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THE spring inspections that year were propitious. Only two fields in the whole district were on the first cleansing schedule, and neither of them belonged to my father, or to half-uncle Angus. The two previous years had been so bad that people who had hesitated during the first to dispose of stock with a tendency to produce deviational offspring had killed them off in the second, with the result that the normality-rate was high on that side, too. Moreover, the encouraging trend was maintained. It put new heart into people, they became more neighbourly and cheerful. By the end of May there were quite a lot of bets laid that the deviation figures were going to touch a record low. Even Old Jacob had to admit that divine displeasure was in abeyance for the time being. 'Merciful, the Lord is,' he said, with a touch of disapproval. 'Giving 'em one last chance. Let's hope they mend their ways, or it'll be bad for all of us next year. Still time for plenty to go wrong this year, for the matter of that.'

There was, however, no sign of a falling-off. The later vegetables showed nearly as high a degree of orthodoxy as the field-crops. The weather, too, looked set to give a good harvest, and the inspector spent so much of his time sitting quietly in his office that he became almost popular.

For us, as for everyone else, it looked like being a serene, if industrious, summer, and possibly it would have been so, but for Petra.

It was one day early in June that, inspired apparently by a feeling for adventure, she did two things she knew to be forbidden. First, although she was alone, she rode her pony off our own land; and, secondly, she was not content to keep to the open country, but went exploring in the woods.

The woods about Waknuk are, as I have said, considered fairly safe, but it does not do to count on that. Wild cats will seldom attack unless desperate; they prefer to run away. Nevertheless, it is unwise to go into the woods without a

weapon of some kind, for it is possible for larger creatures to work their way down the necks of forest which thrust out of the Fringes, almost clear across Wild Country in some places, and then slink from one tract of woodland to another.

Petra's call came as suddenly and unexpectedly as before. Though it did not have the violent, compulsive panic which it had carried last time, it was intense; the degree of distress and anxiety was enough to be highly uncomfortable at the receiving end. Furthermore, the child had no control at all. She simply radiated an emotion which blotted out everything else with a great, amorphous splodge.

I tried to get through to the others to tell them I'd attend to it, but I couldn't make contact even with Rosalind. A blotting like that is hard to describe: something like being unable to make oneself heard against a loud noise, but also something like trying to see through a fog. To make it worse, it gave no picture or hint of the cause: it was — this attempt to explain one sense in terms of others is bound to be misleading, but one might say it was something like a wordless yell of protest. Just a reflex emotion, no thought, or control: I doubted even if she knew she was doing it at all. It was instinctive. . . . All I could tell was that it was a distress signal, and coming from some distance away. . . .

I ran from the forge where I was working, and got the gun — the one that always hung just inside the house door, ready charged and primed for an emergency. In a couple of minutes I had one of the horses saddled-up, and was away on it. One thing as definite about the call as its quality was its direction. Once I was out on the green lane I thumped my heels and was off at a gallop towards the West Woods.

If Petra had only let up on that overpowering distress-pattern of hers for just a few minutes — long enough for the rest of us to get in touch with one another — the consequences would have been quite different — indeed, there might have been no consequences at all. But she did not. She kept it up, like a screen, and there was nothing one could do but make for the source of it as quickly as possible.

Some of the going wasn't good. I took a tumble at one point,

and lost more time catching the horse again. Once in the woods the ground was harder, for the track was kept clear and fairly well used to save a considerable circuit. I held on along it until I realized I had overshot. The undergrowth was too thick to allow of a direct line, so I had to turn back and hunt for another track in the right direction. There was no trouble about the direction itself; not for a moment did Petra let up. At last I found a path, a narrow, frustratingly winding affair overhung by branches beneath which I had to crouch as the horse thrust its way along, but its general trend was right. At last the ground became clearer and I could choose my own way. A quarter of a mile farther on I pushed through more undergrowth and reached an open glade.

Petra herself I did not see at first. It was her pony that caught my attention. It was lying on the far side of the glade, with its throat torn open. Working at it, ripping flesh from its haunch with such single-minded intent that it had not heard my approach, was as devotional a creature as I had seen.

The animal was a reddish-brown, dappled with both yellow and darker brown spots. Its huge pad-like feet were covered with mops of fur, matted with blood now on the forepaws, and showing long, curved claws. Fur hung from the tail, too, in a way that made it look like a huge plume. The face was round, with eyes like yellow glass. The ears were wide set and drooping, the nose almost *retroussé*. Two large incisors projected downwards over the lower jaw, and it was using these, as well as the claws, to tear at the pony.

I started to unsling the gun from my back. The movement caught its attention. It turned its head and crouched motionless, glaring at me, with the blood glistening on the lower half of its face. Its tail rose, and waved gently from side to side. I cocked the gun and was in the act of raising it when an arrow took the creature in the throat. It leapt, writhing into the air and landed on all fours, facing me still, with its yellow eyes glaring. My horse took fright and reared, and my gun exploded into the air, but before the creature could spring two more arrows took it, one in the hindquarters, the other in the head. It stood stock-still for a moment, and then rolled over.

Rosalind rode into the glade from my right, her bow still in her hand. Michael appeared from the other side, a fresh arrow already on his string, and his eyes fixed on the creature, making sure about it. Even though we were so close to one another, we were close to Petra, too, and she was still swamping us.

'Where is she?' Rosalind asked in words.

We looked round and then spotted the small figure twelve feet up a young tree. She was sitting in a fork and clinging round the trunk with both arms. Rosalind rode under the tree and told her it was safe to come down. Petra went on clinging, she seemed unable to let go, or to move. I dismounted, climbed the tree and helped her down until Rosalind could reach up and take her. Rosalind seated her astride her saddle in front of her, and tried to soothe her, but Petra was looking down at her own dead pony. Her distress was, if anything, intensified.

'We must stop this,' I said to Rosalind. 'She'll be bringing all the others here.'

Michael, assured that the creature was really dead, joined us. He looked at Petra, worriedly.

'She's no idea she's doing it. It's not intelligent; she's sort of howling with fright inside. It'd be better for her to howl outwardly. Let's start by getting her where she can't see her pony.'

We moved off a little, round a screen of bushes. Michael spoke to her quietly, trying to encourage her. She did not seem to understand, and there was no weakening of her distress-pattern.

'Perhaps if we were all to try the same thought-pattern on her simultaneously,' I suggested. 'Soothing-sympathizing-relaxing. Ready?'

We tried, for a full fifteen seconds. There was just a momentary check in Petra's distress, then it crowded us down again.

'No good,' said Rosalind, and let up.

The three of us regarded her helplessly. The pattern was a little changed; the incisiveness of alarm had receded, but the bewilderment and distress were still overwhelming. She began to cry. Rosalind put an arm round her and held her close to her.

'Let her have it out. It'll relax the tension,' said Michael.

While we were waiting for her to calm down, the thing that I had been afraid of happened. Rachel came riding out of the trees; a moment later a boy rode in from the other side. I'd never seen him until now, but I knew he must be Mark.

We had never met as a group before. It was one of the things that we had known would be unsafe. It was almost certain that the other two girls would be somewhere on the way, too, to complete a gathering that we had decided must never happen.

Hurriedly, we explained in words what had occurred. We urged them to get away and disperse as soon as possible so that they would not be seen together, Michael, too. Rosalind and I would stay with Petra and do our best to calm her.

The three of them appreciated the situation without argument. A moment later they left us, riding off in different directions.

We went on trying to comfort and soothe Petra, with little success.

Some ten minutes later the two girls, Sally and Katherine, came pushing their way through the bushes. They, too, were on horseback, and with their bows strung. We had hoped that one of the others might have met them and turned them back, but clearly they had approached by a different route.

They came closer, staring incredulously at Petra. We explained all over again, in words, and advised them to go away. They were about to, in the act of turning their horses, when a large man on a bay mare thrust out of the trees in the open.

He reined in, and sat looking at us.

'What's going on here?' he demanded, with suspicion in his tone.

He was a stranger to me, and I did not care for the look of him. I asked what one usually asked of strangers. Impatiently he pulled out his identity tag, with the current year's punch-mark on it. It was established that we were neither of us outlaws.

'What's all this?' he repeated.

The temptation was to tell him to mind his own damned business, but I thought it more tactful in the circumstances

to be placatory. I explained that my sister's pony had been attacked, and that we had answered her calls for help. He wasn't willing to take that at its face value. He looked at me steadily, and then turned to regard Sally and Katherine.

'Maybe. But what brought you two here in such a hurry?' he asked them.

'Naturally we came when we heard the child calling,' Sally told him.

'I was right behind you, and I heard no calling,' he said.

Sally and Katherine looked at one another. Sally shrugged.

'We did,' she told him shortly.

It seemed about time I took a hand.

'I'd have thought everyone for miles around would have heard it,' I said. 'The pony was screaming, too, poor little brute.'

I led him round the clump of bushes and showed him the savaged pony and the dead creature. He looked surprised, as if he'd not expected that evidence, but he wasn't altogether appeased. He demanded to see Rosalind's and Petra's tags.

'What's this all about?' I asked in my turn.

'You didn't know that the Fringes have got spies out?' he said.

'I didn't,' I told him. 'Anyway, do we *look* like Fringes people?'

He ignored the question. 'Well, they have. There's an instruction to watch for them. There's trouble working up, and the clearer you keep of the woods, the less likely you are to meet it before we all do.'

He still was not satisfied. He turned to look at the pony again, then at Sally.

'I'd say it's near half an hour since that pony did any screaming. How did you two manage to come straight to this spot?'

Sally's eyes widened a little.

'Well, this was the direction it came from, and then when we got nearer we heard the little girl screaming,' she said simply.

'And very good it was of you to follow it up,' I put in. 'You

would have saved her life by doing it if we hadn't happened to be a little nearer. It's all over now, and luckily she wasn't hurt. But she's had a nasty fright and I'd better get her home. Thank you both for wanting to help.'

They took that up all right. They congratulated us on Petra's escape, hoped she would soon get over the shock, and then rode off. The man lingered. He still seemed dissatisfied and a little puzzled. There was, however, nothing for him to take a firm hold of. Presently he gave the three of us a long, searching stare, looking as if he were about to say something more, but he changed his mind. Finally he repeated his advice to keep out of the woods, and then rode off in the wake of the other two. We watched him disappear among the trees.

'Who is he?' Rosalind asked, uneasily.

I could tell her that the name on his tag had been Jerome Skinner, but no more. He was a stranger to me, and our names had not seemed to mean much to him. I would have asked Sally but for the barrier that Petra was still putting up. It gave me a strange, muffled feeling to be cut off from the rest like that, and made me wonder at the strength of purpose which had enabled Anne to withdraw herself entirely for those months.

Rosalind, still with her right arm round Petra, started homewards at a walk. I collected the dead pony's saddle and bridle, pulled the arrows out of the creature, and followed them.

They put Petra to bed when I brought her in. During the late afternoon and early evening the disturbance she was making fluctuated from time to time, but it kept up naggingly until almost nine o'clock when it diminished steeply and disappeared.

'Thank goodness for that. She's gone to sleep at last,' came from one of the others.

'Who was that man Skinner?' Rosalind and I inquired anxiously and simultaneously.

Sally answered: 'He's fairly new here. My father knows him. He has a farm bordering on the woods near where you were. It was just bad luck his seeing us, and of course he wondered why we were making for the trees at a gallop.'

'He seemed very suspicious. Why?' asked Rosalind. 'Does he know anything about thought-shapes? I didn't think any of them did.'

'He can't make them, or receive them himself - I tried him hard,' Sally told her.

Michael's distinctive pattern came in, inquiring what it was all about. We explained. He commented:

'Some of them do have an idea that something of the kind may be possible - but only very roughly of the kind - a sort of emotional transfer of mental impressions. They call it telepathy - at least, those who believe in it do. Most of them are pretty doubtful whether it exists at all.'

'Do they think it's deviational, those who do believe it exists, I mean?' I asked.

'It's difficult to say. I don't know that the question has ever been straightly put. But academically, there's the point that since God is able to read men's minds, the true image ought to be able to do so, too. It might be argued that it is a power that men have temporarily lost as a punishment, part of Tribulation - but I'd not like to risk myself on that argument in front of a tribunal.'

'This man had the air of smelling a rat,' Rosalind told him. 'Has anybody else been inquisitive?'

'They all gave her a 'No' to that.'

'Good,' she replied. 'But we must be careful this doesn't happen again. David will have to explain to Petra in words and try to teach her to use some self-control. If this distress of hers does occur, you must all of you ignore it, or, anyway, not answer it. Just leave it to David and me. If it is compulsive, like it was the first time, whoever reaches her first will have to try to make her unconscious somehow, and the moment the compulsion breaks you must turn back and cover up as best you can. We have to make sure we are not drawn together into a group again. We could easily be a lot less lucky than we were today. Does everybody understand and agree?'

Their assents came in, then presently the rest of them withdrew, leaving Rosalind and me to discuss how I could best tackle Petra.

I woke early the next morning, and the first thing I was aware of was Petra's distress once more. But it was different in quality now; her alarm had quite subsided, but given way to a lament for the dead pony. Nor did it have anything like the intensity of the previous day.

I tried to make contact with her, and, though she did not understand, there was a perceptible check and a trace of puzzlement for some seconds. I got out of bed, and went along to her room. She was glad to have company; the distress-pattern faded a lot as we chatted. Before I left I promised to take her fishing that afternoon.

It is not at all easy to explain in words how one can make intelligible thought-shapes. All of us had first found out for ourselves; a very crude fumbling to begin with, but then more skilful when we had discovered one another and begun to learn by practice. With Petra it was different. Already, at six and a half, she had had a power of projection in a different class from ours, and quite overwhelming – but without realization, and therefore with no control whatever. I did my best to explain to her, but even at her present age of almost eight the necessity of putting it in words that were simple enough presented a difficulty. After an hour of trying to make it clear to her while we sat on the river-bank watching our floats, I still had not got anywhere much, and she was growing too bored to try to understand what I said. Another kind of approach seemed to be required.

