

LORD of the STARS

Jean and Jeff
Sutton



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Lord of the Stars

Gultur, Lord of the Stars, knew his race was destined to conquer the Universe, for such was ordained when life first emerged from the slate-gray seas of Munga. He, himself, had decimated a score of worlds. But then, at the brink of his greatest victory, he encountered an alien youth who dwelt alone on the planet of an emerald sun.



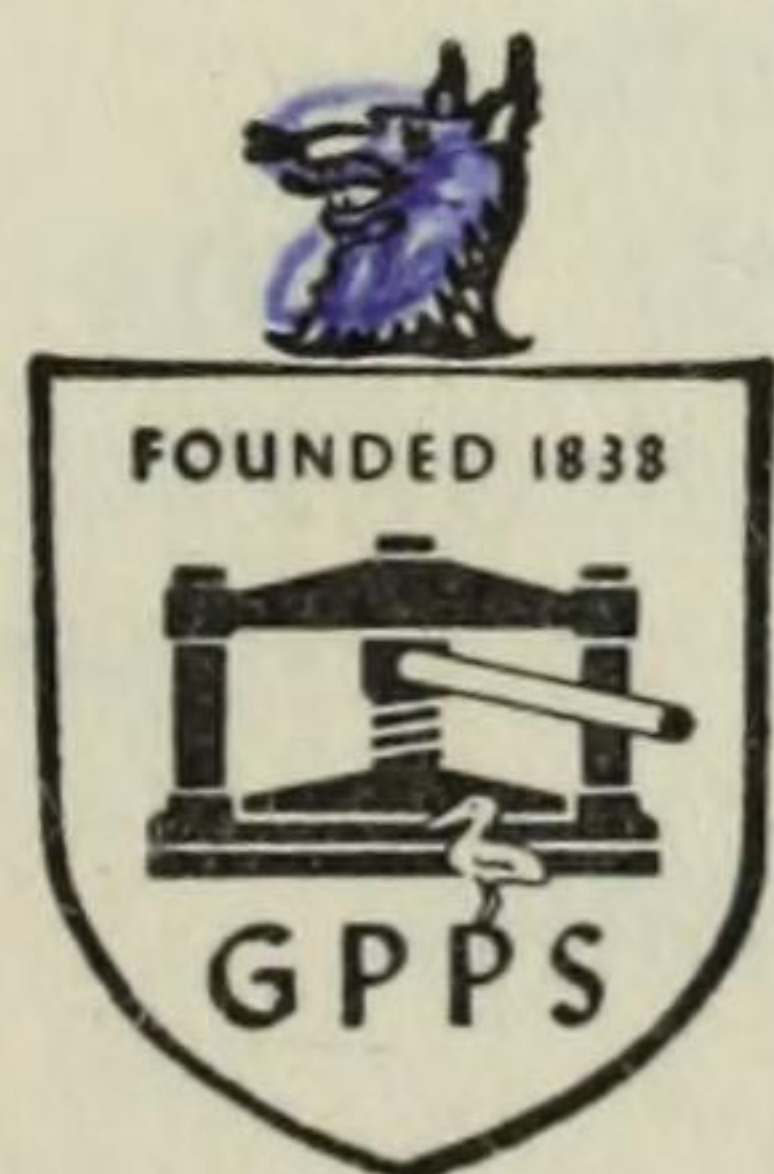
LORD of the STARS

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Jean and Jeff Sutton

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For the four Kicklighters—
Kurt, Andy, Nathan and Laurie Tim

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TOWARD DUSK, when the great emerald sun dipped below the horizon and the heat of day was past, but before the chill of night seeped in, Danny liked to walk out on the meadow and talk with Zandro. He could talk with Zandro while in the forest, of course, or even when inside the big ship; but somehow it was more fun when he was in the meadow.

Although they talked of many things—of galaxies and small, furry creatures that scurried through the tall grasses and hideous dangers that lurked in the nearby swamp—he had never seen Zandro. Danny didn't find that strange, for in his short memory life took many forms—or no form at all.

Zandro was one of the no-form ones.

He never wondered that Zandro's voice was silent, that it came into his mind in almost the same way his own thoughts came. Yet, when he considered it, there was a difference. He could *feel* Zandro enter his mind; it was almost like a physical touch. Often, at night, he would awaken to the sensation, but then Zandro would quickly withdraw, leaving him more lonely than ever in the solitude of the big ship.

Neither did he wonder that he communicated with

Zandro in the same way, without speech, for words and images projected mentally came quite naturally. By projecting images, he could express thoughts for which he had no words. Besides, although he often spoke aloud to himself, it didn't make sense to speak aloud to someone he couldn't see.

Danny got a warm feeling whenever he thought of Zandro. Zandro was his friend, his protector! That idea had come to him . . . how long ago? He wasn't certain, for at first he'd had but a vague concept of time. But it was true; without Zandro . . .

The thought frightened him. Without Zandro he wouldn't have known of the danger in the swamp. Neither would he have known about the food-yielding trees and vines, how to find the edible plants that grew in the forest shade, or how to use the tough cloth material he had found stowed away in the big ship to protect his body against the hot sun and the thorns of trees.

He still remembered how Zandro first had warned him of the storms. He had started toward the meadow when Zandro touched his mind and said, "*You must return to the ship.*"

"*Now?*" he asked disappointedly. The pleasant half-light had just commenced.

"*A big storm is coming,*" Zandro warned.

"*Storm?*" Danny was puzzling over the word when Zandro projected a mental picture of great trees whipping back and forth, their branches tossing wildly against a darkened sky. Brilliant spears of light stabbed downward. With them came swirling balls of water, so closely packed they formed huge pools on the

ground. Frightening rumbling noises churned across the heavens.

"That is a storm," Zandro explained. Danny retreated fearfully to the ship, locking the hatch behind him. In a short while he heard the wind rising. Deep growling noises rumbled across the sky, followed by a spattering against the metal hull which he knew must be caused by the small balls of water. *Rain*, Zandro had called it.

After awhile he slept.

Since then Zandro had explained many things. The sky—the place Danny saw when he looked upward—went on and on and on, never ending. The big emerald fire in the sky—the heat he felt at day was caused by the fire—was a sun. The sun also gave light, which was why the darkness came when the sun fell below the grassy plain. The small, gleaming lights he saw in the sky at night also were suns, but they were too far away for their heat to be felt. And the place on which he lived was a planet.

"Planet?" he asked, when Zandro first told him.

"Planets travel around suns, but they give no heat," Zandro explained.

"Does this planet go around the emerald sun?" he asked wonderingly.

"Yes, and so do other planets—four more."

Danny gazed disbelievingly at the sky. *"Why can't I see them?"*

"You could at night if you knew where to look."

"Are they up there with the other suns?"

"Yes, but much closer."

"At night I see a big place in the sky where there are no suns," Danny said. *"Why is that?"*

"It's a huge gulf," Zandro replied. He explained how such rifts ran like rivers through certain parts of the galaxy, separating one mass of suns from another. The emerald sun was located at the edge of the gulf Danny had asked about.

Rivers in the sky! Rivers of nothingness! And on each side, great masses of stars, each hot like the emerald sun. Danny was fascinated. How much Zandro knew! *"You mentioned a galaxy,"* he said tentatively.

"A galaxy is a great cluster of suns," Zandro explained. *"The suns in our galaxy are as many as the leaves of the forest."*

Awed, Danny asked, *"Is there more than one galaxy?"*

"The number is endless."

"How can anything be endless?" he protested.

"That is the paradox of life," Zandro answered. The galaxy—a mass of great burning suns that flamed in a void, yet small when compared with the whole—was more than Danny could comprehend.

