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TREASURE OF TAU CETI

JOHN RACKHAM

Think unearthly—and the
world's wisdom is yours



The yelping of the Verlan was tinged with fear and need as the adventurers from Earth neared the primitive hut of Uhumeelee, leader of the pack. Once again the three were reminded of the question as to whether these creatures were savage beasts or somehow incomprehensibly intelligent.

Neil Carson, Alan Noble, and Fiona Knight had journeyed to Tau Ceti in search of the legendary touching-stones possessed by the Verlan packs. The stones could bring wealth to them and power on Earth. On Verlan, they could bring all manner of evils.

The expedition pressed steadily forward, aware that now, second by second, their lives depended upon luck. They did not know how the Verlan would respond to them, could not know until the very last moment. . . .

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TREASURE OF TAU CETI

by

JOHN RACKHAM

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I

ACCORDING TO a well-worn fable, an empire can fall because of a loose horseshoe nail, meaning, I take it, that great events can spring from trivial beginnings. In my case it was the idle whim to take a short cut of a dark evening, on my way to my club from my once-a-week workout at Barry's Gym. It was dark enough to destroy color and sharp outline, but the alleyway was short, and there was nothing in my mind except that it would save me ten minutes or so against the long way around. I like walking, and the evening air was cool after my exertions, but I was out of sorts with life. To tell the truth I was finding idleness a bore, and life tedious.

Then I saw two men in the gloom ahead of me. The street lights here were discreetly dim, it being a residential backwater, and I hesitated. Where there's a choice I prefer to mind my own business, what little of it I have, and one never knows just what may be going on in London of an evening. At the turn of the century the metropolis is still a mecca for tourists, and many other kinds of visitors, not quite so innocuous, so I hung on my step a moment, peering. They appeared to be struggling, but it was difficult to be sure. And then I caught the flicker of a knife, no doubt about that, and I went forward at a run, without thinking. I was too late to stop the assault, but in time to catch the knife-wielder by the collar. It was very nearly my last mistake, because he whipped around far faster than I expected, and it was sheer instinct that made me lash out at his swinging arm. The knife went away and jangled on the pavement, but he wasn't done by any means. My impression was of a thin and wiry man of about five-eight—and I am six foot three and heavy made—but he gave me a rough time until my surprise had worn off.

It's a simple matter for a story-teller to say "life-and-

death struggle" but it takes time for the idea to penetrate, time enough for him to have kicked me in the wind, rapped his knuckles against my face two or three times, and then to discover from somewhere a short club that hurt like the devil when he used it on my shoulder. I lost my temper, which is something the gym instructors say one should never do. Right or wrong, it put an end to the fight. I was shaking badly as I bent over the limpness I had thrown against a wall, and it was a relief to discover him still breathing. There was enough light to see his lean face, enough that I would know him again if need be.

Then I turned to the man who had been knifed, an older man, with a heavy jaw and a look of hard experience in his lined face. He, too, was still breathing, but by the bubble and catch in his breath I doubted if it would be for very much longer. His eyes opened as I turned him over.

"Keep still." I said. "I'll get a doctor."

"Too late for that. Swilly—good with—a knife. I'm a fool—turned my back on him. What—?"

"I bounced him off the wall. He'll be no more trouble. You'll be safe for a minute—"

"No!" He managed to move, and the movement made him cough. I was more than ever sure he was a dying man, but he grabbed my sleeve and held on. "Too late for me." He choked, and then showed his teeth in a grin that was pure hate. "Don't want Swilly to get it. Paid him off, but he wanted a cut in the big deal. A rat, always was. You have it."

"Have what?" I demanded, thinking he was raving.

"Wig. My wig. It's all there. Worth millions. Take it."

I shook my head, and he grew agitated, coughed again, and there was blood on his lip. "Take it!" he choked. "Millions. Tonight! Tonight!" and then he coughed again, gave a shudder in the middle of it, and sagged. I felt him dwindle as I held him, and I knew he was dead. As I said before, it takes time to sink in. I don't know how long I crouched there, completely stunned, but it couldn't have been more than thirty seconds or so. A scuffle disturbed me, and I scrambled around in time to see my recent opponent getting to his feet and vanishing into the gloom. It was pointless to give chase. As I turned back, a glint of light from the

knife-blade caught my eye, and I realized just how badly I was placed. Astonishingly enough, no one had shown up to investigate, but that couldn't last much longer, and here I was, bearing all the marks of a fight, along with a dead man, and the knife that had killed him. Something about a wig. I crouched again, drove my unwilling hand to investigate, and a shock of black hair with a pale lock running through it came away in my grip. A wig!

I went away from there quickly. I wanted to run, but I had just enough sense left to realize that if I once started running, panic would take charge. I made myself walk. Fifteen minutes later I was breasting up to the bar and asking the club steward for a brandy, a large one. He must have seen signs of damage and distress but was too well-trained to comment. I could see, in the mirror behind him, that I was a mess, so I drank up hurriedly, perhaps unwisely, and made my way to the washroom. I was still shaking as I made an inspection of myself, beat as much as I could of the dust from my knees and arms, and then leaned at a mirror to look for bruises that would show. There were one or two, but cold water would reduce them a little. I peeled off my cloak and was hoisting my sleeves when the washroom door opened to admit someone else, a tall, easy-moving, competent-looking man of about thirty-five. He looked straight at me and smiled, and I was to learn, later, that the smile was almost a part of him.

"Need any help?" he asked, very gently, and I was on the point of fending him off with some story when a finger of memory stirred.

"We've met," I said, "haven't we?"

"That's right. Once, just briefly, in your father's office, about a year ago. Britannia. I'm Neil Carson."

"Yes." He had placed the memory for me. He had also stirred something else, my father's words in reference to this man. "A very useful chap to know. If ever you want anything taken care of efficiently and discreetly, you can't do better." It was almost enough to open my defenses, but not quite.

"What makes you think I need help?"

"Eyesight and experience. You carry all the marks of a scrap, but you're big and strong enough to take care of that,

so why are you shaking like a leaf?" I saw his eyes flick to my arm, and come back to mine. "Someone used a black-jack on you. I've seen marks like that before. A holdup?"

"Not quite. I've just seen a murder done."

"I've seen one or two myself. Not pleasant. Here, let me help you off with that shirt. How are you involved?"

It was his calmness that got me. No more than ten minutes later we had a secluded table in an alcove and I was telling him everything just as it had happened. He was a good listener, and waited until I was done before asking me to try and describe the two men involved.

"Swilly, I've heard of," he said, and frowned thoughtfully. "Small time crook, runs errands for the big men. A nose. One who gets information and sells it to the best bidder. I think I know the man with the wig, too, but I won't put a name to him yet. Tell me again what he said, the exact words if you can."

I told him as far as I was able, and he frowned again in thought.

"If it's the man I think it is, he wouldn't babble. He plays for big stakes. 'Millions' wouldn't be just words, but fact. And he gave it to you."

"What are you getting at?"

"You have a choice. You can report this affair, and get yourself involved with the law, and investigations and publicity. Or you can keep quiet. You left no traces, you didn't handle the knife, you're clear."

"But Swilly saw me."

"Right. He won't go to the law, that's obvious. But he sells information, and he will sell this. The dead man was on to something big, and Swilly knew it. You've got it now, and Swilly will guess that much, and sell *that*, too. So you're in trouble either way. Wouldn't you like to know what it is that you have?"

"The wig, you mean? You haven't even looked at it!"

"Don't intend to, not here. Too public. Maybe I don't want to get involved either." Carson still had his grin, but there was an undercurrent of seriousness in his voice, and it pulled me up sharp.

"That's true, of course. I've no right to drag you in."

"You didn't. I offered, remember? And I'd like to help, so

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long as we get one point clear. I'm betting this is something big, and outside the law. By that I don't mean necessarily criminal, but we will be mixing with criminals. The kind of people who carry knives, or worse, and are ready to use them, as you know. Also, as you obviously don't feel like handing this over to the lawful authorities, better get clear what you're letting yourself in for. Danger. Threats. Hazard. Possible rewards, no doubt, but it's something you have to commit yourself to, and no backing out once you've started. You think about it."

I did think, while I finished off what was on my plate, and another cup of coffee. Carson had a point. Events had moved so suddenly and swiftly that I needed time to take stock. From one point of view I had everything to lose. My life could be summed up in a few brief phrases. Alan Noble: twenty-three; single and unencumbered; only son and heir of Robert Noble, director-owner of Noble International Interplanetary Finance; amiable; inoffensive; totally unfit for a business life, much to my father's disgust; but well-acquainted with the pleasant occupation of caring for a country estate *and thoroughly bored with my life*. That last emphasis had to be made, because I now had to set it against what Carson was spreading before me. Risk and danger and possible disgrace, plus a mystery, but a possible rich reward. It added up to adventure. I looked at him again, searchingly.

"You'll come in with me?"

"Only if you'll listen to my point and accept it. If we go any further with this thing we will be in it right up to here." He chopped at his chin with one hand. "We'll be on our own. No crying for help. And the competition doesn't wear gloves. So, if you let me in, it will be to take charge. You see, I've done things like this before."

I can't hope to describe the way he said that. All I can say is that he convinced me entirely. "You have a deal," I said, and offered him my hand. He took it firmly. "What now?" I asked. "What's the first thing?"

"I make a phone call. It's a pure guess, but it will save time. I know someone who might just be able to help, and is reliable in any case."

"A third party?"

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"I said reliable. Never be slow to use experts, where you can. I'll be back in a minute. Finish your meal."

I tried, while he was gone, to get from my memory a little more on him, but there wasn't much to be had. That he was American, I could deduce anyway from his slight accent. That the job he had done for my father was something irregular and important was obvious from the respect with which he had treated him. My father is slow to show respect to anyone unless there's a good reason. I had completed my meal by the time he returned.

"I've asked our expert to meet us at my apartment. It's just along the Embankment. You fit?"

Some clock struck ten as we set off, and I could hardly believe that so much had happened in such a short time. Even the Embankment itself looked different, almost unreal, with its great glazed-floor span over the stinking Thames, and the steady roar of traffic to and fro. I have tried to imagine how it must have been when the river was still open and ships hauled where that traffic was now skimming, but it's difficult. Where on earth did all the cars and runabouts travel, if not along the River Road?

"I know you don't want to commit yourself as yet," I said, "but when you say 'something big,' just how big do you mean?"

"Do you know anything about the underworld, Noble? About people who move on the other side of the law?"

"Nothing concrete. I've heard stories, of course."

"Stories have to be dramatized, made acceptable. And ethical. I mean, the good guys have to win, in stories. Not in reality. I imagine you'd say your father is an honest man. I suppose he is, by most standards. But he is up against people who can, and do, buy and sell information—trade secrets, manufacturing tricks, industrial know-how, that kind of thing. So he has to do it too. And there are organizations who specialize in just that. There are also individuals, very clever people, who will stop at nothing to get something they can sell to someone who needs it. That's the field I work in, and it can be big stuff. In this case, unless my guesser is completely out of order, I'd say it is something off-planet."

It was the last thing I expected to hear, and I said so. Apart from the fact that I had never been off-planet myself,

and had never felt the urge toward it, I had the impression that everything off Earth was crude and half-civilized. Frontier stuff. He laughed; a quiet gentle chuckle.

"Insularity of the British," he murmured. "No offense, but you people have difficulty crediting other parts of Earth with culture, much less the far reaches of space. Like it or not, there are fortunes to be made out there, and you should know, since a good third of your father's business deals with trade out into space. We'll see, anyway."

We'd hardly been in his apartment five minutes before the doorbell announced our expert. In that brief time, we had both examined the enigmatic wig with some curiosity. I couldn't see anything particularly odd about it, apart from the lightness of the thing. I had always imagined a wig to be thick and heavy, but this was soft and insubstantial. The pale lock running down the middle of it made it look like the pelt of some strange animal. I put it on a table as he went to let his visitor in. He came back to say, "Noble, this is Fiona Knight. Fiona, meet Alan Noble, with a problem that should be right up your street."

She looked as surprised as I was, but took my hand in a very good grip and grinned with more than a hint of mischief.

"Nice to know that you're real. I half suspected Neil had made you up just to drag me away from my boredom. He thinks I'm bored, that is."

She settled into a seat, and Carson handed her the wig.

"That's the problem," he said, and then, "I'll make coffee." And he went away into the kitchen. She obviously knew him well, because she said nothing at all, just took the furry thing in her hands and examined it closely. It gave me the opportunity to examine her. I like to think that I know how to use my eyes, and it didn't take long to see that there were two people here, one on the surface and another, quite different, underneath. Her midnight-black hair and astonishingly blue eyes against a fair skin dusted with freckles and, as far as I could see, innocent of makeup apart from her mouth, gave her an open air country look. She wore a heavily embroidered thing like a tabard, a brief garment that ended at her hips, with matching ankle-boots, and the rest of her was as good as nude in an electro-static body

stocking. That much was the ultramodern demure look that so many try but few can justify as well as she did. But there was also the stillness, the purposeful movements of her hands and fingers, the total involvement with what she was doing, not even looking up as Carson set a coffee cup by her side. That didn't match her social butterfly exterior at all. Carson grinned at me as he sat.

"Fiona has the notion that I invent distractions for her."

"So you do," she murmured, without looking up. "You treat me as if I were still a small girl. What's your attitude toward women, Noble?"

"I haven't bothered to form one, frankly."

"That's honest, anyway. Not worth bothering about, eh?" Her eyes came up like twin needles, and then she smiled and looked away to Carson. "Of course, I had a hint from you, but how did you spot it?"

"Habit of looking, and good guessing," he murmured. Her eyes came back to me, devastatingly.

"Where do you come into this?"

"The wig is mine. Bequeathed to me. What about it?"

"By the door," she said, "you'll find a box. Bring it, and I'll show you. Carefully, please, the equipment in there is mine on loan."

When it was on the table by her side she snapped it open to show some kind of recording apparatus. From a small compartment she produced a loupe and tweezers, and began picking at a thread in the blonde lock of hair. I got the idea after a while. There was a fine wire in that hair.

"A recording wire! I would never have thought of it!"

"You didn't have the background," Carson soothed. "I did. It had to be a message of some kind. And Fiona has the technique, the equipment, and the sense to keep her mouth shut afterward."

"Thank you very much." She didn't look up. "He's like that all the time, Noble. While we ordinary mortals are wondering whether there's a problem or not, he's not only seen it and solved it, he's three steps on the way to some action. Want to bet he already knows what's on this wire?"

"No. He has already guessed it's something off-planet. How soon can you test that?"

"Five or six minutes. It will take some time to get the

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speed set right. Off-planet, eh? You're a good guesser, Neil, but that's a bit far out, even for you. Any reasons?"

"You shouldn't ask me that." He was very gentle. "You've seen far more field-research wires than I ever have. Wire-recorders are comparatively rare on Earth, where tape is handier, except for espionage. And they don't use that particular kind of ferrite."

"As you said to Noble, I don't have the background. Lord, I don't know what kind of wire industrial spies use in their gadgets! Hush, this is it!"

We heard a crackle and then a sharp voice against interference.

"This is Leon Clan. This wire is the original and only wire, taken from the records of the third Tau Ceti Research Expedition, carrying this data. No other record exists."

"Hold it!" Carson spoke, and she lifted her finger. "Just for the record, that's the man I had in mind, Noble. Leon Clan. Go on, Fiona."

"Go on nothing!" she blazed at him. "You knew this, too, didn't you? The Tau Ceti Research? My father?"

"Just good guessing is all. Noble described Clan, and I know his form. It would have to be something big, and where is anything worth millions, these days, except off-planet? And, of course, it could have been Lyra, or Cygni. But when he was so insistent, with his last breath, to say tonight, it added up."

"To Knight." I echoed, separating the words as he had done.

"My father," she turned the blaze on me, "Professor Larabee Knight, who is *the* living authority on Tau Ceti Three."

"Maybe I picked the wrong Knight. Go ahead and play the damned thing, Fiona. Let's have the data first, the arguments afterward."

She lifted her finger and the reels began to spin again. Now an old and thickly accented voice came, choosing words with pedantic care.

"The recording which follows was made by me personally on Tau Ceti Three: that is, the third planet of the Tau Ceti system, so far without any official name, but which should in my opinion be named after the inhabitants, who call themselves Verl; hence I suggest the name Verlan."

Down went her finger again. "I know that voice. Dr. Artur Gallint. He swore he had been able to establish meaningful communication with the humanoid inhabitants, and called them Verl. That, and 'Verlan,' is accepted now. But he was such a muddler in other ways that when he swore half his stuff had been stolen no one believed him. Where did you get this?" Her eyes bored into me.

"In a moment," Carson promised. "Let's hear it."

The old voice resumed. "The speaker is one Uhumelee 'ng 'aro, as closely as I can duplicate his sounds. I gathered that he was some kind of leader, chief, or headman, of the pack or group I was observing. He speaks:"

For a moment there was just crackle, and then the quiet room was full of curious sound, a mixture of labials and liquids, yowling and yelping overtones, making no kind of sense to me at all. Miss Knight listened raptly, almost as if she understood it. When it stopped after about ten minutes, she jabbed with her finger to bring silence once more.

"I'd say that was genuine. It sounds like a field recording. And the language. Let me explain. While no one really believed Gallint's claim, several researchers have made sound recordings, just as one would do with bird or animal noises. And it is a language."

"You mean you can understand it?" I demanded.

"After a fashion, yes. I could do better if I put it through my analyzer. Let me finish. That recording is at least ten years old. Gallint was never able to duplicate his data, nor was he ever able to convince anyone that these Verlan were really able to talk, as we understand talk. He died without being able to justify himself. Since then, by degrees, we have built up enough sounds to reconstruct a kind of language. Nothing as long and complex as this, though. We have other reasons for believing the Verlan to be intelligent, now. I'm well informed on this simply because Dad has used me and my skills to codify all the communication data on the Verlan—and I have never heard anything approaching this for depth and clarity. It is extremely valuable, just as it is. Do you realize that?"

"Hold on." Carson inserted his easy drawl. "It has to be valuable in some other way. I knew Clan. He wouldn't risk

his neck for semantics, or exobiological research. He'd want cash value."

"I'll call you on that," she retorted. "You've been to Verlan. I haven't, but I know the place is a paradise in spots. So it matters, in cold commercial terms, whether the Verlan are intelligent humanoid or not. Matters to statesmen, politicians, national groups, and business exploiters of all kinds. Makes all the difference to them, and there is a ferocious hush-hush battle in progress right now over that very point."

"Granted," he said, nodding. "But not to a crook. Not that kind of precious. Let's hear the rest of it."

She shrugged, lifted her finger and the wire started sliding again. Gallint's voice. "I have made a rough translation of that speech, claiming no accuracy for fine nuances, only a gist. As follows: 'Before, long ago, much time, were the great ones who knew all things. We served them. They made us good, happy, doing all things for them. But they were not many, and their children were not many. And so they died. Knowing all things, they knew they would die. Before they died they gave to each pack, or cluster, a touching-stone of great power. This is the touching-stone. With it I make well anyone in my pack who becomes sick. I had the stone from the one who was chief before me. I will give it to the one who takes my place. I will tell him the history, as it was told me. That the great ones made their last home on the island called Hlowlee. Before they died they took a great many things, touching-stones and other things of great power, and put them away in a safe place on that island. Where they still remain.'

"That, I believe, is the gist of the chief's speech. He showed me the touching-stone. It is cylindrical, a crystal about three inches long and half-an-inch in diameter; a jewel with an internal structure; it glows; it is obviously artificial; it is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Just as a gem it would be priceless. I was not allowed to touch it. He carried it in some kind of fiber tube, and that inside a braided pouch. To use, he grasped the uncovered jewel in his right hand, or paw, and touched his subject with his left paw. The demonstration I saw involved a young male who seemed to be stricken with cramps and stomach ache, possibly in-

digestion or food poisoning. Within seconds of being touched he was healthy enough to scuttle off at a good speed.

"I should also explain that while the old man was holding the gem he was inspired, but reverted to dull-eyed stupidity on releasing it. I cannot begin to guess what that effect could be, but I saw it. I have made repeated efforts to contact that same pack again, but so far without success. I can give a guess as to the island referred to. Hlowlee means, according to text, old home, den and footprint, footshape or paw. There is a solitary island about fifty miles to the southeast of Outpost One which fits this description very well. As far as is known, it is barren."

The wire fizzed on a little more then ran out with a click. She reached out, switched off the machine, then sat back and crossed her long legs with a fine abandon, her eyes on Carson.

"Well, now," he murmured, "that is much more like it. A hoard of priceless gems." His smile was for me, but then his eye caught Miss Knight, and I saw him frown, and then sigh. "You're going to be difficult, aren't you?"

"You bet I am," she declared. "You've just had the benefit of my professional services. I can do more. I can put that wire through my analyzer and get a more accurate translation, possibly a point or two that Dr. Gallint missed. Yes. But I charge a fee!"

"A fee?" I stared. "But, of course, if you wish. I hadn't thought about it, but certainly. Name it." I was reaching for my credit card when she shook her head; did tricks with her long legs again, deliberately exhibiting them.

"My price is high," she said. "I want in!"

II

IT TOOK ME a moment to understand what she meant, and then I had to look to Carson for guidance. He looked right back at me, and his smile was very thin.

"You heard the lady," he said. "She wants to come along."

"You're both too quick for me," I protested. "If that wire is to be believed, there's a hoard of priceless gems some-

where on Verlan. If I assume that you mean to try and get it—that *we* are to try and get it—surely that will be on the ragged edge of illegality?”

“It certainly would. And she knows that. It’s her key card.” I must have looked as baffled as I felt, for he went on. “Fiona is officially involved with Verlan. Her father is the expert on it, and she is connected with the Museum’s exobiological department. All she has to do is sound the alert, tell the authorities that this wire is in existence and that you have it, and that is that, so far as you are concerned. *We*, if you prefer it that way. The proper authorities will take over.”

All at once that seemed a terrible prospect. Before me danced the rare chance of high adventure, a chance to do something exciting, and the thought of that chance being swallowed in the dull mills of authority was an offense. I glared at her. “You would do that?”

She showed her perfect teeth in a gloating smile. “I can. Nothing easier. You can stop me. All you have to say, politely, is ‘Please, Fiona, would you like to join us in our expedition?’ That’s all.”

“It’s not for me to say. Even before we heard what was on that wire, I made a deal with Carson. I’ll stand by it. The deal was that if anything came up worth the trouble, he would be in charge. Ask him.”

“It’s your wire. You said so.”

“Hold on, Fiona,” Carson drawled. “Noble is telling it the way it is. I’ve heard his story, which is why I was able to do all that smart guessing. You haven’t heard it yet. Now would be a good time. Tell her.”

I told my story again, understanding it better now that I knew the forces beneath it. She listened intently.

“All right, now.” Carson took over as I finished. “Let me spell it out. We can assume that Gallint had it right, right enough for some high-level crooks to get interested. A fortune in gems, plus God alone knows what in alien artifacts. But we do not have it all to ourselves. Swilly knows, for sure. Others know, by conjecture. Clan didn’t get on the trail all by himself, you can bet. So there will be competition, violent and ruthless. And then there’s the planet itself. I’ve been there, and I know a little of its conditions. It can be rugged. There is also this. The settled portion of Verlan is a rich man’s

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hunting ground, a paradise for some, and they do not go very strong for law. They believe in freedom to do what they like, there. I'm not criticizing that, except to rub in the fact that we won't have any kind of authority to turn to. Play it right and you can commit just about any crime you like on Verlan and no one will even be curious.

"So. I reckon I can take care of myself. Noble, here, is big enough, strong enough, and willing. He is also a product of the British style of higher education, which may not strike you as significant, but I'll come to that. You"—he focused on Miss Knight, and there was no easiness now, but hard purpose—"I know you, Fiona, and you know me, so let's not beat around any bushes. Noble agrees that I'm in charge, so it's this way. I'll include you in the party, certainly, but on my terms. And you know what they are. Otherwise you can take the wire, for me, and do what you like with it."

Of all that, I understood just one thing and I choked on it. "You mean you'd actually agree to taking her along? A girl?"

"So you *do* have an attitude to women!" she snapped. "I might have known. Let me tell you—"

"No. I'll tell him." Carson didn't raise his voice, but it shut her up efficiently. "Don't get any wrong ideas, Noble. Fiona can handle herself. She can swim, fight, drive anything that runs on wheels, cushions or flies. She is handy equally with sword, knife, or beam weapons. She has climbed mountains, been down potholes, has lived rough, slept under the stars, been frozen, sunburned, chased by wild animals—did I leave out anything?"

"Skydiving, deep diving—one or two other things. Unarmed combat." She grasped her chair-arms ready to spring up. "You'd care to take me on?"

"What would that prove?" I demanded. "Carson's in charge. I want to hear his reasons on this!"

"Good for you," he said, and grinned. "You're competent, Fiona, I don't argue that. There's just one thing, and you know it. Let me throw back to what I said a while back. British higher education. They teach them to take orders, to accept authority. Discipline. Somebody has to be in charge, somebody who knows the form. It matters. It could make the difference between life and death. And you know it. I'm

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not such a fool as to try to guarantee total success, but neither am I the kind of fool to go up against men like Swilly and Clan unless I am with people I can rely on all the way. People who will do as I say, instantly and without question. You want in, you're in, but on those terms. Otherwise, forget it."

She didn't like it. Her face showed it plainly. "You *need* me," she argued. "I can pull strings. I can understand Verlan. I can speak it, a bit. You *need* someone like me!"

"I know it. I also know you. Make up your mind."

She scowled a little longer, then sighed. "All right, I'll pander to your ego, damn you! You're in charge. What's the next move?"

Ten terse minutes later we had a plan of sorts and I helped carry her box of tricks down to street level, where we caught a beetle: she to the Museum; me back to my town apartment, leaving Carson busy with the phone and various strings of his own to pull. As we climbed into the little automatic runabout and she programmed it for the Museum, I was still suffering from a sense of unreality.

"I'm confused," I admitted, "but I think I should say I hope I haven't interrupted anything important in your life?"

"Not really." She settled back easily. "My main work is the kind of thing that could use up a lifetime. Phoneme coding and analysis. In other words, trying to get enough data into the big machine to build up the ideal international language. Like trying to keep an encyclopedia up to date, it can't be done, but it's always useful. Tell me, how well do you know Captain Carson?"

"Captain? I didn't even know that. I've met him only once before. My father spoke well of him, and that's enough."

"I never knew anyone honest *not* to speak well of him. He is quite a character. Turned in a spectacular career in Space Service simply because they were on the point of kicking him upstairs fast, into a desk job. He couldn't face that, but, since Space Service is still very young, and there's an acute shortage of good men, there was no way he could have dodged it. So he quit. Said he'd rather do his own living than tell somebody else how to."

"I see!" I said. "That explains something. He asked me why I was idling my time, and I told him it was that or be

stuck in my father's office, and I just couldn't see it. You know him very well?" She nodded, and I went on. "Why make such a fuss about accepting his authority?"

"Because I'm female," she said cryptically, and the beetle swung in to the side and halted. "This is where I get off. See you around noon tomorrow." She went away across the broad pavement outside the Museum, a slim leggy shape hauling the big box, and I rode on the fifteen additional minutes to my apartment. My inner confusion, if anything, was worse than before, and I was now unhappily conscious of various aches and pains from Swilly's efforts. My mind was an uneasy sandwich. On top were the crisp orders from Carson for me to get as much sleep as possible, clear up any unfinished business, make contact with my father—presently in Britannia—and somehow talk him into agreeing to let me travel to Verlan. That would require some thought. At bottom was my placid and nonspectacular existence so far, alternating between our country home and London, quite aimlessly. In between was the most indigestible mixture of drama and intrigue, violence, fantastic treasure, murderous villains—and it just wouldn't settle into anything reasonable at all.

The unreality was still there as I paid off the beetle with my credit card and took the elevator up to the apartment on the fifteenth floor. It wasn't until I was actually placing my key in the lock of the door that I gave heed to a sense of something wrong, and by then it was too late. Figures came at me out of the shadows purposefully, a dark arm rose and fell, blasting the dim light of the corridor into a million stars in my head. I went down, not quite out, my head splitting. I heard a voice, caught just a glimpse of a thin, rat-snarling face, and the urgent order, "That's him, all right. Belt him another one!"