'Let's play a game,' I suggested. 'You shut your eyes. Keep them shut tight, and pretend you're looking down a deep, deep well. There's nothing but dark to see. Right?'

'Yes,' she said, eyelids tightly clenched.

'Good. Now, don't think of anything at all except how dark it is and how far, far away the bottom is. Just think of that, but look at the dark. Understand that?'

'Yes,' she said again.

'Now, watch,' I told her.

I thought a rabbit for her, and made it twitch its nose. She chuckled. Well, that was one good thing: at least, it made sure that she *could* receive. I abolished the rabbit, and thought a

puppy, then some chickens, and then a horse and cart. After a minute or two she opened her eyes, and looked bewildered.

'Where are they?' she asked, looking round.

'They aren't anywhere. They were just think-things,' I told her. 'That's the game. Now I'll shut my eyes, too. We'll both look down the well and think of nothing but how dark it is. Then it's your turn to think a picture at the bottom of the well, so that I can see it.'

I played my part conscientiously and opened my mind to its most sensitive. That was a mistake. There was a flash and a glare and a general impression that I had been struck by a thunderbolt. I staggered in a mental daze, with no idea what her picture had been. The others came in, protesting bitterly. I explained what was going on.

'Well, for heaven's sake be careful, and don't let her do it again. I damned near put an axe through my foot,' came aggrievedly from Michael.

'I've scalded my hand with the kettle,' from Katherine.

'Lull her. Soothe her down somehow,' advised Rosalind.

'She isn't unsoothed. She's perfectly tranquil. That seems to be just the way it is with her,' I told them.

'Maybe, but it's a way it can't stay,' Michael answered. 'She must cut it down.'

'I know – I'm doing my best. Perhaps you've got some ideas on how to tackle it?' I suggested.

'Well, next time warn us *before* she tries,' Rosalind told me.

I pulled myself together and turned my attention to Petra again.

'You're too rough,' I said. 'This time make a *little* think-picture; a really little one ever so far away, in soft pretty colours. Do it slowly and gently, as if you were making it out of cobwebs.'

Petra nodded, and closed her eyes again.

'Here it comes!' I warned the others, and waited, wishing it were the kind of thing one could take cover from.

It was not much worse than a minor explosion this time. It was dazzling, but I did manage to catch the shape of it.

'A fish!' I said. 'A fish with a droopy tail.'

Petra chuckled delightedly.

'Undoubtedly a fish,' came from Michael. 'You're doing fine. All you want to do now is to cut her down to about one per cent of the power in that last one before she burns our brains out.'

'Now you show me,' demanded Petra, and the lesson proceeded.

The following afternoon we had another session. It was a rather violent and exhausting business, but there was progress. Petra was beginning to grasp the idea of forming thought-shapes - in a childish way, as was only to be expected - but frequently recognizable in spite of distortions. The main trouble still was to keep the strength down: when she became excited one was almost stunned by the impact. The rest complained that they could get no work done while we were at it: it was like trying to ignore sudden hammer-bangs inside one's head. Towards the end of the lesson I told Petra:

'Now I'm going to tell Rosalind to give you a think-picture. Just shut your eyes, like before.'

'Where's Rosalind?' she asked, looking round.

'She's not here, but that doesn't matter with think-pictures. Now, look at the dark and think of nothing.'

'And you others,' I added mentally for the benefit of the rest. 'just lay off, will you? Keep it all clear for Rosalind, and don't interrupt. Go ahead, Rosalind, strong and clear.'

We sat silent and receptive.

Rosalind made a pond with reeds round it. She put in several ducks, friendly, humorous-looking ducks of various colours. They swam a kind of ballet, except for one chunky, earnestly-trying duck who was always a little late and a little wrong. Petra loved it. She gurgled with enjoyment. Then, abruptly, she projected her delight; it wiped out the whole thing and dazed us all again. It was wearing for everyone, but her progress was encouraging.

In the fourth lesson she learnt the trick of clearing one's mind without closing one's eyes, which was quite a step. By the end of the week we were really getting on. Her thought-shapes were still crude and unstable, but they would improve

with practice; her reception of simple forms was good, though as yet she could catch little of our projections to one another.

'Too difficult to see all at once and too quick,' she said. 'But I can tell whether it's you, or Rosalind, or Michael, or Sally doing it, but going so fast it gets muddled. The other ones are much *more* muddled, though.'

'What other ones - Katherine and Mark?' I asked her.

'Oh, no. I can tell them. It's the other other ones. The long-way-away ones,' she said, impatiently.

I decided to take it calmly.

'I don't think I know them. Who are they?'

'I don't know,' she said, 'Can't you hear them? They're over there, but a long, long way.' She pointed to the south-west.

I thought that over for a few moments.

'Are they there now?' I asked.

'Yes, but not much,' she said.

I tried my best to detect anything, and failed.

'Suppose you try to copy for me what you're getting from them?' I suggested.

She tried. There was something there, and with a quality in it which none of us had. It was not comprehensible and it was very blurred - possibly, I thought, because Petra was trying to relay something she could not understand herself. I could make nothing of it, and called Rosalind in, but she could do no better. Petra was evidently finding it an effort, so after a few minutes we decided to let it rest for the present.

In spite of Petra's continued propensity to slip at any moment into what, in terms of sound, would be a deafening bellow, we all felt a proprietorial pride in her progress. There was a sense of excitement, too - rather as if we had discovered an unknown who we knew was destined to become a great singer: only it was something more important than that. . . .

'This,' Michael said, 'is going to be very interesting indeed - provided she doesn't break us all up before she gets control of it.'

At supper, some ten days after the loss of Petra's pony,

Uncle Axel asked me to come and give him a hand with truing-up a wheel, while there was still light enough. Superficially the request was casual, but there was something in his eyes which made me agree without hesitation. I followed him out, and we went over behind the rick where we should neither be seen nor overheard. He put a straw between his teeth, and looked at me seriously.

'You been careless, Davie boy?' he asked.

There are plenty of ways of being careless, but only one he'd ask me about with the manner he was using.

'I don't think so,' I told him.

'One of the others, maybe?' he suggested. Again, I did not think so.

'H'm,' he grunted. 'Then why, would you say, has Joe Darley been asking questions about you? Any idea?'

I had no idea why, and told him so. He shook his head.

'I don't like it, boy.'

'Just me - or the others, as well?' I asked.

'You - and Rosalind Morton.'

'Oh,' I said, uneasily. 'Still, if it's only Joe Darley ... Could it be he's heard a rumour about us, and is out to do a bit of scandal-raising?'

'Might be,' Uncle Axel agreed, but reservedly. 'On the other hand, Joe is a fellow that the inspector has used before now when he wants a few inquiries made on the quiet. I don't like it.'

I did not care for it either. But he had not approached either of us directly, and I did not see where else he was going to get any incriminating information. There was, I pointed out, nothing he could pin on us that brought us within any category of the Scheduled Deviations.

Uncle Axel shook his head. 'Those lists are inclusive, not exclusive,' he said. 'You can't schedule all the million things that *may* happen - only the more frequent ones. There have to be test cases for new ones when they crop up. It's part of the inspector's job to keep watch and call an inquiry if the information he gets seems to warrant it.'

'We've thought about what might happen,' I told him. 'If

there should be any questions they'll not be sure what they're looking for. All we'll have to do is act bewildered, just as a norm would be. If Joe or anybody has anything it can't be more than suspicion, no solid evidence.'

He did not seem reassured.

'There's Rachel,' he suggested. 'She was pretty much knocked by her sister's suicide. Do you think she -?'

'No,' I said confidently. 'Quite apart from the fact that she couldn't do it without involving herself, we should have known if she were hiding anything.'

'Well, then, there's young Petra,' he said.

I stared at him.

'How did you know about Petra?' I asked. 'I never told you.' He nodded in a satisfied way. 'So she is. I reckoned so.'

'How did you find out?' I repeated anxiously, wondering who else might have had a similar idea. 'Did she tell you?'

'Oh, no, I kind of came across it.' He paused, then he added: 'Indirectly it came from Anne. I told you it was a bad thing to let her marry that fellow. There's a type of woman who isn't content until she's made herself some man's slave and doormat - put herself completely in his power. That's the kind she was.'

'You're not - you don't mean she told Alan about herself?' I protested.

'She did,' he nodded. 'She did more than that. She told him about all of you.'

I stared at him incredulously.

'You can't be sure of that, Uncle Axel!'

'I am, Davie boy. Maybe she didn't intend to. Maybe it was only herself she told him about, being the kind who can't keep secrets in bed. And maybe he had to beat the names of the rest of you out of her, but he knew all right. He knew.'

'But even if he did, how did *you* know he knew?' I asked, with rising anxiety.

He said, reminiscently:

'A while ago there used to be a dive down on the waterfront in Rigo. It was run by a fellow called Grouth, and very profitably, too. He had a staff of three girls and two men, and they did as he said - just as he said. If he'd liked to tell what he

knew one of the men would have been strung up for mutiny on the high seas, and two of the girls for murder. I don't know what the others had done, but he had the lot of them cold. It was as neat a set-up for blackmail as you could find. If the men got any tips he had them. He saw to it that the girls were nice to the sailors who used the place, and whatever they got out of the sailors he had, too. I used to see the way he treated them, and the expression on his face when he watched them; kind of gloating because he'd got them, and he knew it, and they knew it. He'd only got to frown, and they danced.'

Uncle Axel paused reflectively.

'You'd never think you'd come across just that expression on a man's face again in Waknuk church, of all places, would you? It made me feel a bit queer when I did. But there it was. It was on his face while he studied first Rosalind, then Rachel, then you, then young Petra. He wasn't interested in anybody else. Just the four of you.'

'You could have been mistaken - just an expression . . .' I said.

'Not *that* expression. Oh, no, I knew that expression, it jerked me right back to the dive in Rigo. Besides, if I wasn't right, how do I come to know about Petra?'

'What did you do?'

'I came home and thought a bit about Growth, and what a comfortable life he'd been able to lead, and about one or two other things. Then I put a new string on my bow.'

'So it was you!' I exclaimed.

'It was the only thing to do, Davie. Of course, I knew Anne would reckon it was one of you that had done it. But she couldn't denounce you without giving herself away and her sister, too. There was a risk there, but I had to take it.'

'There certainly was a risk - and it nearly didn't come off,' I said, and told him about the letter that Anne had left for the inspector.

He shook his head. 'I hadn't reckoned she'd go as far as that, poor girl,' he said. 'All the same, it had to be done - and quickly. Alan wasn't a fool. He'd see to it that he was covered. Before he actually began on you he'd have had a written deposi-

tion somewhere to be opened in the event of his death, and he'd see that you knew about it, too. It'd have been a pretty nasty situation for all of you.'

The more I considered it, the more I realized how nasty it could have been.

'You took a big risk for us yourself, Uncle Axel,' I told him. He shrugged.

'Very little risk for me against a great deal for you,' he said. Presently we came back to the matter in hand.

'But these inquiries can't have anything to do with Alan. That was weeks ago,' I pointed out.

'What's more, it's not the kind of information Alan'd share with anyone if he wanted to cash in on it,' agreed Uncle Axel. 'There's one thing,' he went on, 'they can't know much, or they'd have called an inquiry already, and they'll have to be pretty damn sure of themselves before they do call one. The inspector isn't going to put himself in a weak spot with your father if he can help it - nor with Angus Morton either, for the matter of that. But that still doesn't get us any nearer to knowing what started it.'

I was pressed back again into thinking it must have something to do with the affair of Petra's pony. Uncle Axel knew of its death, of course, but not much more. It would have involved telling him about Petra herself, and we had had a tacit understanding that the less he knew about us the less he would have to hide in case of trouble. However, now that he did know about Petra, I described the event more fully. It did not look to us to be a likely source, but for lack of any other lead he made a note of the man's name.

'Jerome Skinner,' he repeated, not very hopefully. 'Very well, I'll see if I can find out anything about him.'

We all conferred that night, but inconclusively. Michael put it:

'Well, if you and Rosalind are quite satisfied that there's been nothing to start suspicion in your district, then I don't see that it can be traceable to anybody but that man in the forest.' He used a thought-shape rather than bothering to spell out 'Jerome Skinner' in letter-forms. 'If he *is* the source, then

he must have put his suspicions before the inspector in this district who will have handed it on as a routine report to the inspector in yours. That'll mean that several people are wondering about it already, and there'll be questions going on here about Sally and Katherine. The devil of it is that everybody's more suspicious than usual because of these rumours of large-scale trouble from the Fringes. I'll see if I can find out anything tomorrow, and let you know.'

'But what's the best thing for us to do?' Rosalind put in.

'Nothing at the moment,' Michael advised. 'If we are right about the source, then you are in two groups; Sally and Katherine in one, you, David, and Petra in the other; and the other three of us aren't involved at all. Don't do anything unusual, or you may cause them to pounce, on suspicion. If it does come to an inquiry we ought to be able to bluff it out by acting simple, as we decided. But Petra's the weak spot; she's too young to understand. If they start on her and trick her and trap her, it might end up in sterilization and the Fringes for all of us. . . .

'That makes her the key-point. They *must not* get hold of her. It's possible that there's no suspicion attached to her - but she was there, so she's liable to be suspected. If there's any sign of interest in her it'll be better to cut your losses and get her away - if they do start on her they'll have it out of her somehow.

'Very likely it'll all blow over, but just in case it does get sticky, David will have to be responsible. It'll be your job, David, to see that she isn't taken for questioning - at any cost. If you have to kill someone to prevent it, then you must. They'd not think twice about killing us if they had the excuse. Don't forget, if they move at all, they'll be doing it to exterminate us - by the slow method, if not by the fast.