Another time, sitting beside the blue-green stream in the meadow, he asked, *"Why do you call me Danny?"*

"Because that is your name."

"Name?" He contemplated the word.

"Everything that exists has a name," Zandro answered patiently. *"Trees, mountains, rivers, rocks . . ."* As he spoke, Danny experienced a mental image of each thing named. Zandro talked for a long time, explaining how names were used to distinguish one thing from another, to group different objects into a class, or to locate

them in time or space. Danny thought that names were quite wonderful. He was Danny!

But then another thought struck him. "*There are lots of suns,*" he said.

"*Billions upon billions,*" Zandro agreed.

"*And lots of trees and lots of birds.*" He paused, feeling a great solitude fill his soul, then blurted desperately, "*Why is there only one me?*"

The silence came again, so vast and deep that even the gurgling of the stream seemed to cease before Zandro replied, "*There are others like you, Danny.*"

"*Like me?*" He clung desperately to the words, awed by the thought. "*Where?*"

"*Far, far away. They are not on Wenda.*"

"*Wenda?*"

"*The name of this planet.*"

"*Not here,*" Danny exclaimed. A dismal feeling filled his soul, bringing such a loneliness that he turned from the meadow and rushed blindly back to the ship, his eyes wet. He was alone!

He remained in the ship for several days. Too miserable to eat, sleepless, he stared at the white metal walls. When Zandro sent probing questions into his mind, he refused to answer. It was then he discovered that, by concentrating, he could shut out Zandro, leaving himself alone with his anguish.

Alone! That was how he felt. Trees had trees, and flowers had flowers; little furry animals lived in the woods, and birds hopped from branch to branch or flew over the grassy meadow. Shiny creatures with large, solemn eyes lived in the blue-green stream; they all had one another, but he had no one. His eyes brimmed at

the thought. When finally he returned to the meadow, he didn't mention being alone; it was too painful. Instead he asked, "*Why are some trees big and others small?*"

"There are different kinds of trees," Zandro told him.

"*But lots of them look alike, except for size.*"

"*Their ages differ, Danny.*"

"*Ages?*"

"*How long they've lived.*"

"*Don't they live forever?*"

"*Not the same trees.*" Zandro explained how trees came into being, how they flourished, reproduced, and died, leaving the younger trees behind. Danny believed it quite wonderful.

"*Does the same thing happen with birds and animals?*" he asked. "*Do they come from seeds?*"

"*Yes, but in not quite the same way.*" Zandro went on to say there were two kinds of each animal, and that together they brought new life. Male and female! Danny pondered it, filled with wonder. Life came, flourished, and passed away. That explained why the tall, pink flowers that grew in the meadow and sent their fragrance into the air often disappeared for long periods of time; the flowers died.

"*How old am I?*" he asked.

"*On Wenda your age would be seven and a half years old.*"

"*What are years?*"

"*The time it takes Wenda to go around the emerald sun. Each time it goes around is one year. You would be a different age on the planet of your native sun.*"

"*My native sun?*" He whispered the words aloud.

"A rather small sun," Zandro said. "Really quite insignificant. Your native planet is somewhat smaller than Wenda and revolves around its sun in a shorter period."

He asked faintly, *"If there's only me, how did I get here?"*

"You came in a ship."

"Alone?"

"The others who came with you are dead, Danny."

"Dead?" he asked tremulously. But, of course, he was alone.

"Life is a transient thing."

"How did they die?"

"The ship encountered trouble," Zandro explained. "It had something to do with fuel and critical mass, but I'm not exactly certain what."

"How do you know?"

A long silence ensued before Zandro said, *"Everything you've ever seen or heard, even though you might not understand it at the time, leaves a record in your brain. I read that record."*

"Is that how . . ." He struggled for words.

"That I know your language, so much about you? Yes, that is how. You have seen and heard far more than you could ever know, Danny, right back to your earliest infancy."

Caught with another thought, Danny scarcely heard him. *"But the ship wasn't destroyed,"* he protested. *"I can't see any marks on it."*

"The ship you came down in is just a lifeboat launched from the big ship. Did you ever wonder that it was so small?"

"It doesn't look small to me."

"Very small," Zandro asserted.

"Did it come down by itself?"

"It was automatically controlled." Zandro described how the lifeboat's instruments had been set to detect the nearest planet and to actuate the guidance and controls to bring it down into the atmosphere. When its sensors had determined that the planet was habitable, the landing had been made automatically. Otherwise the lifeboat would have sought another planet. "If none of the planets within this system had been habitable, then of course you would have died," he said.

Danny felt a great longing. *"Why didn't the others come with me?"*

"Perhaps there was no time. I'm not certain. Your memory pattern shows confusion."

"What does that mean?"

"There was great excitement at the time. Your mind is filled with bits of information, quite disconnected. I have a picture of a woman—yes, it was your mother—putting you in the lifeboat, then rushing off to get your father."

"Why didn't they come back?" he asked numbly.

"Perhaps there was no time," Zandro suggested. "I imagine the lifeboat was programmed to launch itself automatically at the last possible moment."

Danny gravely contemplated the information. If Zandro knew that much, he must know . . .

Zandro caught the question in Danny's mind and said, *"It was a colonist ship."*

"What does the word mean?"

"Colonists? They are people who settle new worlds."

"Was my father a colonist?"

"He was the captain." Zandro explained what that meant. *"The ship was named the Golden Ram."*

His father—the captain! Danny felt a surge of pride. *"Did he have a name?"*

"Gordell June," Zandro replied. *"Your mother's name was Wenda."*

"Like this planet?"

"He named this world for her, Danny."

"Were they coming here?" He asked excitedly.

"The name of this planet and the ship's proximity to it at the time it was destroyed indicate that, yes. Fortunately for you, they were quite close."

"Did you get that from my mind?"

"Yes, but much of it is fragmentary."

"You mentioned my native planet." Danny whispered aloud again. *"What is its name?"* Suddenly he felt an imperative need to know.

"Earth . . . Earth in the language of your people."

"Earth," he murmured, caught with the sound. A lovely name. He felt a great longing. *"My native sun?"* he asked humbly.

"Your people call it Sol."

"Sol is a fine name," he declared stoutly.

"A name is just a means of identification," Zandro countered. *"Remember, we spoke of names—how they are used to identify objects or to distinguish one object from another. A name is just a form of number."*

"No," he protested huskily, *"it's not that way at all."*

"Why do you say that?"

"A name makes me feel something," he asserted. *"Earth and Sol—they make me feel good all over."*

"You come from a race of dreamers, Danny."

"What are dreamers?"

"People who twist reality into unreality. It's characteristic of races which can't face the harshness of life."

"My father wasn't that way," he denied. *"He was captain of the Golden Ram. You said so yourself."*

"You're speaking from emotion," Zandro counseled.

"I'm not," he denied. *"How do you know what you say?"*

"I've seen things in your mind that your people call music and poetry and art," Zandro explained. *"They appear as attempts to disguise a Universe which is too fearful for them. Your people attach emotions to inanimate things to give them special meaning, make them something more or less than what they are. That is why a name gives you that feeling. Actually there are millions of planets quite similar to Earth. Then don't you find it strange that you should feel attached to that particular one?"*

"It's my native planet," he protested.

"You were far too young to remember it."

"Don't your people feel that way about their planet?" he asked wonderingly.

"My people face reality."

"But what is reality?"

"Reality is this: but one race can survive in the Universe. My race." The answer was stiff and uncompromising.

"Your race?" Danny felt a quick dismay.

"My race," Zandro repeated loftily. Danny sensed his quick withdrawal. Bewildered, he stood on the meadow,

watching the darkening sky. Zandro had always been so gentle, so understanding; but this time his projected thoughts had held a harsh, proud note that was totally unlike him.