When I came to, I felt that my head, like Gaul, had been divided into three parts, but with a blunt saw. I was stretched out over the doorway of the apartment, with the door standing half open. I managed to get my wristwatch in focus, and saw three-ten, so I had been out something like four hours. Standing up was an effort, and it revealed to me that I had been thoroughly searched: cape and pants, vest, even my socks and shoes. And the flat. The first bleary glance

around, after I flicked on the light, made that painfully clear. I leaned against the wall and made my head work. Swilly! That had been his face, with another to help. Remembering what he had done to Clan, I supposed I was lucky to be alive, but I had doubts just then. I struggled to the phone, made my head work further, dug up from the chaos the number Carson had given me, and dialed it. He must have been abed, and I was prepared for a dismal wait, but his voice came on seconds after the second buzz.

"Noble here," I said, my voice sounding as if it came from inside a metal box. "Two men waiting for me—possibly more—when I got home. Knocked me out, searched me, took my keys, ransacked the flat. I've just come around."

"How bad are you? Need a doctor?"

"I doubt it. Feels bloody, but nothing broken. Later. Point is, I recognized Swilly. And they got the wig."

"Yes." His quiet voice, even over the phone, had a hum in it like a dynamo spinning. "Very good staff work by somebody. Wait." There was a pause of about fifteen seconds, then, "This is what you do. Report this, as it stands, to the police. Get a doctor for yourself. Call it breaking and entry, which it is. Get them to hurry formalities because you are taking an urgent trip to Britannia, which you are. Then do that as soon as you can. You can nap on the monorail. See your father. Tell him as much as is relevant. How will he take it, can you guess?"

"Nothing unusual about it. There have been several similar outrages around this area recently."

"That helps. Fine! Use it as part of your excuse, say you're fed up with London, with civilized perversion, anything you like. Make it known you'd like to take off to Verlan. Make it good. You'll have to carry this part alone. I'll contact Fiona right away. She and I will make our own way. We will pick you up somehow, en route, making it look accidental. There must be no overt link between us."

"I'm the patsy," I said, and he chuckled.

"It's not that bad. They could have killed you. Why didn't they?"

"I don't know. Can't think, not the way my head is cracking."

"Sorry about that. Obviously, you're too big a name, Noble.

Alive, you could raise a stink, but that would simply delay *you*. Dead, the authorities would step in, and our opponents don't want that. Clear now? Right. We'll meet again, soon."

And that was that. I began to appreciate what Miss Knight had said, about his mind taking steps while ordinary people were still gawking at the data. I had no trouble at all playing my part. The law was most cooperative, and I was almost comfortable as I settled down for a couple of hours nap on the monorail. Just one thing bothered me. Obviously Swilly had sold his information to someone, and that someone had managed to identify me, and locate my home address, and fast! I had reason to believe that Carson was good, but was he as good as our unknown competition?

Thanks to medication, and, I suppose, a clean constitution, I arrived in Britannia with little more than a headache. Frankly, I do not care for the functional city that has been called Britain's new capital. Better pens than mine have rhapsodized over its advanced design, its architecture, the marvelous view out over the Wash, the reclaiming of fenland to make the world's most modern land-sea-space terminal, and all the rest of it. Personally, I prefer a little disorder, a sense of the happy chance. In any case I was in no mood, that morning, to dwell on such things. From my father's office, high up in one of the administration buildings which overlook the sea-city, I could see the dock, and far out in the North Sea, the splash-port where ships came and went carrying goods and merchandise—only these ships went straight up, destination Moonbase and beyond. In a short while, if all went well, I was going to be on one of those ships. Even now, it was hard to believe.

"Well?" My father, finishing up some trivial business, called me back from reverie. "What brings you here? Some trouble, obviously."

I told him my tale, carefully edited, and he snorted at it, which depressed me a bit. I'm of age, my own master, and there has never been any great deal of affection between us, but I suppose old habits die hard, and I didn't relish trying to go against his wishes.

"You didn't come all the way up here, overnight, just to tell me of a break-in by hooligans. What do you really want?"

It came to me that I could do worse than adopt Carson's

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style, to tell the truth, as much as was needed. "I want to get off-planet for a while," I told him, "just for a change. I'm fed up with just idling around."

"Indeed! They say discontent is a healthy sign. What particular place had you in mind?"

"I had thought of Verlan. I've heard it's fairly civilized."

"I see!" He fiddled with papers a moment, and I expected him to turn me down flat, but he shook me. "Very well, I think I can accommodate you. As it happens, I was contemplating sending someone to look over the market there."

"Me?" I was astonished. "But I know nothing about business and trade, you know that!"

"You know more than you think, Alan. Look!" and he brought up a map on his wall-screen. "Verlan, third planet of Tau Ceti. That continent. Take a good look. The living conditions are almost ideal. The interior is parklike, the climate ranging from subtropical in the south to Scandinavian in the north. Around the coastline, see, a number of community settlements. They are all different, but they have one thing in common. They are very luxurious. And the business council of Shangri-La, which is what they've called the place, has only one objective, to provide what the consumer wants."

"Sounds ideal."

"Exactly. And they have one strict rule. No producer industries, no factories, no workers, no pollution, nothing like that. Wealthy people only, everything imported. So, a fantastic market." He cut the display and fixed his eye on me. "I hardly expected the day would come when I would need your talent, my boy, but here it is. Every producer business on Earth has an eye on that continent, is itching to provide what they need. But most of them are having difficulty in thinking in terms of sheer pleasure. Businessmen are more apt to think in terms of necessities and essentials, mass markets and mass production. I'm in the same boat. I have expert scouts, men who know their stuff, but they are not 'rich' minded. You are. You've lived that kind of life ever since you left school. You know that kind of people, you can mix with them, talk their language. You can also keep

your eyes and ears open, and make notes of what is needed. What they *really* want, not what salesmen are trying to sell them. You understand me?"

I did. He had me all wrong, but I had the sense to keep my mouth shut and let him sell me. Of the old-fashioned school, my father. He disapproved of my idle ways, but, by gum, if he could use them to his advantage, he was going to do that. And he did, with the result that, after a telephoned word here and a discreet command there, money and prestige had their way, and I was riding the shuttle-boat out to the splash-port, on my way to the Moon. Unfortunately, all the money in the world couldn't buy off the devilish harmonics of the hypox drive, which seemed to strike some instant harmony with my headache, and I was never so glad of anything as I was to see the arrival signal go up in the cabin set aside for me. Feeling as if my head had melted and was slowly solidifying again, with fractional gravity threatening to finish off my partial disintegration, I managed to make my way to the reception station, a vast and noisy space full of mechanicals and distressed travelers like myself.

As I fell into an easy chair and felt its comfort, a buzzing little mechanical approached. I shoved my travel-card at it, pushed it into a slot, and it spoke courteously.

"I am programmed to answer any or all of the questions listed on my screen, if you depress the appropriate button."

I saw the list, and was trying to focus my eyes to read it when a sleek young woman in skintight silver came gliding up, removed the card, sent the machine away, and smiled upon me.

"Mr. Noble. Can I be of service to you?"

"I hope so. If there is an equivalent to travel-sickness in space, I've got it. Something in a glass might help."

"Of course!" She went away with a self-conscious wriggle, and I sat back and wondered how I had ever let myself be talked into such a mess. It had dawned on me during that fiendish ride that I was certainly hours ahead of my time, that Carson would not expect me to get moving this fast. And that, of course, meant that I would be traveling to Verlan alone. I think I touched rockbottom at that point. Then the gorgeous silver-clad creature returned with a tall

glass and a worried look. She waited until I had imbibed half the potion, then she coughed discreetly.

"We have a slight difficulty, sir, with regard to your passage to Verlan. That will be on the *Imperial Queen*, the director's suite, of course."

"What's the problem?" I asked, feeling better with every breath.

"A party of scientific people needing urgent passage had already been assigned that accommodation. You have priority, of course, and we can fill them in on a later flight—"

"What d'you want me to do, share with them? How much room is there?"

"There's space for four, and only two in the scientific party. Of course, if you would rather not, I'll give word for them to be taken off—"

"They are already aboard?"

"Yes, sir. The *Queen* lifts in twenty minutes!"

"Oh, Lord!" I put away the rest of the drink and tried to think. It speaks for the state of my faculties that it took almost a full minute before the obvious truth dawned on me. A scientific party of two! The young woman stood patiently, ready to dash away at my least word. I managed a smile.

"It's all right," I told her. "Let them stay. I don't mind sharing a cabin, in a good cause. Do you think I could have another of those magic potions?"

"Certainly, sir, and thank you very much. It will save a lot of trouble. I will arrange for a mechanical to come for you."

After all that fuss, the quarters were hardly palatial. I was delivered to a miniscule cabin with bunks for four and enough room in the middle for the same four to stand, provided they weren't too fat. And, of course, Carson and Miss Knight. He turned his easy smile on me, but put up a hand.

"You were fast, Noble. Maybe too fast. The co-pilot has just told us that we may have to get off. Apparently some V.I.P. wants this suite!"

"Doesn't it make you want to puke?" she muttered. "Just because some bloated business tycoon suddenly gets a desire to travel in search of even more wealth, we have to wait. So much for the prestige of science!"

It struck me as funny, and I laughed. She was furious. I

had always considered "blazing blue eyes" a literary exaggeration, but she proved me wrong on that. For a moment I thought she was going to haul off and hit me.

"I'm sorry"—I hastened to soothe her—"it just struck me as comical that you should blast somebody about his lawful business, while you are using your so-called scientific prestige for illegal purposes."

"All the same," Carson said, "it's a bit hard to be held up now, after making such good time. Especially you. I never expected—here, just a moment! I'm slipping. Last minute annexation of the director's suite, and then *you* turn up—am I right?"

"Absolutely. You can unpack. Your bloated business tycoon has agreed to share his luxurious accommodation with you."

Miss Knight was deflated, and Carson was quick to rub it in. "You have to admit, Fiona, that he is pulling his weight so far."

"Oh, shut up!" she muttered, and began unpacking her case.

"How long," I asked, looking around, "are we to be confined in this decorated shoe box?"

"One hundred sixty hours," Carson said. "And if you think this is a box, you should see the lower decks!"

"How do they stand it for a whole week?"

"They don't. Nor will we. We use this." He popped open a small cabinet next to the toilet-cubicle. From it he produced a coil of plastic that had oval green pills embedded in it at regular intervals. "Slow down, in the jargon. Metabolic retardants. You take one, wait what seems like an hour—and it's tomorrow. You feel hungry, you eat and drink, take another—and that's the way it is."

To be accurate, it wasn't quite like that. We worked. We tried our best to learn the Verlan tongue, we studied maps of the planet, and we got to know each other a little better. Apart from her rather breathtaking candor and her equally breathtaking shape, I discovered that Fiona had a wit almost as keen as Carson's, and an appetite for work equal to his. They were thorough, those two, and I had to go like mad to keep up with them. So it wasn't all dull and sodden with

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time-passing drugs. But I am now an expert on space-travel, as much as anyone is, and I can tell you, there's nothing to it. Literally.

III

WE HUNG ABOUT in orbit around Verlan for quite a while awaiting landing clearance, and my V.I.P. status got us the chance to see the place through the only available viewers, in the main control cabin. I will admit that some of the credit ought to go to Fiona, who turned on her charm full-blast, and was exhibiting herself in a nothing-dress of some peculiar stuff that looked transparent one moment and rainbow-crazy the next. Shangri-La looked very like a more rounded version of Australia, and Carson spotted our island for us.

"That's it," he murmured, "but don't point. There, like a dog's paw, see? That's our destination, eventually, after we've done other things."

Then we were slipping away over the main continent again, and Fiona had to sigh at it.

"A beautiful place. I don't wonder that locals want to save it from spoilage. Where do we land?" This last was for the captain, who was only too pleased to point and explain.

"There. Port Salutation. Everyone enters by that gate and is recorded." A junior approached him with a hurried word and he nodded, then came back to us apologetically.

"You'll have to return to your cabins now, please. We are going down. Landing in about thirty minutes. You'll be first off, so be ready when the chime sounds."

The atmosphere of this part of Verlan was not only tinted with gauzy hues, it was delicately perfumed, as we discovered when we made our way to the landing gangway and down into the trimaran that came scooping alongside to collect us. And it was hot enough to make us immediately uncomfortable as we moved forward to give room for our fellow-travelers to come aboard.

"This is almost tropical," Fiona complained. "I hope there aren't any silly bylaws against exposure. I shall be cooked if I don't peel something off soon!"

"Better get used to it," Carson advised. "It's going to be a lot warmer than this where we're going."

She had a cutting retort ready, but I touched her arm. "Look over your shoulder, and feel easy," I said.

"Welcome to Salutation!" The young woman who had emerged from the forward cabin addressed us in a round and rich contralto that caught every ear and every eye, too, and small wonder. A wisp of white synthetic twisted about her hips like a loincloth was all that stood between her and the admiring stare of the passengers. She was tall, with a shape that would have driven a Norse goddess green with envy, and from her heavy gold tresses down to her bare feet she was smoothly tanned the color of old honey. As she moved now, to grab a handful of brochures and come among us to distribute them, she was so artfully and utterly right that she disarmed any possible reaction to her near-nudity. Back on her tiny elevation again, she said, "The brochure gives you a map of Salutation and all the information you need to find your way around. If you should be in any difficulty or doubt whatever, just ask anyone. We are all good friends, in Shangri-La." With that, and a beautiful smile, she stepped down into her seat and the engines growled into life. Carson frowned at his gift, at the back page, where there was a general map of the continent.

"It's changed some in the five years since I was here last, but you'll notice almost all the city-complexes are to the north of here, all around the coast. This southern end of the continent is a shade too warm for most folks."

"That's to our benefit, surely?" I suggested, and he nodded.

"In a way, sure. Reduces the risk of interference from the local law. Not that they're all that strong on law here. But it also means we're on our own. No chance of screaming for help if we get in a jam."

He put the folder away, and we looked up to meet Fiona's stare, with one eyebrow slightly raised to mean she had been waiting to get in her contribution.

"Just to make sure," she aimed the remark at me, "about something. That near-naked Venus who is piloting us. You don't mind? I mean, about a girl making herself comfortable?"

I glanced away, over the sparkling sea where a group of young people were dashing toward us, apparently skating on the water, but in reality riding on small motor-powered surf-

boards. Take all the seven or eight of them together and there wasn't enough clothing to make a small handkerchief. "Judging by that," I said, "it doesn't seem to matter much whether I mind or not. Anything goes, here."

"That's not what I meant. Never mind them, I'm talking about us. Will it bother you? Damn it, you know what I mean, and I can't help being female."

"Look"—I chose words with care, because I could see a smothered grin of unholy glee on Carson's face, out of range of her eyes—"let me put it this way. Some people need to be concealed because they offend, or because they have some kind of illusion to maintain. You don't need that. Ornamentation, for you, is gilding the lily. Go ahead and be comfortable, please. You won't upset me at all. But don't expect me not to look and admire. That would be like taunting a thirsty man with wine and then not letting him drink."

She turned to Carson. "Isn't he nice? I ask a simple question and I get a poem in reply."

"It was a silly question," he told her mildly. "And you know it. You just can't help trying to make a man squirm. It's your nature. Watch it, we're going alongside. You much of a swimmer, Noble?"

The question lifted the tension before it could sting. We scrambled out of the trimaran and onto a quayside that gave us a view of really beautiful buildings and tree-lined vistas, all of it looking as clean and freshly scrubbed as if it had just been gone over for our benefit.

"Not a good swimmer," I told him, as we started a slow stroll toward the city center. "I can keep afloat, and make some progress, for quite a while, but I'm no performer. Any special reason why?"

"No. Just useful data. Islands, swimming—just association of ideas. That looks like the registration center."

Our documents enabled us to comply with the formalities very quickly, but Carson pointed out, as we left the building again, "That's a very neat system. We are now officially here, and we stay here until we leave through that machine. So you have, at one stroke, a complete population check and breakdown and an instant reference for data about imports. No guessing at the market. But I'd dearly love to backtrack on their records over the past few months."

"You have master-criminals on the brain," Fiona scoffed, and he just gave a shrug and a smile and led us away to a bench in a beautiful plaza. Out came the map again, on his knee, while we sat at either side. "We're here," he said, with his finger on Salutation, "and we want to be here." The finger moved clear across the lower stretch of the continent to Outpost One. "That's to start with. That's where Fiona will pull her weight, will establish our scientific bona fides and get us a little help, maybe. Current information, at least."

"And then," she added, in rich scorn, "we go jumping off into the mist to try and locate Gallint's semi-mythical pack. Frankly, Neil, I think that is the craziest part of the whole plan. If Gallint himself couldn't find old Uhumelee again, what chance have we got?"

"I must admit," I said, "that I feel the same way on that. You've talked of the time factor, and I can appreciate that, so why must we waste some of it on a hopeless quest?"

"Oblige me," said Carson quietly. "I can only lay the phenomena before you, I can't make you add it up the way I do. I see it this way. Dr. Gallint was regarded as eccentric by his own colleagues. He was sick. He didn't have much time. But, in spite of all that, he did *try* to find that pack again. And he *did* manage a highly accurate translation of that speech. That's one picture. Next, I'm pretty sure no one except us knows anything about that island. That was the key item on the wire, and Swilly didn't know it. Third, there is the constant need to avoid laying a trail. So far we have blazed a false one, Fiona in the name of science, Noble as an advance agent for business. So far we are still in the picture. I know you don't buy the idea of a master-crook very easily, but I do. I know that kind. I'm quite happy to let him trail us all the way to Outpost One, and beyond into the hot-belt, because that fits our ostensible pattern, and will give him even more reason to doubt Swilly. A man in doubt stops to think. He goes slowly. I'm gambling on that. I don't intend to hang around looking for Uhumelee any longer than is necessary. I have my eye on that island. We'll get there. But I don't want to lead anyone else there, if I can help it. Because, just for one thing, it is, roughly ten miles by fifteen in extent, which is over a hundred square miles to search,

with no other clues at all. That could take half a lifetime! So if there are any further clues at all, we can't afford to pass up the chance of getting them. All right? Now, let's organize ourselves some transport."

As we strolled off, it occurred to me that the map had not shown any roads, and I mentioned it to Carson, who was as puzzled as I about it, until we came to a store which supplied what we were looking for. The brisk young woman who came to attend to us saw nothing strange in our request for a substantially roomy vehicle of some kind that would take us wherever we wanted to go. Apparently it was not unusual for small parties to take off at random and just wander anywhere.

"The interior," she said, putting up a large map for us on a screen, "is virtually trackless. There is an enormous variety of scene, mountains, semi-jungle, great plains, rivers and lakes—no dangerous wild life—and an even climate. It gets cooler as you go north, so you can pick your own temperature. You can go anywhere you like, do what you like for as long as you like, and come back to civilization when you're ready for it. You can even pick the kind of civilization you fancy, as the coastal cities are all different in one way or another, but all pleasant and easy going." She was obviously proud of her country, and with good reason. I could see where it would appeal enormously to people suffering from the crowded regimentation of Earth. If they could afford it, of course.

She produced for our approval a sleek and capacious car she called a Roamer, an air-cushion model that could go anywhere and do anything short of climbing straight up a wall. She showed us all the gadgets: the radio, for use in emergency only—"to keep the airwaves clean and free"; the homing gyro-compass and map link; the auto-chef that would process into edibility anything we might shoot, and the weapons to do the shooting. There were self-erecting sleeping-out units should we want to forsake the vehicle by night, and a waste-disposal unit that she lingered on with emphasis.

"All wastes, please," she told us. "Do not throw anything away. We are very strongly anti-litter. On the next block you will find equipment stores, and they will tell you the same

thing about clothing and personal gear. Put it in the disposal. Do not throw it out. To encourage this we make a pro rata payment for the accumulation in the unit, on an evaluation by analysis. This is a clean country and we want it to stay that way."

She quoted us a price, finally, that made me blink a little, as we had previously agreed that I would pick up the tab at this stage. But even that was softened. "We have branch stores in all major cities," she explained, "so you are not obliged to return the goods here, but can trade them in anywhere, repayment according to mileage. Have a good trip!"

The clothing stores came next, on Fiona's insistence. "I am not standing these binders," she declared, "one moment longer. I'm melting!"

Carson and I had our needs settled very quickly, but naturally it took a lot longer for her to choose what she wanted, and this gave us time to ask a few questions of the sales staff.

"All women," Carson remarked to the dark-eyed Latin lovely who had served us and was only too willing to talk. "Have we struck a peculiar part of town, or is this common?"

"It is the common thing," she told us, in a delightfully Spanish-flavored English. "To go off and live in the wilds, it seems to have appeal for men, but a woman prefers to stay closer to a town. So almost all services are staffed by women. Also, the salaries are so high, and the expenses so small—for food, clothing"—she gestured casually at the negligible blue-and-gold skirt she wore, which was little more than a waist strap to support pouches—"and there is no need to spend anything much—so that a girl can work here for about three years and save enough to be independent. And have a wonderful vacation at the same time."

I liked Shangri-La better, the more I learned about it, and we spent a very pleasant half hour or so talking to our informant, until Fiona was ready. I failed to see what had taken her so long, because she appeared in a quite simple and brief white-net wraparound loincloth affair, and ankle-high transparent boots, an outfit that seemed hardly worth the time. Minutes later we were on our way, with our cast-off clothing safely put away and the feeling of having, by

that act, finally broken with Earth ways. The sight of Salutation dropping away behind us helped the feeling. Ahead the land rose in great slow-rolling hills, thick with green and crested here and there with strange trees, all wrong-angle branches and puff-ball leaves.

"Handles well," Carson approved, the breeze whipping his voice away, "and responsive, but this rainbow atmosphere can make a fool of your distance vision if you're not careful."

"What's the cause of it?"

"Something to do with upper-atmosphere ionization and the humidity. It will grow more intense as we go, because we're angling south. You'd better take over for a while, Noble, just to get the feel of it. And then you, Fiona."

We slowed and I took his place at the wheel, while he explained a point or two. The auto-pilot was set for Outpost One, and, as there were no roads at all, steering as such was no problem. The only thing the driver had to do was compensate from time to time, by overriding, when the terrain called for it. For instance, as Carson explained, if the direction lay such that it would take us along the slope of a steep hill, the driver could override and go down, then tack back, which would be better than running for miles at a forty degree cant. He went on to propose that I would drive for four hours, then Fiona for another four. He must have seen the set of her chin.

"It's a drill," he declared. "We are not on a holiday jaunt. It will be dusky by the time you've done your four, Fiona, and then I'll take over. I reckon my night vision is a shade better than either of yours."

"And what are you going to do until then?"

"Sleep!" he said, moving back into the rear.

"We are going to drive all night?"

"We are. I have my instincts, and they are telling me not to waste any time. If we maintain a steady fifty-five we should strike Outpost One by daybreak or just after."

Only a few minutes later, Fiona came to sit by my side as I drove. She looked annoyed. "He's asleep already," she said.

"A handy trick, if you can do it."

"You're as bad as he is," she snapped. Then, after a long silence, she said, in a totally different voice, "Did you mean

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what you said, back there, about ornamentation, and me?"

"I usually do say what I mean," I told her. "It saves time, and it's easier than inventing conventional responses. So far as you're concerned, you've no need to add anything to your basic equipment."

"But a girl likes dressing up!"

"Ask yourself why. Isn't it because she needs something to boost her self-confidence? Do you need that?"

"Hardly!" she retorted, then grinned. "On that line of thinking, we should all go around nude all the time."

"Except when some kind of protective clothing is absolutely necessary, why not? You asked me, a long way back, what my attitude was toward women, and I told you I didn't have one. There's part of the reason. Because they just can't be satisfied to be just themselves. They have to gild it up with paint, or drapery, or something!"

"I don't!" she began, then hesitated. "Yes, I suppose I do, at that. You're a surprise packet, you know," and she punched me affectionately on the arm. "Frankly, what with your aristocratic looks and plummy voice, I had you down as a handicap. My apologies."

"Makes us even," I told her. "I had never thought that a girl could fit into anything like this. What experience I've had with pretty girls is that they need pandering to and waiting on."

"Oh, well," she giggled, "I don't mind if you're polite and hold the door open for me and things like that."

We lapsed into a companionable silence. Driving was no effort at all and gave me plenty of opportunity to study the country. It would have made first class farmland, on a small tenant-farming basis. Maybe there would be a market for home-grown produce? Surely there was no need to import *that* class of material over space? It was an intriguing thought, but soon Tau Ceti's red disc began to lower in the sky and Fiona nudged me.

"My turn," she said. "You go and sleep. I'll be all right. I'm stopping at midnight anyway, for a meal."

"The orders were to go straight on."

"I'm stopping when I feel like it. You go and sleep!"

There was no point in arguing with that tone, so I went. The mix of fresh air and the gentle motion, plus being

cooped up in a ship for a week, I was fast asleep on the cushion opposite of Carson within seconds of closing my eyes, and the next thing I was conscious of was Carson's voice.

"What are we stopped for?"

As I sat up drowsily in the dark I heard her retort, "I've done my four, there's four hundred miles on the counter, and I'm hungry. What more reason do you want?" The cabin lights flared up and I blinked, then squirmed around to see Carson quite still for a moment, staring at her. Then he shrugged.

"All right, we'll take fifteen minutes. Go and play with the auto-chef. I'll take the wheel."

"No funny business now, like driving off."

"That's all right. I need to check up on the charts and gauges anyway."

She passed me, with her chin up and eyes gleaming, and went on into the chef-nook at the rear of the cabin. I caught Carson's delicate jerk of the head and went forward to join him at the wheel, putting out my hand to switch on the light. He took my wrist, gently but firmly.

"Don't," he said, very quietly. "You'll see why in a minute."

There was enough starlight for him to manage, and most of the instruments were self-lit with fluors anyway. Outside it was a beautiful night. We rested in a gentle gorge that aimed precisely where we were going. The rainbow effect had vanished with the sun and the night air was crystal clear.

"But it's still damned warm," I complained, and he chuckled.

"That's a minor worry, right now, as Her Highness is about to find out. On another point, tell me, you've led a totally different life from mine, but surely you've known that itching uneasiness you get when things run too smoothly?"

"Smooth? I've been beaten twice, vibrated into a coma and cooped up in a prison cell by another name for a whole week. Now I'm being slow-boiled, and you call it smooth?"

"Hah! If that's the worst we have coming to us, we'll—" I lost the rest of it as Fiona shredded the quiet with a full-lunged screech that made my skin erupt in goosebumps. I was half-turned and headed for the cabin when he grabbed my arm again.

"Fast reactions are fine, sometimes," he muttered, and there

came another yell from the back, "but it also helps to see just what you are getting into. Take a look."

Through the narrow doorway I could see into the rear cabin, into the glare, into a snowflake chaos of flying insects of all shapes and sizes. The air was thick with them, and in the center was Fiona, flailing and swatting helplessly at the things. A fantastic sight, because from wings and bodies came a million glitters of rainbow reflection, sparking from the overhead glare. They were all over her body and thick in her hair. There was no real danger, only nuisance. And there was nothing I could do. Except—I spun to him.

"Put that light out!"

"Of coursel" he said, doing it. "And then what?"

"Get moving. Hold it." I turned back and shouted to her, "Grab hold of something and then keep still. We're starting up. The breeze will flush them out." On went the headlights, the engines boomed, and we went down that gorge as if hellhounds were at our heels, for about ten minutes. Then we halted again, and he switched the rear canopy out of its housing until we heard it click home.

"Go give her a hand," he said, "she'll need it. You know where the medikit is? See you get *all* the bites, or she'll have other stiff places besides her neck, come morning. These bugs raise 'bumps, believe me. I've had some!"

He put on the rear cabin lights again and I went through. She was furious, but sane enough to stay still while I prowled the cabin, and then all around her, just to make sure. With the canopy in place, the automatic ventilation system had cut in and the space was shiveringly cool, so the few winged pests that remained were torpid enough for me to be able to pick them up and ditch them in the outlet. There were three in her hair and one stuck to the small of her back, and I could see scores of tiny white spots where poison had penetrated.

"That seems to be the lot," I said. "Now just stay still while I get the medi-kit." It was in a cabinet by the auto-chef.

"I don't need your help!" she snapped.

"Don't be any more of a fool than you can help." I took the box to the table and broke it open. "If you don't get those bites treated fast you'll swell out in bumps all over the place, besides itching like mad." The anti-bite stuff was a

tube of garishly purple jelly and she glared as I squeezed some out onto tissue and approached her.

"I don't seem to have much choice, do I? Itch and swell, or be marked with that filthy stuff. Why don't you laugh outright?"

"Because I'm not amused." I got close enough to see the white pustules on her face, and made the first gentle dabs. "You sat up and begged for this, you know. There was nothing to stop us eating on the move!"

"We'll reach Outpost One early tomorrow. I'm supposed to use my influence on the scientific staff there. And I shall look like some fugitive from a nightmare with this purple stuff all over me!"