'If the worst comes to the worst, and you can't save Petra, it would be kinder to kill her than let her go to sterilization and banishment to the Fringes - a lot more merciful for a child. You understand? Do the rest of you agree?'

Their agreements came in.

When I thought of little Petra, mutilated and thrust naked

into Fringes country, to perish or survive as it should chance, I agreed, too.

'Very well,' Michael went on. 'Just to be on the safe side, then, it might be best if the four of you and Petra were to make your arrangements to run for it at a moment's notice, if it becomes necessary.'

He went on explaining in more detail.

It is difficult to see what other course we could have taken. An overt move by any of us would at once have brought trouble on the rest. Our misfortune lay in our receiving the information regarding the inquiries when we did, and not two or three days earlier. . . .

THE discussion, and Michael's advice, made the threat of discovery seem both more real and more imminent than it had been when I talked to Uncle Axel earlier in the evening. Somehow it brought it home to me that one day we should find ourselves faced by the real thing – the alarm which wasn't simply going to work up and blow over, leaving us much as before. Michael, I knew, had been increasingly anxious during the last year or so, as if he had a feeling that time was running out, and now I caught some of that sensation, too. I even went as far as making some preparations before I went to bed that night – at least, I put a bow and a couple of dozen arrows handy, and found a sack into which I put several loaves and a cheese. And I decided that next day I would make up a pack of spare clothes and boots and other things that would be useful, and hide it in some dry, convenient place outside. Then we should need some clothing for Petra, and a bundle of blankets, and something to hold drinking water, and it would not do to forget a tinder-box. . . .

I was still listing the desirable equipment in my mind when I fell asleep. . . .

No more than three hours or so can have passed before I was wakened by the click of my latch. There was no moon, but there was starlight enough to show a small, white night-gowned figure by the door.

'David,' she said. 'Rosalind –'

But she did not need to tell me. Rosalind had already broken in, urgently.

'David,' she was telling me, 'we must get away at once – just as soon as you can. They've taken Sally and Katherine –' Michael crowded in on her.

'Hurry up, both of you, while there's time. It was a deliberate surprise. If they do know much about us, they'll have tried to time it to send a party for you, too – before you could

be warned. They were at Sally's and Katherine's almost simultaneously just over ten minutes ago. Get moving, quick!

'Meet you below the mill. Hurry,' Rosalind added.

I told Petra in words:

'Get dressed as fast as you can. Overalls. And be very quiet.'

Very likely she had not understood the thought-shapes in detail, but she had caught their urgency. She simply nodded, and slipped back into the dark passage.

I pulled on my clothes, and rolled the bed blankets into a bundle. I groped about in the shadows till I found the bow and arrows and the bag of food, and made for the door.

Petra was almost dressed already. I grabbed some clothes from her cupboard and rolled them in the blankets.

'Don't put on your shoes yet,' I whispered. 'Carry them, and come tiptoe, like a cat.'

Outside in the yard I put down the bundle and the sack while we both got our shoes on. Petra started to speak, but I put my finger to my lips, and gave her the thought-shape of Sheba, the black mare. She nodded, and we tiptoed across the yard. I just had the stable door open when I caught a distant sound, and paused to listen.

'Horses,' whispered Petra.

Horses it was. Several sets of hoofs and, faintly, the tinkle of bits.

There was no time to find the saddle and bridle for Sheba. We brought her out on the halter, and mounted from the block. With all I was carrying there was no room for Petra in front of me. She got up behind, and hung on round my waist.

Quietly we slipped out of the yard by the far end and started down the path to the river-bank while the hoof-beats on the upper track drew close to the house.

'Are you away?' I asked Rosalind, and let her know what was happening with us.

'I was away ten minutes ago. I had everything ready,' she told me reprovingly. 'We've all been trying our damndest to reach you. It was lucky Petra happened to wake up.'

Petra caught her own thought-shape, and broke in excitedly to know what was happening. It was like a fountain of sparks.

'Gently, darling. Much more gently,' protested Rosalind. 'We'll tell you all about it soon.' She paused a moment to get over the blinding effect.

'Sally -? Katherine -?' she inquired.

They responded together.

'We're being taken to the Inspector's. We're all innocent and bewildered. Is that best?'

Michael and Rosalind agreed that it was.

'We think,' Sally went on, 'that we ought to shut our minds to you. It will make it easier for us to act as normals if we really don't know what is happening. So don't try to reach us, any of you.'

'Very well - but we shall be open for you,' Rosalind agreed. She diverted her thoughts to me. 'Come along, David. There are lights up at the farm now.'

'It's all right. We're coming,' I told her. 'It's going to take them some time in the dark to find which way we went, anyhow.'

'They'll know by the stable-warmth that you can't have got far yet,' she pointed out.

I looked back. Up by the house I could see a light in a window, and a lantern swinging in someone's hand. The sound of a man's voice calling came to us faintly. We had reached the river-bank now, and it was safe to urge Sheba to a trot. We kept that up for half a mile until we came to the ford, and then for another quarter-mile until we were approaching the mill. It seemed prudent to walk her past there in case anyone were awake. Beyond the wall we heard a dog on the chain, but it did not bark. Presently I caught Rosalind's feeling of relief, coming from somewhere a little ahead.

We trotted again, and a few moments later I noticed a movement under the trees of the track. I turned the mare that way, and found Rosalind waiting for us - and not only Rosalind, but her father's pair of great-horses. The massive creatures towered above us, both saddled with large pannier baskets. Rosalind

was standing in one of the baskets, her bow, strung and ready to hand, laid across it.

I rode up close beneath her while she leaned out to see what I had brought.

'Hand me the blankets,' she directed, reaching down. 'What's in the sack?'

I told her.

'Do you mean to say that's all you've brought?' she said disapprovingly.

'There was some hurry,' I pointed out.

She arranged the blankets to pad the saddle-board between the panniers. I hoisted Petra until she could reach Rosalind's hands. With a heave from both of us she scrambled up and perched herself on the blankets.

'We'd better keep together,' Rosalind directed. 'I've left room for you in the other pannier. You can shoot left-handed from there.' She flipped over a kind of miniature rope-ladder so that it hung down the great-horse's left shoulder.

I slid off Sheba's back, turned her head for home, and gave her a smack on the flank to start her off, then I scrambled up awkwardly to the other pannier. The moment my foot was clear of the mounting-rings Rosalind pulled them up and hitched them. She gave the reins a shake, and before I was well settled in the pannier we were off, with the second great-horse following on a lead.

We trotted awhile, and then left the track for a stream. Where that was joined by another we branched off up the lesser. We left that and picked our way across boggy ground to another stream. We held on along the bed of that for perhaps half a mile or more and then turned off on to another stretch of uneven, marshy ground which soon became firmer until presently the hoofs were clinking among stones. We slowed still more while the horses picked a winding way amid rocks. I realized that Rosalind had put in some careful planning to hide our tracks. I must have projected the thought unwittingly, for she came in, somewhat coldly:

'It's a pity you didn't do a little more thinking and a little less sleeping.'

'I made a start,' I protested. 'I was going to get everything fixed up today. It didn't seem all that urgent.'

'And so when I tried to consult you about it, there you were, swinishly asleep. My mother and I spent two solid hours packing up these panniers and getting the saddles slung up ready for an emergency, while all you did was go on sleeping.'

'Your mother?' I asked, startled. 'Does she *know*?''

'She's sort of half-known, guessed something, for some time now. I don't know how much she's guessed - she never spoke about it at all. I think she felt that as long as she didn't have to admit it in words it might be all right. When I told her this evening that I thought it very likely I'd have to go, she cried - but she wasn't really surprised; she didn't try to argue, or dissuade me. I had a sort of feeling that she'd already resolved at the back of her mind that she'd have to help me one day, when the time came, and she did.'

I thought that over. I could not imagine my own mother doing such a thing for Petra's sake. And yet she had cried after my Aunt Harriet had been sent away. And Aunt Harriet had been more than ready to break the Purity Laws. So had Sophie's mother. It made one wonder how many mothers there might be who were turning a blind eye towards matters that did not actually infringe the Definition of the True Image - and perhaps to things that did infringe it, if the inspector could be dodged. . . . I wondered, too, whether my mother would, in secret, be glad or sorry that I had taken Petra away. . . .

We went on by the erratic route that Rosalind had picked to hide the trail. There were more stony places and more streams until finally we urged the horses up a steep bank and into the woods. Before long, we encountered a track-way running south-west. We did not care to risk the spoor of the great-horses there, and so kept along parallel with it until the sky began to show grey. Then we turned deeper into the woods until we found a glade which offered grass for the horses. There we hobbled them and let them graze.

After we had made a meal of bread and cheese Rosalind said:

'Since you slept so well earlier on, you'd better take first watch.'

She and Petra settled themselves comfortably in blankets, and soon dropped off.

I sat with my strung bow across my knees, and half a dozen arrows stuck handy in the ground beside me. There was nothing to be heard but the birds, occasionally a small animal moving, and the steady munchings of the great-horses. The sun rose into the thinner branches and began to give more warmth. Every now and then I got up and prowled silently round the fringe of the glade, with an arrow ready nocked on the string. I found nothing, but it helped to keep me awake. After a couple of hours of it Michael came through:

'Where are you now?' he inquired.

I explained as well as I could.

'Where are you heading?' he wanted to know.

'South-west,' I told him. 'We thought we'd move by night and lie-up by day.'

He approved of that, but:

'The devil of it is that with this Fringes scare there'll be a lot of patrols about. I don't know that Rosalind was wise to take those great-horses - if they're seen at all, word will go round like wildfire, even a hoof-mark will be enough.'

'Ordinary horses have the speed of them for short bursts,' I acknowledged, 'but they can't touch them for stamina.'

'You may need that. Frankly, David, you're going to need your wits, too. There's hell to pay over this. They must have found out much more about you than we ever guessed, though they aren't on to Mark or Rachel or me yet. But it's got them very worried indeed. They're going to send posses after you. My idea is to volunteer for one of them right away. I'm going to plant a report of your having been seen making south-east. When that peters out, we'll have Mark start up another to take them north-west.'

'If anyone does see you, stop him getting away with the news, at all costs. But don't shoot. There's an order going out not to use guns except when necessary, and as signals - all gunshots to be investigated.'

'That's all right. We haven't a gun,' I told him.

'So much the better. You can't be tempted to use one - but they think you have.'

I had deliberately decided against taking a gun, partly on account of the noise, but mostly because they are slow to reload, heavy to carry, and useless if you run out of powder. Arrows haven't the range, but they are silent, and you can get a dozen and more of them off while a man is recharging a gun.

Mark came in:

'I heard that. I'll have a north-west rumour ready for when it's needed.'

'Good. But don't loose it till I tell you. Rosalind's asleep now, I suppose? Tell her to get into touch with me when she wakes, will you?'

I said I would, and everybody laid off projecting for a while. I went on keeping my watch for another couple of hours, and then woke Rosalind for her turn. Petra did not stir. I lay down beside her, and was asleep in a minute or two.

Perhaps I was sleeping lightly, or it may have been just coincidence that I woke up to catch an anguished thought from Rosalind.

'I've killed him, Michael. He's quite dead . . .' Then she slid off into a panicky, chaotic thought-shape.

Michael came in, steady and reassuring.

'Don't be scared, Rosalind. You had to do it. This is a war, between our kind and theirs. We didn't start it - we've just as much right to exist as they have. You mustn't be frightened, Rosalind, dear: you had to do it.'

'What's happened?' I asked, sitting up.

They ignored me, or were too much occupied to notice.

I looked round the glade. Petra lay, asleep still, beside me; the great-horses were cropping the grass, undisturbed. Michael came in again:

'Hide him Rosalind. Try to find a hollow, and pile leaves over him.'

A pause. Then Rosalind, her panic conquered now, but with deep distress, agreeing.

I got up, picked up my bow, and walked across the glade in the direction I knew she must be. When I reached the edge of the trees it occurred to me that I was leaving Petra unprotected, so I went no farther.

Presently Rosalind appeared among the bushes. She was walking slowly, cleaning an arrow on a handful of leaves as she came.

'What happened?' I repeated.

But she seemed to have lost control over her thought-shapes again, they were muddled and distorted by her emotions. When she got nearer she used words instead:

'It was a man. He had found the trail of the horses. I saw him following them. Michael said . . . Oh, I didn't want to do it, David, but what else could I do . . . ?'

Her eyes were full of tears. I put my arms round her, and let her cry on my shoulder. There was little I could do to comfort her. Nothing, but assure her, as Michael had, that what she had done had been absolutely necessary.

After a little time we walked slowly back. She sat down beside the still-sleeping Petra. It occurred to me to ask:

'What about his horse, Rosalind? Did that get away?'

She shook her head.

'I don't know. I suppose he must have had one, but he was following our tracks on foot when I saw him.'

I thought it better to retrace our course and find out whether he had left a horse tethered anywhere along it. I went back half a mile, but found no horse, nor was there any trace of recent hoof-marks other than those of the great-horses. When I got back, Petra was awake and chattering to Rosalind.

The day wore on. Nothing more came to us from Michael or the rest. In spite of what had happened it seemed better to stay where we were than to move by daylight with the risk of being seen. So we waited.

Then, in the afternoon, something did come, suddenly.

It was not a thought-shape; it had no real form; it was sheer distress, like a cry of agony. Petra gasped, and threw herself whimpering into Rosalind's arms. The impact was so sharp that it hurt. Rosalind and I stared at one another, wide-eyed.

My hands shook. Yet the shock was so formless that we could not tell which of the others it came from.

Then there was a jumble of pain and shame, overridden with hopeless desolation, and, among it, characteristic glimpses of forms that we knew without doubt were Katherine's. Rosalind put her hand on mine and held it tightly. We endured, while the sharpness dimmed, and the pressure ebbed away.

Presently came Sally, brokenly, in waves of love and sympathy to Katherine, then, in anguish, to the rest of us.

