside the clear bubble.

He helped her get secured, and Gromal, and himself—the while he kept a constant link with Rana up there and ahead.

"The machine noise is decreasing," she reported, "and we are going down closer to the sea surface."

All secured, Rang took hold of Meryl's hand, and Gromal's paw, let Kohl grasp and hold him, and they went down, and down, to where the water was dark, with only the eerie light from the train of bubbles forced by their furious passage through the water. Meryl's hand clung hard, her other hand coming to join it, to clutch his wrist in terror. He spared a moment to reach for her mind and soothe it as best he could. In that moment he realized as never before how totally alone she was, how they all were, these tortured humans. It served to shock him into perspective. His own sense of desolation, and rage at futility, his feeling of helplessness—these were trivialities compared with the way these people must be strangled inside, always and forever alone in the midst of their swarming fellows. Kohl touched him gently.

"This is how I am without the senses and comradeship of the other creatures who serve me. Aloneness is a terrible thing to bear. Considering their many handicaps, these humans do very well and have great courage. Do what you can to comfort her."

Rang felt her stiff panic ebbing a little. He tried cautiously

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to get into that part of her mind that would respond and know he was there, and he did feel just a vague stirring of response. But then Kohl, attending ahead, snapped an urgent summons for his attention and in unison all three of them centered in the aircraft, on Rana. The machine was dropping quickly now. She looked away from the whitecaps and into the front part of the machine, where a man sat with pads over his ears and watched a panel of instruments.

From one side, Hector turned to say, very quietly, "I'm sorry about all this, Rana. I don't know why they had to drag you into it. I don't give a damn about myself—"

"It's all right," she whispered. "We are not alone," and she turned to smile at him. His red hair stood in spikes of alarm, his glasses were askew and his neckband had come unfastened, but he stirred now into dawning excitement at her words.

"You mean—Rang? And the others?"

"We are all together. Also Meryl." She relayed this at a nudge from Rang. That shocked Hector into a cry.

"Merry? She's come along too?"

"Be quiet!" The man who stood between them on guard growled the order. "Your hopeful talk is a waste. You ask why did we bring the woman? I will tell you. We used a hypnotic to make you walk from the hotel under orders, but that is not a good way to get obedience when we need high intelligence. So we use the woman for that. You will do everything we ask, at once, or we will cut off her little finger and show you. And then another, the next time. And so on. You understand?"

"I've never believed in hell, but only now do I regret that, because it's the only fit place for things like you."

"There is no hell, Mr. Raine. Such emotional concepts are futile. They don't work. We long ago abandoned that kind of thinking. There are no rewards, no punishments, neither justice nor retribution nor good nor bad, only consequences. We make things work. That is the only standard we use. See for yourself. There is our submarine now!"

Kohl bubbled with curiosity, studying the great metal

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shape, which now rose to wallow in the wave-troughs from two angles, through Rana's eyes looking down, and with his own vibration sensors through the water.

"Submarines can be tracked!" Hector snapped, but his guard was unimpressed, used a gun-muzzle to prod him into movement along to the lowering-cage.

"Tracked, Mr. Raine? First your authorities must discover its existence. Then, and then only, will they want to track. And this submarine is a new design, especially intended not to be traced from the surface. But even if they *are* successful, would they destroy us—with you on board? Think about it, Mr. Raine. *Gatovi li vi?*"

"*Dal*"

The lowering cage swung out and went down. Rana watched it, saw it descend and sway about a structure that protruded from the back of the sea-machine. Men stood there ready to seize and guide. Red lights glowed. In a few moments it was her turn to scramble, under threat, into the cage and down. Always there was that gun pressed hard against her side and a strong aura of death ready to strike in an instant. She was harried along a narrow tunnel that smelled of thick breathing and hot metal into a wider space where four men stood alertly by controls. All were stiff-faced and clad in dark close-fitting fabrics with designs on arms and shoulders. Kohl's amazed interest was a constant bubbling in the back of Rang's mind.