"Very well." I put one final dab on her throat then tossed the tube and swab back in the box. "Go on and itch. I hope you enjoy it," and I turned away to go forward to the driving cabin. She called me just as I was ducking into the passage, and I turned again. She made a helpless gesture.

"I'm sorry. Please come and finish what you were doing." I went back and started again, working my way down her slim back. "Am I really a fool?" she asked, in a small voice, as I crouched to operate on her long legs.

"Perhaps not," I said. "It was a mistake that I would have made, if I had been in your place."

"I didn't mean that. Wouldn't you feel—embarrassed—if you were all daubed with hideous purple blotches?"

"A bit, yes! But not enough to worry about. Damn it, who cares how you look? It's what you do and what you are that matters, isn't it?" I moved around to her front, straightening up to look at her face, and saw that she was blinking back tears as hard as she could go. It wasn't hard to see why. All over her skin there were nasty white blisters ringed with angry red, and where her arms were raised just a little from her sides, her fists were tight clenched. "I'll be as quick as I can," I promised, and smeared the purple stuff on liberally all over. "Does it help?"

She nodded without saying anything, and stood quite still until I had finished and straightened up again. "All right now?"

"Lovely, thank you. I am a fool. No, please let me say it. Ever since I can remember I have been fighting this silly

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notion that because I'm a girl I have to be treated differently, that I can't do anything a man can do."

"I'll subscribe to that," I said. "Apart from sheer physical strength, a girl has brain, skill, talent, nerve, initiative—all the same potentials—if she wants to use them. You seem to have used yours very well."

"I've tried. But you've just shown me, after all this time, that I have been kidding myself, too. I've been taking it for granted that men are dazzled by my looks, until it has grown to be habit. I expect it. But you don't dazzle at all. I thought perhaps you were against women in general, but it's not that either. I didn't mind peeling down to the minimum because I know I can stand it, and even that didn't make any impression on you. Now you tell me 'Who cares how you look, it's what you are that matters!'—and, all at once, I could see myself as I really am!"

"A shirt and slacks," I suggested, "and a touch of makeup, and no one will ever know the difference."

"That will do for the peasants"—she managed a smile—"but nothing will ever make any difference between us, from now on," and she held out her hand to grip mine. The gesture was utterly ruined as Carson sent a shout back to us.

"How's the grub coming along?"

"Five minutes!" she shouted back at him and squeezed my hand, wrinkling her nose in a grin. "We lesser mortals keep getting side-tracked, don't we? Come and give me a hand."

Ten minutes later we were all crowded amicably together up front with our food; watching the dark night ahead of us dividing before our headlights, only to close again after our passage.

"A point," I said, between bites. "Why don't we use the air-conditioning all the time? It's quite cool back there now."

"Acclimatization," he said, and moved the switches that folded back the rear canopy again, also dousing the light. "We will be moving south by degrees, and it's going to get steadily warmer. We expect to be stuck on that island a while, and it's further south still. Now, there are such things as atmosphere suits, and they keep a man comfortable for eight hours at a stretch. But it will be far more efficient for us if we get used to the heat as it comes, so that we can

function without such encumbrances. Gadgetry is fine, and I'm prepared to use it when it helps, but it doesn't pay to get so that you lean on it, become dependent on it. To make a point, this gyro-guide is fine, but I am also checking us by the stars, partly from habit, but also because it is a useful thing to be able to do, and a skill rusts if you don't keep it oiled occasionally. You won't, incidentally, see Sol from here. This is the wrong hemisphere. Now, if you've finished, you two go and sleep. I shall be all right, and I will sing out good and loud if I need help, believe me."

Sleep didn't come so easily this time. I heard Fiona murmur "good night" in the dark, and within a few minutes her deep and slow breathing told me she was fast gone, but my mind was troubled a little. It had never been my intention to influence anyone else's character or habits, but it was obvious that I had done so here, like it or not, and I couldn't help being nervous about the consequences.

Again, when I awoke, the Roamer was at rest. Fiona was asleep, resting as peacefully as a child. A shimmering rainbow dawn was painting the sky with a wealth of pastel tints. I sat up, peered forward, and Carson called, "Come and look. Tell me if you see what I do."

IV

IT WAS A SCENE to catch the breath and the eye. Before us, in a long slow slope, the green land stretched smoothly down for miles to the sea. That was a different, impossible green, shimmering with a million reflections from its running wave-crests, and darkening with distance. Far beyond, and looming up enormously into the blue sky was a vast vapor wall of boiling rainbow thunder-clouds. I am reasonably free from superstition, but that great wall struck me as a fit and proper introduction to either Heaven or Hell.

"Edge of the hot-belt," Carson said, prosaically enough. "What I want to know is—where is Outpost One? According to my instruments we are looking right at it. Down there!"

If there had been a city of any size, or even buildings, they would have stood out starkly against a backdrop like that. But there was nothing at all, except one slim but tower-

ing concrete-and-glass structure, and what appeared to be a scattering of small huts about its base. There were many of those, but at the very most they couldn't have been more than one floor high.

"You're sure this is the place?"

"I don't blame you for asking. But yes, I'm sure. Apart from the gyro and map references, I recognize the coastline, near enough."

"What?" Fiona demanded, knuckling her eyes and coming to settle between us. "Is that it?"

"We'll soon find out." Carson stirred the motor and we went swooping down the hill in the bright morning light. The nearer we came, the more the enigma coiled on itself. The high-rise tower remained, solid and substantial, in the center, but the scatter of little huts now proved to be in orderly rows, widely spaced, and even smaller than we had originally assumed. Closer still, we saw that they were definitely only one-floor affairs, glass-walled and all deserted. Each had a heavy roof, that Carson guessed to be a bank of solar cells, but the total absence of people struck us as the most disconcerting aspect of all. He slowed down to a crawl as we approached one of the curious structures.

"Hold it!" I called, peering from my side. "Seems to be a notice of some kind planted in the turf." A moment later we had veered enough so that I could read it. WESTERN AVENUE.

"Avenue?" Carson echoed. "I suppose you could call it that. At least it gives us a direct approach to that central building. Do you get the feeling there's an awful lot more here than meets the eye?"

"I've had that for some time," I said.

"Of course, we're miles too early," Fiona said. "Everyone will be still asleep!"

"All wrapped up in their invisibility outfits," I suggested, and she gave me a hearty punch on the shoulder. Then Carson gave a snort.

"So simple. So logical, too!" He set the Roamer gliding slowly along Western Avenue, smiling to himself. "They are about a city block apart, you'll notice, with cultivated gardens in between. Call them, each one, the ground floor, entrance lobby, foyer, or whatever. And think!"

It was a challenge, and I tried my best. Each little build-

ing as we came to it and passed appeared to be about one hundred and fifty feet a side, about ten feet high, transparently walled, and with some kind of box-like structure in the dead center. His calling them entrance halls made me think of a kind of lobby or waiting room arranged about a central elevatory system, but that was as far as I could go, apart from reading the occasional etched legends which were spread along those glass-like fronts.

"Hey, wait!" Fiona said suddenly, pointing ahead and to the right. "That one we want," and as we sighed to a stop beside it I read, VERLAN RESEARCH FOUNDATION: ANTHROPOLOGY SECTION.

"That's us," Carson agreed, as we stopped, but made no move to get out. Grinning widely, he said, "We'd better change in something a bit more formal before confronting the savants."

That engaged us for about half an hour, in which time I refused to grind on the enigma any more. I know my brain. Pushing it beyond a certain point just makes it close up. By virtue of much scrubbing and a little cosmetic help, Fiona managed to mask the remaining stains on her face, and covered the rest with crisp white shirt and slacks. She looked totally different, but her frown proved that she had no more solved the puzzle than I had.

"Savants?" she murmured, as we dismounted and approached the low-roofed building. "I'm ready to meet them, but where are they?"

And then, as we shoved open a heavy glass door and went in to a tiled floor, and waiting seats—and the central structure *was* an elevator system—I experienced a flash of intuition and utter disgust at myself for not having seen the answer earlier. Carson marched to a counter, glass-topped, where a notice said RING AND WAIT. He depressed the indicated button and stepped away, turning to us.

"Any other bells ringing yet?"

"I've seen it," I said. "As you said, logical. Sensible. Preserves the nautral amenities. A pity we don't do it more on Earth."

Then Fiona got it, too. "Of course!" she gasped. "Upside down! They're all underground! What a fascinating ideal!"

The gentle clash of gates brought us to the desk, where a

young woman in a sleek green tunic stood, having just emerged from the elevator.

"I am sorry," she said, in rippling Italian, "you are much too early. The Institute is not yet open."

Fiona paced forward and presented her credentials, at which our receptionist's fine dark eyes opened wide and her manner became much more friendly.

"Miss Knight. An honor. But such a disaster, too!" She used her hands and shoulders to express extreme dismay. "One moment. I will see if Dr. Bernard is available." She turned to a console and buttoned for someone we were unable to see, then chattered away briskly to him in an impossible mixture of French and Italian jargon for a moment or two. Beside me Carson murmured, "I smell trouble of some kind."

"Dr. Bernard will see you immediately, Miss Knight. He is about to have breakfast, and begs that you and your companions will join him. This way, please. Seventh level, suite seven-zero-three."

As we joined her in the elevator, Carson spoke. "There's something wrong? Can't you tell us what it is?"

"Dr. Bernard will explain everything. I do not know all the details, only that it is a terrible affair. *Scandalò!*"

There were twenty buttons on that elevator control panel, and the mental image conjured up staggered me for a moment. But then, I thought, why not? It is no more difficult to dig a deep hole than to erect a high structure. Most high-rise buildings are so double-glazed and insulated, temperature-controlled and artificially lit, that they might as well be underground anyway. And you'd be quite free of strength problems concerning high winds and temperature changes, weathering and erosion. Above all, it would be much simpler to maintain a steady and equable temperature inside. And you leave the natural surface unspoiled and clean, which was almost a fetish on this planet.

Dr. Bernard was waiting for us in the doorway of his suite. A small and stout Frenchman, much given to excitable gestures, he fussed around us, took us inside, reeled off suggestions for coffee, or something stronger, something to eat, at such a rate that we couldn't slow him down until we were seated at a magnificent meal. We needed the breakfast, but we needed an explanation more.

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"Now, you wish to study Dr. Gallint's data, yes?" Dr. Bernard came to the point reluctantly. "I regret, it is impossible. It has been stolen!"

"When was this?" Carson demanded.

"Yesterday, in the afternoon. I will explain. In the morning we had a distinguished guest, a patron. He desired to look around, asking particularly for Dr. Gallint's section, because he had heard of the so-unfortunate controversy which has shut down all our activity there. I was ashamed!" Bernard showed us just how ashamed, with appropriate gestures. "That section has been neglected terribly. So, in the afternoon, after our guest had departed, I myself decided that it should be cleaned up, made presentable, you understand? And then—how can I tell you? Everything was gone. Notebooks, microfilms, specimens—everything! Stripped clean!"

"And nobody saw anything?" Fiona demanded.

"Why would they? We have no security here, no guards. What is there to steal that is of value to anyone?"

I had already made four out of two and two, but Carson caught my eye, and shook his head fractionally. "It's unfortunate," he said. "We particularly wanted some data from Dr. Gallint's research."

"Look!" I broke in. "Even if Gallint was as eccentric as a corkscrew, surely he logged his data with the computer store?"

"But of course!" Dr. Bernard stared. "*That* cannot be stolen, only the priceless originals!" That's what notoriety can do for a man. A few years ago, Gallint was the butt of his companions. Now his stuff is priceless!

Still, we could get what we came for, and Fiona went to attend to it as soon as we had finished our meal, leaving Carson and myself to pacify Dr. Bernard, and to get from him, discreetly, a description of his distinguished visitor. Bernard named him as a Mr. Lee Hi-Pin, and described him as a small man but with tremendous presence: very simply dressed in a plain gold cloak, his only ostentation a pair of massive gold bracelets and a servant, an enormous black man. I could see Carson taking it all in. Pretty soon Fiona came back and worked some of her charm on Dr. Bernard. Between that, and the pull of Dr. Larrabee Knight's pres-

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tige, she could have talked him out of just about anything. As it was, we did very well.

Another avenue brought us to the edge of an abrupt cliff, where we parked the Roamer and descended a zig-zag path hewn from the face of the cliff. There, idle in pens, were four research-craft, one of which had been loaned to us with Dr. Bernard's blessing. We three carried with us only a beamer each, from the Roamer's store, and our hot weather clothes, as it was really hot and clammy here.

"Score one for being a girl," Fiona gloated, as we pushed off and went heaving out over the rolling water. "Dr. Bernard had no right at all to loan us this, but he did. Good, huh?"

"Now who's pandering to whose ego?" Carson demanded, the sweat streaming down his face. "Come and learn how to handle our new home before we do anything else. This is a more up-to-date model than any I've seen, so I have some learning to do, too."

It was a very versatile craft, about thirty feet long and eight in the beam. It could be totally enclosed and submerged if necessary, and there were outriggers available for extra stability. It was outfitted to support eight people in near-luxury for months, so we were well satisfied. There was air-conditioning equipment, but Carson reminded us that we were not going to use it.

"I'm feeding Fiona's data into the course-gyro," he told us, doing it, "and that should bring us to landfall exactly where Gallint did. Then we will have to find somewhere to stow the craft and go ahead on foot, into jungle. So the more we sweat now, the easier it will be in the long run."

By now we were heaving through a turbulent sea of copper-green, with insanely tinted air all around us, so that it was almost impossible to separate the horizon. Carson left it to the course-gyro, and then turned to Fiona.

"Something for you. I've kept on about opposition until you say I have criminal masterminds on the brain. Well, now we know. Dr. Bernard described his distinguished guest to Noble and myself. Not much of a description, but he added a gigantic black servant. I think I know who it has to be. He has no form on any police dossier, he's too smart for that, but he is a legend among the shadowy forces of the wrong

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side. My guess is that Clan was working for him, assembling the key data."

"How could anyone get here ahead of us?" she demanded.

"We came in late, that's all. This thing has been brewing for a long time. You said yourself that Gallint made his original observations about ten years ago. Long enough for rumors to spread and crystallize. Ample time for our man to have established himself right here as a wealthy untouchable, while his paid hirelings ferreted out the key information. What I would like to know, but never will now, is whether Acco Zeb intervened back there to destroy clues we were after—meaning he knows about us already—or whether it was just some foul coincidence that he chose that moment to grab at information he needed."

"Acco Zeb?" she echoed. "You know his name?"

"A name. No one knows very much more than that."

"You make him sound like some kind of crooked superman," I said, and Carson nodded, his smile momentarily missing.

"In my opinion," he said, "and that opinion is shared by several other people, Acco Zeb has a genius mind—and he is certainly one of the most ruthless men alive today. By comparison, Clan was a fumbling amateur. Rumor has it that Zeb is part Chinese, part Ceylonese, part Hindu; combining the highspots of all three. The big black man that Bernard spoke of is Hovac. He's six-foot-six and has the strength of ten men. Hovac is Zeb's executioner as well as slave."

We surged steadily on, heaving and lifting over the running sea, and it grew hotter by the minute, until I felt that I was filling up with moisture from the thick air. Carson warned us about that, too.

"No matter what it feels like," he said, "you can't gain moisture by breathing, you can only lose it. And you lose by sweating. So drink plenty. We can't run short of water while the desalination plant is running."

Visibility fell off steadily until we could no longer be sure what we were seeing, or whether we were seeing anything at all. The swirling patterns of color, ever more vivid, perpetually changing, grew until they seemed substantial, building weird shapes and dissolving them again all around us.

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Only the motor throb and the heaving beneath us served to assure us that we were in motion at all.

"It's like a psychedelic nightmare," Fiona declared, as we huddled together in the cockpit and stared at the display. "You ever been on a trip, Alan?"

"Never felt the need for it. Nor can I follow the reasoning of those who do. 'Mind-expanding' is just noise, to me."

"I'm not surprised," she retorted. "You've no romance in your soul."

"Romance has nothing to do with it. Semantics is the whole trouble. The mind isn't an entity, or a place to go out of, it's a process. It's the resulting synthesis of everything you've ever experienced. There is a constant influx of new data, a constant evaluation, a discarding of the untrue and unnecessary and revamping of values and processes in the light of past, present and probable future."

"But what about individual personality?"

"What about it? It is easily demonstrable that it is totally impossible for any two people to have the same data right down the line. So everyone is different to some degree."

"You leave out all the magic and mystery, the wonder!"

"No, I don't!" I declared. "There's all the magic and wonder anyone could want, outside, without having to invent it in myths about minds. In my opinion those people who carve inner mysteries are those who are stuck on the notion that what goes on inside their heads is somehow more important than the rest of the universe outside. Such people are egocentric, which is just a fancy name for immature. Obsessed with their own importance."

"I'm with you, there," Carson came in. "That is exactly what children do, retreat into an inner fantasy world because they aren't old enough or strong enough to face the vastness of the outside world. It's all right for kids, but there's something wrong with adults who do it. They are afraid or unwilling to admit that the Universe is a helluva big place, wherein Man is only a grain of animated dust. Man is the only animal that says 'I am,' and thinks it matters."

She was silent awhile, then, "But what about the unknowns? Like ESP, and all that sort of thing?"

"Unknowns are simply things we don't yet understand. After all, it is quite possible that what we regard as great

knowledge, tremendous advances in science and understanding, are only the simpler and more obvious things, and to try to explain everything else on what little we know could be like me trying to understand Swahili because I've learned my alphabet and three-letter words in the English language. It's the savage who invents gods to explain unknowns."

"And that doesn't explain a thing," Carson agreed. "It simply explains away, pushes the whole question into the 'forbidden' area."

"You two," she snapped, "must enjoy being in a minority!"

"*Vox populi*," I told her, "has never been the source of wisdom. Isn't that the essential weakness of democracy? Remember, it was the popular ballot that gave the hemlock to Socrates, and crucified Christ."

"I think," she said, wriggling free and turning away, "that I will go and make some coffee!"

When she was safely clear, Carson grinned and grasped my hand firmly.

"Nice work. Won't do her any harm at all to get cut down to size once in a while."

"That wasn't my intention, but I'm damned if I intend to tailor my thinking to suit someone else's opinions."

"She can't help being attractive," he said enigmatically, and left it at that. In a while she came back to sit between us once again and peer through the pigmented craziness outside while we sipped the coffee.

"And yet," she said, swiping a stream of moisture from her brow, "you can talk about instincts, about running into danger!"

"I can't explain that"—Carson grinned—"but I can feel it more than ever right now. According to our radar we are about twenty miles from the point we are aiming at, and we shouldn't have any draft troubles at all, but I'm going to put on the depth sonar, just the same." He moved a switch, and we all heard a faint and shrill "pinging" from somewhere under our feet. The heat was now as tangible as a steaming blanket and the outside light glared like the lighting used on stage to convey mystery and horror, all side-slanting reds and greens. It was at that moment that I heard something that was neither sonar nor engine noises.

"Do we have outside sound pickups?" I asked, and Carson

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flipped a switch at once, without question. Instantly the cabin was full of the rush and rustle of water and winds, and over and through the play of the elements there came a faint and eerie wailing. There were many voices in chorus, with now and then a yelp to break the howls.

"We can't be that close!" Carson muttered frowning, but he reduced our speed until we were wallowing heavily, and put on the bow light. Vision was treacherous, but after a moment of peering I could make out a head in the water, and then another, then several. Carson saw them as soon as I did, and adjusted the sonar rapidly to a surface scan.

"Swimmers all around us," he announced quietly, and reached for his beamer, setting it for wide-angle. "Better have yours ready," he advised, "just in case. There's no record of the Verlans being hostile, but let's not gamble on it too far. You make anything out of that howling, Fiona?"

She had her head cocked, listening intently. "A little, not very specific. I think they came looking for us, or for help, and they want us to come with them, to hurry. They will show us the way. Something like that."

"Suits me," he said, and trod on the throttle again cautiously.

"The moods are the hard part," she said. "They do not have many distinct phonemes. Most of the meaning comes from emotional overtones and pitch. Can you hear it? A kind of anxiety, worried about something, needing help—and yet they are half-afraid of us at the same time."

"According to the sonar, they are giving us a direct route to exactly where we want to go, so that's all right. And they are keeping up on either side. Escort, eh? I wonder what for?"

I had nothing useful to offer, so I kept silent, but I was studying the heads I could barely see, bobbing in the water on either side. I had the strangest feeling that all this was somehow familiar to me. An hour later, when the radar told us we were almost home, I was still trying to place that elusive thought into something concrete. My vision had adapted surprisingly well, but it didn't help much. Even a man will look strangely seal-like when he's swimming with just his head out of the water, especially if he has long hair and a beard. The manner of their swimming was strange,

though, as if they lay flat and paddled with their arms and legs.

"Here comes the tricky bit," said Carson, all at once, cutting off the headlights and reducing speed rapidly. Out there we heard the smash and roar of surf on rocks, and in a moment or two we were able to discern an enormous looming wall of black rock that went up and into the rainbows. It was black as midnight, yet speckled with diamond highlights, and the sea spouted and belched multi-colored foam along its base. As uninviting a prospect as I ever saw, but I couldn't see why he had put out the headlight.

"There's an inlet hereabouts," he explained, "that shows up like a sore thumb on radar, but First Expedition spent eight crazy hours out here trying to find it until somebody thought of putting the light out. The dazzle, the jewel facets, and the spray are enough to drive you out of your mind!"

We were heaving wildly now as we ran across the backswell, getting ever closer to that pounding surf, but all at once he livened the engine again and I saw the scanty break in the foam ahead of us. We shuddered ahead, and for one nerve-racking spell that boiling froth brushed us on either side, then we were through and into comparative calm, with the sinister black walls standing up on either side like some immense prison barrier. Now he put the headlights on again, and the swords of radiance cut tunnels through the dimness and struck blinding dazzles from the rock wall.

"Okay, you two," he said, "I'll juggle her as close alongside as I can, then you hop out and tie up. No problem. This rock is so cubic in structure it stands up like columns and bricks."

He was quite right. I took the forward rope, stout nylon with a preformed loop, and clung to the guard-rail until I could step ashore. Then, it was a simple matter to find an upright and make secure. Although much smaller in dimensions, that rock formation reminded me very strongly of that curious phenomenon, off the Irish coast, known as the Devil's Causeway. By the time Fiona had signaled that the stern was fast, Carson had cut the engines and dropped fenders over the side.

"We could be in luck," he said, as we gathered to talk. "Instead of having to spend a day or two locating a pack of

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Verlans, they've come looking for us. And that must mean something. That's your angle, Fiona. As soon as we can climb up out of this cleft to the top, we wait and they will make the next move. That will be your cue. You know what we want, to find Uhumeelee, or someone who knows about him."

"Do we carry arms?" I asked, and he nodded.

"Just as a precaution. Don't shoot unless there's absolutely no other course. And we can take headlights too. Hold on while I get them." He was back in minutes with one for each of us. They were nothing more than springy plastic headbands with built-in spotlights powered by miniature cells. "Good for about eight hours," he explained, "but don't use them unless you have to. For one thing, they ruin your dim-vision, and they could blind the Verlans. And, with one of these in the middle of your forehead, you're a target. Right? Let's go."

Of course he was right about the adaptation. By the time we gained the top, after about fifty feet or so of scrambling from one flat ledge to another, I could see with reasonable accuracy up to five or six yards. That was fine, but what I hadn't expected was the near-gale we ran into as soon as we gained the top. It was a thoroughly unnerving experience to lean into a forty-mile-an-hour hot blast of swirling colors. It was so exactly like being swept up by a roaring sea of water that it was several seconds before I could overcome the instinctive fear of gulping in a lungful of water when I had to breathe. Then I felt Carson's hand on my arm, and Fiona's head coming close until we were touching each other.

"This is no good!" he shouted. "Let's head upwind until we find a lee of some kind. Better hook on!" The last phrase didn't make sense to me until I saw him guide her hand to the small of his back, where she took a good hold of the waistband of his shorts. Then I realized that I had to do the same with her loincloth, and we set away. That wind was fairly steady, but every so often it would shriek up to a savagery that had me staggering, and I am certain Fiona would have been blown away entirely had she not been anchored between us. This kept on for almost three quarters of an hour, until, thankfully, we felt the violence grow less. Within a further ten minutes we sighted a dark bulk of trees

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and then we had only random gusts to deal with. Ten minutes more and all the gale was up in the treetops, roaring and rushing, leaving us with the calm. We came to one giant bole and halted.

"This will do us," Carson decided. "But it is going to be fun going back. Between us, I think we would be wise to abandon dignity and crawl. Better than diving over the cliff at a mad run. This wind, though, must be seasonal. I don't recall anything like it—" he interrupted himself to cock his head and listen. Fiona went tense in the dimness.

"Don't move!" she whispered. "They're all around us. Hear them?"

I could. Under the constant surf-roar of the gale-tossed branches up there I heard a dozen, a hundred, faint howls and yelps, calls questing from one to the other. She had tried to teach us what she knew of the Verlan tongue, but her understanding was far ahead of ours, so I watched her. All at once I saw her beautiful bosom swell as she drew a deep breath and then let out a high, ululating howl. I had heard her do this kind of thing before—what the ship's officers must have thought, I dare not imagine—but it still seemed as strange now as it had done then, that such an animal sound could come from one so slim and lovely. Yet not altogether animal. I recognized the call. It said, in effect, we are friends, but carried an overtone of curiosity. She made a sign, and I tried my best to imitate her sound, as Carson also did. Then she tried a different one. "What do you want?" It was too complex for us, so we kept quiet.

The jungle noises stopped, too. And, for a long while, there was nothing but hot gusts of random breeze. Then, all at once, there was someone standing and watching us, not ten feet away, by a tree.

We all kept very still. He was about five feet tall, distinctly manlike, his shoulders hunched, knees bent and arms half-spread as if ready for instant flight. His body, lean and wiry up to the waist and deep chested with flat muscles above, was covered entirely with a gray-brown pelt. Apart from bare pinkish patches on his belly and breast, the effect was that of sealskin. His short neck bore a head distinctly human, but with the nose advanced into a muzzle. His ears were too large and mobile, and his big bright eyes were well-hooded

with brow-ridges. I had read, in the data we had gathered, that the Verlan were of canine origin, but it was one thing to read that, another to see it in fact and to realize with a start that I had often seen just such a look in the eyes of my dogs at home. After a long wait, Fiona drew another breath and made, very gently, the "we are friends" sound at him again.

His ears flicked forward, his head swung from side to side uneasily, and then he howled in reply. She said, "He wants us to follow."

"Okay with us," Carson murmured. "Tell him to lead on."

She yelped, made a gesture, and the Verlan turned and ran in a curious crouching trot, yelping as he went, arousing echoes of his call from the dimness. We followed as fast as we were able, winding in and out among the trees.

"What about finding the way back?" I asked. "Just in case we have to?"

"No problem," he said, patting his hip. "I have a pocket-gyro. I'd like to know just what our guide there is running us into. This is contrary to all the reports, which claim that the Verlan are hard to find. This lot seems to want us pretty badly." His emphasis on "lot" was hardly needed. The mewling and yelping all around told of a host of the creatures. As we plunged on deeper into the forest the breeze lessened until there was hardly a breath, and the heat was tremendous. Fiona, just a little ahead of us, gleamed in the dimness, her loincloth plastered to her hips, and we were just as badly off. I began to wonder how long we could last without drink. And there was increasing tension, not anything to hear, but that I could feel in every nerve.

We came at last to a kind of crest and began scrambling down the other side into a glade. There was the chatter and splash of water ahead, so we were in the valley slopes of some stream. Then we struck a clearing and could see the water that made the noise, where it fell over a rock-edge to our right. In front, in the focus of the open space, stood what looked like a very primitive hut, made by standing long branches against each other and piling them with shorter ones and leaves. All around were hordes of Verlan, all descending the slopes with us, converging on the hut. Closer to the hut, I saw that it was about seven or eight feet long and barely high enough to admit a man on his knees. Our

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guide went on, Fiona following, leading us, but the rest of the Verlan now held back in a ring. The yelping grew keener. Fiona stopped and turned to us. "I'm stuck," she confessed, "I don't know what they're saying, now."

V

"CAN'T YOU EVEN GUESS?" Carson demanded, and she shook her head.

"These are new sounds altogether. They are not talking to me, to us, any more. They seem to be calling someone inside that hut affair."