'They've broken Katherine. They've broken her... Oh, Katherine, dear... you mustn't blame her, any of you. Please, please don't blame her. They're torturing her. It might have been any of us. She's all clouded now. She can't hear us... Oh, Katherine, darling... Her thoughts dissolved into shapeless distress.

Then there was Michael, unsteadily at first, but hardening into as rigid a form as I had ever received:

'It is war. Some day I'll kill them for what they've done to Katherine.'

After that there was nothing for an hour or more. We did our rather unconvincing best to soothe and reassure Petra. She understood little of what had passed between us, but she had caught the intensity and that had been enough to frighten her.

Then there was Sally again; dully, miserably, forcing herself to it:

'Katherine has admitted it; confessed. I have confirmed it. They would have forced me to it, too, in the end. I -' she hesitated, wavering. 'I couldn't face it. Not the hot irons; not for nothing, when she had told them. I couldn't... Forgive me, all of you... forgive us both...' She broke off again.

Michael came in unsteadily, anxiously, too.

'Sally, dear, of course we're not blaming you - either of you. We understand. But we must know what you've told them. How much do they know?'

'About thought-shapes - and David and Rosalind. They were nearly sure about them, but they wanted it confirmed.'

'Petra, too?'

'Yes... Oh, oh, oh...!' There was an unshaped surge of

remorse. 'We had to - poor little Petra - but they knew, really. It was the only reason that David and Rosalind would have taken her with them. No lie would cover it.'

'Anyone else?'

'No. We've told them that there isn't anyone else. I think they believe it. They are still asking questions. Trying to understand more about it. They want to know how we make thought-shapes, and what the range is. I'm telling them lies. Not more than five miles, I'm saying, and pretending it's not at all easy to understand thought-shapes even that far away... Katherine's barely conscious. She can't send to you. But they keep on asking us both questions, on and on... If you could see what they've done to her... Oh, Katherine, darling... Her feet, Michael - oh, her poor, poor feet...'

Sally's patterns clouded in anguish, and then faded away.

Nobody else came in. I think we were all too deeply hurt and shocked. Words have to be chosen, and then interpreted; but thought-shapes you feel, inside you...

The sun was low and we were beginning to pack up when Michael made contact again.

'Listen to me,' he told us. 'They're taking this very seriously indeed. They're badly alarmed over us. Usually if a Deviation gets clear of a district they let him go. Nobody can settle anywhere without proofs of identity, or a very thorough examination by the local inspector, so he's pretty well bound to end up in the Fringes, anyway. But what's got them so agitated about us is that nothing shows. We've been living among them for nearly twenty years and they didn't suspect it. We could pass for normal anywhere. So a proclamation has been posted describing the three of you and officially classifying you as deviants. That means that you are non-human and therefore not entitled to any of the rights or protections of human society. Anyone who assists you in any way is committing a criminal act; and anyone concealing knowledge of your whereabouts is also liable to punishment.

'In effect, it makes you outlaws. Anyone may shoot you on sight without penalty. There is a small reward if your deaths

are reported and confirmed; but there is a very much larger reward for you if you are taken alive.'

There was a pause while we took that in.

'I don't understand,' said Rosalind. 'If we were to promise to go away and stay away -?'

'They're afraid of us. They want to capture you and learn more about us - that's why there's the large reward. It isn't just a question of the true image - though that's the way they're making it appear. What they've seen is that we could be a real danger to them. Imagine if there were a lot more of us than there are, able to think together and plan and co-ordinate without all their machinery of words and messages: we could outwit them all the time. They find that a very unpleasant thought; so we are to be stamped out before there can be any more of us. They see it as a matter of survival - and they may be right, you know.'

'Are they going to kill Sally and Katherine?'

That was an incautious question which slipped from Rosalind. We waited for a response from either of the two girls. There was none. We could not tell what that meant; they might simply have closed their minds again, or be sleeping from exhaustion, or perhaps dead already. . . . Michael thought not.

'There's little reason for that when they have them safely in their hands: it would very likely raise a lot of ill-feeling. To declare a new-born baby as non-human on physical defects is one thing: but this is a lot more delicate. It isn't going to be easy for people who have known them for years to accept the non-human verdict at all. If they were to be killed, it would make a lot of people feel uneasy and uncertain about the authorities - much the same way as a retrospective law does.'

'But *we* can be killed quite safely?' Rosalind commented, with some bitterness.

'You aren't already captives, and you aren't among people who know you. To strangers you are just non-humans on the run.'

There was not much one could say to that. Michael asked: 'Which way are you travelling tonight?'

'Still south-west,' I told him. 'We had thought of trying to find some place to stop in Wild Country, but now that any hunter is licensed to shoot us, we shall have to go on into the Fringes, I think.'

'That'd be best. If you can find a place to hide-up there for a bit we'll see if we can't fake your deaths. I'll try to think of some way. Tomorrow I shall be with a search-party that's going south-east. I'll let you know what it's doing. Meanwhile, if you run into anyone, make sure that you shoot first.'

On that we broke off. Rosalind finished packing up, and we arranged the gear to make the panniers more comfortable than they had been the previous night. Then we climbed up, I on the left again, Petra and Rosalind together in the right-hand basket this time. Rosalind reached back to give a thump on the huge flank, and we moved ponderously forward once more. Petra, who had been unusually subdued during the packing-up, burst into tears, and radiated distress.

She did not, it emerged from her snuffles, want to go to the Fringes, her mind was sorely troubled by thoughts of Old Maggie, and Hairy Jack and his family, and the other ominous nursery-threat characters said to lurk in those regions.

It would have been easier to pacify her had we not ourselves suffered from quite a residue of childhood apprehensions, or had we been able to advance some real idea of the region to set against its morbid reputation. As it was, we, like most people, knew too little of it to be convincing, and had to go on suffering her distress again. Admittedly it was less intense than it had been on former occasions, and experience did now enable us to put up more of a barrier against it; nevertheless, the effect was wearing. Fully half an hour passed before Rosalind succeeded in soothing away the obliterating hullabaloo. When she had, the others came in anxiously; Michael inquiring, with irritation:

'What was it this time?'

We explained.

Michael dropped his irritability, and turned his attention to Petra herself. He began telling her in slow, clear thought-forms how the Fringes weren't really the bogey place that people

pretended. Most of the men and women who lived there were just unfortunate and unhappy. They had been taken away from their homes, often when they were babies, or some of them who were older had had to run away from their homes, simply because they didn't look like other people, and they had to live in the Fringes because there was nowhere else people would leave them alone. Some of them did look very queer and funny indeed, but they couldn't help that. It was a thing to be sorry, not frightened, about. If we had happened to have extra fingers or ears by mistake we should have been sent to the Fringes - although we should be just the same people inside as we were now. What people looked like didn't really matter a great deal, one could soon get used to it, and -

But at about this stage Petra interrupted him.

'Who is the other one?' she inquired.

'What other one? What do you mean?' he asked her.

'The somebody else who's making think-pictures all mixed up with yours,' she told him.

There was a pause. I opened right out, but could not detect any thought-shapes at all. Then:

'I get nothing,' came from Michael, and Mark and Rachel, too. 'It must be -'

There was an impetuous strong sign from Petra. In words, it would have been an impatient 'Shut up!' We subsided, and waited.

I glanced over at the other pannier. Rosalind had one arm round Petra, and was looking down at her attentively. Petra herself had her eyes shut, as though all her attention were on listening. Presently she relaxed a little.

'What is it?' Rosalind asked her.

Petra opened her eyes. Her reply was puzzled, and not very clearly shaped.

'Somebody asking questions. She's a long way, a very long, long way away, I think. She says she's had my afraid-thoughts before. She wants to know who I am, and where I am. Shall I tell her?'

There was a moment's caution. Then Michael inquiring with a touch of excitement whether we approved. We did.

'All right, Petra. Go ahead and tell her,' he agreed.

'I shall have to be very loud. She's such a long way away,' Petra warned us.

It was as well she did. If she had let it rip while our minds were wide open she'd have blistered them. I closed mine and tried to concentrate my attention on the way ahead of us. It helped, but it was by no means a thorough defence. The shapes were simple, as one would expect of Petra's age, but they still reached me with a violence and brilliance which dazzled and deafened me.

There was the equivalent of 'Phew' from Michael when it let up; closely followed by the repeated equivalent of 'Shut up!' from Petra. A pause, and then another briefly-blinding interlude. When that subsided:

'Where is she?' inquired Michael.

'Over there,' Petra told him.

'For goodness sake -'

'She's pointing south-west,' I explained.

'Did you ask her the name of the place, darling?' Rosalind inquired.

'Yes, but it didn't mean anything, except that there were two parts of it and a lot of water,' Petra told her, in words and obscurely. 'She doesn't understand where I am either.'

Rosalind suggested:

'Tell her to spell it out in letter-shapes.'

'But I can't read letters,' Petra objected tearfully.

'Oh, dear, that's awkward,' Rosalind admitted. 'But at least we can send. I'll give you the letter-shapes one by one, and you can think them on to her. How about that?'

Petra agreed, doubtfully, to try.

'Good,' said Rosalind. 'Look out, everybody! Here we go again.'

She pictured an 'L'. Petra relayed it with devastating force. Rosalind followed up with an 'A' and so on, until the word was complete. Petra told us:

'She understands, but she doesn't know where Labrador is.'

She says she'll try to find out. She wants to send us her letter-shapes, but I said it's no good.'

'But it *is*, darling. You get them from her, then you show them to us - only gently, so that we can read them.'

'-Presently we got the first one. It was 'Z.' We were disappointed.

'What on earth's that?' everyone inquired at once.

'She's got it back to front. It must be "S,"' Michael decided.

'It's not "S," it's "Z,"' Petra insisted tearfully.

'Never mind them. Just go on,' Rosalind told her.

The rest of the word built up.

'Well, the others are proper letters,' Michael admitted. 'Sealand - it must be -'

'Not "S"; it's "Z,"' repeated Petra, obstinately.

'But, darling, "Z" doesn't mean anything. Now, Sealand obviously means a land in the sea.'

'If that helps,' I said doubtfully. 'According to my Uncle Axel there's a lot more sea than anyone would think possible.'

At that point everything was blotted out by Petra conversing indignantly with the unknown. She finished to announce triumphantly: 'It is "Z." She says it's different from "S": like the noise a bee makes.'

'All right,' Michael told her, pacifically, 'but ask her if there is a lot of sea.'

Petra came back shortly with:

'Yes. There are two parts of it, with lots of sea all round. From where she is you can see the sun shining on it for miles and miles and it's all blue -'

'In the middle of the night?' said Michael. 'She's crazy.'

'But it isn't night where she is. She showed me.' Petra said. 'It's a place with lots and lots of houses, different from Waknuk houses, and much, much bigger. And there are funny carts without horses running along the roads. And things in the air, with whizzing things on top of them -'

I was jolted to recognize the picture from the childhood dreams that I had almost forgotten. I broke in, repeating it

more clearly than Petra had shown it - a fish-shaped thing, all white and shiny.

'Yes - like that,' Petra agreed.

'There's something very queer about this, altogether,' Michael put in. 'David, how on earth did you know -?'

I cut him short.

'Let Petra get all she can now,' I suggested. 'We can sort it out later.'

So again we did our best to put up a barrier between ourselves and the apparently one-sided exchange that Petra was conducting in an excited fortissimo.

We made slow progress through the forest. We were anxious not to leave traces on the rides and tracks, so that the going was poor. As well as keeping our bows ready for use we had to be alert enough not to have them swept out of our hands, and to crouch low beneath overhanging branches. The risk of meeting men was not great, but there was the chance of encountering some hunting beast. Luckily, when we did hear one it was invariably in a hurry to get away. Possibly the bulk of the great-horses was discouraging: if so, it was, at least, one advantage we could set against the distinctive spoor behind us.

The summer nights are not long in those parts. We kept on plodding until there were signs of dawn and then found another glade to rest in. There would have been too much risk in unsaddling; the heavy pack-saddles and panniers would have had to be hoisted off by a pulley on a branch, and that would deprive us of any chance of a quick getaway. We simply had to hobble the horses, as on the previous day.

While we ate our food I talked to Petra about the things her friend had shown her. The more she told me, the more excited I became. Almost everything fitted in with the dreams I had had as a small boy. It was like a sudden inspiration to know that the place must really exist; that I had not simply been dreaming of the ways of the Old People, but that it really was in being now, somewhere in the world. However, Petra was tired, so that I did not question her as much as I would have liked to just then, but let her and Rosalind get to sleep.

Just after sunrise Michael came through in some agitation. 'They've picked up your trail, David. That man Rosalind shot: his dog found him, and they came across the great-horse tracks. Our lot is turning back to the south-west to join in the hunt. You'd better push on. Where are you now?'

All I could tell him was that we had calculated we must be within a few miles of Wild Country by this time.

'Then get moving,' he told me. 'The longer you delay the more time they'll have to get a party ahead to cut you off.'

It sounded good advice. I woke Rosalind, and explained. Ten minutes later we were on our way again, with Petra still more than half asleep. With speed now more important than concealment we kept on the first southward track that we found and urged the horses to a ponderous trot.

The way wound somewhat with the lie of the land, but its general direction was right. We followed it for fully ten miles without trouble of any kind, but then, as we rounded a corner, we came face to face with a horseman trotting towards us barely fifty yards ahead.

THE man cannot have had a moment's doubt who we were, for even as he saw us he dropped his reins and snatched his bow from his shoulder. Before he had a shaft on the string we had loosed at him.

The motion of the great-horse was unfamiliar, and we both shot wide. He did better. His arrow passed between us, skinning our horse's head. Again I missed, but Rosalind's second shot took his horse in the chest. It reared, almost unseating him, then turned and started to bolt away ahead of us. I sent another arrow after it, and took it in the buttock. It leapt sideways, catapulting the man into the bushes, and then sped off down the track as hard as it could go.