Unlike him? The question startled Danny. Suddenly he realized how very little he did know of Zandro. Nothing, really. Zandro had always talked about him, never about himself. He'd never discussed his own people—who they were or where they came from. This was the first time he'd even mentioned them. *The Universe was created for his race!* Danny didn't believe that. His father wouldn't have believed it, either!

How had Zandro come to Wenda? He perused the question uneasily. Why was he here? Were others of his kind on the planet? If so, why hadn't Zandro mentioned them? It was all very strange. Why, he didn't even know what Zandro looked like . . . if he had a body!

The last thought was disquieting. Up to now he'd never considered Zandro as . . . a physical being. He'd always accepted him as . . . what? A voice in his mind, a curiously disembodied being who was profoundly wise. Could a mind exist without a body? He deemed it unlikely. What, then, did Zandro look like? More important, where, if he had a body, was it?

His perturbation grew. Why did Zandro invade his mind at night? Why did he flee at the instant of Danny's awareness? To escape detection? If so, why? He'd always wanted to ask, yet somehow had never quite dared. There was so much about Zandro he didn't know.

Yet Zandro was his friend; there was no denying that. Without him he might never have known who he was or how he had come to this vast, quiet, lonely

world with its flaming emerald sun. He might never have known about his father or mother or about the great ship named the *Golden Ram* which, like a bird, had flown among the stars—had broken its wing. He felt a sadness.

“Earth . . .” He spoke the name wonderingly. His father, Captain Gordell June of the *Golden Ram*, had come from there, had named this planet Wenda for his mother. He felt a fierce pride. His father must have considered it a very fine planet.

He gazed at the sky. In the late dusk the first stars had appeared, glowing in the firmament like the fireflies he often glimpsed at night in the forest. His eyes went to the great black gulf where no stars gleamed. Across that blackness, at some incalculable distance, was a wonderful sun named Sol; and around it sailed the wonderful planet of Earth.

He grew more sober as he reached the small clearing in the forest where the ship had settled down. Pausing at the edge of the trees, he studied the squat shape nestled in the tall grass. In the deep dusk it appeared scarcely more than a black shadow, discernible mainly through its geometric shape.

It was small; he could see that now. He looked again at the great black gulf in the sky and at the countless dusky orange stars sprinkled off to one side. Clearly this ship could never be flown among those stars—certainly not across that vast gulf. He knew that with certainty. But if men had bridged that gulf once, they would come again—another ship like the *Golden Ram*. He felt a burst of pride.

The interior of the ship was dark, but he knew every

inch of it from long experience. The sleeping pallets that folded against the walls, the dials and controls he'd never understood, the tool bins, cabinets that once had held emergency food supplies and in which he now stored the fruits and nuts he gathered in the forest, the narrow door that led to the curious engine compartment—how small everything appeared!

He closed the hatch, rotating the lock bar into place. Although he'd never seen a large animal, Zandro's warning of the fierce beasts that lived in the swamp prompted the precaution. He got some fruit from one of the bins, then lay on a pallet, staring upward into the darkness. *He wasn't the only one of his kind!* He felt a strange excitement. Across the gulfs of space were others like him.

His last thoughts before falling asleep were of the *Golden Ram*—how immense it must have been!—and of the brave man named Gordell June who had been its captain.

In the lonely, quiet hours preceding the half-light of dawn, when sleep was at its deepest, Danny felt the touch again. As if a warning signal had been triggered in his brain, he fought to awaken, yet curiously was unable to make his body obey.

"Sleep, Danny, sleep." The familiar voice came soothingly into his mind.

"Zandro!" Danny heard the strangled cry rip from his throat as he struggled to push himself erect.

"Sleep, sleep, sleep."

"No, Zandro!"

"Sleep, Danny, and everything will be all right." The lulling words in his mind brought a calming effect, and

his struggles ceased; suddenly he wanted nothing so much as to return to the deep slumber from which he had awakened.

“Sleep, sleep. Forget Zandro’s world, Danny. Zandro is here to help you.”

“Yes,” he murmured drowsily. Zandro was his friend—friend, protector, and teacher. Zandro was good; he had come to this lonely world to help him. A sense of peace stealing through him, all memory of his doubts about Zandro slowly vanished.

In the darkness of the ship, he slept.

The emerald sun was high in the sky when Danny took his bow and arrows and went outside. Pausing in the cool shade of the forest, he inhaled deeply, his nostrils filled with the fragrance of the tall, pink flowers that shot up each spring.

Spring! Four springs had come since that long-ago time when Zandro had explained about the seasons and how they were caused by Wenda’s axial tilt from the vertical. Since then he’d counted each summer, each fall, each winter, waiting for spring to come again, for that was the pleasantest time of all. Spring meant tall, pink flowers, swimming in the deep pools along the blue-green stream, exploring the tall rushes and stunted trees that bordered the swamp.

It was spring, and on Wenda he was twelve springs old, which meant twelve years old. On his native planet Earth, according to Zandro, he would be more than fifteen years old. And he was growing! He could tell that by the way the lifeboat’s cabin seemed to be shrinking. Now he had to duck his head to pass through the

hatch, while at night he all but filled the narrow sleeping pallet. And he was getting stronger. Last year he could scarcely bend the big bow—he'd gotten the concept from Zandro's mind—which he'd made with the tools in the bin. Now he could pull an arrow its full length, put it into a target no larger than himself from a distance farther than he could hurl a rock.

Shouldering the bow, he ate leisurely of fruits and berries as he picked his way toward the meadow. He halted at the edge of the trees to gaze upward. Scattered clouds, fleecy against an emerald sky, promised a cool afternoon.

"Zandro?" He projected the name mentally—"telepathically" was the word Zandro used—and listened for an answer. He wasn't surprised that none came. Zandro seldom responded when the sun was high and occasionally would remain quiet for days at a time.

He reached the stream, pausing to gaze at the strange life forms that lived in the blue-green water and in the thick rushes that grew along the banks. Swift, finned creatures with huge globular eyes furtively watched him from the depths, darting to mossy sanctuaries at his slightest move. Smooth-skinned animals sat immobile at the water's edge, their long forked tongues occasionally flicking out to scoop in unwary insects. Other animals slithered, chirped, croaked, or uttered plaintive calls in the thick rushes.

He never tired of studying them. "*Life has unending variations,*" Zandro once had told him; and again, "*Life is a constant battle for survival.*" Here, along the stream and in the forest, Danny saw the truth of the statements. Scarcely a day passed but that he didn't en-

counter a new life form; on every side he was aware of the constant struggle for food. Each creature had its prey and its predator.

At the edge of the swamp he halted, his pulses quickening. Ahead the stream emptied into a marsh filled with stunted trees and rushes that grew to great heights. An odor of decay permeated the air. "*Don't go near the swamp*"—Zandro's warning rang in his mind. Fierce animals lived there; death lurked at every turn.

What kind of animals? Zandro had never told him. That, more than anything else, piqued his curiosity. He had been this far before, but never farther. Yet he had known all along that some day he would explore the swamp. Today's as good as any, he decided impulsively.

His eyes swept over the scene, picking out areas where the land appeared firmer. Fitting an arrow into the bow, he moved stealthily forward. As the ground became soggy, he was forced to zigzag to avoid small pools of stagnant water.

Now and then he paused to listen. The feathery whirring of frightened birds rising from the tall rushes ahead, the rustling of small animals scurrying from his path, the hum of insects—the familiar sounds reassured him. Ahead, where the rushes opened, he glimpsed a large, dark pool.