The howling was hideous now, and despite the twitches of nerves up and down my spine, I had again that strange impression that this was familiar in some way. Then we saw movement at the vee-opening of the hut, and a Verlan man emerged, crawling on all fours and favoring his right arm. He was old, his pelt almost white, and he seemed frail, with hardly the strength to move himself. The pack fell silent as he stopped for breath and then struggled to get erect. By now it was obvious that his right arm was useless, possibly broken. He stood watching us, and again I saw that curious half-expectant, half-fearful stance. One or two voices lifted in the waiting pack, and Fiona gripped my arm.

"Hear that? Doesn't it sound like Uhumeelee?"

I heard it only remotely, because now that sense of familiarity had crisped into knowledge. I knew. I remembered where I had met something like this before. And I knew what to do. It had to be done quickly, and with confidence. I started straight down the remainder of the slope, straight toward the old man, and as I went I was a boy again, a lad of fifteen, all alone in the kennel-yard with our Irish Wolfhounds. Three-and-a-half pair, we had, and they were mine to take responsibility for. And now the leader, Mooney, had broken his leg. Sam Blake, our kennelman, had told me often, and his words rang again in my ear, "You'll always know when a dog's bad hurt, because he's afraid of you then. That's the animal in him. If you're going to do anything at all for him, you have to get friends again, treat him right." I could hear the words now as I drew close to the

old man, saw him retreat half a step away. I put out my hand.

"It's all right, boy. All right, now. I'm not going to hurt you. It's all right." It doesn't really matter what you say, it's the tone of voice that matters, and the smile, the whole air of confidence. I touched him gently on the shoulder, and he stiffened, his lip lifting, and I saw, for the first time, that he had very useful fangs in the upper jaw. But, weight for weight, he was very little bigger than my hounds had been.

"Let me look, now, boy. Just keep still and let me see what's the matter. Quite all right, nothing to worry about." I could feel the tension give just a little, and went closer still, using my eyes and fingers, murmuring all the time. I noticed, incidentally, that he wore a fine braided collar around his neck and a pouch dangled from it, but I had more important things to attend to. Sam had taught me all he knew about this kind of thing, and though he might have been puzzled for a moment by a man-dog, I think he would have seen what I saw just as fast as I did. It was nothing more than a dislocation, unless my anatomy lessons were all wrong. I knew what to do. I had no idea how old the injury was, which makes a considerable difference, but there was no way of finding out, so the only thing to do was put it right. I investigated that shoulder and arm as best I could, touching gently, and the old man twisted his head to watch, but kept still otherwise.

"Steady now, boy," I said, maneuvering for a good hold. "This is going to hurt a bit, just a bit, but it will be all over very quickly." I was stroking him now with both hands, talking all the while, raising the injured arm delicately until it was where I wanted it, and with my other arm around him, not too tight. Then, all in one quick twist and squeeze, it was done and I stood away, still within touching distance, still talking. He had given one shrill yelp, but now he moved the arm, and I nodded, took his hand and moved it more. It was all right, probably painful, but all right. He howled, and the intonation alone was enough to tell me that he was talking to his fellows. For a while there was quite an interchange, then I smiled again, patted his shoulder and stood further away. I heard Carson come to a halt by

my side, on my left, Fiona arriving at my right a moment later.

"It took a year off my life," he muttered, "when I saw you go marching down here. What did you do to him?"

"Dislocated shoulder. I put it back. He'll be as good as new in a day."

"How did you know?" she demanded.

"Seen it before. I used to have Wolfhounds, big as these fellows. It's just a knack, that's all."

"Yeah? What's he saying now, Fiona?"

"I'm not quite sure. Give me a minute." She yowled at the old man and he yelped back at her for a while, then she turned to us. "This is Uhumeelee, no doubt about it. And he wants you, Alan. Something he wants you to do."

The old man was pawing my arm and holding out the pouch that hung at his neck. She translated haltingly. "Take and touch. Take—better do it."

The pouch was of some kind of fiber with a spring to it that kept it shut. Inside was a thick tube of rubbery stuff. Carson nodded.

"That's the gem in there, just as Gallint said, but why is he offering it to you? Gallint said he wasn't allowed to touch it."

"If it cures things," Fiona said, in sudden animation, "perhaps he wants you to touch him with it!"

"I think you've got something there. Try that, Noble."

When I squeezed the end of the rubbery cover I felt the thing inside move, and show itself at the other end. I heard Fiona gasp. I couldn't blame her. I had a rod of living fire in my fingers, a crystal cylinder that glowed with every color imaginable, that definitely had internal structures and designs, that was like nothing I have ever seen before, and utterly beyond my power to describe. And that was only the first inch or so protruding from its sheath. But when I went to touch the old man with it he backed off, yelping, and became quite agitated. So that was wrong, somehow.

"Help me." I appealed to Fiona. "What was it, exactly, that Gallint said on that wire?"

"I can tell you," Carson said. "In use, he grasped it in his right hand, or paw, and touched his subject with his left hand. Those are the words."

Now I felt a singular reluctance to do the obvious. I was still holding only the insulating sheath. I didn't want to touch that gem, but there was no visible choice. I transferred the thing to my left fingers, squeezed more, and took the whole gem, now free of its cover, in my right hand. And nothing! Not so much as a tingle. It felt quite cold. I clenched it firmly, then stretched out my left and touched the old man on the shoulder.

It was the most electrifying sensation one could ever imagine. I felt instantly godlike, magnified above all men, intoxicatingly powerful yet immensely calm and serene, as if sonorous choirs sang in the distance at my glory. Light and sight, sound and sensation, all were refined a thousand times and wonderful as never before. I felt power flowing through me from that thing in my hand and into the old man I was touching. By some magical extension of my senses I felt his aches and pains, his fatigues and weariness, all wash away and vanish, and he stood straighter, more erect, even younger. And I knew, without knowing how, the right moment to break contact with him, when the healing process was complete. That moment was less dramatic than the beginning. Now the blaze of glory faded slowly, everything dimmed gradually, and it was like waking from a wonderful dream, only some of the inspiration remained like an echo. And I slid the fiery gem back into its sheath again, shaken by the whole thing. I heard Carson let out a long breath of relief.

"That's quite a talisman, Noble. It seems to have fixed him up in no time. Gallint wasn't kidding at all!"

Truly, the old man was transformed, was full of vigor and dignity. And the pack was transformed too. The air filled with yelpings and howlings as they began to line up in ragged order, to be touched. We moved off to one side to watch, and it was a sight I shall never forget. Counting women and young ones, the pack numbered more than a hundred. Women and children came first, to stand and be touched, to howl and go bounding away, visibly enlivened and renewed in health and vigor.

"Poor things!" Fiona murmured. "No wonder they came seeking help. They are completely dependent on the old man and that stone. What did it feel like, Alan?"

"I can't possibly tell you. I'll try, later. Right now I'm still dazed by it. Power—it seemed to surge from that thing right through me!"

"You're doing all right," Carson declared. "If you haven't got the old man's confidence, then it can't be done. We'll have to talk to him as soon as the ceremony is over. Meanwhile, I hope he won't mind, but I'm going to squat."

I was only too glad to agree, and we three made ourselves reasonably comfortable by the slope. I was not fatigued, in fact I couldn't recall when I'd felt more full of energy, but my mind was completely in chaos, so much so that I didn't notice until she had nudged me delicately a time or two, that a young female was offering me a heavy bunch of what looked like some kind of green grapes. I murmured to Fiona, and she looked, howled a question, and said, "They're for us. To eat. Her name's Lowloo. Attractive thing!"

She was, indeed. I managed her name, and the appropriate noise for gratitude, and she scampered off to come back with more, this time a bulky thing not unlike a melon, but with a tougher covering. Carson solved the problem of opening it by setting it on the ground nearby and carving it apart with his beamer set for narrow. The inside was rich yellow stuff with plenty of juice and a most appetizing smell. The grapes were good too, very sweet indeed. Lowlee came to kneel by me and I offered her a piece, but she refused.

"Carnivores," Carson murmured, watching me. "Makes you think, though. It seems they know the kind of food *we* eat. Which would argue that the old wise ones had that much in common with us." His use of the word carnivore helped my wits a little, and I made friends with Lowloo exactly as I would have done a dog, by scratching her gently between her shoulder blades. She liked it, and said so by a throaty growl of pleasure and snuggling against my knee.

"You've made a conquest," Fiona commented, putting a slight edge on her voice, and I had to grin. But then we saw that the ceremony was over and the old man had seated himself on the turf outside his hut.

"Protocol." Carson chuckled. "He's the chief. We have to go to him on his own ground. Come on!"

Well, the next hour was tedious in the extreme. For one

thing, the old man seemed dull and stupid until Fiona managed to get it across to him that we wanted to know about the old ones, and the hoard of gems. Then, with an effort, he got out his talisman once more and this time held it horizontal between both palms—and he was as different again as one could imagine. It was as if the gem had the power to multiply intelligence. While Fiona and he struggled with difficulties of translation, Carson took the chance to murmur to me, “You realize, Noble, that just one gem like that would be worth a fabulous sum on the market?”

“I know, and that just as a gem. Lord only knows what the potentials are otherwise. It’s some kind of metabolic amplifier I would guess.”

“Gallint’s score is mounting, as far as I’m concerned. He knew what he was talking about. And he mentioned a hoard of various things: alien artifacts, gems, Lord-only-knows-what new lines in technology. I don’t wonder this drew Clan—and Acco Zeb. If only we can find it!”

Eventually Fiona called us in on the discussion. She looked beat, but satisfied. “I haven’t been able to get much more out of him than we already had on the wire,” she told us. “It seems to be some kind of ritual story, handed down from one generation to another. But we have a stroke of luck with the island, Hlowlee”—and I saw the old man duck, also Lowloo, as she made the sound—“because, it seems, they visit the place regularly, again as a ritual.”

“When?” Carson demanded.

“That’s the point. The visit is due now. That’s what they were upset about. Seemingly, the power of the talisman starts to run out after a certain time, and that’s when the chief has to visit the island and recharge it. And he couldn’t, because his arm was injured. You see, he swims!”

I was still reeling from the idea of a thirty mile swim in that sea-and-sky nightmare, as Carson said, “Recharge? I wonder. Can you ask him, ‘Top of high hill,’ or words to that effect?”

She yelped and wailed at the old man for a while and he became agitated. It was a good guess. The stone was some kind of solar cell, and the island hilltop was the nearest place where the Verlan could expose it to direct sunlight. That much was fine, but then we ran into pro-

tocol complications within the pack itself. Fiona gave us a running commentary. Important above everything was the touching-stone itself, and its power, but there was a difficult decision to make. Was the old chief still fit enough to make the swim there and back, or had the time come for him to relinquish his supremacy to a younger man. Apparently he had such a man all ready and standing by—and I should point out here that we kept running into difficulties with names until we learned that what we thought were proper names were merely offices. From that time on, we called the old man “chief” and his assistant “seconds” and we had no more confusion. The others, so far as I know, had no names nor family lines at all. “Lowloo” simply meant young and attractive female, which was accurate enough. Anyway, Carson cut through the dilemma neatly by suggesting that we offer transport on our craft to both the old man and his assistant.

That was easy enough to say, but a strain on Fiona’s talking powers, and it wasn’t until she dragged me in as a figure of confidence that there came an agreement. Then, of course, it became necessary to recall the pack and pass the word on to them. All told, I made it nine hours by my watch before we set back to the craft, and I was thoroughly weary of the whole thing. Carson, however, was jubilant, and complimentary to me.

“You deserve all the credit, Noble,” he said. “That stunt of yours with the old man made all the difference.”

I couldn’t see it. Some people have a natural knack with animals, and I happen to be one of them. Any good kennel-man could have done as much.

The return journey, especially the bit across the flat plain to the clifftop, was something I would rather forget. Taking Carson’s advice, we traveled that part on all fours and backward, which is about the slowest and most awkward method of traveling I have ever struck. It was preferable to being caught up and bowled away by the howling gale, but only just. By the time we reached the edge and started down, I was aching in places that I never knew I had muscles to ache, and Fiona was ready to drop, probably would have done so a time or two had we not clung desperately to each other all the way down.

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We had more trouble trying to persuade the two Verlan males to come aboard the craft. They were very timid. It wasn't until Carson and Fiona had gone aboard and below decks, and then made themselves visible through the transparent forward canopy that I could persuade the pair of them to tread on the restless deck and perch forward in the bows. It was pointless to go further and try to talk them inside. Lowloo, oddly enough, was much more reasonable. With no more than a hesitant whimper or two, she followed me down the ladder and inside, and then went sniffing all around in eager curiosity, although never venturing very far away from my side. I think it was because she was younger than the other two, and trusted me implicitly. It amused Fiona to repeat her jibe that I had made a conquest, but I managed to cut that kind of barbed comment altogether by pointing out that I could do a deal worse. "At least," I said, "she trusts me, and she doesn't talk back!"

"Oh, well"—she shrugged—"if it's a slave you want!"

"She responds to the right treatment. If you'd ever read Kipling, the *Just So Stories*, you'd know that in every animal there's at least one place it can't scratch itself. You scratch it there, and you make a friend. It's as simple as that. With Lowloo it is just between the shoulder blades, see?"

"Smarty! I suppose if you find the right place to scratch me, it will have the same effect?"

"Cool it, you two!" Carson ordered, grinning. "We're away. Keep your eye on those two up forward, see if they give us any lead. I have a fix on the location of the island, but I'm deliberately running a few points off, just to see. Watch 'em, will you?"

Sure enough, after about ten minutes of surging through the heaving water the old man grew agitated again and waved his arm away to the side, pointing. Carson veered a little, then a little more, until the Verlan was satisfied, then consulted his gyro and nodded.

"Did he hit it?" Fiona demanded.

"Right on the nose. Sense of direction, plus. I only hope he has other gifts to match this. Like being able to point us straight at the treasure."

"Did you expect something like this?"

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Carson gave me a grin. "Pure jam. Not that I'm complaining because it fell into our laps. Fortune. Like you being sympatico with dogs."

"That," I said, "was nothing."

"You may think so, but it could make all the difference to us. You go grab some sleep. At this gait we should make the island in about four hours."

His guess was accurate enough. By the time he called us, we were running out of the thick of the haze. Before us loomed the black mass of the island, stark and forbidding, with a blunt peak standing high above lesser ones. Remembering the paw shape as seen from above, I realized that we were approaching from what would be the "wrist" direction.

"Fine so far," Carson murmured. "But now we have to find a place to park this craft. No problem for the swimmers, but we need a bay of some sort."

"There must be something," Fiona declared. "I can't see the ancient wise ones swimming, can you?"

We were too low in the water for a good view, so I asked Carson to switch on the outside pickups and went up on to the deck, then up on to the cabin roof. The conical peak that had looked smooth and regular from a distance, was rough and jagged now at close range. There was a frothy lace of surf at its foot. The two Verlan exchanged growls and then plunged over the side to swim on ahead as Carson reduced speed.

"Small break in the surf ahead," I reported. "See that waterspout? That's too narrow for us, but if you look away to starboard there's a bigger one, big enough for us."

We nosed gently into a small cove, a natural harbor, slowed, and I took the bow rope and leaped ashore to secure it. Much to my surprise I found, exactly where it would be needed, a weatherstained ringbolt, the shank solidly sunk into the black rock. I made fast quickly and ran aft where Fiona was hauling out the stern line.

"Hang on to that a minute," I said, and ran past her, using my eyes. And I found another, the duplicate of the first, but set at a distance that spoke of some craft half as long again as ours. We barely had enough line to make fast either end. Carson came to look, and scowl in thought.

"White metal alloy, and old. A long time since they were used. I don't like this at all." He looked up to the high edge where the two Verlan were waiting for us, then stared all around, and shook his head again. "Ghosts are talking to me. What we find, others can find too. I don't like it. I would just as soon *not* be caught all neatly tied up and trapped here."

I had nothing constructive to say, but Fiona demanded, "What else can we do? We would be crazy to pass up an ideal berth like this, just because you have breezes along your spine!"

"I know!" he agreed. "It sounds crazy. Tell you what." He looked around again, calculatingly. "This stuff is easy enough to walk on, it's all steps. I'll leave you two here, to see what you can find out from the old man, while I take a trip further along the coast. No more than five or six miles, I promise. Either I find another billet, and walk back to join you, or I don't, and bring the boat back here, right? No more than two hours, at the outside. Fair?"

"You're in charge," I said. "You've guessed pretty accurately this far."

"Will you be able to find us again?" Fiona challenged, and he grinned.

"Sure, I'll find you, as long as you don't go climbing the mountain."

Frankly, I was none too happy to see him back out and go booming away out of sight around the corner of the bay. He had that quality of inspiring confidence, of knowing exactly what he was doing, and I felt vulnerable with him gone. But, when I turned from watching him disappear, I saw that Fiona was already up the rock-side and standing with the two Verlan, waiting for me. Even Lowloo, whining at my side, seemed anxious to move on. A slip of a girl, my own age, devastatingly feminine, nymph-nude but for a skimpy loincloth, and enhanced by the drifting rainbow light—yet she had more courage than I had, or no nerves at all. I made haste to follow, pushing my own worries aside, but I, too, felt that there were ghosts here.

The chief and his assistant had trotted on ahead some distance, running with that peculiar crouch, and holding their fingers across their eyes against what was to them a

glare. Lowloo kept by my side as we followed. The rocky surface was uneven but in no way difficult or hazardous, apart from isolated patches of moss that were slippery. To the right, the great dark bulk of the mountain rose to lose itself in haze; on our left, the sea pounded constantly at the wall.

"Where do you suppose they are taking us?" I wondered, and Fiona shrugged.

"Some pathway up the mountain, at a guess. They look excited!"

We went on for perhaps half a mile, swinging in a slow arc around the foot of the slope, when all at once I heard a low, thunderous roar, swelling up rapidly into an enormous rush of bellowing noise. A crash, and then, ahead of us, a great spout of water leaped high in the air, hung a moment, then opened out and fell back with a clatter like giant rain. We both stopped dead.

"What do you make of that?" she gasped, and in a moment it came to me.

"I saw that from out there as we were coming in. My guess was way off. I had it placed about a hundred yards away from the harbor. There's a kind of narrow channel or cleft connecting with the sea, I think. Come on, it doesn't seem to bother our guides at all."

After a moment or two of scrambling over wet rocks, we came to the edge of a great hole. It was all of fifteen feet across and so nearly circular as to look artificial. I've no head for heights at all, and long before I reached the rim I was down on my knees, and then on my face as I wriggled the last little bit and peered over. Fiona crawled along with me. We stared down together. It was darkish down there but there was enough fugitive light and sparkle from the restless water to give an indication.

"I make that surface to be about thirty feet down," I said. "You can see by the turbulence that it's connected to the sea by some channel or other."

"Right!" she agreed, lying flat and peering. "But why did they bring us here?" She frowned a moment longer, then sat up and started howling and yelping at the two Verlan. Lowloo, perhaps wisely, had remained a few feet back, well clear. I sat back from the edge, too, and studied the sur-

roundings, taking it for granted that we were intending somehow to pass this great hole. The seawall on the left was narrow, and I discarded that temporarily anyway, as there was a gap in it, the same gap I had seen from the sea. That left a narrow ledge to the right, about fifteen inches wide, between the rim of the hole and the sheer lift of the mountain-side. I didn't fancy it one bit, but in my experience, the longer one hesitates to dwell on a hazard, the more frightening it gets.

So I left Fiona to her interrogation, scrambled to my feet, and started away and around. It was no great effort, so long as I avoided looking down into the pit on my left hand, and the straight-up cliff-wall was smooth, with no odd obstructions to hamper me. About half way across, pacing gingerly along, I came to a recess in that wall, a square-cut cavern about three feet wide, six feet high and some five feet deep, where part of the interior rock remained to make a seat that a man could sit on. There was even a thick bar of rock across at about the right height to make a backrest. The whole thing was too weatherworn to show if it was artificial or not, and it gave me a moment of unease, but the concept of a seat was too inviting to ignore, so I scrambled in and sat.

I could now look out across the round hole, and there, directly opposite me, was the cleft in the sea wall, just as I had estimated it. That gap was an odd shape, being about seven feet across at the top, then narrowing quickly to only a few inches, in a wedge shape. The narrowness went down perhaps three feet, and then the whole thing opened out widely once more, down where the restless sea surged to and fro. I am no expert on hydrodynamics, but it struck me as obvious that when the accidental wave out there happened to strike that gap just right that peculiar configuration would shape the flow like a funnel and send it storming in here to create the awesome spout we had seen. I had no sooner seen this fact than I heard again that ominous muttering. I saw the leap and rush of a great churling crest dashing in to the gap. The mutter grew to a roar and shout, a breathtaking blast of hot, damp air, and then an upward explosion of water and spray that engulfed me, deafened me; smashed and battered around in my retreat, hurling me

to and fro with it, seeking to sweep me out and up so that I turned and clung frantically to that back-bar for dear life. Then, for a moment of stillness, I was solidly submerged. Everything seemed to stand still. Then the flow reversed, that great column of water fell away and down, dragging at me, sucking at my legs and body as if determined to have me down into that bore-hole.

Half-dazed, and clinging desperately, I heaved for breath as the water went away, leaving a momentary boil of surf on the flat rocks. Shaking the water from my face I leaned out and saw Fiona and the two Verlan regaining their feet, waving crazily for me to return. Their meaning was obvious, and there was nothing I wanted more, but there was something I needed to settle before I moved from my refuge. The mere thought of being caught halfway round on that ledge was enough to chill me. I had never realized before that ordinary water could hit and smash at a man like that. If this phenomenon had any kind of regularity at all, I had to find it. I settled grimly in my seat and studied what I could see of the wave patterns out there beyond the cleft. Fiona almost ruined it by making a move to follow me, at which I leaned out to where she could see me and bellowed at the top of my voice just the one word, "Wait!"

All in all I sat there twenty-five minutes by my watch, and that fearsome spout came to batter me almost senseless four times more, enough to show that there was a fairly regular interval of between five and seven minutes to the thing. That was ample time to get back. In fact, if one moved reasonably lively, it was long enough time to get right around and go on. I even managed to make a guess at the cause of the uproar itself. Out there in the sea there was a constant succession of cross-waves, none of which caused much more than a surge in the hole. It was only when two of them came together, canceled each other, and came straight at the cleft with double power, that the water leaped and spouted. So, having made the most out of an unfortunate situation, I waited out one more deafening spout, then set away, none too steadily, back to where Fiona stood waiting for me. She was furious.

"What the hell," she demanded, in crackling deliberation, "were you doing, admiring the beauties of Nature?" I stared

at her, shook the water out of my ears, and she added. "Or were you just taking a nap?"

"I was timing the spout," I said, my voice sounding odd.

"Timing it?" she shrieked, raising twin clenched fists as if to beat me. "Are you out of your mind? This is the time to take scientific observations?"

"Don't be a damned fool!" I said, losing my patience—and at that moment the blasting spout of water came again, drenching us and sending us staggering away from the edge together. She would have fallen had I not caught her arm. In a moment, as the clattering spray ran away around our feet, she gripped me and held me close, staring up, her blue eyes blazing.

"Think a minute!" I suggested angrily. "Do you imagine I wanted to get caught in that, out there on that blasted ledge?"

"Caught?" Her rage flickered and died away into confusion. She twisted her head to stare back there, then again at me. "Oh! I never thought—oh, Alan, I was so scared! I couldn't see you properly. I just wanted you to come back, right away! I couldn't think of anything else!"

"I don't blame you for being confused. I was scrambled myself when the spout caught me the first time. Thought I'd had it. But it's not so bad once you've seen what it does." Her arms went all the way around me and she hugged herself close, putting her face against my shoulder. "So I had to time it, to be sure I would be able to get back. It's not so bad. In fact, if we're careful, we can get right around and beyond, and go on, wherever we're going."

I felt her stiffen. She put her head back to stare at me and her heart thumped against my chest as she said, "We're not going anywhere. That's what the old man brought us here for. Alan, the treasure hoard is down there. Down in that hell-hole!"

VI

WE MOVED FORLORNLY away from the devil-spout to the first spot that seemed convenient to sit on, and we went into a prolonged session with the old chief. The Verlan tongue

is no medium for conveying distances and times, nor anything very specific about such things, but we hammered on until we had established the basic details. The fabulous cache of the old wise ones was down that hole. It was secreted in some kind of chamber. And it was a long way down. The nearest we could get was approximately ten times the height of one of us, and that was just a guess, because ten was as far as Uhumelee could go. It was enough for me, right there. I didn't say it until Fiona, recovering from her fright and carefully refraining from mentioning it again, had gone back two or three times to study the death-trap in hopeful detail.

"It's quite a thing," she said, at last. "Do you suppose they went down there and did their stuff, and then cut that feed channel so as to make a deliberate obstruction?"

"I don't see that it matters a lot, one way or the other, now."

"No, possibly not. It's quite a thing. Fifteen feet diameter. The walls are as slick as glass. The standing surface is about thirty feet down. Say the chamber or whatever it is, is thirty feet more—hm. That water down there will be comparatively steady, *under* the spout. I mean, that's sea level! Below that it should be reasonably calm. With scuba, and a line, once one got down past the uproar—"

"You must be out of your mind!" I said firmly. "If that's where the loot is, that is where it stays, for me. Whoever put it there intended it to stay, and I go along with that. Forget it!"

She shrugged, but made no further comment. Instead she started asking the Verlan pair what they had to do next, how they planned to scale the peak, and would they mind waiting until our other partner returned? Lowloo came to snuggle by my side and blink in the shade of my body. I had recovered by now from the holocaust of that shattering spout, but we were near enough to it to be reminded, every six minutes or so, that it was still there. I had my wits again, and they began to churn, as slowly as always. What about tides? Or perhaps there was a way of blocking that influx from the sea?

It was a minute or two less than an hour since he had left us that I saw Carson again, striding easily over the

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slabby rock with a pack slung over one shoulder. He waved just once, then came to join us.

"There's another bay, a dead ringer for this one, about two miles up the coast. Ringbolts and everything, so we're all secure. When do we start up the hill?"

"You need to know something, first," I told him. "We've found the treasure. At least"—as he started in excitement—"we know where it is. I'll show you."

He lost his easy smile when he saw the waterspout and the dark hole it came from, but he listened carefully as I filled him in on the details. He took a long moment to survey the scene, noting the points, then we went back to where Fiona still sat, her back against a rock and her long legs crossed.

"Call it six minute intervals," he said quietly. "That's not much!"

"What about tides?" I made him a gift of my futile deliberations. He shook his head at once.

"None to speak of, only the solar tide, due to Tau Ceti. Not worth the trouble of calculating. No, we're going to need diving gear and some good tackle."

"You're as bad as herl!" I cried. "You can't seriously contemplate going down there?"

"Can you think of another way? And do you think we've come all this way just to throw our hands in, now? But let's not rush at it. In any case, we had better wait until the chief has done what he came to do. Come on, they seem to be getting restive."

Uhumeelee and his assistant, fidgeting by this time, were quick away, leading us back to the first harbor area, then a bit beyond, and then up the slablike stones of the mountain until, all at once the pair of them crouched down low in succession and seemed to disappear into the rock. Following, we found an overhanging ledge, and under it a low gap that was no more than three feet high, with a shaft beyond it that ran straight into the rock for about seven or eight yards. Carson led the way, gingerly, with Fiona after him and me last. Or I would have been had it not been for Lowloo who tagged along at my heels. I was thankful to find that very soon the passage opened out and expanded until there was ample room to stand. By extending my arms on

all sides I made it to be about six and a half feet high and four feet across. And the sides, everywhere I touched, were as slick as polished glass. There was a steady upward cast to the floor of about one in ten.

"This is surely artificial?" I said, as we three gathered for a moment.

"I would say so," Carson murmured. "I should have foreseen something like this. I mean, it's common sense the Verlan wouldn't like scrambling up the side of a mountain in what is for them blinding daylight. That's not why I brought the headlights, but just as well I did. You take one, Noble. If you bring up the rear we should only need one. Better not lag, either. There may be side-passages, you never know."

That turned out to be an understatement. We had gone about eight or nine yards when I saw a right-hand swing into another gallery, going down, and there were plenty more to follow. Carson kept calling back warnings as the trail swung and twisted crazily, like a snake's dream. As far as I could see, there were no guide posts or marks, or anything to differentiate this passage from the many others. I couldn't help wondering at the alien technology that had carved this maze so seemingly random, and yet with such exact finish, for all the walls I touched were of the same glass-smooth texture. I can only guess how long we had been going, following our guides at a steady and swift speed, when my legs began to protest. It felt like two hours, but it could have been less, because I was also laboring under the weight of that shocking death-pit we had just left, and they say mental states affect judgment. However it was, I came to the point that I couldn't go on any longer, and called for a halt.