"What gross machines and controls! So massive, noisy and crude that they leave almost no space at all for the operators. Surely they cannot live for very long in such a ship?"

"Kohl!" Rang was so concerned he ventured to interrupt harshly: "There are more important matters, surely?"

"Patience, my Rang. Until we know more about this strange craft we may do more harm than good. Ah, now it moves and sinks below the surface. Spinning shafts and circular paddles, movable extensions to modify its flight. And their power-source appears to be a partial mass-energy conversion system—but all they use it for is heat-energy. Fantastic!"

"Will we be able to overtake them?"

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"Oh yes. That craft cannot possibly move as fast as I can. The big problem, however, will be to get inside. The metal skin is tough, and even if we could penetrate it in some fashion, we run the risk of destroying its buoyancy and sending it to the bottom. This requires more thought."

X

INSIDE THE SUBMARINE, Hector and Rana had been urged and prodded along further narrow tunnels and into a spacious room with a table and couch and lights which swung from the roof. Here there was a hairless man in a garment thickly crusted with metallic ornamentation. He rose from behind a table to speak in the familiar language that Rang understood.

"I am Maly Shevlov, the captain of this ship. In the name of my glorious country and on behalf of rational people everywhere, I welcome you to a better life, Mr. Raine. Please be assured that if you behave with reason and good sense you will find us the same. We wish no harm to yourself and your so beautiful companion. Put the pistol away now, Rakov; it will not be needed."

"This woman is a tigress," the escort warned. "She smashed Krasny like a doll, and hurt two others before we could bring her to reason."

"You were foolish to try violence in the first place!" Shevlov scolded. "Couldn't you see she is a fine and healthy woman? Also very beautiful. May I be privileged to know your name, Miss—?"

"Her name is Rana!" Hector growled. "And she has nothing at all to do with this. You leave her alone!"

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"We mean no harm, I assure you. I am delighted to meet the lady, and most sorry we have no proper facilities by which she might repair her slight disorders of appearance. However"—and he shrugged apologetically—"you must allow me to be hospitable. A drink, perhaps? Cigarettes?"

Sensing Rana's growing rage, and acting on a guess, Rang inserted a hint into her stream of thought. She snatched at it immediately as a means of moving into the attack. With quick urgency she put strong fingers to her dress and ripped it free of her body. The reaction was exactly as Rang had hoped, an instant surge of surprise and awkwardness.

"What are you doing?" Rakov yelled, shooting out a hand. "Stop that! Stop!" He followed his hand, and walked right into her flailing blow, delivered with all the power she could summon, backhanded across his face. The impact threw him sprawling and falling backwards clear across the room and up against a metal wall. Shevlov fell back into his seat, snatched at a drawer and his hand came up holding another pistol, aiming it.

"Stop," he said flatly, "or you die!"

Rana eyed him calculatingly, then went through with her original intention, slowly but deliberately ripping off the dress and discarding it. She felt better, more free and capable. Hector stirred, drew a breath.

"Take it easy, Rana!" he muttered, and at the sound of his voice that gun-muzzle moved just enough to cover him, enough for Rana. Like a striking snake she lashed out across the table, her hand striking down hard on the wrist, smashing it to the table so that the gun went skittering away. Instantly reversing the blow, she whipped that hand up under Shevlov's chin, snapping his head back. All in the same tigerish movement, she breasted the table to get her other hand there, locking it about his throat. Now both hands clamped and squeezed. Hector shouted at her.

"It's all right! You can let go; I've got the gun! Let go!"

She craned round her head to make sure, then relaxed

her pressure unwillingly and slid back across the table to stand by Hector. Shevlov heaved for breath, coughed painfully, and massaged his throat. His face was red, but paled rapidly as he weighed the situation.

"It will do you no good," he croaked. "You are two. We are twenty!"