We passed the thrown man without checking. He cringed aside as the huge hoofs clumped by within a couple of feet of his head. At the next turn we looked back to see him sitting up, feeling his bruises. The least satisfactory part of the incident was that there was now a wounded, riderless horse spreading an alarm ahead of us.

A couple of miles further on the stretch of forest came to an abrupt end, and we found ourselves looking across a narrow, cultivated valley. There was about a mile and a half of open country before the trees began again on the far side. Most of the land was pasture, with sheep and cattle behind rail and post fences. One of the few arable fields was immediately to our left. The young crop there looked as if it might be oats, but it deviated to an extent which would have caused it to be burnt long ago at home.

The sight of it encouraged us, for it could only mean that we had reached almost to Wild Country where stock could not be kept pure.

The track led at a gentle slope down to a farm which was little better than a cluster of huts and sheds. In the open space among them which served for a yard we could see four or five women and a couple of men gathered round a horse. They

were examining it, and we had little doubt what horse it was. Evidently it had only just arrived, and they were still arguing about it. We decided to go on, rather than give them time to arm and come in search of us.

So absorbed were they in their inspection of the horse that we had covered half the distance from the trees before any of them noticed us. Then one glanced up, and the rest, too, turned to stare. They can never have seen a great-horse before, and the sight of two bearing down upon them at a canter with a thunderous rumble of horse-beats struck them momentarily rigid with astonishment. It was the horse in their midst that broke up the tableau; it reared, whinnied, and made off, scattering them.

There was no need to shoot. The whole group scuttled for the shelter of various doorways, and we pounded through their yard unmolested.

The track bore off to the left, but Rosalind held the great-horse on a straight line ahead, towards the next stretch of forest. The rails flew aside like twigs, and we kept going at a lumbering canter across the fields, leaving a trail of broken fences behind us.

At the edge of the trees, I looked back. The people at the farm had emerged from shelter and stood gesticulating and staring after us.

Three or four miles farther on we came out into more open country, but not like any region we had seen before. It was dotted with bushes, and brakes, and thickets. Most of the grass was coarse and large-leafed: in some places it was monstrous, growing into giant tufts where the sharp-edged blades stood eight or ten feet high.

We wound our way among them, keeping generally southwest, for another couple of hours. Then we pushed into a copse of queer but fair-sized trees. It offered a good hiding-place, and inside were several open spaces where there grew a more ordinary kind of grass which looked as if it might make suitable fodder. We decided to rest awhile there and sleep.

I hobbled the horses while Rosalind unrolled the blankets, and presently we were eating hungrily. It was pleasantly

peaceful until Petra put one of her blinding communications so abruptly that I bit my tongue.

Rosalind screwed up her eyes, and put a hand to her head. 'For heaven's sake, child!' she protested.

'Sorry. I forgot,' said Petra perfunctorily.

She sat with her head a little on one side for a minute, then she told us:

'She wants to talk to one of you. She says will you all try to hear her while she thinks her loudest.'

'All right,' we agreed, 'but you keep quiet, or you'll blind us.'

I tried my very hardest, straining sensitivity to its utmost, but there was nothing - or as near nothing as the shimmer of a heat-haze.

We relaxed again.

'No good,' I said, 'you'll have to tell her we can't reach her, Petra. Look out, everyone.'

We did our best to damp out the exchange that followed, then Petra brought down the force of her thoughts below the dazzle level, and started to relay those she was receiving. They had to be in very simple form so that she could copy them even when she did not understand them; in consequence, they reached us rather like baby-talk, and with many repeats to make sure that we grasped them. It is scarcely possible to give any idea in words of the way it came across, but it was the overall impression that mattered, and that reached us clearly enough.

The urgent emphasis was on importance - the importance not of us, but of Petra. At all costs she must be protected. Such a power of projection as she had was unheard of without special training - she was a discovery of the utmost importance. Help was already on the way, but until it could reach us we must play for time and safety - Petra's safety, it seemed, not our own - at all costs.

There was quite a lot more that was less clear, muddled up with it, but that main point was quite unmistakable.

'Did you get it?' I asked of the others, when it had finished.

They had. Michael responded: 'This is very confusing.'

There is no doubt that Petra's power of projection is remarkable compared with ours, anyway - but what she seemed to me to be putting across was that she was particularly surprised to find it among primitive people, did you notice that? It looked almost as if she were meaning us.'

'She was,' confirmed Rosalind. 'Not a shadow of doubt about it.'

'There must be some misunderstanding,' I put in. 'Probably Petra somehow gave her the impression we were Fringes people. As for -' I was suddenly blotted out for a moment by Petra's indignant denial. I did my best to disregard it, and went on: 'As for help, there must be a misunderstanding there, too. She's somewhere south-west, and everybody knows that there are miles and miles of Badlands that way. Even if they do come to an end and she's on the other side of them, how can she possibly help?'

Rosalind refused to argue about that.

'Let's wait and find out,' she suggested. 'Just now all I want is sleep.'

I felt the same way, and since Petra had slept most of the time in the pannier, we told her to keep a sharp look-out and wake us at once if she heard or saw anything suspicious. Both Rosalind and I fell asleep almost before we laid our heads down.

I awoke with Petra shaking my shoulder, and saw that the sun was not far off setting.

'Michael,' she explained.

I cleared my mind for him.

'They've picked up your trail again. A small farm on the edge of Wild Country. You galloped through it. Remember?'

I did. He went on:

'There's a party converging there now. They'll start to follow your tracks as soon as it's light. Better get moving soon. I don't know how it is in front of you, but there may be some men cutting across from the west to head you off. If there are, my bet is that they'll keep in smallish groups for the night. They can't risk a cordon of single sentries because there are

known to be Fringes people scouting around. So, with luck, you should be able to sneak through.'

'All right,' I agreed wearily. Then a question I had meant to ask before occurred to me. 'What's happened to Sally and Katherine?'

'I don't know. No answer. The range is getting rather long now. Does any one know?'

Rachel came in, made faint by the distance.

'Katherine was unconscious. There's been nothing understandable since then. Mark and I are afraid -' She faded, in a foggy reluctance to continue.

'Go on,' Michael told her.

'Well, Katherine's been unconscious so long we're wondering if she's - dead.'

'And Sally -?'

This time there was even more reluctance.

'We think - we're afraid something queer must have happened to her mind. . . . There've been just one or two little jumbles from her. Very weak, not sensible at all, so we're afraid . . .' She faded away, in great unhappiness.

There was a pause before Michael started with hard, harsh shapes.

'You understand what that means, David? They *are* scared of us. Ready to break us down in the attempt to find out more about us - once they can catch us. You mustn't let them get hold of Rosalind or Petra - far better to kill them yourself than let that happen to them. You understand?'

I looked at Rosalind lying asleep beside me, the red of the sunset glistening on her hair, and I thought of the anguish we had felt from Katherine. The possibility of her and Petra suffering that made me shudder.

'Yes,' I told him, and the others. 'Yes - I understand.'

I felt their sympathy and encouragement for a while, then there was nothing.

Petra was looking at me, more puzzled than alarmed. She asked earnestly, in words:

'Why did he say you must kill Rosalind and me?'

I pulled myself together.

'That was only if they catch us,' I told her, trying to make it sound as if it were the sensible and usual course in such circumstances. She considered the prospect judicially, then:

'Why?' she asked.

'Well,' I tried, 'you see we're different from them because they can't make thought-shapes, and when people are different, ordinary people are afraid of them -'

'Why should they be afraid of us? We aren't hurting them,' she broke in.

'I'm not sure that I know why,' I told her. 'But they are. It's a feel-thing not a think-thing. And the more stupid they are, the more like everyone else they think everyone ought to be. And once they get afraid they become cruel and want to hurt people who are different -'

'Why?' inquired Petra.

'They just do. And they'd hurt us very much if they could catch us.'

'I don't see why,' Petra persisted.

'It's the way things work. It's complicated and rather nasty,' I told her. 'You'll understand better when you're older. But the thing is, we don't want you and Rosalind to be hurt. You remember when you spilt the boiling water on your foot? Well, it'd be much worse than that. Being dead's a lot better - it's sort of like being so much asleep that they can't get at you to hurt you at all.'

I looked down at Rosalind, at the gentle rise and fall of her breasts as she slept. There was a vagrant wisp of hair on her cheek; I brushed it away gently and kissed her without waking her.

Presently Petra began:

'David, when you kill me and Rosalind -'

I put my arm round her. 'Hush, darling. It isn't going to happen, because we aren't going to let them catch us. Now, let's wake her up, but we won't tell her about this. She might be worried, so we'll just keep it to ourselves for a secret, shall we?'

'All right,' Petra agreed.

She tugged gently at Rosalind's hair.

We decided to eat again, and then push on when it was a little darker so that there would be stars to steer by. Petra was unwontedly silent over the meal. At first I thought she was brooding upon our recent conversation, but I was wrong, it appeared: after a time she emerged from her contemplations to say, conversationally:

'Sealand must be a funny place. Everybody there can make think-pictures - well, nearly everybody - and nobody wants to hurt anybody for doing it.'

'Oh, you've been chatting while we were asleep, have you?' remarked Rosalind. 'I must say that makes it a lot more comfortable for us.'

Petra ignored that. She went on:

'They aren't all of them very good at it, though - most of them are more like you and David,' she told us kindly. 'But *she's* much better at it than most of them, and she's got two babies and she thinks they will be good at it, only they're too little yet. But she doesn't think they'll be as good at it as me. She says I can make stronger think-pictures than anybody at all,' she concluded complacently.

'That doesn't surprise me one bit,' Rosalind told her. 'What you want to learn next is to make *good* think-pictures instead of just noisy ones,' she added deflatingly.

Petra remained unabashed. 'She says I'll get better still if I work at it, and then when I grow up I must have babies who can make strong think-pictures, too.'

'Oh you must, must you?' said Rosalind. 'Why? My impression of think-pictures up to now is that chiefly they bring trouble.'

'Not in Sealand.' Petra shook her head. 'She says that everybody there *wants* to make them, and people who can't do it much work hard to get better at it.'

We pondered that. I recalled Uncle Axel's tales about places beyond the Black Coasts where the Deviations thought that *they* were the true image, and anything else was a mutant.

'*She* says,' Petra amplified, 'that people who can only talk with words have something missing. She says we ought to be sorry for them because, however old they grow, they'll never

be able to understand one another much better. 'They'll have to be one-at-a-times always, never think-togethers.'

'I can't say I feel very sorry for them at present,' I remarked.

'Well, she says we ought to because they have to live very dull, stupid lives compared with think-picture people,' Petra said, somewhat sententiously.

We let her prattle on. It was difficult to make sense of a lot of the things she said, and possibly she had not got them right, anyway, but the one thing that did stand out clearly was that these Sealanders, whoever and wherever they were, thought no small beans of themselves. It began to seem more than likely that Rosalind had been right when she had taken 'primitive' to refer to ordinary Labrador people.

In clear starlight we set out again, still winding our way between clumps and thickets in a south-westerly direction. Out of respect for Michael's warning we were travelling as quietly as we could, with our eyes and ears alert for any sign of interception. For some miles there was nothing to be heard but the steady, cushioned clumping of the great-horses' hoofs, slight creaking from the girths and panniers, and, occasionally some small animal scuttling out of our way.

After three hours or more we began to perceive uncertainly a line of deeper darkness ahead, and presently the edge of more forest solidified to loom up like a black wall.

It was not possible in the shadow to tell how dense it was. The best course seemed to be to hold straight on until we came to it, and then, if it turned out to be not easily penetrable, to work along the edge until we could find a suitable place to make an entrance.

We started to do that, and had come within a hundred yards of it when without any warning a gun went off to the rear, and shot whistled past us.

Both horses were startled, and plunged. I was all but flung out of my pannier. The rearing horses pulled away and the lead rope parted with a snap. The other horse bolted straight towards the forest, then thought better of it and swerved to the left. Ours pelted after it. There was nothing to be done

but wedge oneself in the pannier and hang on as we tore along in a rain of clods and stones flung up by hoofs of the lead horse.

Somewhere behind us a gun fired again, and we speeded up still more. . . .

For a while or more we hurtled on in a ponderous, earth-shaking gallop. Then there was a flash ahead and half-left. At the sound of the shot our horse sprang sideways in mid-stride, swerved right, and raced for the forest. We crouched still lower in the baskets as we crashed among the trees.

By luck alone we made the entry at a point where the bigger trunks were well separated, but, for all that, it was a nightmare ride, with branches slapping and dragging at the panniers. The great-horse simply ploughed ahead, avoiding the larger trees, thrusting through the rest, smashing its way by sheer weight while branches and saplings cracked and snapped at the onslaught.

Inevitably the horse slowed down, but its panic determination to get away from the guns abated very little. I had to brace with arms and legs and whole body to avoid being battered to pieces in the pannier, scarcely daring to raise my head even for a quick look, lest a branch should knock it off.

I could not tell whether there was any pursuit, but it seemed improbable. Not only was it darker under the trees, but a horse of ordinary size would most likely have disembowelled itself in any attempt to follow over the snapped-off stems standing up like stakes behind us.

The horse began to grow calmer; the pace and violence eased, and it started to pick its way instead of crashing through. Presently the trees on our left grew thinner. Rosalind, leaning out of her pannier, caught up the reins again and urged the creature that way. We came out obliquely upon a narrow open space where we could see the stars overhead again. Whether it was an artificial track, or a natural opening was impossible to tell in the poor light. We paused a moment, wondering whether to risk it, then decided that the easier going would offset the disadvantages of easier pursuit, and turned southward along it. A crackling of branches to one side brought both of us facing round, with bows ready, but it was only the other great-horse.

It came trotting out of the shadows with a whinny of pleasure, and fell into place behind us as though the rope still held it.