"Hold on a bit!" I declared. "Like it or not, if I don't sit and rest I shall fall down!" At that same moment I also realized that my neck ached quite a bit, possibly from the need to hold my head steady while casting a light for the rest of them. Just ahead of me, Fiona let out a long sigh, and halted, slumping against the wall.

"I've been dying for somebody to say that," she groaned, and slid slowly down to a squat in the angle between wall and floor.

"Why didn't you sing out?" I lowered myself creakingly down by her side.

"Stiff neck. Weaker vessel. I didn't want to think I was holding you back."

Carson came back a dozen steps and joined us, groping in the pack he was carrying. Out came a plastic bottle of wine and packs of protein-meal slabs.

"Field rations," he announced. "Go easy on the wine, it's fortified. In any case, drink is going to be our problem unless we find a stream."

So we munched our meal, sipped sparingly of the wine, and did what we could to relax. That is, Fiona and I did. Carson, after a mouthful or two, was at his pack again, to bring out a slim wallet of tools and unfold it on the floor between his knees. His headlight glinted off an array of silvery chisels and stocks. He chose one, and a shift-wrench to use as a hammer.

"Association of ideas," he said softly. "Thinking of buried treasure made me think of digging, so I brought these along just in case. But if this stuff is what I think it is, I've wasted my time. We'll soon see."

The sharp rap of metal on metal stirred long echoes in the tunnel and brought questing howls from our guides. By my side, Lowloo shivered and wriggled close. But for all the difference it made to that floor, Carson might just as well have been using a brush.

"Not so much as a scratch," he said ruefully, rubbing his fingers over the surface. "Diamond hard. Probably some kind of fusing technique."

"Why would anyone build an ant's nest like this?" Fiona asked.

"Who knows? Who can think inside someone else's mind? And these were aliens, remember? It's tempting to assume they were something like us. We know they ate similar food and had a similar metabolism. The jewel-thing says as much. Also they stood something like our height. But that's as far as we are entitled to go. This passage, so far, is crazy—but the net effect is a straight line uphill. It's almost as if it was deliberately designed to be difficult. Or it could be that the builders had to follow strata weaknesses. Who knows?"

"It could be like the pyramids," she mused, "with all kinds

of hidden chambers. On the other hand, possibly they were some kind of termite, unable to stand the light."

"Speculation is fun," he said. "We may have a chance to explore later, but right now our best bet is to get to the top and let the old man do what he came for. We can recharge our beamers and lights at the same time. When you're ready—?"

It took us, I would guess, another two hours of desperate walking, winding and twisting, with many curious side-branching passages to avoid, before we saw daylight ahead. How the Verlan knew their way I can't begin to guess. As soon as I could see the glow ahead, I extinguished my light and followed the rest until we all stood in a larger cavern, some fifteen feet in all directions, to look out and down into a small natural bowl, a kind of amphitheater resting on the mountain crest. I'd say it was about thirty feet across, very shallow, with a rough wall surrounding it. What mattered was the curious construction in the center. As soon as I saw it, I knew what it was.

"Well I'm damned," I said. "There's the old man's hut—in stone!"

"That's right." Carson nodded. "This should be interesting."

After much whimpering and rubbing at his eyes, the old man made a determined dash from our cavern, down across the floor of the bowl to the long lean-to shape. It was nothing more than two slabs of the black stone resting against each other, edge to edge, with a long narrow capstone resting on the junction. He stopped, groped with one hand until he found the flat top, then carefully set his precious gem on it, full in the warm light. The next moment he had ducked and crawled into the pitiable shelter.

"What do you want to bet," Carson murmured, "that he has to stay there, and suffer, until the thing is charged? Ritual. Anyway, I think this is a good moment to show you two how to recharge a beamer. Not that ours need it, but it can't hurt to learn. Like this." He shrugged the stubby weapon into his hands and proceeded to break it apart by the handgrip. Then the butt-plate came free, and he drew out the power-pack, which looked like nothing more than a dull gray plate. That, he explained, was almost fully charged.

He drew our attention to a thin strip of shining metal on the outer edge.

"When it's run-down it's all like that, alloy-shiny. As it charges it goes dull. And that stops it from overcharging, too. You just lay it in the sun, that's all."

We practiced this a time or two until we could extract and replace the packs smartly, then we left the things alongside Uhumeelee's gem, to charge. At the same time Carson laid out several little buttonlike discs for the same purpose. "Just making sure," he explained. "These are micro-packs, always handy to have. You've got 'em in your headlights. Now, let's take a look over the wall and see where we are."

Following his lead, we scrambled up the shallow slope to the wall and to a place where there was a gap big enough to edge through. As I've already said, I have no head for heights, and I didn't enjoy the view nearly as much as it called for. Beyond the wall, there was a rough ledge of sorts so that we were able to circle, and peer breathlessly down over the precipitous slope, until we spotted the waterspout. Then we sat while he dived into his pack once more and brought out a compact folded-prism monocular and a gyro-compass.

"You seem to have thought of everything," I remarked, and he grinned.

"I try to, but I've never quite made it yet. There's always something—" With the naked eye I could make out our first harbor, and with a struggle, what had to be the second, where he had bestowed our craft.

"There!" I pointed. "But I can't see our boat!"

"Not even if you were close to it, Noble. I put up a camouflage screen. It comes as standard equipment on those craft. Hold it a minute while I get a fix on that spout, and line up with our exit hole up here. This damned colored air doesn't help any. Fiona—would you hop up on the edge and mark me for the—no, hold it! Flat down, everybody!"

The last was in such a crackling tone of command that I obeyed it without question, then raised my head gingerly to see what had stirred him. Fiona lifted her head, too, and we saw him pointing cautiously.

"We've lost our head start," he said, and then I saw the boat. It was right out on the very fringe of visibility, but it

was there, scudding over the sparkling sea. Very soon it was near enough for us to make out detail. It looked a little bigger than ours.

"Private yacht," Carson muttered. "And he knows exactly where to go. He's seen the anchorage."

"How the hell could they follow us that accurately?" I demanded, and he shook his head. Looking again at the boat I saw the bow-wave slacken as it veered and pointed for the little cove.

"Not following. Why would he? There are other Verlan packs, other healer-chiefs, other gems needing a recharge. Zeb would know how to extract information, the hard way."

"So he must know about the gem?" Fiona gasped.

"Right! And the cache. God help anyone who gets between Zeb and that nest egg, now."

"That spout will make him think," I said, and Carson nodded.

"Maybe. It should slow him down a bit, anyway. Here, you take the glass, watch what they do. Fiona, you can help me check our bearings on that marker down there. Keep your head down!"

It was a very good glass, and it took me a moment to overcome the unreal sense of being close enough to reach and touch, yet not being able to hear the shouts as they swung in alongside. The flat-decked craft was more ornate and chrome-decorated than ours. The crew appeared to be all Oriental, but I couldn't say whether Chinese, Malay, or what. I'm no expert on criminals, and they looked, all five of them, commonplace and ordinary, but they knew their business with the boat. In very short order they had it secured and were out on the dockside, waiting, it was obvious, for the great man to make his appearance.

Then came an enormous black figure, a giant in a white loincloth, to hoist a gangway as if it had been a toy, and fling it across the narrow gap.

"You weren't joking, about the black giant," I muttered, and Carson lifted his head from his instrument a moment, to look.

"That's Hovac. According to the rumors, he is almost a moron, is Zeb's tool absolutely, and, they say, he was

force-fed to be that size, on some illegal growth hormones, or something like that."

Peering again, I could well believe it. And now came Acco Zeb himself. A small man, just as Dr. Bernard had said, squarish built, nothing impressive apart from a deliberate manner of moving, and quite simply dressed in a loose smock of gold stuff. Reaching the solid rock, he turned and made a gesture that said, unmistakably, "Bring it," and I saw the light flash from a bracelet on that wrist. Hovac ran back aboard, to reappear dragging a pitiful little Verlan, half-blind and out of his mind with fear.

"Let me look!" Fiona dropped down beside me, and I gave her the glass, bringing her up to date as I followed the dismal procession down there with the naked eye, as far as the spout. There was an argument that I couldn't guess at, then Fiona gasped, and her face went white as death.

"What?" Carson demanded, settling on her far side.

"They stood there," she said, unsteadily, "and I could see the Verlan telling them that the stuff was down in the hole. Then that black devil picked him up, shook him, and ditched him like a doll. Dead. Just like that."

"Learn!" Carson's voice was like steel. "That's Zeb's style. You've just seen the destruction of a whole Verlan pack, and Zeb knows it as well as we do. Without their chief, and the gem, the pack will perish by painful degrees. It won't trouble him for one moment. Take it from me, he would snuff us out with the same indifference should we get in his way."

"You want us to be afraid of him?" I demanded.

"Choose your own words. I'll tell you this. I consider Zeb to be a damn sight more dangerous than that water hole trap. And get this. We have no leeway for heroics. Zeb is a host in himself, and he has six men helping him. We are three. Forget all the nonsense about goodies being better than badies. That Hovac could tear the two of us apart without exerting himself. If we are going to do anything useful at all, we do it without Zeb even suspecting we are on the job. Once he knows, we might as well give up."

"Isn't that what they are doing?" Fiona pointed down the slope again and we saw the boat backing away from the wall, to go driving rapidly out to sea.

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"Going," Carson agreed. "But giving up? Not Zeb. He's off to get gear, equipment of some kind. I don't know exactly what, that's up to him, but I'd say we have something like nine or ten hours, at least. He won't go back to Outpost One because he doesn't know how much fuss we've kicked up. So he will have to hit the next nearest city on the coast. Takes time. Call it nine hours, at the best speed that craft can make." He sat up now, cautiously, and we followed suit. Fiona brushed at her prominent curves and made a shaky laugh.

"All this crawling about on my face isn't doing a thing for my epidermis," she said, but Carson refused to play her game.

"If that's all you have to worry about before we're through, you'll be a lot more fortunate than I anticipate. Now, how to use the time best? Obviously we can't now afford to ferry our friends back to their home land. I hope they won't mind that."

"I don't know," I said, "whether it had occurred to you to wonder if they mind us attacking their sacred remains?"

"I had thought of it," he said frowning. "I've been trying to figure out a way of asking them without going too far. It looks as if our best bet will be to avoid it altogether. If we can send them home without us—well, what they don't see can't upset them. Point is now, how much longer are they going to take with this ritual?"

"I'll go and ask the assistant," Fiona said, and went away through the gap in the wall. Carson stared after the boat thoughtfully until it was lost to view. I could almost hear the wheels buzzing in his head.

"Do you reckon Zeb will figure out a way to beat that water-trap?"

"I think so," he said quietly. "I could, given time. Which he has, and we don't." He got out his gyro again, studying it.

"Why so keen to take fixes on everything?" I asked, and he grinned.

"Habit, mostly. But necessary here. Do you think you could find your way back down that passage, or return here, without guidance? Just supposing you had to? With this, I can. Standard equipment for any exploring team. It's a miniature version of the same thing I had in my control

cabin on every ship I was ever in charge of. I'll show you." There was a certain fascination in seeing the delicate but precise skill of his fingers, and the incisive way in which he presented me with the essential facts so that I could readily grasp them. A miniature battery, a tiny motor, a constant-running gyro totally gymballed, all inside a compact case, and it presented him with an unvarying pointer relevant to the rotation of the planet, and a reliable horizon at all times. "You can do a lot," he said, "so long as you have those two items of data. But there's something else bugging me: that dead Verlan down there."

"Nothing much we can do about it, now."

"Well, there is this. If we can get down there before the old man and his helper, we can conceal the evidence; save them that much distress."

"How do we do that?"

"That passage has more kinks in it than the Mississippi. If we go straight down, on the surface, we should beat them easily. It's not as bad as it looks, you know. This rock is all flat sections."

That was easy enough to say, for him. The prospect paralyzed my tongue to the point where I couldn't offer any objection until it was too late. While I was still trying to speak, I heard a strangely piercing "twang" as if someone had snapped a silver wire.

"Hahl!" Carson was on his feet in a moment. I followed him back through the gap and saw Uhumeelee dart out from his precious shadow and grab the jewel, then scurry for the cave-mouth, almost knocking Fiona down on the way, as she had just emerged. She waved to us.

"That's it. Let's go!"

"Tell them to go ahead," Carson called. "We're going the overland route. It's faster."

She comprehended instantly, turned to yelp something to the Verlan, then came scrambling up the rock to where we were. "Now you're talking," she enthused. "I prefer the fresh air every time. This should be a breeze!"

It probably was, for those two. Carson, slinging his pack securely across his back, led off by leaping bodily down the first three or four ledges in a series, then halted only a moment to estimate the next lot. She went down after him like

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a goat, only no goat was ever such a shape. It was left for me to follow as best I could. It was very like that effort needed to dive into icy water and get it over with, a steeling of one's nerves and a determination not to even think ahead. I went down, not gracefully, not lightly, not very fast, and certainly not with any enjoyment, but I went. In fact I was kept so busy not falling, watching them to see which way they went, trying to pick the easiest way, and using my hands as much as possible to save dropping all my weight on my feet, that my nauseous fear of that yawning drop never had the chance to get beyond the edge of awareness. But it was there all the time, nevertheless.

There were broad jumps, stomach-heaving drops, unexpected faults to cross, and frequently slides of loosened stone. I have never perspired so freely before in all my life, and it wasn't all heat. Like it or not, I had to look down, over and over again, to see where she had led, and every time I did my stomach left me for somewhere else. There came one needed break, about halfway down. We came across a small, leaping stream, and stopped to try it, to rinse ourselves in it and feel somewhat refreshed. I have a vivid picture, still, of Fiona standing knee-deep and scooping the warm water up over her head and letting it run down over her body, looking as fit and full of energy as if she had just begun.

"It wouldn't hurt to follow this for a way," she suggested, and he agreed.

"I was just thinking the same. A source of water is always handy to know about."

So we scrambled along for a while in the rocky bed of the stream, until it cheated us by diving underground and escaping from us.

"Never mind," he said cheerfully. "It has to come out somewhere. At least we know roughly where to look, should we need it."

At this point I was calm enough to notice that we were not, in fact, headed for the water hole, but aiming for the second harbor, where our craft was stowed.

"That's right," Carson said, when I asked him. "We have time in hand, so we're going straight to the boat to get

gear, and then we'll make our way to the hole and see what we can do."

"You still think it's possible to go down there?"

"I do, yes. We'll see."

And then we were off again. To know that he had not abandoned his insane scheme helped me not at all. That last mad scramble down the side of the mountain is only a vague blur in my mind. By the time we achieved a measure of level footing and were within sight of the dock I was shaking all over, and running with sweat. Fiona made it that much worse by waiting for me at the end, standing insolently erect, breathing a little strongly but otherwise undistressed, to punch me vigorously on the arm and say, "And there I was, thinking this was all muscle. The way you're blowing, it must be flab!"

"I'm sorry about that." I puffed. "I'll be all right in a minute. The thing is, I've no head for heights, at all, never did have. The highest I've ever gone with pleasure was up a small tree."

"Oh, my God!" She was instantly stricken, coming close to hug me hard. "You idiot! Why the devil didn't you say so?"

"You're not the only one with a stiff neck!"

"We make a fine pair, us and our pride."

"Pride be damned," I told her. "I'd gladly do that all over again, blindfolded, rather than have Carson try diving down that death-trap. He can't be serious, surely?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said airily. "It's not as bad as it looks," and went leaping on ahead, leaving me to follow and remember where I'd heard that before. By the time I reached the boat, Carson was already rummaging in the fore peak, hauling out lines and blocks and alloy rings. By my watch, we had made the descent in a little under two and a half hours, which put us well ahead of the Verlan, with ample time to get to the spout before they could. We even had time for a quick bowl of soup and some protein-meal squares, as well as being able to discard our minimum clothing and break out fresh.

When we did start out for the waterspout, we were well laden. Each of us carried a forty-foot coil of what I have been calling nylon rope up till now but which Carson had

explained to me was not nylon, but some other synthetic, the name of which I forget. At any rate, it was light enough to float, had bulk enough to grip, and was powerful enough to hold back several tons of dead weight. In addition, he had a set of light alloy blocks and a mass of line to go with them. I had the oxy-nitrogen cylinder of a submersible set, and Fiona had the rest of it: the harness, mask, mouth-piece and flippers, and a headlight. She seemed a trifle preoccupied, I thought, possibly wondering about the ordeal we were walking into.

It was a fair walk, but the shadow of the mountain cooled it just a little for us. I had almost forgotten about the Verlan corpse, and the sudden sight of that lifeless clump of pelt-covered body was quite a shock, one I could have done without. We made a small pile of our equipment, about seven or eight feet away from the spout-hole edge, where only the periodic spray fell on us, and Carson took a moment to read us a repeat lesson.

"Take a good look"—he thumbed toward the corpse—"and remember. No stupid heroics. Three against seven makes heroism silly. That is why we are doing this now, simply because we must avoid a head-on clash with Zeb at all costs. Is that understood?"

"Even to running away?" Fiona murmured, and he aimed a steady stare at her.

"That's one thing we won't do, because I can't visualize the situation that would make it work. We won't get the chance! Right, we will hide the body somewhere—" It didn't take long. "And now, let's work this thing out as carefully as we can. We'll check that inflow cleft again, just to start with."

I went with him. Although it was not protected, like the recess in the wall opposite, there was room to duck back and lie down as the worst of the furious upsurge swept over us. The cleft itself was, as I had guessed, about nine feet broad at the top, but within about five feet it had shrunk to inches. He took a metal tube from his pack that was about a foot long and as thick as my wrist. This he laid in the jaws of the cleft and stamped on it again and again until it was jammed securely.

"Note," he said, "that the gap narrows just here in that

direction, so, come what may, that bar will not pull out that way. Check me, just to be sure."

Then we made our way back to where Fiona waited, and he explained to us just what he had in mind, how the ropes would be, and what we were to do. It sounded workable, sensible, and the only thing to do. All I had against it was my conviction that to go down that hole in any circumstances was madness, and that was hardly a logical point, so I kept silent. Then Fiona spoke up.

"I like it," she said. "I think it deserves to work. It's worth a try, anyway. There's only one thing wrong with it."

"And that is—?" Carson demanded.

"That you are going down there. You. That won't work. At all. If anyone goes down there—it has to be me. That's obvious."

VII

IT WAS NOT obvious to me, at all. I thought she had gone crazy, and I said as much. "You can't mean it, Fiona! To think of Carson going down there is bad enough, but it was, after all, his idea. And he—well—it's just not on! You can't!"

She took absolutely no notice of me at all, but kept her eyes on Carson. He lost his easy smile altogether.

"Steady, Fiona," he said, very quietly. "This is no stunt. Remember what I said about heroics? Damn it, you know there's no need to prove to us that you're a member of the team. That goes. But this—well, I don't want to lean on it overmuch, but it's going to be damned dodgy, and I can't very well ask anyone else to do it in my place."

"You are not asking me, Neil. I'm telling you. I know how difficult it is, how dangerous it is—and also how essential it is. It's our only chance, or we wouldn't even be talking about it."

"That's right."

"So who's being heroic now? Neil, what do you weigh?"

"Oh, come now!"

"What do you weigh? Over two hundred pounds? And Alan, at a guess, goes more, about two twenty. And I weigh only one hundred thirty. That's just one point. There are

others, you know. You know damned well that I can swim rings around you any time. I've done lots of this stuff. You are both a lot stronger than I am, where it counts, on hoisting. You want more?"

His face was a study in concern. She expired violently in impatience.

"Get the sex out of our eyes for a minute, please. Neil, you are the man in charge, here. Our leader. You made that point, hard, yourself."

"That's right. That's why I can't ask anyone else to pull my nuts out of the fire!"

"You fool! What the devil do you think we are going to do if anything happens to you? We've followed. You've been ahead of us all the time. I doubt if we could find our way home from here, unaided!"

And she was right. All my other faculties rejected the idea as insane, but common sense told me she was absolutely right. I could see it convincing Carson, too. If one could step back and take an impersonal view, she was right all down the line. Then, all at once, he put up his hand, looking away past us.

"Leave it for the moment. Here come our friends."

Uhumelee and the others must have run all the way without pausing for rest. They came loping over the rocks toward us now, mewling their curiosity, with Lowloo taking up her favorite position by my side. We moved a few yards away from the intermittent bellow of the waterspout and Fiona began to tell them the latest developments, once they had overcome their surprise at seeing us down here ahead of them. The first item, that we would not be going back with them, they took very well, but when Carson asked her to tell them the next bit, that we proposed to dive down that hell-hole and try to lift the ancient cache, it needed no great acumen to see that they didn't care for it at all.

"What I figured." He sighed. "Now we are no longer popular. We are interfering with their gods."

"I don't think it's that," Fiona argued. "Give me a minute." After a lot more howling and yelping to and fro she turned back to us with a wry grin.

"I thought so. No sacrilege about it. They just think we're

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crazy. In their terms, what the old ones put away, only the old ones can get out, and we haven't a hope!"

"They are so right," I said, but Carson ignored that blandly.

"Fair enough, Fiona. Now, you better tell them, too, that there are bad men about, men who will kill them and rob them of their touching-stone, given half a chance. Warn them to be on the lookout."

More howling and yipping to and fro, and I noticed that Lowloo kept her place by my side, returning little throaty snarls to the old man and his aide from time to time. Fiona had a strained grin on her face as she finally made her report to us.

"They are in a hurry to get back. They don't mind going alone, they'd have had to do it in any case. And they will watch out for trouble. But they are bothered about us, on this island. Seems to be some kind of taboo, not to be lived on. They could be right, bless 'em. But here's the capper"—and she aimed her blue eyes at me—"to do with your darling Lowloo. She doesn't want to leave. Wants to stay here with us!"

It was a compliment I could have done without. "Can't you tell her it's not possible? We have troubles enough already."

"You tell her," she invited, and I put my hand down to touch Lowloo on the shoulder, to urge her away, to join her colleagues. But she clung, and howled, and looked so damned pathetic that I hadn't the heart to be rough. I looked to Carson for help, and he shrugged.

"Let it go, Noble," he suggested. "She won't be in anyone's way, and it is her island, after all."

"What about food?"

"We've enough for an extra mouth for a week or two, that's no great problem. We'll work out something."

So, much against my will, Lowloo stayed, and watched the two men as they trotted down to the little harbor and plunged in without ceremony, to start the long swim home.

"Better them than me," Carson said, as the two bobbing heads went away. "I wouldn't fancy it. But they've done it before, both ways, so I suppose it's no great trick to them. I'd give a lot to have their sense of direction, though. That

is really something. 'Now—' and we returned to the business of suicide.

There was no more argument about who was to go down. Fiona had made her point, and there was nothing to gain by rehashing it. I was in a minority, but that only made it the more imperative that I do everything I could to make the scheme work out. Carson planned it meticulously, rehearsing us again and again until we had it right. The plan was like this:

He would mount the rock where the cleft was, and stand firmly on the tube-bar he had wedged there. One end of a line was secured to that and went to the middle of the hole, there to pass through an alloy-ring and back to him, to be reeved around the bar and held so that he could haul in or lower away as needed. Another line was secured by one end to the back bar of the seat-niche, went out to meet that alloy-ring again, and came back also to reeve around the bar and thus hold that ring poised above the center of the hole. That line was my responsibility, but we expected it to remain fast. From the ring itself depended the block and tackle, with Fiona and her harness slung from the purchase, and me holding the line from my seat. The operation was as simple as we could make it. I would lower away, or haul up, and otherwise receive signals by tugs on the line. Carson would haul or lower as needed to swing her from dead center to the side, as she signaled. And that was all. The rest was timing, and that was crucial.

"If we do it right," he said, "there'll be very little strain on the lines at all. You'll go down as fast as you can with the backwash, and keep on going down, because once you're below that thirty-foot level the water will be comparatively still, and there'll be a little weight to haul on. Signals, of course, and you know the main points to look for. That kit will give you a full hour if you need it, and the water's warm, so you'll have no trouble with that. Coming back up will be tricky, but if we assume, as I think we can, that you will know when the spout comes and goes, you will take off as soon as the backwash settles, go like hell for the surface, and then ride up on the next spout, unless you have time to get completely clear without it. Can you hoist her thirty feet in six minutes, Noble?"

"I can try. If you slack off, and she walks the wall at the same time, I can have her up and in that nook with me in that time."

"That's it, then. The best we can do. Don't forget the net bag. And don't"—he pinned Fiona with a bleak stare—"don't take any stupid chances. We want *you* out of that hole, not a body!"

"Fear not," she said lightly. "I'm rather fond of my skin, and the shape it's in. You be sure you have those signals right, Alan. In pairs, only. Pay no attention to a single tug, that could be a trick of the water, or anything. All right, let's go."

Carson and I took up our positions, he braced in the cleft, me wedged in my seat with one hand on the guy-rope and the other holding the free end of the tackle, the spare of it dangling down in the water. That took only a minute or two. Fiona sat herself on the edge, half-way between us, with the line to her harness stretching away to the suspended black, and her slim legs over the edge, the face-piece of her kit ready to slip over her face and the gleaming cylinder at her back. My line held her not quite tight, in readiness for the next mad rush of water. I was not at all happy. We had done everything we could think of to anticipate trouble, but there were so many unknowns, not least the dark and glassy-sided hole in front of me. And the sheer vehemence of that water was the main factor. The ropes would withstand any strain we might put on them, but could we, mere flesh and blood, stand up to it?

Beyond Carson, out there in the sea, I saw two feathering wave-crests run headlong into each other and leap into fury. The time for worrying was over. I raised my arm in a signal, carried it around to her, and braced myself. Here it came, bellowing and shouting, to my mind more savage than ever before, smashing and growling through the funnel of the rock-split, spouting into the great pipe with a giant blast of wet air, and then leaping straight up, to engulf me in a solid green mass. For a long moment it boiled and swirled around me, then paused, holding its breath. My cue to reeve in on Fiona's line, to help her to plunge in the column. The solid mass of water dragged at my efforts. Then away down it went, sucking at me with a devil's clutch, and I felt the line

spin out through my palm. And tension came on the guy-rope too. Shaking the blur out of my eyes, I saw those two ropes dipping, singing under the awful strain as the down-dropping flood dragged at Fiona's body below, and the hoist-line screamed, burning my palm, as it ran out.

Then, just as I was aching all over in sympathy for the weight that must be on her, it calmed. The guy-ropes eased, and the line in my hand ran more slowly, steadily, with surges that told me she was swimming. It was a glad astonishment to me that she was even alive, still. I hadn't expected anything like that gigantic drag downward. I held back on her slipping line, gently, and felt two double tugs, the signal that she was all right and going on. I let the line run and waved a thumb's up signal to Carson. After about a minute her line stopped and went slack, so I hauled in just enough to get taut, and felt one double tug, a pause, then two sets. That was her signal for Carson to slack away, and I passed it along to him with a circular wave. Now the guy-ropes sagged until the ring and hook were far below me. I wondered what she had found. Her line had gone slack again, so I reeved in, and there came two more doubles. Still all right, still going. I was so engrossed in wondering what she was doing that I almost missed the warning signs of the next onslaught. With a furious wave to Carson, I drew her line taut and gave three quick jerks, and then it was upon us again, roaring and snarling as if in demonic anger at our defiance, smashing its furious way up the bore and drowning me again in solid green water. On top of that, to churn my wits into wild apprehension, I felt both the lines in my charge grow taut as bowstrings.

Once, long ago, I was foolish enough to go swimming off a shelving pebble beach in a large surf, and I have never forgotten the disdainful ease with which that rolling sea caught me up and threw me down; tossed me about on the stones like a matchstick. That awful memory came back vividly now, as the vibrating lines told me of immense strain down there. I could no more move either of them than I could have uprooted the mountain, until the fearsome water had fallen back in bafflement. Then they both went slack, and I hauled in swiftly on her lifeline. And it came up hard! There was no possible doubt. The difference between the

lively drag of her body-weight, and this utterly unyielding stop, was unmistakable. The line was snagged on something as solid as the mountain itself. I had no signals for this, at all. I hauled hard, racking my wits for what to do next. We had prepared only two distress signs. Four tugs meant "haul me up fast"—and that was the one thing I couldn't do now. Or, should the rope run free without signals, haul up anyway. But this dead solidity was a baffler! I let out a little slack, hauled in again, and there it was, solid as ever.