"Your arithmetic is fine," Hector grated, "but we have you, and this. You're the captain in charge. And we control you. One funny move and I shoot!"

"You are a fool!" Shevlov set his jaw. "Shoot me! Go on! What good will that do you?"

"He is sincere," Rana said, having touched that mind enough to know how it stood. "You will not force him with that. But I can make him obey, if you wish?"

Now Shevlov's lip curled. "How will you do that, I wonder? By seduction? Are you also as big a fool as he?"

"Like this!" She launched the whole power of her mind at him, knowing that Rang was instantly with her. And Kohl came in with all his great strength in instant agreement.

"To compell the mind of another is a bad thing, but necessary in this case. It is the least objectionable way. All together, now!"

Sweat burst out on Shevlov's forehead as the pressure went on, as three vigorous minds reached out and clamped down on his. Rang had done this kind of thing only rarely before, and then only as a nudge or thrust to guide some animal mind in the way he wanted it to go. It ate up energy very fast. And it hurt exquisitely because the attacked mind fought instinctively and with inbuilt urges to preserve its integrity. Shevlov fought hard, long after he had ceased to be aware of himself as Shevlov, but eventually the shrill scream of defiance winked out and he collapsed limply over his desk. Kohl sighed, then passed the order to Rana.

"Take command of him. Explain to Hector what is to be done. He must give the order to the others to halt the craft, bring it to the surface—we are almost there." Then both he and Rang withdrew their attention swiftly, to pay heed to their own angles.

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They were arrowing through the water now in an upward swoop, moving from black to purple to blue to dark green. They slowed, and there ahead was the great dark bulk of the submarine angling sluggishly up towards the surface. Kohl withdrew his tentacles and slid off out of sight. Rang reached to tap Meryl's helmet and point up and ahead. He saw her white face, and then he broke surface, saw her come up alongside Gromal. He pointed again and began to swim. The dark bulk of the submarine grew out of the water, edged in foam where the wave-crests slapped against its side. Now he was close enough to reach and touch it, to find a rail he could grab and hoist himself up out of the water. Up came Gromal with a splatter of paws. Rang turned and reached down a hand to heave Meryl up and out. A slap freed the wolf-hound from his helmet harness, to let him whuff and shake himself vigorously.

Moments later Rang had freed Meryl and himself. She stood unsteadily on the moving metal bulk, looking completely bewildered.

"Where are we? What's going on?"

"This is a submarine. Rana and Hector are inside. You stay here and keep watch on our helmets, while we go inside." He turned to step away to the protruding structure and she called out in fear.

"Don't leave me here, all alone!"

Although he ached to get inside and do violent things, she seemed so helpless and lost that he was torn. Gromal yelped impatiently, sensing the hunt in store. Then, high above, a familiarly bad-tempered thought speared down and Rang shot back an order.

"Come down. There is a place to land in dryness, and a female who is our friend, who needs your protection." To Meryl he said, "Virgal is on his way down. He'll look after you and keep you safe!" He heard the whistle of wind through those huge pinions as he strode away to climb up the metal-work to where the hatch was. Gromal scrambled up after him eagerly, to stand inside an oval wall of steel and scowl angrily at the hatch in the floor, solidly shut. He had barely

formed the urgent reminder to Rana to get the hatch open somehow, when it hummed and began to lift. Rang edged clear. At his back he heard Virgal land with a flap of his great wings, but his eyes were for that rising hatch alone. It spilled light, and a head with a dark blue cap, then shoulders twisting. Rang reached, took hold, hoisted the man out, all in one savage movement of one hand, cuffed him insensible with the other and tossed him into the sea. Then he went down fast, hands and feet finding the rungs instinctively.