The country was more broken now. The trail wound, taking us round outcrops of rock, slanting down the sides of gullies to cross small streams. Sometimes there were fairly open stretches, at others the trees met overhead. Our progress was inevitably slow.

We must by now, we reckoned, be truly in the Fringes. Whether or not the pursuit would risk following any farther we could not tell. When we tried to consult Michael there was no response, so we guessed he was asleep. It was perplexing to know whether the time had not come when we ought to get rid of the tell-tale great-horses – perhaps drive them on along the track while we made off in a different direction on foot. The decision was difficult to make without more information. It would be foolish to get rid of the creatures unless we were sure that the pursuit would risk coming right into Fringes country after us; but, if it did, it would gain on us quickly by making a great deal faster time in daylight than we were making now. Moreover, we were tired, and the prospect of starting to travel on foot was far from attractive. Once more we tried, and failed, to make contact with Michael. A moment later the choice was taken away from us.

We were at one of the stretches where the trees met above us, making a dark tunnel through which the horse chose its way slowly and carefully. Suddenly something dropped full on me, crushing me down in the pannier. I had no warning, no chance to use the bow. There was the weight jolting the breath out of me, then a shower of sparks in my head, and that was the end of it.

I CAME back slowly, lingering for what seemed a long time only half-aware.

Rosalind was calling me; the real Rosalind, the one who dwelt inside, and showed herself too seldom. The other, the practical, capable one, was her own convincing creation, not herself. I had seen her begin to build it when she was a sensitive, fearful, yet determined child. She became aware by instinct, perhaps sooner than the rest of us, that she was in a hostile world, and deliberately equipped herself to face it. The armour had grown slowly, plate by plate. I had seen her find her weapons and become skilled with them, watched her construct a character so thoroughly and wear it so constantly that for spells she almost deceived herself.

I loved the girl one could see. I loved her tall slim shape, the poise of her neck, her small, pointed breasts, her long, slim legs: and the way she moved, and the sureness of her hands, and her lips when she smiled. I loved the bronze-gold hair that felt like heavy silk in one's hand, her satin-skinned shoulders, her velvet cheeks: and the warmth of her body, and the scent of her breath.

All these were easy to love – too easy: anyone must love them.

They needed her defences: the crust of independence and indifference: the air of practical, decisive reliability; the unroused interest, the aloof manner. The qualities were not intended to endear, and at times they could hurt; but one who had seen the how and why of them could admire them, if only as a triumph of art over nature.

But now it was the under-Rosalind calling gently, forlornly, all armour thrown aside, the heart naked.

And again there are no words.

Words exist that can, used by a poet, achieve a dim monochrome of the body's love, but beyond that they fail clumsily.

My love flowed out to her, hers back to me. Mine stroked

and soothed. Hers caressed. The distance – and the difference – between us dwindled and vanished. We could meet, mingle, and blend. Neither one of us existed any more; for a time there was a single being that was both. There was escape from the solitary cell; a brief symbiosis, sharing all the world. . . .

No one else knew the hidden Rosalind. Even Michael and the rest caught only glimpses of her. They did not know at what cost the overt Rosalind had been wrought. None of them knew my dear, tender Rosalind longing for escape, gentleness, and love; grown afraid now of what she had built for her own protection; yet more afraid still, of facing life without it.

Duration is nothing. Perhaps it was only for an instant we were together again. The importance of a point is in its existence; it has no dimensions.

Then we were apart, and I was becoming aware of mundane things: a dim grey sky; considerable discomfort; and, presently, Michael, anxiously inquiring what had happened to me. With an effort I raked my wits together.

'I don't know – something hit me,' I told him, 'but I think I'm all right now – except that my head aches, and I'm damned uncomfortable.'

It was only as I replied that I perceived why I was so uncomfortable – that I was still in the pannier, but sort of folded into it, and the pannier itself was still in motion.

Michael did not find that very informative. He applied to Rosalind.

'They jumped down on us from overhanging branches. Four or five of them. One landed right on top of David,' she explained.

'They?' asked Michael.

'Fringes people,' she told him.

I was relieved. It had occurred to me that we might have been outflanked by the others. I was on the point of asking what was happening now when Michael inquired:

'Was it you they fired at last night?'

I admitted that we had been fired at, but there might have been other firing for all I knew.

'No. Only one lot,' he told us with disappointment. 'I hoped

they'd made a mistake and were on a false trail. We've all been called together. They think it's too risky to come farther into the Fringes in small groups. We're supposed to be assembled to move off in four hours or so from now. Round about a hundred they reckon. They've decided that if we do meet any Fringes people and give them a good hiding it'll save trouble later on, anyway. You'd better get rid of those great-horses – you'll never cover your trail while you have them.'

'A bit late for that advice,' Rosalind told him. 'I'm in a pannier on the first horse with my thumbs tied together, and David's in a pannier on the second.'

'Where's Petra?' asked Michael anxiously.

'Oh, she's all right. She's in the other pannier of this horse, fraternizing with the man in charge.'

'What happened, exactly?' Michael demanded.

'Well, first they dropped on us, and then a lot more came out of the trees and steadied up the horses. They made us get down and lifted David down. Then when they'd talked and argued for a bit, they decided to get rid of us. So they loaded us into the panniers again, like this, and put a man on each horse and sent us on – the same way we'd been going.'

'Farther into the Fringes, that is?'

'Yes.'

'Well, at least that's the best direction,' Michael commented.

'What's the attitude? Threatening?'

'Oh, no. They're just being careful we don't run off. They seemed to have some idea who we were, but weren't quite sure what to do with us. They argued a bit over that, but they were much more interested in the great-horses really, I think. The man on this horse seems to be quite harmless. He's talking to Petra with an odd sort of earnestness – I'm not sure he isn't a little simple.'

'Can you find out what they're intending to do with you?'

'I did ask, but I don't think he knows. He's just been told to take us somewhere.'

'Well –' Michael seemed at a loss for once. 'Well, I suppose all we can do is wait and see – but it'll do no harm to let him know we'll be coming after you.'

He left it at that for the moment.

I struggled and wriggled round. With some difficulty I managed to get on to my feet and stand up in the swaying basket. The man in the other pannier looked round at me quite amiably.

'Whoa, there!' he said to the great-horse, and reined in. He unslung a leather bottle from his shoulder, and swung it across to me on the strap. I uncorked it, drank gratefully, and swung it back to him. We went on.

I was able to see our surroundings now. It was broken country, no longer thick forest, though well-wooded, and even a first look at it assured me that my father had been right about normality being mocked in these parts. I could scarcely identify a single tree with certainty. There were familiar trunks supporting the wrong shape of tree: familiar types of branches growing out of the wrong kind of bark, and bearing the wrong kind of leaves. For a while our view to the left was cut off by a fantastically-woven fence of immense bramble trunks with spines as big as shovels. In another place a stretch of ground looked like a dried-out river-bed full of large boulders, but the boulders turned out to be globular fungi set as close together as they could grow. There were trees with trunks too soft to stand upright, so that they looped over and grew along the ground. Here and there were patches of miniature trees, shrunk and gnarled, and looking centuries old.

I glanced surreptitiously again at the man in the other pannier. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with him except that he looked very dirty, as were his ragged clothes and crumpled hat. He caught my eye on him.

'Never been in the Fringes before, boy?' he asked.

'No,' I told him. 'Is it all like this?'

He grinned, and shook his head.

'None of it's like any other part. That's why the Fringes is the Fringes; pretty near nothing grows true to stock here, yet.'

'Yet - ?' I repeated.

'Sure. It'll settle down, though, in time. Wild Country was Fringes once, but it's steadier now; likely the parts you come from were Wild Country once, but they've settled down more.

God's little game of patience I reckon it is, but He certainly takes His time over it.'

'God?' I said doubtfully. 'They've always taught us that it's the Devil that rules in the Fringes.'

He shook his head.

'That's what they tell you over there. 'Tisn't so, boy. It's your parts where the old Devil's hanging on and looking after his own. Arrogant, they are. The true image, and all that. . . . Want to be like the Old People. Tribulation hasn't taught 'em a thing. . . .

'The Old People thought *they* were the tops, too. Had ideals, they did; knew just how the world ought to be run. All they had to do was get it fixed up comfortable, and keep it that way; then everybody'd be fine, on account of their ideas being a lot more civilized than God's.'

He shook his head.

'Didn't work out, boy. Couldn't work out. They weren't God's last word like they thought: God doesn't have any last word. If He did He'd be dead. But He isn't dead; and He changes and grows, like everything else that's alive. So when they were doing their best to get everything fixed and tidy on some kind of eternal lines they'd thought up for themselves, He sent along Tribulation to bust it up and remind 'em that life is change.

'He saw it wasn't going to come out the way things lay, so He shuffled the pack to see if it wouldn't give a better break next time.'

He paused to consider that a moment, and went on:

'Maybe He didn't shuffle quite enough. The same sequences seem to have got kind of stuck together some places. Parts where you come from, for instance. There they are, still on the same lines, still reckoning they're the last word, still trying their damndest to stay as they are and fix up just the same state of affairs that brought Tribulation last time. One day He's going to get pretty tired of the way they can't learn a lesson, and start showing them another trick or two.'

'Oh,' I said, vaguely but safely. It was odd, I felt, how many

people seemed to have positive, if conflicting, information upon God's views.

The man did not seem altogether satisfied that he had got his point home. He waved his hand at the deviational landscape about us, and I suddenly noticed his own irregularity: the right hand lacked the first three fingers.

'Some day,' he proclaimed, 'something is going to steady down out of all this. It'll be new, and new kinds of plants mean new creatures. Tribulation was a shake-up to give us a new start.'

'But where they can make the stock breed true, they destroy Deviations,' I pointed out.

'They try to; they think they do,' he agreed. 'They're pig-headedly determined to keep the Old People's standards - but do they? Can they? How do they *know* that their crops and their fruit and their vegetables are just the same? Aren't there disputes? And doesn't it nearly always turn out that the breed with the higher yield is accepted in the end? Aren't cattle cross-bred to get hardiness, or milk-yield, or meat? Sure, they can wipe out the obvious deviations, but are you sure that the Old people would recognize any of the present breeds at all? I'm not, by any means. You can't stop it, you see. You can be obstructive and destructive, and you can slow it all up and distort it for your own ends, but somehow it keeps on happening. Just look at these horses.'

'They're government approved,' I told him.

'Sure. That's just what I mean,' he said.

'But if it keeps on anyway, I don't see why there had to be Tribulation,' I objected.

'For other forms it keeps on keeping on,' he said, 'but not for man, not for kinds like the Old People and your people, if they can help it. They stamp on any change: they close the way and keep the type fixed because they've got the arrogance to think themselves perfect. As they reckon it, they, and only they, are in the true image; very well, then it follows that if the image *is* true, they themselves must be God: and, being God, they reckon themselves entitled to decree, "thus far, and no farther." That is their great sin: they try to strangle the life out of Life.'

There was an air about the last few sentences, rather out of keeping with the rest, which caused me to suspect I had encountered some kind of creed once more. I decided to shift the conversation on to a more practical plane by inquiring why we had been taken prisoner.

He did not seem very sure about that, except to assure me that it was always done when any stranger was found entering Fringes territory.

I thought that over, and then got into touch with Michael again.

'What do you suggest we tell them?' I asked. 'I imagine there'll be an examination. When they find we're physically normal we shall have to give some reason for being on the run.'

'Best to tell them the truth, only minimize it. Play it right down the way Katherine and Sally did. Just let them know enough to account for it,' he suggested.

'Very well,' I agreed. 'Do you understand that, Petra? You tell them you can just make think-pictures to Rosalind and me. Nothing about Michael, or Sealand people.'

'The Sealand people are coming to help. They're not so far away as they were, now,' she told us confidently.

Michael received that with scepticism. 'All very nice - *if* they can. But don't mention them.'

'All right,' Petra agreed.

We discussed whether we would tell our two guards about the intended pursuit, and decided it would do no harm.

The man in the other pannier showed no surprise at the news.

'Good. That'll suit us,' he said. But he explained no further, and we plodded steadily on.

Petra began to converse with her distant friend again, and there was no doubt that the distance was less. Petra did not have to use such disturbing force to reach her, and for the first time I was able by straining hard to catch bits of the other side of the exchange. Rosalind caught it, too. She put out a question as strongly as she could. The unknown strengthened her projection and came to us clearly, pleased to have made contact, and anxious to know more than Petra could tell.

Rosalind explained what she could of our present situation, and that we did not seem to be in immediate danger. The other advised:

'Be cautious. Agree to whatever they say, and play for time. Be emphatic about the danger you are in from your own people. It is difficult to advise you without knowing the tribe. Some deviational tribes detest the appearance of normality. It can't do any harm to exaggerate how different you are *inside* from your own people. The really important matter is the little girl. Keep her safe at all costs. We have never before known such a power of projection in one so young. What is her name?'

Rosalind spelt it out in letter-forms. Then she asked:

'But who are you? What is this Sealand?'

'We are the New People - your kind of people. The people who can think-together. We're the people who are going to build a new kind of world - different from the Old People's world, and from the savages.'

'The kind of people that God intended, perhaps?' I inquired, with a feeling of being on familiar ground again.

'I don't know about that. Who does? But we do know that we can make a better world than the Old People did. They were only ingenious half-humans, little better than savages; all living shut off from one another, with only clumsy words to link them. Often they were shut off still more by different languages, and different beliefs. Some of them could think individually, but they had to remain individuals. Emotions they could sometimes share, but they could not think collectively. When their conditions were primitive they could get along all right, as the animals can; but the more complex they made their world, the less capable they were of dealing with it. They had no means of consensus. They learnt to co-operate constructively in small units; but only destructively in large units. They aspired greedily, and then refused to face the responsibilities they had created. They created vast problems, and then buried their heads in the sands of idle faith. There was, you see, no real communication, no understanding between them. They could, at their best, be near-sublime animals, but not more.'