Then, as I was trying to work out some weird combination of waves to tell Carson what was happening, I felt a vibration in the line. I slacked, and drew taut, and there she was, two sets of jerks. All clear and proceeding! I became conscious of shivers in my arms and an ache all down my back. As soon as I could manage it steadily, I passed another thumb's up to Carson and took a few much needed breaths. The line in my hand ran out steadily, slowly, and I imagined her possibly plunging further and further down. It would be cold down there, surely? And what about the pressure at sixty feet? I didn't know enough to guess. I had to assume that she knew what she was doing. But I couldn't help worrying, if over nothing else, at the way the line was running out. Then it stopped again, went slack, and when I hauled taut, I got one pair of jerks. My wits were so scrambled by now that it took me a moment to remember what she had sent. Then it came, and I waved crazily to Carson. She had found it. Something, anyway. My imagination shifted now, pictured her crawling around in some narrow recess, possibly gathering water-stained treasures into that net bag. The line slackened in my hand, and I gathered it in steadily until I felt three quick pairs of tugs.

All over and she was coming back. So quickly? I gathered in the slack steadily, hand over hand, and then, once again, it snagged and came solid. My heart went into my mouth. I glanced at my wrist. Another spout was due, was a second or two overdue! I held tight, hating that solid feeling. Then, thankfully, it gave again, was alive. Again that quick succession of tugs to signal that she was coming back. But so was the spout. I waved madly to Carson, tugged to warn her, and the line slacked in my hand. I hauled in frantically—and here came the tempestuous water again, rioting into the

pipe, smashing against the walls and roaring upward. In the midst of that fury, signals were out of the question. All I could do was hang on and hold my breath until the maelstrom subsided and dropped away, dragging and gurgling. And again both my lines sprang wire-taut and hummed like harp strings, the lifeline scorching my hand as I tried to let it run fast enough. As if in a dream I saw Carson stagger and fall flat, saw his lines whip away down there, saw him scramble up and come running like a stag along and around and scrambling along the ledge to where I was hauling in on that lifeline as fast as I could go.

He dropped by me and took hold of the guy-ropes; started heaving them in. "Something parted!" he snapped. "Don't know what. Damned near had me in. That blasted backwash! I never figured it would be so fierce!"

He yanked furiously until he had the ring and the head-block right up to the lip of the hole, then he made fast around the back-bar behind me. A moment later and he had clapped on my line, alternating his grip with mine, and the line raced in rapidly. I saw the red stains of blood where he gripped, but there was no time for asking foolish questions. I heaved as never before and he matched me in furious concentration. We had to beat that next spout. Now I thought I saw the faint fugitive gleam of light down there, and then, yes, there it was, drifting and sparkling off the blackly glossy wall opposite.

"Hitting the sidel!" I panted, and he grunted without stopping, "No time to worry about that. It's smooth anyway. Haul, damn you!"

I was hauling, but I didn't blame him for being angry. He must have felt what I did, that she was heavy. A dead weight. I knew, long before her head came within sight, that she was unconscious, if not worse. There came the moment when the two sets of blocks met—my cue to lean perilously out and down, grab hold of her harness, and hoist her bodily up alongside us. Carson was scooping in the tangle of cordage as I lifted her.

"What's the time?"

"Less than a minute, at the outside!" I panted, as I gathered her onto my knees and held tight.

"Too chancy. We'll ride this one out. Make her secure!"

It was a squeeze. Two of us crowded the little nook, but I managed to get up and around, and lay her out on that rough seat, so that we two could stand with our backs to the coming convulsion and thus make sure that she would not be swept out and away again. I took a moment to put my ear to her breast and finger to her throat, ignoring the blood that oozed thickly from her nostrils.

"She's alive," I said. "A good strong beat."

Carson made no comment but busied himself gathering the mass of cordage into some kind of manageable heap. And then that damnable fury of water was dashing at us again, foaming into the pipe, spouting crazily up and submerging us. It seemed to be stronger every time, and it was all I could do to hold on to the back-bar and save myself from being carried away as it sank swiftly back and down. Then, tapping me on the shoulder, Carson said, "Grab her, and go. Head for our boat, fast as you can, but not until you've stripped her of that gear. Don't bother about anything else. I'll gather up the rest of it."

I needed no further instructions. Slinging her over my shoulder, I trod that ledge as fast as I could until I was safely clear of the spout, then laid her down flat and peeled away the straps and ties, unable to avoid seeing the purple bruises that were already starting to show where the straps had bitten into her flesh. The buckles on her thigh-straps had become inextricably tangled in her loincloth, so that came away too, and I had no time to care. I didn't like the bubbling noises in her throat, nor the blood that she was coughing up, but I knew one thing that would help, because it had once been done to me, in a similar case. As soon as she was divested, I slung her over my shoulder again, face down, and started off. She was no featherweight. I imagine she had understated her one hundred and thirty pounds. And I was far from fresh. But I knew I had to keep up this jog-trot stride for a while, at least. With her limp body jack-knifed over my shoulder, and all her weight jouncing on her stomach with each step I took—something ought to happen. And it did. I had just passed the bay of our original harbor when she started to snort and cough, and retch, and it was a pleasant sound to my ears.

A moment later, I felt something wet dribbling down my

back, and that was good too. I suppose I must have been a little light-headed by that time, with relief, for I remember distinctly reaching across with my free hand to pat her affectionately on the most prominent curve handy, and saying, "Good girl. Throw it all up, you'll feel better."

I do not remember in any clear detail the rest of that staggering tramp over the rocks, except that I was obsessed with the idea that I must not put her down, or waste any time. I have vague flashes of Lowloo, running in front of me and then trotting back to whine wonderingly at my painful progress. She had stayed well clear of our insane exploit and couldn't possibly have understood what was happening, but she definitely knew something was wrong. I remember weaving to a halt at the edge of the harbor where our craft was tied up, and staring at it, and wondering why it looked so dreamlike unreal, until I recalled the camouflage screen. Then I blundered on, boarded, descended the brief ladder to the after cabin, and then, at last, put down my burden.

From that point, although I was shaking with fatigue, my mind was pinpoint clear, assorting and arranging all the things I had to do, in the best order. I laid her flat on the central table, took one look at the frightening smears of blood and slime all down her front, and made for the shower cubicle, to switch on and fumble with the injector until I had put in a strong dose of antibiotic additive. This, too, as Carson had told us, was standard fitting on any expedition into unknown territory. Then I gathered her up and dumped her, as gently as I could manage, in one tiled corner and got busy with the sprays. The bloody mess didn't bother me unduly. I've seen that kind of blood before and it looks scary, but the slightest cut can sometimes produce alarming quantities of blood. I went over her with the hand-spray, noting the purple bruises, and in particular, a nasty-looking one over her right eye.

She was knocked out. I hoped it was nothing more. What reassured me most was her breathing, which was strong and regular now. When she was clean, I gathered her up again, along with a towel, and put her back on the table, then broke out the medi-kit. I heard the tramp of Carson's feet on the deck over my head, but I was too busy to bother about that. With Lowloo watching me, I opened a tube of

oil-based goo and smeared my fingers liberally with it, then started to make sure she had no broken bones. I was pretty certain anyway, but it always pays to check up, and the goo was for those angry-looking scrapes and abrasions.

"How is she?" Carson spoke from the region of my elbow.

"No broken bones. She's had a bad crack on the head, but nothing broken there, either, so far as I can tell."

"You've got blood all down your back."

"That's hers. Just a nosebleed from pressure, and a little strangling. She's breathing loud and clear now. You want to take over?"

"Not me," he said, and smiled carefully. "You're doing fine. Make her as comfortable as you can, Alan, she's earned it. I'll be stowing the gear."

He went away, leaving me to fumble and curse my unsteady hands, but I still had that urgent clarity in my mind. And something else, a curious blend of cold and simmering anger on the one side, and humble adoration on the other. She lay quite still, quite peacefully, like a child, but no child was ever so beautifully and wonderfully designed, nor so satin-silken to touch. I admit freely that the care with which I annointed her bruises was as much from the pleasure of caressing her curving beauty as from a need to render medical aid. I think it came to me then, what I had been trying to hide from myself for so long, that this girl was everything in my life. That awareness was at once a delight, and a terror, so that I was thoroughly confused and hardly to be blamed if I took innocent advantage of this opportunity to pay homage to her loveliness. It was as I worked carefully over a long and painful-looking graze on her right shin-bone that I detected something odd about her breathing. And I stopped quite still, keeping my eyes down.

"How long have you been conscious?" I asked.

"Quite a while. Please don't be angry, I didn't want to spoil it. You have such a delicate touch!"

"I've been told I'd make a good vet."

"You *are* angry. Please don't stop!"

"You can manage the rest yourself, quite well."

"But I don't want to. Alan, I ache all over, but I don't mind, so long as you are taking care of it for me." She moved now to prop herself up on her elbows, and I raised

my head to meet a curious, wondering light in her eyes.

"Why," she demanded, "do I have to get myself hurt before you'll be nice to me?"

"That's not why you did it."

"No, but it seems to be one of the fringe benefits, so don't be mean. I need attention, darn it, so attend to me!"

"You're no helpless female," I muttered, finishing off that raw scrape and reaching for the can of collodion spray. "But you shouldn't be sitting up, not yet. Keep still."

"I gave up the idea of being helpless a long time ago," she murmured, settling back again. "Times like this, I think I made a bad bargain."

"Shut your eyes," I ordered, bringing the spray up to her forehead. She obeyed, keeping quite still while I sealed off the bruise and then moved to places further down.

In a while her breast heaved gently and she said, "Don't you want to know what I found down there?"

"I don't give a damn what you found. You came back up, safe and alive, and that is about as much as I can handle right now."

She went quiet again, and in a while I helped her to turn over on her face while I completed my work. "You're going to ache quite a bit for a while," I told her, "but I'm going to warm up some soup, and lace it with a sedative. You'll take it, and rest for about an hour, to give this ointment a chance to work, and the worst will be over."

"Yes, sir!" she murmured, and I could have smacked her. She was in just the position for it, too. By the time I went back to her with the soup she had eased herself down from the table and was stretched out on her bunk, propped on one elbow, watching me.

"Tell me just one thing," she said, as I put the bowl in her hands. "I really don't know this bit, honestly, but I suppose I did swallow quite a bit of water. Part drowned, you would say?"

"That, and other things."

"Did you have to give me the kiss of life treatment?"

"No. It wasn't necessary. I jogged you over my shoulder, and that shook up all the water."

"Sounds horribly practical, but thank you. And I'm glad you didn't have to give me the kiss of life, after all."

"Why?" I asked, walking right into it.

"Because I should hate to think that I'd been unconscious and missed it!"

That was where I left her and went shambling up to the upper deck, all at once almost falling down with fatigue, and other things. For a moment I thought my vision had failed me, but then I realized it was sunset. And there, in the pastel-tinted gloom, Carson sat silent, smoking a rare cigarette.

VIII

"How is she?" he asked, looking up.

"Conscious, rational, a bit shaken but nothing serious. I've given her some soup, with a sedative. She'll be all right for an hour."

"Good. Something on your mind, Alan? You sound short."

"Damn right there is." I settled beside him. "Just one thing. The treasure. I'm through with it. Finish!"

"Spoken like a rich young man."

"I am not that rich," I said, still with that abnormal clarity of mind, "that I can buy back Fiona's life. Are you?"

"I'm sorry. I asked for that one. No, I'm not that well off. I'm comfortable. I'll never starve, so to speak."

"Then what?" I demanded harshly. "Are you stuck with some semantic hold up on the idea of quitting?"

"Not that either. I know when I'm beat. But you're overlooking a point, Alan. We're partners, aren't we? All *three* of us? What about Fiona? After all, she went down there. Doesn't she get a say?"

Somehow, that simple question hit me like a splash of cold water. Of course he was right. As I tried to adjust my thinking, he went on quietly.

"Let me tell you something about her. She resents being a girl, simply because it means being tied down someday, to a home and family. She wants to be free to do whatever she feels like doing."

"That makes sense. So do I. That's why I can't stand an office."

"Me too. We're three of a kind. And we have to think in

threes, or we'll ruin the whole thing. I know that's not easy. I muffed it myself, in that argument about who should go down. You can muff it too if you get to thinking in terms of marrying and settling down with her."

"I'm not the marrying kind," I mumbled, glad of the dark that hid my hot face, "although she makes it difficult."

"Neither is she, Alan, and she is not being difficult, just natural. I've known her since she was a tot, and I've never known her to take to anyone as she has done to you. I'm glad about that, but forget any old-fashioned ideas you may have about being the big strong protective male. That would really tear everything up between you. She has met men, plenty of them, and run them into the ground, just to prove she can do it. Don't try to beat her at her own game. Let her be herself, as good as you."

"Probably better." I sighed. "You make me feel a bloody fool."

"Forget it," he said, and we sat in silence and watched the spectrum-play of the glorious twilight. Out of some rosy dream, Lowloo stirred me with a throaty whimper, and the deck-door swung open behind us.

"Well, well!" Fiona remarked. "Two old men sitting out on the stoop. May I join you. I bring cheer."

She had, too, in the shape of a bottle and glasses. And a cushion to sit on, to spare her bruises. "That water," she said, "falls like hell on the backflow. I can't be sure about depth, so I have to guess I went down about twenty feet before my light struck a hole in the glassy wall, right under the chair nook. There's a little light from the cleft opposite, so I could place myself near enough. You slung me across all right, and there was room to duck inside, but from there it was hairy. The hole is about six feet by three, and barred. Cross bars that look exactly like the white metal of the ring-bolts, as thick as my thumb. About a foot apart."

"As close as that?" I gasped. "You were stopped, then?"

"I thought maybe I was." She put her hand on my wrist. "But then I thought, after coming all that way, it was worth a try. So I slipped out of the harness, hooked it securely to one of the bars, and—well—that's how I got all the scrapes. That's the very first time in all my life I've

really regretted that I'm a big girl, with such outstanding developments. But I got through, just!"

"I can feel my hair turning gray," Carson muttered, and I agreed with him on that. She laughed.

"It wasn't that bad. I only took the gear off long enough to get through, then I could get that through easily, and put it on again. It was me, and that damned cylinder, we had to part. We couldn't make it together. Anyway, by the time I had unfastened, and squeezed myself through the bars, and then done it all up again, the second spout came and shot me along that passage like a cork. There's a point, here. Below the entry-point, as we guessed, the turbulence is mild, but that inflow sets up a devil of a pressure for a moment. I almost blacked out. Anyway, I went back to the bars and then swam the passage again, to check the stretch of it. I make it all of a hundred feet long, same size as the original opening, about six by three, and it slopes up steeply. I'd say about one in three. I broke surface a few feet short of the hundred and had to crawl the rest. Slippery as anything. Then I was in a chamber about eight or nine feet a side, on the level. And I was up against what felt like a sheet of plate glass, only I'll bet it isn't. Still, it's transparent, and I could put my light through it. The stuff is there, all right."

"What kind of stuff?" Carson sounded no more tense than I was.

"My light showed what could have been bags or boxes once, but now only decayed remains. And scattered masses of the gem-things. I have to guess, but I'd say at least a couple of hundred. And, Neil, they were dark and still when I saw them first, but as I stood there and took a careful look around, not wanting to miss anything important, they started to come alive. They were drinking up the light I was casting on them, and starting to glow and glitter, and the more I looked the brighter they got, until all I could see was rainbows!"

"So much for that," he said, in relief. "At least it's not a mare's nest. And then?"

"Well, that chamber scared the pants off me after a while. I tried a sniff of the air without my mask, and it was cold—and old. Ages old."

"Did your ears pop?"

"Just a little, when I came up out of the water into the chamber. Why?"

"Just a datum. You came back, then?"

"Right. I couldn't see anything else to do, so I back-tracked. And that's where I ran into trouble. Those bars again. I was half-way through, easing myself as gently as possible, with the gear all hooked on to the outside, when that awful spout came and caught me. It's a down-squeeze at first, and it scooped me out like meat through a mincer, clouted my head against that cylinder, and tangled me up. Then, while I was struggling to get loose, it hiked me up and I almost strangled on the ropes. I don't know how I got free, really. Somehow I got buckled in again, just in time for the backwash to slam me down and bash my head against the side of the hole—and that's about all I remember until I felt Alan here taking lovely liberties with my abraded dimensions." She squeezed my arm, and laughed.

Carson got up and moved, saying over his shoulder. "I've got something to show that will put the final touch to it," and he flicked on the deck-light as he came back to settle beside her. "You saw me brace that metal tube in the notch of the rock," he said. "Tubes like that are used a lot in machinery work. We call them 'samsons,' and they are used to give extra leverage to a wrench, or as extensions to a chisel, stuff like that. In short, they are tough, intended to stand up to hammering and strain. Now look!" and he showed us the tube. It had been folded neatly in half, and there was rope still trapped in the fold. "I had to cut it free. It wouldn't yield otherwise. So I'm to blame for underestimating the power of that water."

"Nonsense!" she cried. "You weren't to know. I'm as much to blame as anyone. I've been in deep water often enough. I should have anticipated the pressure effect. I paid for it."

"And I paid for mine," he grinned. "I was holding that rope when the tube folded. This is what I got," and he showed us his palms. Right across each one was an angry red rawness where the skin had been stripped off. The raw flesh gleamed under a layer of ointment and collodion, but it looked as painful as an open wound. Fiona caught her breath, but he put his hands away again, and added, "It's nothing. Be as right as rain in a day or two. Just making a

point. I do not know it all. I *do* make errors. I have to say that, because Alan, here, has been bending my ear with a decision. On his own, that is."

"Let me guess," she murmured, turning to look at me in the gloom. "You want to call it off. Let's go home, eh?"

"That's right," I said. "No amount of treasure is worth one square inch of this," and I touched her lightly on her knee.

"I thought so. But you forget this much. It's mine, not yours. I'm quite willing to trust it to you when I have to, when I want to, but it's still mine. Let's not say any more about that, please. Let's think together?"

"All right, but on your own showing, we're stuck! You've done better than either Carson or I could have done, but you failed!"

"Perhaps not," Carson put in mildly. "Let's put it this way. We've won a grace period. If Fiona had to struggle to get through those bars, it is certain none of Zeb's men will manage it, if any of them get that far. You see, the snag with being a crook is that you're limited in your choice of staff. Nor do I think that Zeb will be able to turn up anything to cut those bars, either, not if they are the same metal as those ring-bolts. I've tried, and they defeat anything I can turn on them. So we've won a little time, and we have brains. In the meanwhile, you, young lady, need sleep. I know I do, and so does Alan. So that's the program for the next four hours or so. We'll grab a quick bite and then rest. I'll go fix it, right now."

He flicked off the deck-light as he went, and I said, "That was tactful of him, perhaps?"

"You learn fast," she murmured, with a hint of mirth. "Neil tactful? I doubt it. I'll bet he's already planning some other way of lifting that loot. When he sets his mind to something, mountains move over, if they're wise."

"You really admire him, don't you?"

"He is the only man I ever met who is so far ahead of me that I haven't a ghost of a chance of overtaking him."

"You set a pretty killing pace yourself, for anyone to keep up with. When I think of you down there, in that water—"

"Don't think for one moment," she whispered, "that I would have even given the idea a second thought with any-

one else on the other end of the line. I said that Neil is out of sight. He is for most people. But you manage to keep up to him all right within your scope. You're ahead of me—"

"Rubbish! Ahead? I have the sensation of panting along at your heels, always seeing the obvious when it's put under my nose, wondering where you'll lead me next, and always out of breath."

"You need practice, that's all. You've never lived at top speed before. You'll find, after a while, that you get hooked on it. Then you'll shoot off and I'll be the breathless one, watching you fade into the distance."

"I can't see that. I'm pretty breathless right now."

"As I said," she murmured, "you need practice. You could try your kiss-of-life technique now, for instance. After all, even if Neil did put the light out because he's naturally cautious and doesn't want us to be seen from the sea, there's no point in wasting it, is there?"

I was really breathless by the time I'd passed the first lesson, and she sighed, deep in her throat. "You pick the most unfortunate times, my dear, to discover things. Chewed over by insects the first time. Now I'm so tender all over that I feel like a raw egg. Or is it deliberate? Do you prefer your women helpless and handicapped?"

"I can't imagine you ever being helpless, Fiona."

Whatever she was about to reply to that got caught in the forming, for at that moment Lowloo stirred by my side and said, quite distinctly, "Fiona."

There was difficulty with the first letter, the labial stop, but there was no mistaking the word. As we stared in surprise, Lowloo tried again.

"Alan."

Here again she had trouble with labials, and it came out more like Ahan, but there was no possible doubt of what she meant.

"That's very good!" Fiona declared excitedly. "I wonder how many more words you know, child?"

"Not like that," I cautioned her, regaining my wits. "Understanding what somebody says is a damn sight easier than twisting your own tongue around the same words. I know. I'm no linguist in performance, but I can catch what others are saying reasonably well. Try it this way. Lowloo,

can you point? Anywhere—to the sea, for instance? Show me.”

Quite distinctly and immediately she lifted her slim arm and pointed out to sea, making a pleased little yelp.

“That’s good, but now we will try something harder. Let me see you point to Lowloo?”

This time she yipped in delight and patted herself on the head.

“That tells me a lot. You are one very smart young lady. Dr. Gallint should be here now. Or, rather, his critics should be.”

“You’re pretty smart yourself.” Fiona punched my arm. “Knowing that bit about understanding faster than you can speak.”

“I was raised with animals”—I reminded her—“and it has been a belief of mine for a long time that animals, particularly dogs, cats and horses, can and do understand what we say quite well. The trouble is, we expect them to talk back as proof, all the time. And, of course, they can’t do that very well.”

Carson put his head out of the deck-door and called us to come and get it, and I made a point of inviting Lowloo to join us. He was most intrigued at our discovery, and the fact, as we proved beyond all doubt, that Lowloo had plenty of intelligence. She even had the wit to copy our ways of using a spoon, and drinking from a cup, although she drew the line at coffee. Fiona made a wry joke out of my gentle persistence—which is just another habit of mine. To get anywhere with an animal, you have to at least be as patient as you would be with a child. I have never understood why most people assume that shouting and waving will work where simple repetition is all that is needed.

“Now I really have a rival,” she declared, as Lowloo sat by me and managed to consume a bowl of protein soup quite neatly. “Next thing you know, she’ll be after my clothes, and then looking for some way to discard that lovely fur.”

“I doubt it,” Carson said innocently. “She’s a lot prettier the way she is than most women I can think of. It’s more likely that you’ll try to grow your own personal mink coat.”

He was right. Although a little shorter than Fiona, and slimmer, Lowloo's shape, enhanced by the sheen of her pelt, compared well with any human young woman. Where the fur halped, at wrist and ankle and over her stomach and bosom, her skin was as satiny pink as any girl's. Her face betrayed her as alien, of course, but that, too, was pretty—once you grew accustomed to it.

"Next item." Carson was still restless. "Alan was right about the waterspout. That way is not possible. But there may be another. Fiona, you need sleep, plenty of it. Alan and I will catch a few hours, and then I'm taking him with me to try something. I'll leave Lowloo with you, just in case."

"All right," she said, and gave me a stern look. "Don't let him run you down, will you? Once he gets an idea he doesn't know when to stop."

It was still twilight when he called me, but I'd had four hours, and felt reasonably fit. Without explanation, he led the way until we were again at the tunnel mouth. Then, from his pack, he produced a plastic pot and paint brush.

"More research equipment," he murmured, grinning. "Luminous paint. You take it. When I say 'Mark,' make a small ring on the roof. That way we will at least be able to find our way out again. Clear so far?"

"I'm with you," I said, "in theory. But where are we going?"

"You'll see." He produced his gyro-compass now, and studied it. We set away, and this time we diverged from the way we had first taken. I knew that much because we started going down. He was like a hunting dog casting about for scent, halting at intersections, going a few paces, coming back often, and every once in a while instructing me to mark the ceiling. An idea grew in my mind, but I kept quiet about it because it suffered from one serious flaw. We went on slowly but steadily. After a long while we struck a space where the passage opened wide into a chamber some fifteen feet either way, and high. Here he made me stay where we had entered until he had circled all around it, and located another passage directly opposite. Then I was able to mark the two doors carefully, and we went on. Only a few yards, this time, and he came to a halt.

"Stay there," he said, and moved slowly along by the

smooth wall, then stopped, deep in thought. Then he came back again, passed me as he went in the opposite direction, halted, and came back. Now he was intent on the gyro. He laid it on the floor, adjusted it delicately a time or two, then pointed at the wall.

"There!" he said softly. "Make a mark. And now"—when I'd done that—"you know what I'm up to, surely?"

"I think so. By arts and skill known to you, but which I can only admire, because I'm no good at figures at all, you've found the point in this rat-run of passages that is nearest to that treasure chamber."

"That's right. Not a lot to it. I keep data, as you know. I am therefore able to say, with assurance, that I am now pointing straight in the line of the chamber, the blow-hole, the cleft in the seawall, and the sea. That's the easy bit. Now comes the hard part. I'll need that brush, and some peace and quiet. I have figuring to do. Navigation," he murmured as he started to make delicate little dabs on the wall, "is a matter of habit and practice. But this is not a ship, and I do not have a computer standing by to help me. So I have to do it the hard way, which is also part of training. I mean, there can always come the time when you have to figure your way out of a spot with all auxiliaries dead. What I have to tell myself is that I am just as smart as any computer—only a lot slower." He was dabbing little symbols and frowning, then studying the gyro, and dabbing more, all the while he spoke. And then, staring a moment, he sighed and returned the brush to the pot.

"That's it. I don't like it much, but figures can't be bent here. We are thirty eight feet away from that treasure chamber, in that direction and at an angle of dip of eight degrees below horizontal."

"That's fantastic," I said. "And I mean that. I am always awed by people who can juggle with figures. But Carson—thirty eight feet of solid rock?"

"I know," he said softly, "and I have been thinking about that, too. You learn all sorts of tricks, and you never know when one might come in—like this. Watch me." He unhooked his beamer and squatted down in the crook of the wall, waving me down by his side. Holding it in a curious way he gave a quick tug and wrench, and the barrel came

away in his hand. He laid it aside and produced a slim screwdriver from his bag.

"That's the focus-tube," he explained, "what you'd call the barrel. This is the beam-set button, on the grip—and this is where it works, inside. There is a safety-stop so that you can't fine it down more than so much. You can get down to a beam half-an-inch diameter with a spread-cone of three degrees of arc. And that's all. Because if you squeezed in any more you'd stand a chance of melting the focus-tube, see? But, if I adjust this locally—like that—I can now pinch in that beam not just narrower—but to reverse cone. In other words it will come to a point about thirteen inches ahead of the output diode. That—I have to warn you—is dangerous. In effect, you are squirting energy into a corner it can't get out of, so it builds up fast, it bursts out eventually—and God help anything that happens to be in the way. Particularly the guy holding it. So the trick is to use that energy as fast as it is being concentrated, to use it on something else. That's what I propose to do now, in a moment."

He stood again, took the paint once more, and made a mark in the angle of the roof immediately above my mark, then drew a thin straight line down, all the way to the floor. Deliberately, he drew another vertical eighteen inches to the left of that, and another to the right of it.

"There's our door," he murmured. "Now we'll try to open it. Pray—cross your fingers—do anything you can that you think will help," and he laid down the brush and took up the beamer once more.

IX

HE HELD THE awkward looking weapon close to that black surface, high up in the corner of the wall, took a breath, then pressed the firing-stud. A pale blue finger of radiance leaped out, impinged on the rock, splashed a ring of yellow stars, and then sizzled like frying bacon. "That's it!" he murmured, and drove the beam deep, the blue finger burying itself in the rock while yellow particles spouted furiously out, to drift away and die in mid air. When the bared coils

were no more than an inch free of the surface, he hesitated a moment, then started down, slow and steady. Spouting yellow fire ran all around the beam. Sparks came cascading out, but there grew a deep narrow notch in that wall, all the way down to the floor. He shut it off, stepped aside, and did it all over again with the left vertical. I was so tense, watching him, that I coughed, and jiggled the light I was casting for him, but fortunately it did not put him off. Then he moved to the right and did it a third time, all the way down to the floor. At that point he stopped and turned to me. And I stared.

"Carson! I hope that black on your face and arms is just dust. Not some kind of radiation burn?"

"Eh?" He dabbed at his wrist, then grinned, and it was a dazzle against his sooty face. "Not burns. I'd have felt those. Not with this stuff in any case. No, it's dust. Monomolecular dust, at that. And it's going to be a problem I had not allowed for. Main thing, though—this works!"

"Depends what you mean," I said. "I don't want to sound pessimistic, but so far as I can see, all you have done is to cut three grooves a foot deep, half an inch wide, and six feet long. At that rate, driving a forty foot shaft will take us years!"