Down went his bare feet on to a metal floor and he grunted as two men jumped him, one from either side. He shoved violently away from the ladder, grabbed one and threw him away hard, then reached to pluck the other from his back and swing him in a crushing circle against the ladder. Homing in on Rana, he raced along the tunnel into the space where those men stood by the controls. The machinery was quieter now, the men muttering to each other, but they erupted into violent yells as he appeared. For a while the action was furious, the air thick with yells, gasps and grunts as they all tried to get at him at the same time. In a moment Gromal came bounding in to join the fray with a throaty yowl of delight and the shouts changed to screeches of terror as the frantic men tried to get away from those snapping fangs. With no time to be fancy, Rang fell into the style Rana had used, of bunching his hands into fists and using them like hammers. He was just getting into the feel of it when it was all over and the chamber was quiet. Almost with regret, he lifted his head and felt for Rana again, then went haring through a hatch and along another tunnel. This time he burst out into a larger space where two tables were laid on either side of the walkway, and seven or eight men sat or leaned, muttering to themselves.

Again there was instant pandemonium. Tableware went clattering as men leaped to intercept him, one grabbing up a knife, another catching up a bottle like a club. Rang hurled himself bodily at one group while Gromal bayed and sprang snarling at another. A blade came out of the melee to burn Rang from elbow to wrist, jolting him into remembering that

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he had weapons. He grabbed two heads, smashed them together, thrust them away, kicked a third body violently, threw himself backwards and into a roll, to come up with his paralyzer set and ready for fine-beam full-power. Thumb on the stud, he aimed and it yelped. And again. And again, until the chamber was silent. Blood trickled warmly along his forearm and he raised it to lick, and suppress his impulses. It was savagely pleasant to lash out and feel satisfied, but that way was dangerous. The humans had weapons, and he couldn't afford to take chances. He raised his head again, questing, and this time he went more cautiously into the passage that led the way he wanted to go. This time he pushed out a careful probe ahead. He detected fear and hostility somewhere close, on the other side of a door. He battered at it with a fist, but it was locked tight. He faced the door, concentrated on that fear until he knew exactly where it was, and aimed. And the fear ceased.

He prowled on, Gromal at his heels. Suddenly, directly ahead, Rana sent an urgent cry-thought and he leaped forward, came to a door, went at it full-tilt with his shoulder and it burst inwards with a crash. Rana was on the floor with one man clinging grimly to her feet and another fighting to hold down her body. Rakov, his face a gory mess, was struggling with Hector for possession of the gun and trying to stamp on her face at the same time. Rang fired one, two, three times, and there was gasping silence. He went down on his knee to help her up. She shook her hair from her face.

"I was a fool!" she admitted. "I had my back to the door. These two burst in, hit my head, knocked me silly for a moment."

"Are you all right now?"

"My head aches, but that is nothing. You're bleeding!"

"There was one with a knife. It's not serious."

"Let me see it!" She took his hand and arm anxiously and he laughed and put that same arm all the way round her to hug her strongly to him.

"There, you see? There's nothing wrong with it!"

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"Am I glad to see you!" Hector said unsteadily. All at once he was shaking so much he had to steady himself with a hand on the table. "Boy, I've never been so glad to see anybody before in all my life. But how the devil did you get here?"

"Not now," Rang declared. "There will be time for that later. There may be more men in this strange ship. We want no more carelessness. Gromall!" The wolf-hound yelped, swung round and went back along the way they had come, ears pricking, all senses at the alert. Rang stalked at his heels, then Rana, and Hector in the rear, still carrying the pistol. As they came near the tube where they had come down, Rang heard Virgal's raucous screeching, twisted past Gromal to see legs poised on the upper rungs, and reached up with a fierce hand. The man up there yelled in fear as he was hauled down, but the yell cut off as Rang hit him, just once.

Over his shoulder to Hector, Rang said, "You go up there now. Someone you will be even more glad to see. You stay there with her while we check up the rest of the ship."

"You mean—Merry's up there? But how in sanity did she—?"

"She came with me. She wouldn't be left out, knowing that you were in danger, even though she was very much afraid all the time."

"Well, I'll be eternally damned. And I thought she didn't have time for feelings; certainly not for me."