'They could never have succeeded. If they had not brought down Tribulation which all but destroyed them; then they would have bred with the carelessness of animals until they had reduced themselves to poverty and misery, and ultimately to starvation and barbarism. One way or another they were foredoomed because they were an inadequate species.'

It occurred to me again that these Sealanders had no little opinion of themselves. To one brought up as I had been this irreverence for the Old People was difficult to take. While I was still wrestling with it Rosalind asked:

'But you? Where do you come from?'

'Our ancestors had the good fortune to live on an island - or, rather, two islands - somewhat secluded. They did not escape Tribulation and its effects even there, though it was less violent there than in most places, but they were cut off from the rest of the world, and sank back almost to barbarism. Then, somehow, the strain of people who could think-together began. In time, those who were able to do it best found others who could do it a little, and taught them to develop it. It was natural for the people who could share thoughts to tend to marry one another, so that the strain was strengthened.'

'Later on, they started to discover thought-shape makers in other places, too. That was when they began to understand how fortunate they had been; they found that even in places where physical deviations don't count for much people who have think-together are usually persecuted.'

'For a long time nothing could be done to help the same kind of people in other places - though some tried to sail to Zealand in canoes, and sometimes they got there - but later, when we had machines again, we were able to fetch some of them to safety. Now we try to do that whenever we make contact - but we have never before made contact at anything like this distance. It is still a strain for me to reach you. It will get easier, but I shall have to stop now. Look after the little girl. She is unique and tremendously important. Protect her at all costs.'

The thought-patterns faded away, leaving nothing for a

moment. Then Petra came in. Whatever she may have failed to make of the rest, she had caught the last part all right.

'That's me,' she proclaimed, with satisfaction and totally unnecessary vigour.

We rocked, and recovered.

'Beware, odious smug child. We haven't met Hairy Jack yet,' Rosalind told her, with subduing effect. 'Michael,' she added, 'did all that reach you, too?'

'Yes,' Michael responded with a touch of reserve. 'Condescending, I thought. Sounded as if she were lecturing to children. Still coming from a devil of a long way away, too. I don't see how they can come fast enough to be any help at all. We shall be starting after you in a few minutes now.'

The great-horses clumped steadily on. The landscape continued to be disturbing and alarming to one brought up in respect for the propriety of forms. Certainly, few things were as fantastic as the growths that Uncle Axel had told of in the south; on the other hand, practically nothing was comfortably familiar, or even orthodox. There was so much confusion that it did not seem to matter any more whether a particular tree was an aberrate or just a miscegenate, but it was a relief to get away from trees and out into open country for a bit - though even there the bushes weren't homogeneal or identifiable, and the grass was pretty queer, too.

We stopped only once for food and drink, and for no more than half an hour before we were on our way again. Two hours or so later, after several more stretches of woodlands, we reached a medium-sized river. On our side the level ground descended in a sharp, steep bank to the water; on the other stood a line of low, reddish cliffs.

We turned downstream, keeping to the top of the bank. A quarter of a mile along, at a place marked by a grossly deviant tree shaped like a huge wooden pear, and with all its branches growing in one big tuft at the top, a runnel cut well back into the bank and made a way for the horses to get down. We forded the river obliquely, making for a gap in the opposite cliffs. When we reached it, it turned out to be little more than a cleft, so narrow in some places that the panniers scraped both

walls, and we could scarcely squeeze through. There was quite a hundred yards of it before the way widened and began to slope up to normal ground level.

Where the sides diminished to mere banks seven or eight men stood with bows in their hands. They gaped incredulously at the great-horses, and looked half-inclined to run. Abreast of them, we stopped.

The man in the other pannier jerked his head at me.

'Down you get, boy,' he told me.

Petra and Rosalind were already climbing down from the leading great-horse. As I reached the ground the driver gave a thump and both great-horses moved ponderously on. Petra clasped my hand nervously, but for the moment all the ragged, unkempt bowmen were still more interested in the horses than in us.

There was nothing immediately alarming about the group. One of the hands which held a bow had six fingers; one man displayed a head like a polished brown egg, without a hair on it, or on his face; another had immensely large feet and hands; but whatever was wrong with the rest was hidden under their rags.

Rosalind and I shared a feeling of relief at not being confronted with the kinds of grotesquerie we had half expected. Petra, too, was encouraged by finding that none of them fulfilled the traditional description of Hairy Jack. Presently, when they had watched the horses out of sight up a track that disappeared among trees, they turned their attention to us. A couple of them told us to come along, the rest remained where they were.

A well-used path led downwards through woods for a few hundred yards, and then gave on to a clearing. To the right ran a wall of the reddish cliffs again, not more than forty feet high. They appeared to be the reverse side of the ridge which retained the river, and the whole face was pocked by numerous holes, with ladders, roughly made of branches, leading to the higher openings.

The level ground in front was littered with crude huts and tents. One or two small cooking fires smoked among them. A

few tattered men and a rather larger number of slatternly-looking women moved around with no great activity.

We wound our way among hovels and refuse-heaps until we reached the largest of the tents. It appeared to be an old rick-cover – the loot, presumably, of some raid – fastened over a framework of lashed poles. A figure seated on a stool just inside the entrance looked up as we approached. The sight of his face jolted me with panic for a moment – it was so like my father's. Then I recognized him – the same 'spider-man' I had seen as a captive at Waknuk, seven or eight years before.

The two men who had brought us pushed us forward, in front of him. He looked the three of us over. His eyes travelled up and down Rosalind's slim straight figure in a way I did not care for – nor she, either. Then he studied me more carefully, and nodded to himself, as if satisfied over something.

'Remember me?' he asked.

'Yes,' I told him.

He shifted his gaze from my face. He let it stray over the conglomeration of hutches and shacks, and then back again to me.

'Not much like Waknuk,' he said.

'Not much,' I agreed.

He paused quite lengthily, in contemplation. Then:

'Know who I am?' he inquired.

'I think so. I think I found out,' I told him.

He raised an eyebrow, questioningly.

'My father had an elder brother,' I said. 'He was thought to be normal until he was about three or four years old. Then his certificate was revoked, and he was sent away.'

He nodded slowly.

'But not *quite* right,' he said. 'His mother loved him. His nurse was fond of him, too. So when they came to take him away he was already missing – but they'd hush that up, of course. They'd hush the whole thing up: pretend it never happened.' He paused again, reflectively. Presently he added:

'The eldest son. The heir. Waknuk should be mine. It would be – except for *this*.' He stretched out his long arm, and re-

garded it for a moment. Then he dropped it and looked at me again.

'Do you know what the length of a man's arm should be?'

'No,' I admitted.

'Nor do I. But somebody in Rigo does, some expert on the true image. So, no Waknuk – and I must live like a savage among savages. Are you the eldest son?'

'The only son,' I told him. 'There was a younger one, but –'

'No certificate, eh?'

I nodded.

'So you, too, have lost Waknuk!'

That aspect of things had never troubled me. I do not think I had ever had any real expectation of inheriting Waknuk. There had always been the sense of insecurity – the expectation, almost the certainty, that one day I should be discovered. I had lived too long with that expectation to feel the resentment that embittered him. Now that it was resolved, I was glad to be safely away, and I told him so. It did not please him. He looked at me thoughtfully.

'You've not the guts to fight for what's yours by right?' he suggested.

'If it's yours by right, it can't be mine by right,' I pointed out. 'But my meaning was that I've had more than enough of living in hiding.'

'We all live in hiding here,' he said.

'Maybe,' I told him. 'But you can be your own selves. You don't have to live a pretence. You don't have to watch yourselves every moment, and think twice whenever you open your mouths.'

He nodded slowly.

'We heard about you. We have our ways,' he said. 'What I don't understand is why they are after you in such strength.'

'We think,' I explained, 'that we worry them more than the usual deviants because they've no way of identifying us. I fancy they must be suspecting that there are a lot more of us that they haven't discovered, and they want to get hold of us to make us tell.'

'An even more than usually good reason for not being caught,' he said.

I was aware that Michael had come in and that Rosalind was answering him, but I could not attend to two conversations at once, so I left that to her.

'So they are coming right into the Fringes after you? How many of them?' he asked.

'I'm not sure,' I said, considering how to play our hand to the best advantage.

'From what I've heard, you should have ways of finding out,' he said.

I wondered how much he did know about us, and whether he knew about Michael, too – but that seemed unlikely. With his eyes a little narrowed, he went on:

'It'll be better not to fool with us, boy. It's you they're after, and you've brought trouble this way with you. Why should we care what happens to you? Quite easy to put one of you where they'd find you.'

Petra caught the implication of that, and panicked.

'More than a hundred men,' she said.

He turned a thoughtful eye on her for a moment.

'So there is one of you with them – I rather thought there might be,' he observed, and nodded again. 'A hundred men is a great many to send after just you three. Too many . . . I see . . .' He turned back to me. 'There will have been rumours lately about trouble working up in the Fringes?'

'Yes,' I admitted.

He grinned.

'So it comes in handy. For the first time they decide that they will take the initiative, and invade us – and pick you up, too, of course. They'll be following your trail, naturally. How far have they got?'

I consulted Michael, and learnt that the main body had still some miles to go before they would join the party that had fired on us and bolted the great-horses. The difficulty then was to find a way of conveying the position intelligibly to the man in front of me. He appreciated that, and did not seem greatly perturbed.

'Is your father with them?' he asked.

That was a question which I had been careful not to put to Michael before. I did not put it now. I simply paused for a moment, and then told him 'No.' Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Petra about to speak and felt Rosalind pounce on her.

'A pity,' said the spidery man. 'It's quite a time now I've been hoping that one day I'd meet your father on equal terms. From what I've heard I should have thought he'd be there. Maybe he's not such a valiant champion of the true image as they say.' He went on looking at me with a steady, penetrating gaze. I could feel Rosalind's sympathy and understanding why I had not put the question to Michael, like a hand-clasp.

Then, quite suddenly, the man dismissed me from his attention and turned to consider Rosalind. She looked back at him. She stood with her straight, confident air, eyeing him levelly and coldly for long seconds. Then, suddenly, to my astonishment, she broke. Her eyes dropped. She flushed. He smiled slightly. . . .

But he was wrong. It was not surrender to the stronger character, the conqueror. It was loathing, a horror which broke her defences from within. I had a glimpse of him from her mind, hideously exaggerated. The fears she hid so well burst up and she was terrified; not as a woman weakened by a man, but as a child in terror of a monstrosity. Petra, too, caught the involuntary shape, and it shocked her into a scream.

I jumped full at the man, overturning the stool and sending him sprawling. The two men behind us leapt after me, but I got in at least one good blow before they could drag me off.

The spider-man sat up, and rubbed his jaw. He grinned at me, but not with any amusement.

'Does you credit,' he conceded, 'but not much more.' He got up on his gangling legs. 'Not seen much of the women around here, have you, boy? Take a look at 'em as you go. Maybe you'll understand a bit more. Besides, this one can have children. I've had a fancy for some children a long time now – even if they do happen to take after their father a bit.' He grinned briefly again, and then frowned at me. 'Better take

it the way it is, boy. Be a sensible fellow. I don't give second chances.'

He looked from me to the men who were holding me.

'Chuck him out,' he told them. 'And if he doesn't seem to understand that that means stay out, shoot him.'

The two of them jerked me round and marched me off. At the edge of the clearing one of them helped me along a path with his boot.

'Keep on going,' he said.

I got up and turned round, but one of them had an arrow trained on me. He gave a shake of his head to urge me on. So I did what I was told, kept on going - for a few yards, until the trees hid me; then I doubled back under cover.

Just what they were expecting. But they didn't shoot me; they just beat me up and slung me back among the undergrowth. I remember flying through the air, but I don't remember landing. . . .

I WAS being dragged along. There were hands under my shoulders. Small branches were whipping back and slapping me in the face.

'Sh - !' whispered a voice behind me.

'Give me a minute. I'll be all right,' I whispered back.

The dragging stopped. I lay pulling myself together for a moment, and then rolled over. A woman, a young woman, was sitting back on her heels, looking at me.

The sun was low now, and it was dim under the trees. I could not see her well. There was dark hair hanging down on each side of a sunburnt face, and the glint of dark eyes regarding me earnestly. The bodice of her dress was ragged, a nondescript tawny colour, with stains on it. There were no sleeves, but what struck me most was that it bore no cross. I had never before been face to face with a woman who wore no protective cross stitched to her dress. It looked queer, almost indecent. We faced one another for some seconds.

'You don't know me, David,' she said sadly.

Until then I had not. It was the way she said 'David' that suddenly told me.

'Sophie!' I said, 'Oh, Sophie. . . !'

She smiled.

'Dear David,' she said. 'Have they hurt you badly, David?'

I tried moving my arms and legs. They were stiff and they ached in several places, so did my body and my head. I felt some blood caked on my left cheek, but there seemed to be nothing broken. I started to get up, but she stretched out a hand and put it on my arm.

'No, not yet. Wait a little, till it's dark.' She went on looking at me. 'I saw them bring you in. You and the little girl, and the other girl - who is she, David?'

That brought me fully round, with a jolt. Frantically I sought for Rosalind and Petra, and could not reach them. Michael felt my panic and came in steadily. Relieved, too.

'Thank goodness for that. We've been worried stiff about you. Take it easy. They're all right, both of them tired out and exhausted; they're asleep.'

'Is Rosalind -?'

'She's all right, I tell you. What's been happening to you?'

I told him. The whole exchange only took a few seconds, but long enough for Sophie to be regarding me curiously.

'Who is she, David?' she repeated.

I explained that Rosalind was my cousin. She watched me as I spoke, and then nodded slowly.

'He wants her, doesn't he?' she asked.

'That's what he said,' I admitted, grimly.

'She could give him babies?' she persisted.

'What are you trying to do to me?' I asked her.

'So you're in love with her?' she went on.