"Think so? We'll see. I'll admit the dust is a factor I hadn't considered, and there are one or two other points, but let's get a time estimate right now. How long would you say I've been cutting, so far?"

"I make it something under ten minutes."

"Right. Watch this now, and time me."

With deliberate care he started again, only this time he used that blue pencil of flame to slice across the left-hand panel, high up. Dropping about three inches, he did it again, and again, steadily—and the air was now thick with haze. He kept on until he had sliced the whole of that left-hand panel into three-inch segments. With only a moment to straighten his shoulders, he did it all over again with the other panel. And then he shut off the flame and stood away, turning a glossy black stare on me.

"Forty five minutes all told," I said, trying not to sound defeatist. He cocked his head aside in thought, then nodded.

"We'll cut that a bit, with practice. And the beamer-pack

is rated at two hours maximum output. With any luck at all, that's three cuts per charge. Three feet! That's not at all bad. But now let's complete the work." He rummaged in his pack once more. This time he brought out a short stout chisel and two of the familiar extension tubes, twisting them together to make a long crowbar effect. And then he proceeded to make me feel foolish. Sliding the chisel blade into the topmost horizontal cut, he gripped, jerked down hard and sharp, there was a whip-crack snapping sound, and he laid the chisel aside to seize and draw out a square slab of rock eighteen inches wide, three inches thick, and a foot broad. This he stood on edge by the wall. Then he did it again, only this time he inserted the chisel into the next gap before hauling out the cut slab. While I watched in awe, and helped out by shifting the cut blocks away from his feet, he systematically stripped that wall until there was a neatly cut recess, one foot deep. He stepped back in satisfaction.

"I give you the point," I said, and he shrugged.

"That's just a start. How long, altogether?"

"An hour and a half."

"Practice and teamwork might cut it, but let's allow for accidents and delays. Call it a foot every two hours. Seventy-six hours!"

"If Zeb will let us alone that long."

"I have a notion about that, too. Come." He picked up his gear and we started back, but only as far as the big chamber. He made a gesture. "Our new home. If we take everything we might need out of the boat and stow it here, then submerge the boat so that Zeb's men won't fall on it by accident—we can stretch that seventy-six hours quite a bit—and he'll never know we're here."

This time I didn't waste words on admiring him, I thought hard. And I found a snag. And I told him.

"Good for you." He chuckled. "That's the help I need. What?"

"Power for the beamers. Do we have enough spares to last out?"

"We don't," he admitted, "have that kind of spare at all. But I've an idea or two to work on. Let's get back."

Dawn was just flickering into glory as we sighted the boat,

and the light was strong enough to betray our filthy condition, so we plunged into the water and sluiced away the dirt before going aboard. The black stuff was face-powder fine, but it rinsed off readily, and we were quite respectable by the time we woke Fiona and told her, over breakfast, what had been achieved.

"There's another snag," she announced, as soon as we had finished telling the tale. "I remind you, I was guessing at those distances down there."

"Immaterial," Carson assured her. "Your direction was accurate—and the inner cavern you found was just above sea level, which is a fixed value." Although calm enough in appearance, he seemed to be humming powerfully on the inside. I could feel it, and so could Fiona. In a moment when his back was turned she gave me a rueful shrug and pantomimed shielding her head and ears from an explosion. I knew exactly what she meant. He started on her.

"I leave it to you," he said, "to figure out all the small, the light, the easily-carried items we are going to need. Alan and I will take care of the big stuff. Lowloo, my dear, I have work for you also. Will you help us?"

She nodded excitedly and he smiled, then, very carefully, he explained just what she was to do. "Find a place up on the rock side, as high as you can without taking risks, without dazzling your eyes. Take shelter from the light but keep your eye always on the sea—that way! Keep watch. A boat will come, a boat like ours, only larger. As soon as you see it, howl as loudly as you can, and then run quickly to the tunnel and go inside."

He made sure that she understood, and then sent her away with Fiona, carrying small items we would need. For me there was harder work, as we stole sections from the air-conditioning unit, and the auto-chef, and everything else that might ease our stay underground. We had plenty of food. And Carson had schemes for jury-rigging a heavy-duty power-pack from the auxiliary plant directly to the working beamer so as to provide us with an eight-hour spell rather than just two hours—and he had provisional plans for some kind of mask and tube to give us breathing freedom from the dust. But it was the dust itself that had him worried. For three very strenuous hours we all worked, and none

harder than he did, and yet always his mind came back to that dust. He emphasized the point at one stage, as he paused to inspect the layout in the big chamber, which we were calling by now, the living room.

"We're not wearing anything right now," he pointed out. "I suggest we maintain that, and stop wasting our supplies of clothing. Our skins will wash, but clothing will be ruined within minutes." He got no argument from us, but we knew what was on his mind, and that going naked was only a palliative. We needed water, lots of it, and handy. The problem exercised my mind, too, but I couldn't dwell on it too much because he kept us busy—for three hours. And then, as he and I were combing the engine room of the craft one more time for odd prizes, we heard the long-awaited, half-dreaded signal. Lowloo's howl was far and faint, but quite distinct.

"Here we go!" he muttered, and we worked without further words, shutting and clamping down all the ports and hatches on the deck, checking on all inlets, he tripping the sea-cocks to the tanks immediately, so that we *had* to work fast. And then scrambling ashore as the deck came awash, to stand by and pay out the cables until our craft bubbled and went down to a ledge some twenty feet below. All that had been worked out ahead of time. There was an external control panel by which we could pump her out again quite easily, if and when we needed to. The "if and when" was my mental phrase, but Carson seemed confident enough that all would be well. We ran for the tunnel mouth, not madly but we didn't linger. From time to time we cast curious glances to sea, but it wasn't until we achieved the ledge by the actual entrance that we were high enough to confirm Lowloo's eyesight. It was Zeb's craft, sure enough, out on the skyline and moving steadily. Lowloo met us just inside.

"Yes?" she queried, and Carson nodded.

"Quite right. You did well. At any rate"—he added cheerfully—"it clears the air, doesn't it? We know the score now." Then, for a long breath, he peered at that distant boat, frowning over some thought. "Better part of an hour. I wonder! In you go, Alan, I've just had a notion."

We found Fiona in the living room, busy stacking and arranging everything to be handy and safe. "I heard the

call," she said, looking up, "but I figured there was nothing I needed to go and look at."

"There is now," he said. "Come and learn something of the stonemason's art by watching us." He went on ahead, leaving Fiona to stare at me with a "What now?" look in her eye.

"Search me!" I pantomimed back, and we followed him to the cutting face. A light-cluster shone full on the broken wall, and the working beamer now had a feed-in cable from a heavy-duty power-pack, an arrangement which would give us eight hours of cutting time instead of two. As he hefted the beamer, he looked back at us and grinned.

"Take off your sandals," he said, "and wristwatches, please. All right, Fiona, watch me, please. Closely." And she stood close as he started to cut. Now that I was alerted to it, I could see the dust coming as a fine haze against the light, but rack my brains as hard as I could, I did not see the point in me stripping off my watch and foot-coverings. He stopped when he had cut one panel into horizontal strips, and turned to pass the beamer to me.

"Don't go too far away, Neil, or else we won't be able to see you at all!"

"Quite right. Don't you get too far away either, it's your turn next." Then, as I started my level cuts—and found that it wasn't nearly as easy as he had made it seem—he worked with the chisel, cracking and drawing out the slabs in quick time. It was close work, but we were able to manage it side by side. Then, when I'd made my panel ready, he instructed me to pass the beamer to Fiona and her to cut a panel while I cracked mine.

"Timing," I warned her, "is the key. If you drag it too fast, the beam boils up out of the cut—and if you linger too long, the rock does likewise."

She did very well considering that she was working a foot in past me in a space no more than eighteen inches wide. As she completed her second vertical and began slicing, she coughed and muttered over her shoulder, "I thought someone said something about dust masks?"

"Later, perhaps," Carson said, and halted her. "Switch off. That's all for now. No, don't rub. That black is precious. Listen carefully. By now, Zeb and his gang should be land-

ing. I would very much like to see what they do. In other words, to spy on them a while. And three pairs of eyes beat one, any time. Is it on? I mean, you can't deny we're dressed for it!"

Fiona sighed, cleared her throat, and then she had to smile. It was a dazzling sight. "I should know you by now. You never do anything without good reason. Am I really as black as you two?"

"Thou art black but comely," I told her, and it was the truth. That dust, with sweat to give it body, covered us all with an oily gleam, but I doubt if it flattered Carson and myself as much as it did her. Lowloo let out a yowl of dismay when she saw us, but that was quickly taken care of by our smiles and reassurances. Carson warned her off.

"Don't touch, my dear. Lord knows, we worked hard enough to get it on. You stay here until we get back." He led us to the entrance, and that was when the idea came to me. I called Lowloo close and whispered to her what I wanted her to do. After a moment or two she nodded understandingly and went scurrying away, leaving me to hurry and catch up with the other two.

"Of course it's a gamble," Carson was saying as I caught up with them. "But the whole shooting match is a gamble, isn't it. I hope we won't have to take too many chances, but it's worth some risk, just to know the other man's game. Against Zeb, we need all the data we can get. Now then"—as we assembled within sight of the outside blow—"no complicated rules, just use your heads. Don't, whatever you do, smile! If you have to stare hard, put your hand up in front of your eyes. In any doubt, keep dead still. That's about it. Watch for my signals. Ready? Let's go!"

It must be recorded here that those two had my heart in my mouth a score of times within the first twenty minutes, by which time I was too far gone to react at all. For just one thing, when a man says "signals" to me, I have in mind that he will stop, turn, and wave—and then wait until he has my answering wave before going on. Not those two. She was following him, and I had to take most of my cues second-hand from her as a consequence. I soon discovered that it was her blithe assumption that when I saw her freeze as still as an ebony carving, I would automatically do the same. A

sketchy and grudging stab with one finger meant "going that way" and a cheese-paring scoop-motion with a palm meant "come on." And never once did she look back to see if I was there, or had got the word. She just assumed I was paying attention all the time. And I wish to point out that I literally couldn't *see* her about half the time. Black on jet black, glitter against sheen. After a while my eyes learned to differentiate between angular lines and her outrageous curves, but, to this day, I don't know why they didn't lose me completely scores of times.

As it happened, Zeb's unwholesome crew was far too preoccupied with grief to be paying much attention, and we were able to gain a vantage point far enough from the spout so as not to threaten our camouflage, close enough to each other to whisper, and above the spot they had selected to build something. We could even overhear part of their talk. The Oriental babble meant nothing to us, but we heard Hovac. Everyone heard Hovac. He had a voice to match his Herculean frame, no patience at all, and the temper of a gorilla with a toothache. He was obviously in charge, and, just as obviously, the rest hated his guts, but dared not challenge his overbearing manner.

"Looks like some quick-assembly dwelling-unit," Carson murmured to us, as the unwilling men trudged back and forth bearing alloy spars and sheets of plastic board. "For Zeb, you can bet. And there's a weakness. He won't do anything for himself; he would lose face. So he has to rely on staff. But, as you see, he intends to be right on the spot to see that they work."

My attention was drawn to Hovac, himself, at that moment. He came stalking from the yacht only slightly stooped under the burden of a self-contained air-conditioning unit that must have weighed in the neighborhood of three hundred pounds. The exhibition of sheer brute strength was not lost on the crew, either. And now, with his dwelling completed for him, Zeb himself came, pacing slowly over the gangplank and along the uneven rocks like some old-time prince. I felt distinct relief as he disappeared into his shelter, and Carson must have heard my sigh.

"He has presence, doesn't he? Now you know why I

would rather not meet him head on. But wait, this looks interesting!"

There was to be no rest for the gang. Now they came toiling into sight with more spars—but then I corrected myself as I saw that these were metal tubes, the kind construction men assemble against the front of a building when performing repair work. Sturdy metal, and massive clamps to bind the poles together. Carson hissed thoughtfully between his teeth as they laid out the poles in the form of a tick-tack-toe diagram and got busy locking them rigid.

"What do you make of that?" Fiona demanded, and he scowled.

"Obvious. And it might just work. Watch. They assemble the grid. They lash cables to it and they wait for the spout to pass, and then launch the grid across the hole and lash it down."

They did exactly that. Two men ran to the far side of the hole and held cables ready to pull. Hovac made it obvious that the idea was his, and stood by this side, ready to shove. The spout came and went. With rough coordination there was pushing and shoving, and then the framework rested and was securely roped directly over the hole. Fiona's hand gripped my arm.

"Will it work?" she asked Carson.

"We'll have to wait and see."

"They still have to put a man down," I growled.

"If the frame holds, they can. In a real deep-sea suit!"

It was a bad moment. Fiona was so on edge that she seized my hand and pressed it to her breast. Carson stared like some black tribal demon. Then the water came again, bellowing and raving, smashing into the bore and leaping savagely high into the air, obscuring the scene. I thought I heard screams over the din. The spout hung like a monstrous mushroom, then fell, the spray rattling like hail. And we stared.

The frame was gone as if it had never been, leaving just one buckled and forlorn tube dangling from the cable that had been held by one man on our side. He, like the two on the far side, had been prudent enough to wrap three turns of cable around a handy rock. The fourth man had been

less wise and was now dead. Definitely. No body could be crushed that way and live.

"Scratch one!" Carson sighed. "Poor devil. Hovac underestimated that waterspout, just as I did, but Zeb won't like it. And they won't try that again. Come on, we've seen enough."

We went back just as fast and as carefully, although it was a safe bet the discomfited oppositon was too busy to watch for anything. Back in our living room, Carson got busy working out an alarm system for the entrance.

"Should have done this sooner," he declared. "It won't take long. You two better start cutting. We can work out shifts later."

"Toss you for it!" Fiona smiled dazzlingly.

"What with?" I retorted. "Anyway, you go first."

"And what will you be doing?"

"Resting my flab. I need it."

She chuckled. "All in black you don't look flabby at all. Sort of sinister. I like it. Go on. Relieve me in about an hour, right?"

As soon as she was gone, I signaled to Lowloo, who hissed and nodded excitedly as she came up to me. She had obviously found what I had asked for.

"It is this way." She pointed past the cutting, toward the opposite approach from our room. "Not far. I will wait."

I got the paint pot, and an empty container—one of many that Carson had laid in, with foresight—that would hold a quart. She led me a straight way, not nearly as twisted as the track we had taken to the top. I carefully marked Vee-arrows on the roof at regular intervals, until I could smell the water ahead. Before that moment I had not realized that water had a smell at all. It was in a small side gallery, a waist-thick rustling column that slid down an almost vertical gully from a hole in the roof, ran deeply for about six or seven feet, and then overflowed a ledge and plunged away into darkness once more. And it was cold! I fell into it, wallowed in it, caught my breath and ducked in it, and only then did I realize just how hot, and sticky and filthy I had been. It was a sheer delight to lean against the wall under the stunning flow of that water and feel really clean.

Then, looking up, I saw the fugitive glow of daylight, and it dawned on me that this must be that same stream we had passed on our way down, on the surface. The light looked close, so I tried, holding my breath, to struggle up the gully against the rushing water, but there was nothing I could grip on, so I had to abandon the idea. In any case, I couldn't bear to hoard the good news any longer, so I filled the container and hurried back, Lowloo frisking around me as happy as I was. I knew when I was near the cutting by the diffused glow of light. In another moment I was close enough to hear the fizzle of the cutting beam, and the pop as it cut off. As I turned the corner, I heard a familiar crack and a grunt of effort.

"Ho there, my Bonny Black Bess," I said, coming up behind her back. "Fancy a drink of something?"

"About time!" she cried, clearing her throat. "I had begun to think you had left the country. Lord, what I couldn't do to a long cool soda, now!"

"Your wish is my command, oh Queen of the Night. How about this?" and I put the container up against her naked back.

"Hey!" she shrieked, cringing away and turning. She saw me for the first time. Her eyes opened wide and furious blue. "You!" She choked. "You—you dog! How come you're so lovely and clean? And me all thick—oh! Where did you get like that?" Without waiting for an answer she raised her voice in a yell. "Neill Neill Come and see—"

"I heard," he said, from my shoulder. "And I see. Where d'you find it?"

"Such a fuss about a drop of ordinary plain cold water," I said, and handed the container to her again. She grabbed and tilted it greedily at her mouth. "Not me," I told him. "Lowloo found it. I asked her if she could find water, and she did. It's not far. If you allow for bathing time, about an hour for the round trip."

"Bathing time," he said, very quietly, and shook himself. "By God, Alan, you've helped us a lot with this. And as for you, my dear, I'm too dirty to hug you. Bless you. I wish there was some way to repay you. If ever there is, just you say. Hey, Fiona, damn it, leave some!"

Within ten minutes we were all on our way back to the

fall. I carried one of our heavy lines, Fiona had two quart containers, and Carson was carrying a spare heavy-duty power-pack that he had stowed in a plastic specimen bag for ease of carrying. As always, he didn't explain why. It was a delight just to watch them plunge in, all black and shiny, and see them emerge pink-bronze clean, shivering and radiant with relief. Then I showed Carson the sky-glow.

"We might make it," I suggested, "if you stand on my shoulders and then Fiona goes up on both of us."

"Taking the line with me," she agreed. "But why bother?"

"Lots of reasons," Carson declared. "Good thinking, Alan. A spell of fresh air and daylight is going to be worth much, to us. And it will give us a back door, an escape hatch, should we ever need it. And there's a third point that I'll confirm in a moment. But let's get out first."

I helped secure the line about Fiona's waist. "I think I prefer you as a dark and shiny statue," I told her, as I knotted the line.

"Then you are out of luck, aren't you?" she retorted. "I'd rather be clean and pale, thank you."

It was no trick at all to get out. Once Carson was on my shoulders, with our backs to the slide, Fiona was up over the pair of us and away. In a matter of moments we felt the line come hard up, knew it was secure, and the rest of us followed her, Lowloo first, yelping and spluttering, then me—and the line made it simple—and then Carson. He hauled carefully until we saw him pull up the heavy-duty battery and lay it aside, removing it from the plastic bag. He stood, cautiously, looked around, and nodded to himself.

"Now," he said, "we can work things out a bit. The light here is good enough to charge one of these, slowly. And we have three. So we have a drill. Like this. I cut until my pack is dead. I call my relief and he takes over with a fresh pack. I come here with the dead one, climb up, put it on charge, get the fresh one that has been here eight hours. I clean up, rest, fill up with water, and proceed back to the works, have a bite, and then sleep. And we all do the same. Follow?"

I pondered it and suggested a small refinement. "Eight hours rest is all we need. Why can't the second man help the cutter by moving out the blocks? It will speed the work—and it will mean there's always two of us awake."

"Okay, we'll do it that way. I'll cut first, Fiona clears for me. And so on. First, though, we secure this end of the line where it can't be seen. And we knot it every eighteen inches, to make climbing easier."

We had just done that and dropped the line back into the water when Fiona came scrambling down from a spy-point; her face was grave.

"You're a good guesser," she said to Carson. "I've just been watching them uncrate and set up a deep-sea suit. A real armored job."

He nodded, then set his jaw grimly. "That's all right. What I'm scared of now is that Zeb will see the obvious thing that has been right under his nose all this time. That he already has a way of lowering a man down there. Come on, we haven't that much time to spare, after all."

We were almost back to the cutting again before I got a glimmer of what he was hinting at. "You're thinking of those special ropes?" I asked.

"That's right. He's using the same type that we have, that thick fleecy stuff that is as tough as the devil. Remember, I told you we couldn't even start to stress that stuff? And we didn't. Everything else parted, but not the ropes. And as soon as Zeb notices that, he'll have a man down there in that suit."

"And the bars?"

"I can solve that one, so I have to assume that he can, too. It only needs intelligence."

That's possibly so, I thought, but it's beyond mine. However, we had all we needed to worry about without dreaming up bogeymen. And, now that we were clean and refreshed, we got right at it. We made one small change in the original shift schedule. Fiona started the first cut, continuing where she had stopped when I surprised her with the water, and I carried rock-slabs for her. Carson had other plans in mind, and we found out what they were just as her pack began to fail. The warning was the sound of rapid popping explosions from the cut as the beam lost its intensity. She drew back, and I disconnected her pack, to hook on a fresh one. Carson came, ready to back me and explain.

"The booby trap at the entrance," he said, "is now not just

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a buzzer tip-off. I hooked it into a circuit linked to our second beamer, and that is set up at the inside end of the straight run, about ten feet from the opening. It's set for medium, and anyone who treads in our front gate gets knocked cold right away and triggers the alarm, which I moved closer to us here. It is just a precaution. I do not look forward to getting caught at the far end of a thirty-foot trap. The third beamer stays by the buzzer at all times. All right? Off you go then, Fiona, and get cleaned up."

And so, we worked. Slaved would be a better word, although we didn't think of it like that at the time. Fiona had added seven feet to the first break, making eight. For my cut, going as hard as I could and with Carson cracking and hauling away as fast as I could cut, we added another eight, and that put us ahead of our schedule. But by the time it was his turn again, we knew that we were not going to be able to keep up *that* infernal pace. For one thing, the deeper we went, the further we had to haul back the slabs. And the heat grew steadily worse because we were in a narrow dead end. We dripped as we moved. But worst of all was the dust. We never did solve that problem properly. Regular bathing and plentiful supplies of water helped a lot, but only to alleviate. We tried—Carson used up a lot of his rest period on it—making a mask with an air tube, but the thing was a nuisance to wear and got fogged within minutes. The best we could do, and we kept it, was to bind a wet tissue across our faces and breathe through that. It helped. But that dust flew, drifted, stuck and gritted, and grew on us.

Lowloo helped enormously, arranging the blocks neatly, after we dropped them. And she was always ready to run back and forth with precious mouthfuls of cool water for the cutting-man, forever sneezing at the dust but enduring it. She even learned how to make very good coffee for us, and her command of English grew rapidly. But the one thing she liked best, and which we couldn't grudge her because she had earned it, was to go along to the water-slide with whoever it was in turn to go for rest. Her sleek pelt must have made the dust even less pleasant for her than it was for us in our bare skins. Carson laid down the law on that rest-period very firmly.

"Let's have no silly dodging over it. When it's my turn, I

intend to soak, and wallow and rest, and make the very most of it. And you two are to do the same. You *need* that spell, so take it."

And we did. We sneezed and sweated, we cut and cracked and dragged, and ached, and the shaft grew. Not quite as fast as that first mad rush, but it grew. Fiona had taken it to eight feet. By the time she had dragged herself away from it a third time it was all of twenty-nine feet and right on target. Carson checked that every time he came on, just to make sure. It was fabulous progress, but it hurt me to see how she plodded, almost asleep from the choking dust, the heat, and the constant strain of handling that cutting beam with delicate precision. But then, I consoled myself, she would soon be fresh again, once the cool water and rest had done its work, and I pressed on with my turn at cutting, visualizing her, with Lowloo, taking her power-pack and water cans, and wallowing in the coolness and ease. It was the one thing we all looked forward to with fierce delight.

I continued my cut, spurred by the knowledge that we had only some eight or nine feet to go, possibly less. Carson was just as tense as I was. The heat was a dreadful thing now, with the two of us shoulder to shoulder for the most part, and the air thick with dust, sweat literally streaming off us. I think I was a little light-headed, only automatism keeping my hand moving steadily, enduring that fierce glare and the spouting sparks. And then, in my daze, I halted and knew something was amiss. I heard Lowloo crying out.

"Fiona, gone! Men come. Catch. Take!"

X

I REMEMBER SHUTTING off the beamer and laying it carefully down, then shambling dazedly to where Carson stood staring down at Lowloo with a fierce intensity while she tried to talk. It wasn't until I got within touching range that the shock got right through to me, and I started to shake with rage. I heard the gist as if through a red fog. Fiona had been stretched out in the warm light, dozing. Two men had grabbed her. Fortunately they hadn't noticed Lowloo, and, more fortunately still, she'd had the sense to keep quiet and

hidden until the men had dragged Fiona away, down the mountain. Then she had slipped down through the water and hurried back to us as fast as she could.

"Good girl!" he said, very softly. "You did just right. Now you stay here. Alan and I will bring her back."

"What are we waiting for?" I demanded, and he gave me a hard stare.

"Come on, but keep your head. This is no time to panic. *This way!*" and he called me as I would have gone back to the water-slide. "They will take her to Zeb, that's for sure." That little craziness on my part was enough to pull me out of my blind rage and clear my head. We ran to the entrance, he with our only available beamer in his hand. "I know how to use one of these," he said, "so it's best that I have it."

"Keep it. All I want is the chance to lay my hands on whoever manhandled her. That's all. Just my hands."

"Mind the trips!" he warned as we ran out, and it was as well he did, for I'd forgotten them. And then we were in the light and air again, just as before, black and intent, but now there were only two of us. And if that first expedition was hairy, this one was ten times worse, because we couldn't wait to plan strategy, and we didn't. We ran like goats until we were back to our original spy spot, to see that Hovac, with one of the Orientals, was messing about with the diving suit. Just as we crouched to stare, there came a shout, another Oriental on the run, then two more, between them dragging Fiona, and she struggling every step of the way. I suppose I must have made a noise, for Carson hissed at me.

"Easy. She's in no danger yet. They'll want her to talk."

"Which she won't."

"But Zeb will try it. This must be a baffler for him."

It helped me a little, to see that he was quite right. Fiona, naked as Eve and just as lovely, was better disguised than any clothing could have made her, and Zeb must have been startled, to say the least, at her sudden appearance here, out of the blue. Her captors dragged her to within about seven feet of his shelter, and stopped as I heard him spit some incomprehensible words at her. He tried again, various languages by the sound of it, and then English.

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"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

To my surprise she put her head back and howled in Verlan fashion, a warning to Lowloo to keep clear, to get help.

"That was an error." Zeb's voice, clearly pitched, carried an overtone that chilled me. "You are human, visibly, not a canine primitive. You will talk human. In fifteen seconds!"

"I wish I had my watch," she retorted, "just to see if you cheat."

"Indeed!" Just the single word, but it had razor-edges. Zeb turned and issued an order to Hovac, and Carson did the same with me.

"They are going to persuade her. It will take time, which we can use. See that ledge almost directly above Zeb's shack? To the left? Get there. Get the biggest rock you can handle. Stand by to drop it smack in the middle of his roof when I signal. Right?"

"That's clear. When?"

"You'll hear a scream!" he said savagely. "Not hers. She won't. It will be your cue to drop your rock and get down there fast."

We parted, left and right—me to gain that ledge, and find, on the way, a loose slab that was all I could do to lift; then wait and see what they had in mind. It was simple, obvious, and fiendish. They had bound a rope's end to each wrist and each ankle. They had laid her back against the corner of an upright slab about ten feet clear of Zeb's shelter. The ropes went around it and joined, and then ran over the drum of a winch they had set up not too far from the sink-hole. They tightened ropes until she was spread-eagled helplessly. Hovac had supervised it. Now he galloped happily back to his evil master. Zeb spoke, still as clear and steady as ever.

"You will talk," he said. "In a moment I will signal Tan Sen to run the winch, very slowly. It is very powerful. It will not stop until *after* you have told me what I want to know."

I never saw his signal, but I did hear the winch start up, and saw Fiona's head go back against the rock as the tension came on to tear her apart. Then there was a scream to freeze the blood. I grunted my rock high, heaved it, and flung myself down the slope without waiting to see it hit,

the sound of the rupturing alloy and plastic was joy enough. On the flat and running, I dodged the shambles I had made, saw Hovac's great legs kicking, and galloped to where Fiona was hauling in the slack, trying to get free. I reached to help, but she shook her head and shouted, "Watch your back!" and I spun around to see one of the Orientals coming for me, bewildered but determined. There was no time for fancy work. I bunched a fist and hit him as hard as ever I could, catching him full in the face and jarring my wrist and arm. He went back and down, dazed and bloody. I would have turned back to Fiona, but now Hovac reared up enormously from the crackling wreckage of the shelter, and I knew that if he got into the fray we were all done. Not stopping to work it out, I went forward, grabbed my battered Oriental, heaved him up and threw him bodily at Hovac. The pair of them went down in a great shouting heap.

Again I went to turn, and staggered under the impact of a wiry body on my back and murderous fingers at my throat. I reached back and grabbed, but that heave had cost me a lot, and there wasn't much strength left in my grip. I saw the red of strangulation fogging the scene. Then Carson grunted, "Come up!" and the stranglehold went away, so that I could gasp in air and swing around. He had a bight of the rope around my attacker's throat and his knee in the man's back. He heaved mightily, spun around, let go and kicked, and the helpless Oriental flew head-on into the same rock that had been planned to break Fiona's back—and stopped dead, then folded to the ground. She was free and dancing tigerishly around another man, fainting at him until she lured him near enough to grab, and heave, and twirl—and he, too, flew. And landed on his head. And lay still.