Rang gave him a hard stare. "She cares a very great deal about you. And she is all alone up there, in the dark. Be kind to her!" Hector went awkwardly up the ladder. Rana smiled in a way that Rang hadn't seen before.

"I think you care for me a great deal also," she said. "You were angry inside when you felt I was lost to you, just as I was when you were trapped in that pipe, remember?" He frowned and was on the point of protesting that his feeling was something quite different when a whisper of movement made him whirl and then flatten himself to the metal wall. The gun-sound was enormous in this narrow space, the bullet screaming angrily as it struck steel and went away at

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an angle. He held still, focused his thought forward, then brought up his paralyzer and aimed and fired, all in one movement. Up there along the tunnel, a man sagged and fell. Rang stepped out, and another man leaped into sight, aimed and fired. Rang whipped frantically away, felt the burn and hit of impact at his waist, enough to spin him half-round, and fired his paralyzer again.

He leaned against the metal wall, quite still, checking up on the wound with part of his senses while he speared with the rest to make sure there were no more enemies. Rana came anxiously.

"You're hit!"

"In my side. It is nothing very much. I think the bullet went right through, and I can stop the bleeding quite easily. Now you are angry inside," he pointed out, and she snorted and tossed her head.

"Of course I am. If anything happens to you, where will I find a man for myself? Among these humans? Come, I think we should go up there and see what is to be done next."

It was pleasantly cool up there in the night air. Virgal was perched on the edge of the structure, and Hector and Meryl were some distance away, on the swaying back of the ship, holding each other up.

"You must have known I was crazy about you right from the very first time I saw you," he insisted. "But when you came to work for me you were so cool and efficient all the time, and I was so damned thumb-clumsy every time I tried to get talking to you—I just got the idea you didn't even *like* me. People don't, as a rule. Comes of being a genius, I suppose."

"I was the fool," she argued humbly, "for being so touchy about my shape. I got so it haunted me. I was just something to look at. I wanted you to see me, not just look at me!"

"You were shutting me off," he said, suddenly intense. "Rang told me about that. You can bar somebody off so that they can't get through to you, or you can open up and

make them welcome, like this—" And Rang smiled as he sensed how well Hector had learned. Then his smile dissolved into amazement as the same "ardent" feeling tingled through him, from Rana.

He turned to meet her glowing smile, to hear her ask, "Like this?"

"Very much like that," he agreed, responding fervently. "And there is this also," and he showed her what he had learned from Meryl about shared lips.

"That is a pleasant diversion indeed"—Kohl's cool thought spoke in his mind—"but there is much to be done yet. There is this sea-machine to be dealt with. And the humans. Perhaps you had better ask Hector what is the proper procedure in this instance!"

Hector's interest was hard to stir at first, but once it did take fire he was able to suggest a number of solutions.

"Life goes on, doesn't it?" He sighed. "Well now, there's bound to be a radio on the craft, and we ought to be able to find it. When we do, I can get results from it. Not quite as easy as falling out of bed, but in that region. That should bring the necessary assistance. I guess I can figure out how to put up flares and lights and so forth. A point. How long will these characters be unconscious?"

"Several hours. Until daylight at least."

"Fair enough. The Navy will be here long before that. A convincing story is going to be a different matter. I assume you want to be kept out of it? Believe me, it'll be the best thing for you if it can be fixed!"

Rang got his instant and horridly detailed picture of the screams of publicity that would ensue if the true facts ever became known, and felt Kohl's firm agreement that this should be avoided if possible.

"Can it be hidden?" he wondered, and Hector scratched his chin.

"We can make a stab at it. Our guards won't talk, nor will Hiram, if I put it to them properly. Nobody else saw anything enough to be a nuisance. But how am I going to account for all this mayhem here?"

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"We can suggest that the crew got into a quarrel among themselves," Meryl said, "and let the authorities argue it out whichever way they like. After all, what are they going to care? They have you safe, plus a Russian submarine and full crew. Are they going to argue with that?"