A word again. . . . When the minds have learnt to mingle, when no thought is wholly one's own, and each has taken too much of the other ever to be entirely himself alone; when one has reached the beginning of seeing with a single eye, loving with a single heart, enjoying with a single joy; when there can be moments of identity and nothing is separate save bodies that long for one another. . . . When there is that, where is the word? There is only the inadequacy of the word that exists.

'We love one another,' I said.

Sophie nodded. She picked up a few twigs, and watched her brown fingers break them. She said:

'He's gone away - where the fighting is. She's safe just now.'

'She's asleep,' I told her. 'They're both asleep.'

Her eyes came back to mine, puzzled.

'How do you know?'

I told her briefly, as simply as I could. She went on breaking twigs as she listened. Then she nodded.

'I remember. My mother said there was something . . . something about the way you sometimes seemed to understand her before she spoke. Was that it?'

'I think so. I think your mother had a little of it, without knowing she had it,' I said.

'It must be a very wonderful thing to have,' she said, half wistfully. 'Like more eyes, inside you.'

'Something like,' I admitted. 'It's difficult to explain. But it isn't all wonderful. It can hurt a lot sometimes.'

'To be any kind of deviant is to be hurt - always,' she said. She continued to sit back on her heels, looking at her hands in her lap, seeing nothing.

'If she were to give him children, he wouldn't want me any more,' she said at last.

There was still enough light to catch a glistening on her cheeks.

'Sophie-dear,' I said. 'Are you in love with him - with this spider-man?'

'Oh, don't call him that - please - we can't any of us help being what we are. His name's Gordon. He's kind to me, David. He's fond of me. You've got to have as little as I have to know how much that means. You've never known loneliness. You can't understand the awful emptiness that's waiting all round us here. I'd have given him babies gladly, if I could. . . . I - oh, why do they do that to us? Why didn't they kill me? It would have been kinder than this . . .'

She sat without a sound. The tears squeezed out from under the closed lids and ran down her face. I took her hand between my own.

I remembered watching. The man with his arm linked in the woman's, the small figure on top of the pack-horse waving back to me as they disappeared into the trees. Myself desolate, a kiss still damp on my cheek, a lock tied with a yellow ribbon in my hand. I looked at her now, and my heart ached.

'Sophie,' I said. 'Sophie, darling. It's not going to happen. Do you understand? It won't happen. Rosalind will never let it happen. I *know* that.'

She opened her eyes again, and looked at me through the brimming tears.

'You can't *know* a thing like that about another person. You're just trying to -'

'I'm not, Sophie. I do know. You and I could only *know*

very little about one another. But with Rosalind it is different: it's part of what thinking-together means.'

She regarded me doubtfully.

'Is that really true? I don't understand -'

'How should you? But it is true. I could feel what she was feeling about the spi - about that man.'

She went on looking at me, a trifle uneasily.

'You can't see what I think?' she inquired, with a touch of anxiety.

'No more than you can tell what I think,' I assured her. 'It isn't a kind of spying. It's more as if you could just talk all your thoughts, if you liked - and not talk them if you wanted them private.'

It was more difficult trying to explain it to her than it had been to Uncle Axel, but I kept on struggling to simplify it into words until I suddenly became aware that the light had gone, and I was talking to a figure I could scarcely see. I broke off.

'Is it dark enough now?'

'Yes. It'll be safe if we go carefully,' she told me. 'Can you walk all right? It isn't far.'

I got up, well aware of stiffness and bruises, but not of anything worse. She seemed able to see better in the gloom than I could, and took my hand, to lead the way. We kept to the trees, but I could see fires twinkling on my left, and realized that we were skirting the encampment. We kept on round it until we reached the low cliff that closed the north-west side, and then along the base of that, in the shadow, for fifty yards or so. There she stopped, and laid my hand on one of the rough ladders I had seen against the rock face.

'Follow me,' she whispered, and suddenly whisked upwards.

I climbed more cautiously until I reached the top of the ladder where it rested against a rock ledge. Her arm reached out and helped me in.

'Sit down,' she told me.

The lighter patch through which I had come disappeared. She moved about, looking for something. Presently there were sparks as she used a flint and steel. She blew up the sparks

until she was able to light a pair of candles. They were short, fat, burnt with smoky flames, and smelt abominably, but they enabled me to see the surroundings.

The place was a cave about fifteen feet deep and nine wide, cut out of the sandy rock. The entrance was covered by a skin curtain hooked across it. In one corner of the inner end there was a flaw in the roof from which water dripped steadily at about a drop a second. It fell into a wooden bucket; the overflow of the bucket trickled down a groove for the full length of the cave, and out of the entrance. In the other inner corner was a mattress of small branches, with skins and a tattered blanket on it. There were a few bowls and utensils. A blackened fire-hollow near the entrance, empty now, showed an ingenious draught-hole drilled to the outer air. The handles of a few knives and other tools protruded from niches in the walls. A spear, a bow, a leather quiver with a dozen arrows in it, lay close to the brushwood mattress. There was nothing much else.

I thought of the kitchen of the Wenders' cottage. The clean, bright room that had seemed so friendly because it had no texts on the walls. The candles flickered, sent greasy smoke up to the roof, and stank.

Sophie dipped a bowl into the bucket, rummaged a fairly clean bit of rag out of a niche, and brought it across to me. She washed the blood off my face and out of my hair, and examined the cause.

'Just a cut. Not deep,' she said, reassuringly.

I washed my hands in the bowl. She tipped the water into the runnel, rinsed the bowl and put it away.

'You're hungry, David?' she said.

'Very,' I told her. I had had nothing to eat all day except during our one brief stop.

'Stay here. I won't be long,' she instructed, and slipped out under the skin curtain.

I sat looking at the shadows that danced on the rock walls, listening to the plop-plop-plop of the drips. And very likely, I told myself, this is luxury; in the Fringes. 'You've got to have as little as I have . . .' Sophie had said, though it had not been

material things that she meant. To escape the forlornness and the squalor I sought Michael's company.

'Where are you? What's been happening?' I asked him.

'We've leaguered for the night,' he told me. 'Too dangerous to go on in the dark.' He tried to give me a picture of the place as he had seen it just before sunset, but it might have been a dozen spots along our route. 'It's been slow going all day - tiring, too. They know their woods, these Fringes people. We've been expecting a real ambush somewhere on the way, but it's been sniping and harassing all the time. We've lost three killed, but had seven wounded - only two of them seriously.'

'But you're still coming on?'

'Yes. The feeling is that now we do have quite a force here for once, it's a chance to give the Fringes something that will keep them quiet for some time to come. Besides, you three are badly wanted. There's a rumour that there are a couple of dozen, perhaps more, of us scattered about Waknuk and surrounding districts, and you have to be brought back to identify them.' He paused a moment there, then he went on in a worried, unhappy mood.

'In point of fact, David, I'm afraid - very much afraid - there is only one.'

'One?'

'Rachel managed to reach me, right at her limit, very faintly. She says something has happened to Mark.'

'They've caught him?'

'No. She thinks not. He'd have let her know if it were that. He's simply stopped. Not a thing from him in over twenty-four hours now.'

'An accident perhaps? Remember Walter Brent - that boy who was killed by a tree? He just stopped like that.'

'It might be. Rachel just doesn't know. She's frightened; it leaves her all alone now. She was right at her limit, and I was almost. Another two or three miles, and we'll be out of touch.'

'It's queer I didn't hear at least your side of this,' I told him.

'Probably while you were knocked out,' he suggested.

'Well, when Petra wakes she'll be able to keep in touch with Rachel,' I reminded him. 'She doesn't seem to have any kind of limit.'

'Yes, of course. I'd forgotten that,' he agreed. 'It will help her a bit.'

A few moments later a hand came under the curtain, pushing a wooden bowl into the cave-mouth. Sophie scrambled in after it, and gave it to me. She trimmed up the disgusting candles and then squatted down on the skin of some unidentifiable animal while I helped myself with a wooden spoon. An odd dish; it appeared to consist of several kinds of shoots, diced meat, and crumbled hard-bread, but the result was not at all bad, and very welcome. I enjoyed it, almost to the last when I was suddenly smitten in a way that sent a whole spoonful cascading down my shirt. Petra was awake again.

I got in a response at once. Petra switched straight from distress to elation. It was flattering, but almost as painful. Evidently she woke Rosalind, for I caught her pattern among the chaos of Michael asking what the hell? and Petra's Sealand friend anxiously protesting.

Presently Petra got a hold of herself, and the turmoil quietened down. There was a sense of all other parties relaxing cautiously.

'Is she safe now? What was all that thunder and lightning about?' Michael inquired.

Petra told us, keeping it down with an obvious effort:

'We thought David was dead. We thought they'd killed him.'

Now I began to catch Rosalind's thoughts, firming into comprehensible shapes out of a sort of swirl. I was humbled, bowled over, happy, and distressed all at the same time. I could not think much more clearly in response, for all I tried. It was Michael who put an end to that.

'This is scarcely decent for third parties,' he observed. 'When you two can disentangle yourselves there are other things to be discussed.' He paused. 'Now,' he continued, 'what is the position?'

We sorted it out. Rosalind and Petra were still in the tent where I had last seen them. The spider-man had gone away, leaving a large, pink-eyed, white-haired man in charge of them. I explained my situation.

'Very well,' said Michael. 'You say this spider-man seems to be in some sort of authority, and that he has come forward towards the fighting. You've no idea whether he intends to join in the fighting himself, or whether he is simply making tactical dispositions? You see, if it is the latter he may come back at any time.'

'I've no idea,' I told him.

Rosalind came in abruptly, as near to hysteria as I had known her.

'I'm frightened of him. He's a different kind. Not like us. Not the same sort at all. It would be outrageous - like an animal. I couldn't, ever... If he tries to take me I shall kill myself...'

Michael threw himself on that like a pail of ice-water.

'You won't do anything so damned silly. You'll kill the spider-man, if necessary.' With an air of having settled that point conclusively he turned his attention elsewhere. At his full range he directed a question to Petra's friend.

'You still think you can reach us?'

The reply came still from a long distance, but clearly and without effort now. It was a calmly confident 'Yes'.

'When?' Michael asked.

There was a pause before the reply, as if for consultation, then:

'In not more than sixteen hours from now,' she told him, just as confidently. Michael's scepticism diminished. For the first time he allowed himself to admit the possibility of her help.

'Then it is a question of ensuring that you three are kept safe for that long,' he told us, meditatively.

'Wait a minute. Just hold on a bit,' I told them.

I looked up at Sophie. The smoky candles gave enough light to show that she was watching my face intently, a little uneasily.

'You were "talking" to that girl?' she said.

'And my sister. They're awake now,' I told her. 'They are in the tent, and being guarded by an albino. It seems odd.'

'Odd?' she inquired.

'Well, one would have thought a woman in charge of them...'

'This is the Fringes,' she reminded me with bitterness.

'It - oh, I see,' I said awkwardly. 'Well, the point is this: do you think there is any way they can be got out of there before he comes back? It seems to me that now is the time. Once he does come back... ' I shrugged, keeping my eyes on hers.

She turned her head away and contemplated the candles for some moments. Then she nodded.

'Yes. That would be best for all of us - all of us, except him... ' she added, half sadly. 'Yes, I think it can be done.'

'Straight away?'

She nodded again. I picked up the spear that lay by the couch, and weighed it in my hand. It was somewhat light, but well balanced. She looked at it, and shook her head.

'You must stay here, David,' she told me.

'But -' I began.

'No. If you were to be seen there would be an alarm. No one will take any notice of me going to his tent, even if they do see me.'

There was sense in that. I laid the spear down, though with reluctance.

'But can you -?'

'Yes,' she said decisively.

She got up and went to one of the niches. From it she pulled out a knife. The broad blade was clean and bright. It looked as if it might once have been part of the kitchen furnishings of a raided farm. She slipped it into the belt of her skirt, leaving only the dark handle protruding. Then she turned and looked at me for a long moment.

'David -' she began, tentatively.

'What?' I asked.

She changed her mind. In a different tone she said:

'Will you tell them no noise? Whatever happens, no sounds at all? Tell them to follow me, and have dark pieces of cloth ready to wrap round themselves. Will you be able to make all that clear to them?'

'Yes,' I told her. 'But I wish you'd let me --'

She shook her head and cut me short.

'No, David. It'd only increase the risk. You don't know the place.'

She pinched out the candles, and unhooked the curtain. For a moment I saw her silhouetted against the paler darkness of the entrance, then she was gone.

I gave her instructions to Rosalind, and we impressed on Petra the necessity for silence. Then there was nothing to do but wait and listen to the steady drip-drip-drip in the darkness.

I could not sit still for long like that. I went to the entrance and put my head out into the night. There were a few cooking fires glowing among the shacks; people moving about, too, for the glows blinked occasionally as figures crossed in front of them. There was a murmur of voices, a slight, composite stir of small movements, a night-bird calling harshly a little distance away, the cry of an animal still farther off. Nothing more.

We were all waiting. A small shapeless surge of excitement escaped for a moment from Petra. No one commented on it.

Then from Rosalind a reassuring 'it's-all-right' shape, but with a curious secondary quality of shock to it. It seemed wiser not to distract their attention now by asking the reason for that.

I listened. There was no alarm; no change in the conglomerate murmur. It seemed a long time until I heard the crunch of grit underfoot, directly below me. The poles of the ladder scraped faintly on the rock edge as the weight came on them. I moved back into the cave out of the way. Rosalind was asking silently, a little doubtfully:

'Is this right? Are you there, David?'

'Yes. Come along up,' I told them.

One figure appeared dimly outlined in the opening. Then

another, smaller form, then a third. The opening was blotted out. Presently the candles were alight again.

Rosalind, and Petra, too, watched silently in horrid fascination as Sophie scooped a bowlful of water from the bucket to wash the blood off her arms and clean the knife.