"Let's get!" Carson snapped, and we got, as fast as we could go, not stopping until we were within our booby-trapped doorway. Then we stood and shook, and grinned like fools.

"I don't think"—Carson gasped—"that we were followed. We came out of that damned well, considering. The cat is out of the bag, of course, but it has cost Zeb quite a bit to get that much."

I was trying to count up the score. "What about the man

who was on the winch?" I asked. "Just bent, or completely broken?"

"The past tense is accurate," Carson said grimly. "When I set you away, Alan, my aim was to stop that winch, to wreck it if possible. I did. The man driving it was badly placed, for me. I had to burn him down too. And then the ropes."

"I see what you mean," I said. "Two dead men, at least, one winch busted, ropes cut, his lordly pavilion in ruins. Zeb is getting hurt."

"Right. He may know, now, that we're on the job, but he also knows that we can bite if prodded. And he doesn't know who we are or what we're doing."

"Wait." I demurred. "He must surely be able to guess who we are."

"Yeah? One naked female that he didn't recognize—and two black men that he never saw at all, and his men only saw in motion. Does that sound like us, like Alan Noble, and Fiona Knight, and me? And where are we now?"

"I'd rather not think where we might have been if any of those men had been armed."

"The defects of despotism," he said. "Zeb dared not arm his men before. I imagine he will now, and send them to search for us."

"I wish them luck." Fiona stood and stretched her arms. "I'd hate to try and find a hole in this black nightmare. All the same, we'd better get on with it. My turn to carry, I think."

It was only then that I realized just how absolutely exhausted I was. It was all I could do to stand up.

"I hate to break a rule"—Carson grinned at me—"but I'd advise you not to dawdle too long over your bathing. At the outside, we have only nine feet to go, possibly less. We may cut through any time."

That supported me as nothing else could have, as I went up the passage to the water and clean coolness. Lowloo came with me, as always, and this time she was full of questions.

"Those were bad men?" she asked, and I had to admit they were.

"There are many bad men, Lowloo. We humans may be a

little higher than your kind, but we are standing on the same ladder, and the top is a long way off yet." I went on to explain to her just what those bad men, and others of the same style, would do if ever they discovered there was a fortune in gems to be gained by robbing the Verlan people. "We have to try and stop that, somehow," I told her, "and the only good way is to make your people known to the great and powerful ones among our people, so that you will be treated properly, and protected, and become our friends."

"You are my friend," she said.

"I count it an honor, my dear, but it needs more than that. Somehow we have to show the authorities that you, the Verlan, are people just like us. It won't be easy. The place where you live is not very pleasant for us. It's too hot, too humid, for many people to go there. You probably find it cool, here."

"Not unpleasant," she contradicted me. "I like. You found us in bad season, when all is very wet, with strong winds. Is not like that in good season, is hot and dry, like this."

For some reason that struck me as one of those significant remarks that ought to mean something important, only I couldn't think of it. Then we came to the water, and the coolness, and I dismissed it in the joys of getting cool and fresh again. There was something to remind me of Carson's hint not to linger. As I took hold of the line to scramble up, I found that Fiona's power-pack was still fast to it. I stared at it stupidly for a long time, working it out. If she had followed routine, she had washed, then climbed up, hoisted up her drained pack, hooked on the charged one, lowered it down—this one—and then dozed off and been caught. And I had my discharged one with me. All three power-packs were here! But the cutting *had* to go on!

I thought I knew what Carson would do, what I'd have done in his place. Rather than waste time waiting, he would use the beamer's own power-pack, which would disable our only weapon. I didn't like that idea, so I freed the charged pack from its cover, thrust it at Lowloo, and told her to run with it, back to Carson. Then I tackled that rope, hooked my battery to it, and started to climb. What made me look up I don't know, but to that chance glance I owe my life, for it showed me that the sky-glow from outside was ob-

scured. And that could only mean there was someone up there, casting a shadow on the surface.

I hung a moment, trying to think, but there was nothing else to be done. I took a deep breath and went up. As my head broke the surface, there he was, up to his knees in water and sluicing himself happily. I had the advantage of surprise, but he was quick with his kick at my face. I only had time to grab his foot and hold on. And I was stuck. I needed the other hand to cling to the rope. Or did I? He was kicking furiously by this time, and staggering. I let go of the rope, clapped my other hand on his ankle, and let myself fall, hoping to drag him down. But, somehow, he jammed up in the hole, and I swung there from his leg with the water-flow dwindling to a trickle around me. After a while I knew he was dead, and I could let go and drop back down the slide.

But then, like it or not, I had to go back up that rope and shove him free. And the longer I waited, the greater would be the head of water against me. So, weary but desperate, I climbed that line again, got my head solidly against the body, and heaved. And heaved. And heaved again, until it seemed my arms must come out of the sockets at my shoulders. And he came free, went surging soggly away, letting the water smash down on me again. I went on up because I had to, because if I fell back I could never do it again. And, somehow, I got my weary form out of the water and onto the dry rock, and lay there, pumping for breath, and nagged all the time by the thought of Carson cutting away with just a beamer-pack power unit. So I drove myself to scramble up and get the charged unit, to swap it for my discharged one, to lash it to the line—and then to stand up and sneak a glance down there to see what the opposition was doing. And what I saw scoured away all my fatigue, sent me scrambling back down the rope to grab my fresh battery and run like hell all the way back to where Carson was working. It had never seemed so far before. I had just come in sight of the glowing lights when I heard the quick bleat of a buzzer. The entrance-alarm! Carson and Fiona came boiling out of the cut, black and glistening, as I drew level with it—he frantically ripping the pack from the working beamer.

“Zeb!” I panted. “Got to be. The others are busy!”

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"Zeb in our doorway." He growled, running, jamming the power-pack into our only remaining useful weapon. "God grant it is. We have him cold!"

We ran to within one turn of the straight, then he waved us to hold, and sidled on gingerly. I saw him as a dark bulk against the outside glow, then he stiffened, sprang out into the passage and aimed. I heard the beamer sing in his hand. Then he heaved a sigh, and sagged.

"Was it Zeb?" Fiona and I closed up on either side of him.

"It was. He got away. Those damned bracelets. I should have known!"

"Bracelets?" He had me stopped now. Fiona knew.

"Energy shields! Of course!"

"I should have taken him in the legs. He was stunned. I had him!" There came a clatter from out there, and a silver sphere bounced into sight. I heard Carson yell, "Down! Flat!" and his beamer sang again. Then the whole world blew apart in an explosion that caved in the top of my head. Ages later, as the bells stopped ringing, I was still alive. Blind, and deaf, but I could smell a vile stink. Then Carson's voice came as if through a tin box lined with felt.

"Are we all right? Back up if you can."

We gathered in our hiding hole, and we were a mess. Fiona looked as shocked as I felt, and Carson seemed to have aged ten years.

"How did you know it was Zeb?" he asked, dully, and I told him.

"I saw Hovac lowering somebody in that diving suit. And I accounted for the only other man, so it had to be Zeb. Maybe he got caught in the blast?"

"Not him. He doesn't make that kind of slip. You realize we can't get out now? Not that way, anyhow!"

"Neill!" It was Fiona, with teeth in her voice. "Three of them and four of us, and we do have a way out, the way we've been slaving at all this time. Damn the diving suit, the bars will stop that caper. We've only about nine feet to go!" It got him. He straightened, tried a grin.

"All right," he said. "Come on, we're not licked yet."

No shifts now. We three worked together, me doing the cutting and the other two cracking and hauling away the

blocks—and none of us wanted to say the obvious thing, that the bars would be just as hard for us to pass as for the opposition. We just kept on, verticals and cross lines and crackings, foot by foot. And the damned wall was still solid. The power began to fail. Eight feet, and still solid. Carson fumbled with the leads to the last remaining power-pack, and I started again, my hands shaking and my throat like a lime-kiln. Lowloo brought me coffee, and the first three swallows went down like warm paste. I cut more. Another foot. Another, and my arms flagged so that I could hardly lift the beamer. Beside me, his face creased with fatigue, Carson fumbled with the chisel-bar, and it struck the roof. He stopped shivering, did it again. Hollow!

"By God, we're under it. Cut into the roof! Here!" I heaved my weary arms up, and aimed—and it wavered, and I cursed—and it cut the rock like a knife through bread.

"Two inches thick, at the outside!" Carson muttered. "Cut back here. Two feet will do. That's enough. Back the other side! Now, hold it!" He stood under the area I had outlined, placed his hands against it, and then nodded to me. "Cut the fourth side, steady!"

The slab came down into his hands. I shut off the beamer and leaned against the wall, shaking with relief.

"Stay like that," he ordered and ran heavily back to collect our only lethal weapon. He returned, and I made a step for him with my hands so that he could go up, and struggle, and then disappear from our sight. In a moment he called to us, "All clear. Fiona next!"

I held out my hands for her but she pressed past them to offer her face, and lips, to me. "We haven't had time for much of this," she whispered, "but there'll be lots of time in the future." Then she stepped into my palms and went up like an eel through the hole in the roof. Then Lowloo scrambled up, and Carson showed his face.

"Give me a moment to brace myself, then take my hands," he said.

We were inside the chamber Fiona had told us about. It measured about twelve feet in each direction and was walled, except on one side, with the same glassy stone we had first cut into. That odd side, the "plate glass" that she had mentioned, was furthest away from us, and between us and it

lay a pile of shadowy things that sprang into fantastic and dazzling glowings as we turned our headlights on them.

After a moment of staring, Carson found his voice and said, "Let's cut off our lights or we'll be blinded for anything useful. Lowloo, you're the lightest of us all. I have to ask you to drop down again, and bring bags. You know the heavy plastic ones that we've been using to carry the power-packs? Those. Bring four!"

As I straightened up from lowering her down into the cutting, he tapped my shoulder and made a gesture in the direction of the "glass" wall.

"The pretty things won't run away. I vote we inspect that last barrier there. As Fiona said, it's not likely to be glass."

We circled the heap of living fire in the center of the floor and came close to the transparent stuff, shining our lights on it. He tapped it, felt it, and frowned in indecision.

"We'll have to try the energy beam on it. Shall we wait for Lowloo, or would you mind going down for the gear, Fiona? I mean, Alan takes some lifting!"

"That's all right." She grinned at me. "I like strong silent men. I'll go. Give me your hand, Alan."

I was down on one knee, lowering her weight, when the whole cavern shook violently. We cringed at the sound of a vast explosion that seemed big enough to rock the mountain itself. I was pitched flat on my face, and barely saved myself from diving headlong down the hole we had cut. Fiona had slipped from my grip. I put on my headlight frantically, peered down, and heard a great shuddering and rumbling coming from down there, together with a devil's breath blast of hot air and blinding dust.

"Carson!" I choked. "The whole damned passage has caved in!"

XI

THE BELCHING DUST blinded me for a moment. Carson flung himself down beside me and roared, "Fiona! Can you hear me?"

Moments later she appeared, all eyes and teeth, with Lowloo by her side, ears flattened and thoroughly scared, just

as I was. "Come the bags!" she choked, and pitched them up, one at a time. She grabbed my arm and I swung her, and then Lowloo, up. We didn't need the beamer. When we looked again at the transparent shield over the treasure, it was shattered and broken into shards.

"So much for that," Carson said, and shook his head. "Ahead of us are the bars, the spout, and Zeb and his men—and we can't go back at all now. But we have the treasure. Ironical, isn't it?" Fantastically, he still had the beamer in his hand as he stalked bitterly around the rainbow-glowing gems. "There might even be something here," he said, "that would help us, if only we—" and he choked the words off abruptly, brought his hand up and fired, seemingly just over my shoulder. I leaped aside. In that moment, the chamber was full of the shrill song of beamers. I saw him throw himself aside as he fired, with his hand out to break his fall. Where he had been standing, the black wall glowed incandescent red. He went down, his hand plunging among the gems. He stiffened rigidly—and I felt sick. I knew that something had knocked him unconscious before he had hit the ground.

When I got up and shambled stupidly over to touch him, something put a nerve-knotting tingle into my outstretched fingers, made me pull back. Fiona came, wide-eyed, had the same shock and snatched her hand away.

"My God!" she breathed. "Alan, what are we going to do now?"

Inside my head, the wheels ground to a halt and froze. I looked at her and something came out of my chaos. "Break contact. Touching something!"

She stared blankly a moment, then scrambled away, grabbed a plastic bag, mashed it over her hand, another—and she had mittens of a kind. She put a hand on him. Nothing happened. She grabbed, heaved, and I saw something in lambent blue fire clutched in his rigid hand. My wits creaked into action. I copied her with a bag, struck the evil thing from his grasp and watched him sag limp as a wet sack. She crouched by him and put her ear to his chest.

"Feeble, but regular," she muttered. "Still alive!"

My brain was looping like a one-winged moth at a candle until it found a question. "What was it he shot at?"

We turned, all three, to peer past the shards of glassy stuff into the gloom and then went to look. Half-way out of that rippling water was a body, a black body, the natural kind of black that didn't rinse off. Hovac was dead of a beamer blast, the first I'd ever seen. The hideous hole, crisp-edged but full of butchery red stuff, caught at my stomach. Fiona looked sick too.

"How the blue blazes did he get here?" she cried. "Past the bars, and the spout? How?" I shook my head at her in futility for what seemed a long time. Time? I peered at my watch, and an idea struggled to make itself known.

"What spout?" I demanded, hardly recognizing my own voice. "It's gone. That explosion! Zeb has blown the channel. No spout!"

"You're right!" Her blue eyes blazed with sudden fire. "That's a help. That's it! Alan, stay here, keep the beamer ready!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Dive down there and find out how he got past those bars."

I didn't like it, but I never got the chance to argue. She was away before I could find words. I have never felt so alone in all my life, and no disrespect to Lowloo meant by that. She was as scared as I was, what with the silence, the weird glowing of the gems, Carson's entranced stillness, and the slow lick-lapping of the water. And Hovac's leering death-grin. After an impossible age there came a pink wriggling thing in the water, and Fiona emerged, hauling on a line.

"Don't just stand there!" she puffed. "Give me a hand!"

"What the devil are we pulling in?" I wondered, as the load grew heavy and Lowloo clapped on to help. Fiona grinned fiercely, but didn't reply. I saw, soon enough, as silvery metal showed in the water and then broke clear. It was the deep-sea suit, too heavy to haul out of the water, but we managed to raise it far enough for it to stand up on its own lead-weighted feet. By that time we'd seen enough, through the face-plate, to be sure that the man inside would offer us no trouble at all. Then Fiona gave her guesswork account, which I can't improve on.

"Hovac lowered him. He lashed himself to the bars, and started working with the cutting beamer that is part of the suit. And no go, as we know. So he was stuck. The spout probably shook him a bit, and snatched the rope away from Hovac. So think like Hovac. The suit's lost, and so is the man. Zeb thinks likewise, and plays his last card, blows the channel to cut the spout—and in doing that, he kills this poor devil with the blast. Next, Zeb, in desperation, sends Hovac down with a weapon."

"And he got through to here. How?"

"Because this chap solved the problem. He couldn't cut the bars, but he could do what we did—cut the rock around them. That's what I found. The three middle bars are cut right out. That's how Hovac got in and how we can get out. The light is fading out there, but enough for me to see that there is still an opening to the sea. Not a funnel, but a hole big enough to pass through."

"You, maybe," I muttered. "Or Lowloo. But not me. I'm no swimmer. And what about Carson? Whatever else, he certainly can't swim anywhere!"

She glared at me, but she was really looking at the facts. They had me stopped, but not her. I could almost see the wheels spinning in her head.

"This way!" she snapped. "You in the suit. No swimming, all you have to do is walk. And follow the line. Lowloo and I will take that, to lead you along. You carry Neil in your arms. A bag over his head, will trap enough air to keep him going for a while. Like a captive balloon. It will work!"

It sounded crazy to me, but the devil was driving, and we had no choice. Just getting the dead Oriental out of that suit and me into it was a miserable job, and never mind the fact that his dead body still carried the marks of my fist on his face. Once I was in the suit I was helpless and had to stand there while the two girls did the rest. One scene I shall never forget was that of Fiona scooping up awkward handfuls of nightmare jewels and piling them into a bag that Lowloo held for her—two bags of untold wealth, to be strapped to my cumbersome suit. I watched her struggle with a sliver of the glassy stuff to cut off a length of line with which to bind Carson's limp body securely to me. Then a

final check over to make sure nothing had been forgotten—Fiona, ferociously intent.

"Remember now. Count up to twenty, slowly, then start down the slope. The rope will be at the bars. Follow it from there. Just walk!"

Then on with my face-plate, on with the bag over Carson's head, and away they went, plunging down into the water and out of my sight, trailing the rope after them, leaving me to start counting. Surely the craziest venture ever conceived by the human brain, I thought, recalling Fiona's confident assessment of balances and counterweights. The jewels would weight me down, but Carson and his air-bubble would offset that the other way. I would be heavy, but I wouldn't drop like a stone, at all. I would just settle gently down to the bottom, she said. She had better be right.

With the sense of being a player in some obscene dream, I counted to the score, added ten more for good measure, and then started out. I tried to start out. I couldn't move. With Carson strapped to my chest and only far enough aside so that I could see, the bags weighing me down, I had to learn all over again how to walk—to deliberately lean over to the left before I could get my right foot up and swing it, and then lean to the right, and step. By painful degrees, I waded further and further into the water. And it got easier. It got easier so quickly that I had to restrain myself by the time the heaving water was up to my shoulders, and when I finally went right under, Fiona was vindicated. A pity she wasn't there to see it. I was having some difficulty keeping my weighted feet on the ground, a most uneasy sensation. With an effort, I remembered where the switch was to put on my headlight, and stared at two shimmering white things that seemed to project before me, until I saw that they were Carson's feet, lifting at his knees and floating.

That shocked me a little way out of my fatigue-stupor and I concentrated on what I was doing, aware that time was valuable. I came to the bars, gray horizontals with a gap across the middle and jagged dark holes in the rock at either side where the Oriental had burned away their rock-bedding. I wondered whether I would have had the sense to think of that, as I strained and grunted to get myself through the gap. The line was there all right, securely

knotted to the lower bar. I waved my awkward arm until it trapped the line against my body, and then kicked away forward, reasoning that I might as well move ahead while falling. I had forgotten entirely about the wreck of Hovac's staging. For a few crazy moments it seemed that the whole of the glass-smooth bottom of the pit was littered with metal poles deliberately arranged to trip me, and by the time I was free of them I barely knew which way was up.

I was glad of the line. My head ached and banged, my arms were solid lead, and the sweat dribbled into my eyes unceasingly, although I was given to understand that the suit was air-conditioned. I clung to that line, followed it, and came to a pile of scattered slabby rocks. I knew, dimly, that I had to climb them. My recollection is blurred here, full of balloon-like drifting sensations and scrabbings to get footholds with those damned large boots. And then I caught the to-and-fro rush of water, and the jagged walls came close, and there was a squirming pink body diving at me, gesturing, struggling with the bonds that held Carson's limp body secure to my outside. Answers came like bubbles through syrup in my mind. She—Fiona—was trying to get him free. But why? I think I would have struggled with her had there been any spring in my arms at all, but before I could get them to move she had released him and borne him away, out of range of my light.

But the line was still there, a pale yellow shimmering streak in the water, leading onward and upward. Excelsior! I shambled on, my lightness of foot matching the condition of my mind. And then, so that I stopped and stared stupidly at it, that life line stood up on end. Was I expected to climb it? I actually tried, which will give some index of the ebb of my intelligence at that moment. I tried to grasp it in my armor-gloved hand, and, after a swipe or two, I trapped it between both, and carefully maneuvered it into one fist. I put weight into my grasp, and it came down as I pulled. As I stood there, rocked by the surge of sea waves, and pulled stupidly on the line, another squirming swimmer came near, wriggling through the water like a slow motion eel. It was Lowloo, and she had a trailing bight of the line in her teeth. She stood in the water, raised her palms toward me, and then slid to grope at the loops on my suit. Then she darted

away again, and now the line led away at a slant. I followed, over a floor that was all uneven shelving and surging water to push and pull me into crazy drifting steps.

That part, again, is blurred to memory. Looking back, it seems that I stumbled and drifted drunkenly about on the sea bed for hours, more like a sleepwalker than a sane man. From time to time, a mermaid with black locks came down into my headlights and waved—came close to peer into my window, so that I had to cry out, foolishly, "I'm still in here!"—and then slipped away with an entreating gesture to "Come on!" As I say, it seemed that this unreal dream sequence went on for hours, until, startling me into something close to rationality, I blundered headlong into a solid object and halted. And opened my eyes. It took a long time to get through my head that this was a boat. Then, there was Fiona, smacking my helmet with her bare hand and waving me to climb on the deck, which was some seven feet above where I stood.

"Don't be ridiculous!" I told her patiently. "I can't climb that!"

She went right on waving, then shot away up into the dark, leaving me to start dozing off again. But she came back, hurting my ears with her slapping on the helmet. She began pantomiming something, bobbing up and down. Then she got down by my feet and was doing something there, and I canted suddenly sideways on my right foot. The edge of the deck came down, slid past my window, and I laid hold of the handrail with both hands. She went bubbling past me, and I was in the most ludicrous fix, holding on tightly while my left leg seemed to want to lift me up while my right foot dragged—and it got through to me that she had released one of my weights! Before I could think why, the surface was slapping at my face-plate, and weight came on all over me. I barely had time to heave myself onto the deck before it rose, shedding water in cascades.

"Talk about gray hair!" Fiona puffed, as she snapped open my face-plate and then backed away fast. "Wow! No wonder you were acting stupid!"

That air was wonderful stuff. Invisible energy and sanity surged into me like nectar and ambrosia laced with vodka. By the time Fiona had overcome her distaste, and got my

helmet free, I was fit enough to help with the shedding of the rest of the suit. She took a moment to study the meters inside the breast-plate panel, and nodded. "You were almost out of oxygen, lad. I don't know about nitrogen narcosis at that pressure, but you were certainly blue about the nose. Have we had a time with you!"

"I'm sorry," I began, but she stopped me.

"No, don't apologize. How you managed to walk this far I shall never know. And that was not the plan, at all. Look, Lowloo and I got through to the sea fine, with the rope, but we couldn't find anything to fasten it to. The rocks just there couldn't be smoother, and we were being washed against them all the time anyway. So we had to swim a little way clear and just hang on. And when you didn't show—"

"I got all tangled up in those scaffold tubes!"

Her eyes widened. "I'd forgotten all about them. Anyway, when you were so long, I had to leave Lowloo holding the line and swim down to try and find you. And I had to get Neil up for air, of course."

"How is he?"

"All right. Still unconscious, but otherwise fine. How are you?"

"I've felt better, but I'm not grumbling. I take it we are afloat? Then let's leave. Please?"

"Yes," she said, and there was something wrong with her tone. "The only snag is—that we can't. Not get far, anyway. When you pinched all the spare parts, you didn't touch the main engines, so they're all right. But we have no auxiliaries. No lights. No water. No food, either."

"We'll go hungry," I declared. "And thirsty. And what do we need lights for? It's night now, but we can see enough to get moving, that's all that matters. Fiona, we've got to. I don't profess to know what's wrong with Carson, but unless we get him to a doctor—well, the longer he's like this the worse it will be!"

"But we can't!" she cried. "What's the point of going, when we've no idea which way to go?"

She had a good point there, but the answer came to me in a moment. "We have someone who can point us the way. Lowloo! Look, if she knows the way home from here—and

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what will you bet she does?—then she also knows the other way.”

“All right. I hope you’re right. But I’d feel a lot happier if he would only come around, show some signs of life. I doubt if any doctor can handle what he’s got.”

Half an hour later, with the boat purring along and surging steadily over the running sea, with Fiona at the wheel and me feeling better after a splash and a rest, I stood in the cabin and stared down at Carson, where he lay quite limp and still on his bunk—and I agreed with her. I suppose I have as much faith in medicine men as anyone, but I felt uneasily sure that this was something outside their field. It was the mental echo of “medicine man” which started me thinking about old Uhumeelee. Would he, with his magic touching-stone, have been able to cure this? After all, it had been a different sample of the same magic that had done the damage in the first place. An idea struggled to break through in my mind, and I went to the wheelhouse with it.

“Can you spare Lowloo for a little while?” I asked.

“Don’t see why not. The gyro will hold us on course for a while. What do you want her for?”

“I intend to try something. You’d better come, too.”

Back in the cabin, I hoisted up the three bags of baubles and shook them.

“These all look pretty much alike to me,” I said to Lowloo, “but you’ve seen Uhumeelee’s touching-stone many times. Do you think you’d recognize another one, exactly like it?”

“Alan! You can’t risk it!”

“I can’t risk Carson being like that any longer than necessary, Fiona. Look, we know that one of those things is a healer. If Lowloo can pick it out, I can cure him.”

Poor Lowloo looked stricken. Her lovely young bosom heaved with her agitation as she stared at me. “I could not be sure, Alan!”

“That’s all right. You just do your best.”

It took me a moment to start assorting the things, using a plastic gripper that went with the auto-chef fittings. Then Fiona held the empty bag while I lifted samples out, one at a time, for Lowloo to stare at. She was uncertain, and dubious, and shook her head—and then, all at once, she said, “That one!”

I let her have a good look, and she was still sure. "That's it, then!" I declared, and put it down on the table. As I've said before, there's nothing to gain by waiting at such a time, so I grabbed it quickly with one hand—and breathed easier as nothing happened to me except a faint tingle. Then I said a silent prayer and stretched out my other hand to touch Carson. And there came again that incredible sensation of multiplied power, of genius bursting into my brain, of energy flooding into me and out of me through my hand. I knew, and this time the knowledge made sense. But then that glorious inner flame grew faint, fainter still, and then dark. Everything was dark. Everything!

XII

THAT AWAKENING WAS weird, as if I had slowly materialized out of cosmic dust. Lowloo, sitting by my bunk, ran out at once to cry, "Neill Fional He is well again."

Carson showed his grinning face long enough to say, "You're hungry," and went away. Fiona came to grip my hand tight and glare, and say, "You took your time coming back, didn't you?" but she didn't mean it unkindly.

"Why am I so hungry?" I demanded, grabbing at the bowl of soup Carson handed me. "And how did you know I was?"

"You've been out a whole day," he said. "You took a hell-ova chance, back there, and I owe you my life for it, but you really ran your batteries down. That's why you passed out. You'll be all right when you get that down."

"I thought we were out of food," I said, suddenly remembering.

"We are. That's all there is. And there's a decision to make that includes you, so eat up. Go on!"

"I can listen while I eat. You talk!"

"All right." He settled on a bunk. "We've no food. No auxiliaries. We have about enough fuel to get close to Outpost One. No clothes. Nothing. No lights. No water. So, while you were asleep, we turned back. We are now just around the corner from Zeb's yacht, which has everything we need."

"We what?" In my agitation I almost spilled what was left in my bowl. I realized, now, that there was no engine noise. "Are you out of your mind?"

"I think not. But Zeb is, almost. I've been spying on him. He is all on his own now, remember. And I think he is actually contemplating going after the loot himself. He can't know that it has been lifted already."

"And so?"

"So we wait until he has left that luxury yacht of his, and we steal it, take it away—" and that is exactly what we did. We towed it far enough to be sure that Zeb couldn't swim out and interfere, then we gutted it of everything we needed. That was no problem, as we had done the same thing in reverse when we shifted our gear into the underground room, but I think we won considerably more than we lost, particularly in luxury materials for the girls to dress up in. As Fiona explained, we couldn't very well return to the savants of Outpost One in nothing more than a fine suntan! Our last act was to plant an explosive charge and get rid of that yacht, forever.

"Leaving Zeb stranded on a barren rock," Carson stated, "may just cause me to lie awake nights and worry, but not right now!"

And that's all there is. We had some hairy moments getting those gems safely past various port authorities, and some even hairier ones when it came to disposing of them—out of which we made about a million each—but I have no intention of detailing that here. As Carson said, "There are some tricks better left unexplained," and I wouldn't want to embarrass anyone. There's a substantial share set aside for Lowloo, for whenever she wants it. At the moment, she is having a wonderful time acting as official representative of her people, now that the scientists—and others—have to recognize the Verlan as intelligent humanoids. She is very attractive. It's no surprise to me that one of the current garment fads is an off-the-bosom bolero-type thing in fur. I hope she will be able to visit us soon. We have a lot to talk over.

Would I do it all over again? I don't know. Given companions like Neil Carson and Fiona—I might, at that.