Stealing toward it, he suddenly realized that the mud underfoot appeared to have been flattened by the passage of a heavy body. His throat constricting, he stared at it. The mud had been flattened! He could tell by its smooth surface, the lack of ridges and pitting. The reeds on either side had been crushed. But no foot-

prints! He raised his eyes; the flattened trail led to the edge of the dark pool.

His heart thudding, he crept forward, conscious that his body was wet with sweat. Gripping the bow tightly, he tried to still his fears. *Go back! Go back!* He forced the warning from his brain. At the edge of the pool he halted, gazing around. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

He was beginning to relax when he dropped his gaze to the water, then suddenly stiffened. Believing his vision to be playing him tricks, he peered closer. His first impression was of a gigantic eye floating beneath the surface. The eye stared back at him!

He caught his breath, trembling, and forced himself to study it. The eye appeared to rest atop a huge black blob. Thick, dark trunks, tapering to fine points, radiated out from all sides of the hideous apparition.

A monster! A monster sitting astride a nest of snakes! Terror-stricken, he turned to flee when he froze again, a warning signal flashing in his brain. He darted a quick look around. The rushes, the stunted trees, the stagnant pool—nothing appeared changed. A faint hissing came from overhead as a small shadow crossed his path.

Alarmed, he threw a glance at the sky as he leaped backward. Nothing! The sky was clear. The faint hissing came again. Attempting to locate its source, he spotted a small bird hovering above the rushes.

His eyes swept past it, then jerked back as he realized the bird had been stationary in the sky, its wings unmoving. Startled, he gazed at it with a mixture of awe and fear. Its small red eyes, fixed squarely on him,

held an unidentifiable threat that caused him to shiver.

Threat from a small bird? He wanted to laugh. It was no larger than his hand. Thousands of birds just like it lived in the rushes; he saw them every day. Except that this bird didn't move its wings! And its beady red eyes. . . .

He retreated a dozen paces without shifting his gaze. The hissing came again as the bird moved toward him, its extended wings as motionless as before. The sight was unnerving. It halted above the rushes a short distance away.

Slowly, step by step, he edged around a stunted tree until the bird was lost to sight, then halted, wondering what it would do. *Hzzzzz*. . . . The strange sound came again. This time he definitely associated it with the bird's movements as it came into view, hovering above him at a distance of half a dozen paces.

A bird that hissed? He'd never seen such a strange creature. Neither had he ever seen such a monster as that in the pool. Unnerved, he wanted to turn and flee, yet was restrained by the more imperative need to know what kind of bird this was that flew without moving its wings. A bird that stalked him!

"Life has unending variations"—Zandro's words came again. Gazing at the bird, he reached a decision. Forcing himself to steadiness, he slowly raised the bow, sighting along the arrow as he pulled back on the drawstring. The beady red eyes fixed on him took no cognizance of the threat. Holding steady, he released the arrow.

Thunk! It struck the bird a glancing blow, hurling it off to one side. Leaping forward, he searched the

rushes until he found the torn form. Gingerly he picked it up, then stared at it in horror.

A metal bird! The crumpled form he held in his hand wasn't feathers and flesh at all but was metal—twisted metal and fine wires, like those he saw behind the instrument panel in the ship. He felt his scalp prickle.

"Danny!" Zandro's voice came suddenly alive in his mind, filling him with fear. *"Get out of the swamp,"* the voice thundered. *"Get out! Get out!"*

Terrified, he raced toward the meadow, Zandro's command beating at his brain. Sloshing through ankle-deep mud, he suddenly became conscious that he still held the crumpled metal form in his hand. Violently, urgently, he hurled it into the rushes, then fled to the safety of the ship.

"Sleep, Danny, sleep"—the words came to Danny as if in a dream. He twisted and turned restlessly on the narrow pallet, not knowing whether he was asleep or awake.

"Sleep, sleep, sleep," the soothing voice in his brain said. *"You are asleep, Danny."*

"Yes," he murmured.

"You will forget today, Danny. There was no pool, no monster, no bird."

"No pool, no monster, no bird," he murmured.

"You will forget them, Danny."

"I will forget. . . ."

"Now sleep, sleep, sleep. . . ."



2

THE LUXURIOUS offices of Sol Houston, Overlord of Space, fittingly enough occupied the entire top floor of the 200-story Space Administration Building in Gylan, capital of the planet Makal, third of the cobalt sun Apar. Makal, in turn, served as the administrative center of the 17th Celestial Sector of the Third Terran Empire—which made Sol Houston a very important man.

But Samul Smith wasn't thinking of that as he stepped into an atomic lift and shot up to Sol Houston's private offices. He was wondering at his abrupt summons. An emergency? Of course, otherwise Sol Houston would never have called him so peremptorily. But what kind of emergency?

Samul Smith wasn't a worrier—far from it—but he liked to be prepared. Ordinarily a summons was a summons; but this one, from Sol Houston personally, perplexed him. As Overlord of Space, Sol Houston was answerable only to the Regent Administrator of the 17th Sector, who in turn answered directly to the Prime Administrator of the Third Terran Empire, the capital of which was on Earth. As such, the Overlord concerned

himself only with problems of such moment that they could not be entrusted to any of his more than 100 immediate aides. That indicated quite an emergency.

Samul hummed happily. He liked emergencies. As a point in fact, as Sol Houston's chief troubleshooter, that was all he got. He felt himself fortunate. Every job was different, a challenge. As a bachelor, he could put in as many hours as he liked. It wasn't supposed to be that way, of course; the regulations governing working hours were quite strict. But he made it that way all the same. He disliked regulations.

A secretary eyed him approvingly as he stepped from the lift. Offering a smile meant to charm, she pressed a hidden button that opened the door to the inner office. "Go right in, Mr. Smith." Her voice carried a lilt.

Samul nodded and walked past her. She'd like to get married, he thought smugly. She used her eyes and voice like nets. Not that he would fall for such transparent guile. Never! He valued his freedom too highly.

Sight of the three men seated at the long polished table confirmed his suspicion that the emergency was far from ordinary.

Altair Harbin, Master of Colonial Operations.

Benkar Redmont, Master of Alien Cultures.

Ghengin Kaan, Master of Defense.

The three represented Sol Houston's top administrators, although Samul knew they would never have gotten there were it not for the seniority provisions of the vast civil service hierarchy that spun the wheels of empire; seniority and politics, the latter of which was largely a matter of family. In the absolutism of equal-

ity, guaranteed in the Constitution of the Third Terran Empire, the same families somehow manipulated the same power levers.

As it was, each of the Overlord's masters commanded a jurisdiction covering the more than 400 sun systems that comprised the 17th Celestial Sector. And himself? Samul Smith: lowly investigator to the Master Council, odd-jobman, jack-of-all-trades, and—yes!—trouble-shooter. But he worked at Sol Houston's right hand; that made the difference.

He smiled wryly as he took a seat. Altair Harbin inclined his head in curt acknowledgment; Benkar Redmont and Ghengin Kaan appeared not to notice him. The slight didn't bother Samul. At the age of thirty standard years, he was resented by the others, all of whom were in their seventies or eighties. Besides, his name was Smith. In an age when names held great social and political significance, a Smith was of no moment at all. Not when compared with such names as those borne by the men sitting with him. Their given names, in the male lineage, remained unchanged throughout the generations; their surnames ran like rivers through human history.

Despite his cynicism, sight of the men reminded Samul of the power of the names. He gazed at the Master of Colonial Operations. His given name, Altair for the star, and surname, Harbin for that sun's greatest planet, gave a clear statement of his family background; a Harbin had been first to penetrate the system of that yellow-white star. The name, historically, was synonymous with colonial operations.