"I guess not." He chuckled. "Practical as always, Merry. What would I do without you, eh?"

"You're not going to have to do anything without me, if I can help it. Come on, let's see if you can find the radio shack!"

The coast guard station was properly incredulous at his message, but Meryl recalled something more. "Our guards rang the police while we were chasing you," she said. "You just tell that coast guard to check with the law and see if we are making it all up!"

Hector relayed that item of information and then shut down the set. He looked unhappy under his grin. "You sure that bullet wound isn't going to bother you?" he demanded, and Rang grinned.

"It is nothing, only a scratch, compared with some of the injuries I've had. And I'm in good hands." He meant Rana, but Hector sighed.

"That's the bit I don't like. You've gone out of your way all along the line. Saved my life a couple of times, been shot at, suffered all sorts of hurts and inconveniences, and now you're going off—and leaving me so deep in your debt, it hurts. What I said about publicity is true, and if I let you in for that I would not be doing you a service, but nevertheless I am still going to reap a whole lot of credit and glory that rightly belongs to you! I feel like a heel!"

"There's no need for that feeling," Rang assured him, understanding fully. "You have done much for us, taught us many things. For instance, we know now that although this was our world once, there's no place for us here anymore."

"Now that's exactly where I think you're wrong!" Hector cried, and Meryl joined him in protest.

"You mustn't go away thinking that, please!"

"You've only seen bits," Hector went on. "This is a queer

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old world, far from perfect, but it does have some good points. In many ways, I'm just as much a misfit here as you are; but I like the place, in a contrary kind of way. Why not give it a bit longer? Give me a chance to show you the other side of the coin."

"You're not going to leave right away, are you?" Meryl pleaded. "You can stay a little while longer, surely?"

Rang felt Kohl's quiet thought touch his mind. "We have no choice. I have had time to check over our ship. As of this moment, it is sound and mobile in sea, but unable to leave the planet. It needs considerable repair."

That was an unexpected shock, and Rang was bewildered as he relayed the news. He didn't know whether to be frightened or pleased.

"That's your friend?" Meryl whispered nervously. "The one who dragged us through the water?"

"I'd sure like to meet him sometime!" Hector declared. "We are just beginning to realize, here on Earth, that sea-dwelling creatures can have high intelligence. Rang, can't you see, I have just *got* to know a lot more about you. And you can tell your friend this, from me. I am not poor. I can pull quite a lot of strings. If it's at all possible, I can help to get your ship fixed. And I will be happy to do all I can. Right?"

"That will be very kind of you."

"Forget it. Least I can do. But it will take time, a few days at any rate before the publicity dies away over this Russian business. Then, just as soon as it's all quiet, you must come and visit again. You'll always be welcome, you know that. Only"—and he chuckled—"this time we'll do it right. We will hire a boat, run it out to wherever you say, and pick you up."

"And we can bring clothes for you," Meryl enthused. "We don't want you getting arrested!"

"Hark who's talking!" Hector scoffed. "You had better borrow a sweater or something before the Navy gets here. Not right away, of course—"

"I'm going to have trouble with you," she said, but her mind said something quite different.

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"We will be glad to see you again." Rang nodded. "We have a lot to talk about and things to explain."

"Right! Now, how do we let you know when the coast is clear?"

"We will know. When you are ready, you just think of us, reach out the way I showed you, like this!" and he sent a warm "friend" feeling to both of them, like a hug. "We will come up to meet you. Goodbye, now, until we meet again!"

A few seconds later they were in the sea once more, the three of them, with Virgal flying on ahead to the air-tube canopy to wait. Together with the good wishes of the two on the submarine, they had their own feelings of pleasure at returning home, as well as looking forward to seeing their friends on shore again soon. Even Gromal was pleased, because it had been a good hunt. Only Virgal was cross, and that only because he knew he was going to get his feathers wet again, and he hated that.