Benkar Redmont, Master of Alien Cultures, claimed a

more potent name still, although many would challenge the fact. As every student of dark history knew, Benkar was a contraction of Benjamin Karr, the first earthling to discover an alien culture beyond the confines of the solar system—small plants on the planet Dorn, which wandered the second orbit of the bluish-white binary, Alpha Centauri. Redmonts had dominated the field of alien cultures ever since.

Ghengin Kaan's name was equally esteemed, for it derived from a great conqueror of prehistory who was said to have invented and used the first nuclear weapon in the Battle of Waterloo, the precise site of which had never been determined.

But Sol Houston had the most prestigious name of all, for Sol was the name of the mother sun, and Houston of the great Earth city of antiquity from which men first had reached for the stars.

Samul smiled to himself. Despite legions of scholars, all that lay so deeply buried in the barbaric past that it was scarcely credible, let alone provable. But Smith! There were planets filled with them! At least no one could say that he'd attained his present position through his family name.

He glanced covertly at his companions, seeking to discern some clue to the trouble at hand. Benkar Redmont's narrow face, showing its seventy-eight years for all the cosmetologists could do, held a speculative expression. Ghengin Kaan appeared unruffled. Altair Harbin, at seventy-six years old the youngest of the three, appeared grim. He knows, Samul thought. Then the meeting had to do with his empire—Colonial Operations.

His speculation was broken as the tall doors at the far end of the room silently swung open and as silently closed behind Sol Houston. The Overlord crossed the deep rug with a step surprisingly agile for a man of eighty-three. Olive-skinned, his high cheekbones set in a craggy face, his gray eyes as hard as the tophi pebbles found on the shores of the Wasach Sea, he wore the purple cape of his office.

As the others started to rise, he waved them down. Taking his place at the head of the table, he announced abruptly, "The survey cruiser *Nomad* has been destroyed."

"Destroyed?" It took Samul an instant to recognize Ghengin Kaan's squeaky voice. The Master of Defense appeared dumbfounded. Well he might, Samul thought, for the *Nomad*, the newest and best-equipped survey ship ever launched, also carried formidable disintegrator weapons. If he felt no surprise himself, it was because he seldom did. He long since had learned that anything was possible in an empire which spanned 6,800 sun systems, not to mention the limitless Universe beyond.

Benkar Redmont caught his voice and exclaimed, "Impossible!"

"Why?" Sol Houston stared at the Master of Alien Cultures.

"Destroyed implies an outside agency."

"Yes?"

Redmont returned his stare. "We've never encountered an alien culture capable of destroying a survey ship . . . unless it had landed on a planetary surface," he added uncertainly.

“It hadn’t,” the Overlord replied decisively.

“Then it’s impossible. An accident, perhaps . . .”

“It was destroyed by an alien power, Benkar.” Sol Houston’s words made Samul sit straighter.

“How do we know that?” Ghengin Kaan interjected. His squeaky voice had dropped to a subdued whisper.

“We’ve lost three survey ships in the last ten years—four, counting the *Nomad*—in the same sector.”

“That doesn’t prove . . .”

“Wait!” Gesturing for silence, the Overlord manipulated a button board at his side. As the room grew dim, one entire wall blazed into a magnificent display of the star field. As his fingers moved across the panel, a yellow square crossed the board, stopping when it encompassed a patch of orange suns. Samul recognized the area as across the Ebon Deeps.

As if the suns were hurtling toward them, the square rapidly expanded, bringing hundreds of new stars into view until the original area within the square encompassed the entire wall. Although he had seen the stellar display many times before, he marveled at the ingenuity which had created it.

“Altair,” the Overlord commanded.

The Master of Colonial Operations limped to the wall screen and picked up a pointer. “You will note this as a section from Star Catalogue AN2412SL778—directly across the Ebon Deeps.” His voice held a reedy note. “More precisely, it’s the area which the Empire Council selected for survey and colonization more than ten years ago—standard years, of course—when it voted to expand our stabilization limit through the creation ✓

of an eighteenth sector. Approximately three hundred and fifty sun systems are involved.”

“What has this to do with the so-called alien threat?” Benkar Redmont demanded testily.

“All of the ships have been lost in precisely the same area.” Altair Harbin jabbed the pointer at a small patch of orange suns. Adjacent to them, Samul noted an emerald star that flared in lonely majesty.

“You said that before,” Redmont snapped. “We went over the disasters at the time. As I recall, we ruled out aliens.”

“That was before the loss of the *Nomad*,” Altair Harbin returned primly.

“What does that prove?”

“Granted we’d never encountered an alien culture with a space capability, Sol believed the coincidence too much.” Harbin nodded acknowledgment to the Overlord. “For that reason we equipped the *Nomad* with special space criers—three, to be exact.”

“Space criers?” Redmont arched a brow questioningly.

“Instrumented message units which instantly can be projected into hyperspace in the event of an emergency,” Harbin explained. “They broadcast continually on the Zirg band.”

“And we picked up such broadcasts from the *Nomad*?” Ghengin Kaan interrupted.

“We did.” Harbin moved his head with a birdlike motion. “The first crier reported five strange vessels emerging from hyperspace.”

“Precisely where?”

“Near the second planet of the sun Holhauf, named in honor of our great astronomer emeritus.” The Master

of Colonial Operations jabbed the pointer at an orange speck. "That's here—Star SX323L of Catalogue AN-2412SL778."

"What were the following messages?" Ghengin Kaan persisted. "You mentioned three criers."

"There were none."

"Nothing at all?"

"We have to conclude that the *Nomad* was destroyed immediately after the first launch."

In the silence that followed, something prickled at Samul's memory, and he asked, "Isn't that the general area where that colonist ship was lost a few years back?"

"Here . . ." Altair Harbin jabbed the pointer at the emerald star Samul had noted earlier. "I had intended to mention that. The ship—the *Golden Ram*—had breached the Ebon Deeps in direct violation of Regulation CO559M of my department. You will recall that as a regulation which prohibits the colonization of any area not previously certified as safe and habitable by the Survey Branch of Colonial Operations."

"Do we actually know what happened to the *Golden Ram*?" Samul asked.

"We're fairly certain." Altair Harbin gazed at the Master of Defense.

"It was an old pile ship," Ghengin Kaan explained. "It used the pile for operations below the hyperspace level. Something happened, and the pile went critical."

"How do we know?" Samul persisted.

Ghengin Kaan looked annoyed. "The ship sent an emergency call over the Zirg band," he snapped. "The captain intended to land on the second planet of Aura Rawn. The disaster occurred at that time."

“Aura Rawn?”

“That’s how the captain—I forget his name—identified the star. He also gave the catalogue number.”

“Aura Rawn means Star of Dawn in the old Middle Empire language,” Samul remarked musingly. The study of Middle Empire semantics was his hobby. He thought the name revealed a lot about the captain’s character; he would have been something of a poet.

“I prefer the designation JX428M of Catalogue AN-2412SL778,” Altair Harbin broke in testily. “It’s more definitive.”

Benkar Redmont said caustically, “At least the *Golden Ram* wasn’t destroyed by these so-called aliens.”

Samul disregarded the comments, his eyes on the Master of Defense. “You seem to know quite a bit about it,” he encouraged.

“I should,” Ghengin Kaan snorted. “As senior admiral of the Seventeenth Sector Fleet at the time, I conducted the investigation.”

“Could there have been any survivors?”

“Not if the disaster occurred in hyperspace.”

“Perhaps it didn’t.”

“How can you state that?” Ghengin Kaan demanded.

Samul wasn’t perturbed. “You mentioned the captain intended to land on the second planet,” he commented. “That implies a sun system of at least two planets.”

“Five all told. What has that to do with it?”

“Why the second planet?” Samul countered. “He must have known the planet was habitable. He couldn’t have known that unless he was in planetary space, sufficiently close for a sensor analysis.”

“The Zirg band operates in hyperspace!”

“He could have transferred to hyperspace, sent the message, returned within seconds.”

“Perhaps,” Ghengin Kaan conceded grudgingly.

“So they could have launched lifeboats.”

“We have no evidence of that.”

“We should consider the possibility,” Samul stated.

“Why?” Ghengin Kaan demanded. “If you’re considering a search mission, it’s out of the question. Our consideration now is this alien threat.”

Sol Houston leaned suddenly forward. “What do you have in mind, Samul?”

“The aliens,” he answered. “We’d better hope they haven’t gotten their hands on any of our people.”

“Why?” Ghengin Kaan interrupted.

“If it’s a race with an interstellar capability—as the message from the crier stated—then it’s almost certainly a race capable of draining a man’s memory banks,” he answered gravely. “That could be serious—how serious dependent on how knowledgeable such a captive might have proved to be.”

“Exactly,” Sol Houston interceded. “That has been one of my chief concerns.”

“That seems to be carrying lava to Luna,” Benkar Redmont observed sourly. “There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Do we have any records on the crew or passengers?” Samul looked at Altair Harbin. “It might help to know the degree of knowledge that might possibly have fallen into alien hands.”

“Well, the *Golden Ram* did let down here in Gylan.” Altair Harbin searched his memory. “That was when my

department made the captain cognizant of Regulation CO559M, the prohibition I mentioned against colonization.”

“The records,” Samul reminded.

“We have fairly complete dossiers,” Sol Houston broke in quietly. “I ordered a complete check on the *Golden Ram*’s crew and passengers, starting on Earth, the lift-off planet.”

Samul eyed the Overlord appreciatively. Very little, if anything, escaped Sol Houston. He was one administrator who hadn’t gotten there on the family name.

Ghengin Kaan broke the brief silence. “We just received word of the *Nomad*’s loss,” he said pointedly. “We couldn’t have gathered much in the way of records in this short time.”

Sol Houston looked at Samul. “I commenced the search ten years ago—the day we lost our first survey ship.”

“We should order elements of the Seventeenth Fleet into that sector immediately,” the Master of Defense declared. “If there are aliens there, we’ll take care of them in short order.”

“The Regent Administrator opposes such action.” The Overlord smiled bleakly. “He’s dropping the whole affair into the Prime Administrator’s lap.”

Samul wasn’t surprised. The Regent Administrator, a weak, indecisive man, *had* gotten there on the family name. In the ordinary course of events, it made but scant difference, for the real work of empire administration was carried on by such overlords as Sol Houston. But this wasn’t the ordinary course of events.

"We couldn't get an answer for six months," Benkar Redmont observed. "Not even on the Zirg band."

"Correct," the Overlord affirmed.

"Then what's the purpose of this meeting?"

"To prepare for possible eventualities."

"Eventualities?" Redmont looked askance. "Certainly you don't believe that any alien culture—if one exists—would be audacious enough to attack us? An empire that extends over sixty-eight-hundred star systems? Never."

"I agree," Ghengin Kaan snapped. "The Third Ter-ran Empire is invincible."

"Altair?" Sol Houston shifted his gaze.

Altair Harbin sucked his thin lips nervously. "I believe I agree with Benkar and Ghengin," he affirmed finally. "A threat against the empire is unthinkable."

"Samul?" Sol Houston eyed him.

"I'm shaking," Samul said. "Our empire, to them, might appear less than a leaf in a high wind."

"Exactly."

"I'd like to throw a bioscan on that second planet, see if there's any sign of human habitation."

"So would I, Samul."

"Is that a possibility?"

"Not until we hear from Earth, or unless the Regent Administrator decides to tackle the problem himself."

"The sun will freeze first," Samul replied bluntly. Benkar Redmont gasped, Altair Harbin sniffed, and Ghengin Kaan frowned disapprovingly. Politeness, if not discretion, dictated that a Regent Administrator could do no wrong.

Sol Houston nodded. "You're right, he won't."

"Have we any survey ships in the Deeps now?"

"They've all been recalled."

"I believe that order a sound one," Altair Harbin said plaintively. "We shouldn't risk our survey units out there under present circumstances."

Sol Houston contemplated him frostily before looking at Ghengin Kaan. "I want every unit of the Seventeenth Fleet put on full alert," he instructed, "and I want space warning nets placed around every planet in the sector. Every planet and every moon."

"You mean every habitable planet, don't you?"

"Every planet, Ghengin."

"The methane giants? Why spread the fleet to protect them? It seems to me . . ."

"What do we know of the nature of these aliens?" the Overlord demanded harshly. "They might very well seize footholds on such planets."

Benkar Redmont blurted, "No alien culture known . . ."

"We're talking about the unknown," he interrupted. He kept his eyes on Ghengin Kaan, rapping out orders. "I want a fast cruiser with surface search equipment to stand by for lift-off at a moment's notice," he added.

"For Star JX428M of Catalogue AN2412SL778?" Altair Harbin asked anxiously.

"For the second planet of Aura Rawn, if that's the one," the Overlord assented.

"That's JX428M," Altair Harbin confirmed.

Ghengin Kaan asked nervously, "How about the Regent Administrator's opposition to, uh, such an action?"

“We won’t go without his approval, Ghengin, but I want a ship standing by.”

“Yes, of course.”

Altair Harbin cleared his throat and said, “I hope there are no survivors on that planet.”

“Why?” Sol Houston’s eyes fixed him sharply.

“Well, they’d be there in direct violation of Regulation CO559M,” he answered primly.

Abruptly adjourning the meeting, Sol Houston motioned Samul to remain as the others rose to leave. Samul wryly noted their reactions to what they regarded as rank favoritism. Altair Harbin looked hurt, Benkar Redmont indignant, and Ghengin Kaan positively venomous. Samul didn’t mind. In truth, he felt a trifle sorry for them. There had been a time when he had been appalled by the incompetency of many of the top administrators, but he had long since learned that it was a quality that ran throughout the fabric of government. It was, in fact, a government by regulation; administrators were merely manipulators of orders, codes, laws.

He supposed it had always been that way—a few capable men like Sol Houston to every 10,000 drones. The rebellion of the people of a single sun system, which had brought on the bloody interstellar war that had toppled the Second Terran Empire, was said to have been caused by the indecision of a minor administrator in wording a communiqué at a critical time. He could well believe it. Regulation CO559M—he wanted to laugh.

Sol Houston said musingly, “I don’t know whether or not there’s anything to the *Golden Ram* episode, Samul, but it’s worth considering.”

“I believe it is.”

The Overlord caught his eyes. “I have the uncomfortable feeling that the human race is about to be tested for its right to survive,” he said soberly. “In time it comes to every life form. I can’t believe that in a Universe, the dimensions of which are infinity, there aren’t races which equal or surpass ours. What is the Third Terran Empire, Samul? A grain of sand on an endless shore.”

“Nature always favors her most capable,” Samul countered.

“I fully intend that we meet that requirement,” Sol Houston stated bluntly.

“So do I.”

“But enough of that.” The Overlord settled back into his chair and continued. “I’d like you to scan the dossiers on the *Golden Ram*’s passengers and crew. They are quite complete—as complete as possible for the time allowed us.”

“I’d be very interested in seeing them.”

“Perhaps I’m just whistling in the wind, Samul, but there’s a very good chance that lifeboats were launched. If so, there’s at least an outside possibility that the survivors had some contact with whatever race it was that destroyed our survey ships. What does that mean? I’m not certain.”

His eyes came up slowly. “But I am certain that no race would attack another race without some knowledge of its capabilities, military and otherwise. They could learn quite a bit from the memory banks of a few survivors.”

“That opens other possibilities,” Samul observed.

“You believe they might be tapping us for information by other methods? I’ve considered that.” The Overlord frowned. “It’s unlikely they resemble us sufficiently to land agents on any empire planet.”

“I was thinking of scanners interjected into our planetary orbits,” Samul confessed.

“The reason for the warning nets,” Sol Houston conceded. “I was derelict in not ordering them up when we lost the first survey ship. I wouldn’t at all be surprised to find their scanners in our skies.”

“The nets should be thrown up throughout the empire,” Samul stated.

“I’ve sent a warning to the Space Overlord for each sector.” Sol Houston eyed him musingly. “You’ll find the dossiers interesting. I suspect that the *Golden Ram* was not an ordinary colonist ship.”

“Oh?” Samul waited.

“The captain—Gordell June was his name—was a telepath. He’d been registered at age three, when a positive identification was made. As you know, the mutant laws requiring registration are quite rigorously enforced, even though we can’t restrict their movements.” He smiled whimsically. “Fortunately for us lesser mortals, they tend to live in their own colonies.”

“And June?”

“Left his colony while still a boy, age twelve, to be exact. That was the last heard of him until he turned up as captain of the *Golden Ram*.”

“How was the identification made?”

“The retinal prints made at the time of his registration matched those taken when the ship put into Gylan. He also had a wife.”

“Telepathic?”

“I suspect so. She came from Gelnik, in the Rigel system. As you know, quite a few mutant births occurred there in the centuries following the cobalt bombings that led to the fall of the Second Empire.”

“Any children?”

“June and his wife? A young son. He would have been around three at the time the shop was lost. We have his birth record and essential identification patterns.”

“Was he telepathic?”

“Not by the record.” Sol Houston furrowed his brow. “But we did discover nearly a dozen registered mutants among the *Golden Ram*’s passengers and crew. My personal belief is that they all were telepathic. June probably was heading out to found their own world.”

“I wouldn’t be adverse to that,” Samul answered reflectively.

“The empire likes to keep them close at hand, under control,” the Overlord responded drily.

Samul eyed him. “I’ve often suspected that there are more among us than we know.”

“That’s entirely possible. Our screening procedures are quite loose.” Sol Houston brought an inch-high container from his pocket and slid it across the table. “The records are all there—microdotted.”



3

“IKU 234M . . .”

“Iku 519L, Captain Sklar to Subchief Gullen . . .”

“Iku 445W to Iku 529R . . .”

The telepathic messages flashing through the mind of Iku-Nuku 117G brought no response. His seven powerful tentacles lazily extended, he let his globular body drink in the last meager warmth of the dusky orange sun PuKug, which fast was setting; warmth on the desolate planet Mull was a precious thing. His single eye held a vacuous stare.

Of negligible intelligence, Iku-Nuku 117G responded only to certain stimuli. When a correct one came—usually his call number—he obeyed simple directions, which usually consisted of repeating the messages that came into his mind to whomever they were directed.

Iku-Nuku 117G never considered the contents of such messages, for that was beyond his comprehension. He didn't know that Iku-Nuku, in the language of his race, meant idiot telepath; neither did he know that but for fate he would have been a mind master, sitting in the highest councils of his race. But the odds were long, for about one Kroon in 1,000,000 was telepathic; and of these, about one in 1,000,000 was born with the gen-

ius of a mind master; the remainder of the telepathic Kroons were of the Iku-Nuku.

Although, on occasion, his mind hurtled stellar systems like a bird skimming the treetops, he didn't realize that the Iku-Nuku network, of which he was but an infinitesimal link, fashioned a vast communication complex that spanned an empire of more than 1,000,000 sun systems. Neither did he know that without him, and the billions like him, the empire would perish, leaving only fragments in what, after all, was but a minute speck in the Universe.

Although in appearance a counterpart of other members of his race, Iku-Nuku 117G was a creature of pure response; reason and emotion were strangers. But he could feel; at the moment the scant warmth of the dying day felt good.

"Iku 997P to Iku 643S, scout cruiser Duxma now landing at Krunt."

"Iku 223M . . ."

"Iku 117G . . ."

As the last call flashed in his brain, Iku-Nuku 117G instinctively responded. Retracting his tentacles, he raised his globular body from the warm deck and acknowledged, *"Iku 117G."* At the same time, by some means he didn't understand, he automatically tuned out the other channels on the listening band assigned him.

"Iku 214J, Subcommander Gobit to Lord Gultur."

"Hold." Slithering into the Hall of the Glorious Dead, Iku-Nuku 117G approached the Pool of Repose where Gultur, Lord of the Stars, was refreshing himself. Only a single baleful eye protruded above the dark surface. The Iku-Nuku waited dutifully as the Lord of the Stars

gathered his tentacles under him, thrusting himself upward until his slit mouth came into view.

“Speak,” Gultur commanded.

“Subcommander Gobit, my lord.”

“Let him speak,” Gultur commanded testily. He disliked being disturbed when in the pool, even though he knew that the fate of empires might depend on what his second-in-command had to report from the laboratory world.

“May your stone be high.” The voice was the Iku-Nuku’s, but the words were Gobit’s; he spoke as if face-to-face with his commander.

“My stone will be high,” Gultur rebuked arrogantly, wondering if Gobit held any doubt.

“Of a certainty,” Gobit affirmed. “The six alien duplicates now are ready.”

“Are they exact replications?” he demanded coldly.

“To the last cell.”

“And they will be able to communicate with”—Gultur paused, feeling a slight revulsion—“the young alien on the laboratory world?”

“Mind Master Zandro assures me it is so.”

“Then it is so.” Gultur’s answer held a sharp rebuke, for the mind masters were all-knowing, all-wise. To question one was unthinkable. Yet he was uncomfortably aware of his own inner perturbation. The mind master’s plan to land duplicates of the creature on one of the worlds of his own race to gather strategic military information seemed risky. More, they would have to return the information telepathically to the young alien on the laboratory world, who in turn would reveal it to Zandro. That, too, contained an element of

chance he disliked. He had Zandro's assurance that his mental control of the creature was absolute, but still. . . .

He said uneasily, "It strikes me as strange that the mind master can't contact the duplicates directly, even across the black abyss. If he can't, how can the young alien?" His single eye held the Iku-Nuku as if his second-in-command were standing before him personally.

"It has something to do with the structure of the alien's mind," Gobit explained. "It is . . . different."

Different! That was it, Gultur reflected. The long study of the young alien had provided more questions than answers. He came from a race that held dear such qualities as mercy, compassion, love—emotions as alien to Gultur as the race itself. And it held war in low esteem! That was all to the good, of course.

But the difference went beyond that. It lay in the unique value the aliens placed on the individual as opposed to the Kroon philosophy—dictated by the gods—that any unit of life was but an instrument of divine will, created for the furtherance of the race destiny.

He said, as if speaking to himself, "Nevertheless, we shall destroy them."

"Of a certainty," Gobit acknowledged. He added diffidently, "The scout cruiser *Duxma* has landed to transport the duplicates to Makal."

"Makal?"

"The alien name of the target planet," Gobit answered. "Mind Master Zandro chose it."

"Did he say why?"

“It’s the administrative center of a small local area—some four hundred sun systems,” his second-in-command explained. “The planet also lies on the edge of the black abyss.”

“Have the alien duplicates brought here,” Gultur instructed arrogantly. “I would inspect them.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I shall be waiting.” Gultur dismissed the Iku-Nuku with a curt command, conscious again of a strange unease. He contemplated it. Mull had circled its dusky orange sun eleven times since he’d led his fleet to this lonely outpost on the edge of the great black abyss. Almost immediately his scout cruisers had detected and destroyed an alien vessel in a nearby planetary system.

From the mass of wreckage and exploded bodies, the reconstruction machines had managed to replicate the essential features of both ship and crew. Discovery that the aliens possessed an interstellar drive brought immediate consternation.

Throughout their long history the Kroons had encountered but few civilizations which had reached the nuclear stage of development, fewer still that had achieved interplanetary flight; but never a race that could cross between the stars.

Gultur still recalled his quick trepidation, the doubts that had assailed him. How old, how extensive, how powerful was the empire he faced? Much of his perturbation, he realized, sprang from a subconscious racial guilt which stemmed from the Kroons’ merciless annihilation of every life form they’d encountered—the inborn fear that one day they would meet a more powerful civilization. If such a day ever came, he knew, the

Kroons could expect no mercy. Had that time come? No, it wasn't possible.

But one race shall rule the Universe! Implicit in that decree of the gods was that all other races must perish; implicit, too, was the promise of ultimate and total victory. It could not be otherwise. *Annihilation is the tool of expansion.* That was written in the Book of the Conqueror.

Still he had hesitated, seeking some clue to the nature of the aliens without revealing his own position. It was then that a Kroon patrol vessel, making a biosweep of nearby sun systems in search of habitable worlds, had discovered a single alien of the same race—one of very young age, according to the biologists. Dwelling alone on the second planet of a nearby green sun, he apparently was the sole survivor of an accident in space.

Gultur had seized the opportunity avidly. Here, he had reasoned, was the key to the aliens, for even the mind of the newborn carries the treasury of its race. Back through the idiot telepaths had gone urgent messages; the Council of Mind Masters had responded immediately.

Zandro, the great mind master from the nearby Region of Ull, had been dispatched to the planet of the green sun. Declaring it a laboratory world, he had cut it off from all contact except through the voices of the Iku-Nuku. Since then, in isolation, he had been studying the young alien's mind, wresting from it the secrets of his race. Gultur had waited patiently.

Now, shortly, when the alien duplicates reported the nature of the enemy worlds in detail, the Wind of Death would move across the stars. He contemplated the pros-

pect smugly. The aliens, after all, didn't appear such formidable adversaries; not when compared to the might of the empire!

Slithering out to the balcony, he eyed the towering monument to Dort, his predecessor. In the newborn night, it cut a slender notch against the faintly gleaming stars. Its height, 74 mokols, would forever testify that Dort had annihilated the life of 74 sun systems.

Gultur scarcely ever looked at the towering black needle but that he thought, On some far planet yet unknown, circling a sun not yet seen, his successors one day would erect such a monument to him; and they would say of him, "He was Lord of the Stars." And then like Dort, like Grug, like Ukul—like all the great conquerors extending back along the labyrinthine trail through time and space to the very cradle of Kroon history—he would live eternally in the memory of his race. The dream was sweet.

His single eye fastened on the monument, he felt a secret mockery. Dort had perpetuated his record in 74 mokols of stone; his own would surpass 100 mokols! Conscious of the long years already lost, he made the vow fiercely. Life went swiftly, but the towering stone remains forever. That, also, was written in the Book of the Conqueror.

He switched his gaze to a single patch of orange, now all but lost in the firmament. Beyond that ghostly sheen of color, at incredible distances beyond—yet quickly bridgeable through the minds of the Iku-Nuku—lay Munga, the Planet of Birth. There, at the beginning of time, the gods had brought the first Kroons from the depths of the slate-gray seas to rule the Universe.

It had been so ordained in *The Beginning*.

But Munga was more than the Planet of Birth. Lying amid centrally packed stars, the coruscations of which washed the blackness from the skies, it was also the political pulse of an empire of more than 1,000,000 sun systems. Governed by the Council of Mind Masters through the network of idiot telepaths, it was the seat of ultimate power. Now the empire around it, exploding from the pressure of its spawning grounds, was fragmenting throughout the galaxy.

To conquer—that was his job. He felt a fierce surge of pride. Nay, his stone would soar 200 mokols. A thousand! The alien worlds would die like autumn leaves. He had only to lead his mighty fleet across the gulf. The Wind of Death—he would sow it for a distance of 10,000 stars!

A nearby spray emitted a scent of musk, a signal that he had visitors. That would be Gobit with the alien duplicates. He cast a last look at Dort's monument before returning to the Hall of the Glorious Dead.

As he approached the Pool of Repose, where Gobit was waiting, the subcommander's tentacles twitched fearfully, his globular body trembled, his single eye rolled in wild terror; his attitude mirrored abject respect. Gultur watched approvingly; not many commanders could simulate groveling fear as well as his second-in-command. Gobit should go far, if he lived.

His ceremonial respects paid, Gobit drew his tentacles together, raising his body, but carefully so that his eye should remain below the level of his commander's. "I have brought the six alien duplicates, my lord." He gestured with a tentacle.

Gultur let his gaze linger on them for the first time. He suppressed a shudder. They appeared exactly alike—small, bipedal, with curious dual extensors, each of which terminated in a five-digital complex which, he guessed, had been instrumental in raising them above the level of the other animals in their biosphere.

But it was the odd cephalic structures that interested him most. Each contained two eyes set above a dual nostril system, two oddly shaped flaps of flesh that undoubtedly were designed to catch sound, a strangely lipped mouth; each was topped by a yellowish tuft of hair or fur, much like the bipedal animals he had exterminated on a planet of the Qudel sun. He found them utterly disgusting. He said so.

“Extremely disgusting,” Gobit agreed. “It is an awkward, ugly body. Its movements are grotesque.”

“Weak—it has no strength.”

“Strength is not possible in such a structure, my lord.”

“It is barbaric.”

“Barbaric?”

“The body decorations. I have seen such dress on lower animals before.”

“I believe it is to protect them against the weather,” Gobit ventured. “They are a soft race.”

Gultur said musingly, “Yet they have crossed between the stars.”

“That is the puzzle,” Gobit admitted.

“I dislike taking the risk of landing them on an alien world.”

“Mind Master Zandro believes it is imperative, my lord.”

“But why six? The risk of discovery is increased six-fold.”

“One will be stationed near each of six key points,” Gobit explained. “Mind Master Zandro believes that less dangerous than trying to direct a single unit to the various centers of information which, after all, are quite widely spread.”

“Does Zandro believe these creatures to be dangerous?”

“No, they amuse him. But still he would like to ascertain the extent of their power.”

“It will be negligible,” Gultur predicted disdainfully. His baleful eye dwelt on his subordinate. “Still, landing them could be risky. Should they be discovered . . .”

“There is but slight chance of that,” Gobit promised.

“But if they are, then, of course, you die.”

“Ten thousand deaths, my lord.”

“Take them away,” Gultur abruptly instructed. Slithering into the Pool of Repose, he sank to the bottom. And slept.

Danny was curious, puzzled, a bit fearful. His perturbation, he knew, arose from the nightmares—a new experience—some of which had been frightful indeed. There was the recurring dream about the huge monster in a pool; he could see it clearly—a gigantic, black, globular body, the glowering eye, the snakelike limbs. And there was the bird with the beady red eyes—a bird that stalked him; a bird that was made of metal and wire!

He'd wanted to ask Zandro about the nightmares, yet sensed a curious caution. Zandro usually was

friendly and helpful, but there were times when he was aloof, almost hostile. Those were times, Danny knew, when he asked just such questions. It was then, also, that he'd sense Zandro probing at his mind in the deep of night, in the still hours before the emerald sun—Aura Rawn, his father had named it—climbed above the forest-clad hills.

But more than that he was perturbed over Zandro himself. Twice, daringly, he had penetrated Zandro's mind. The first time he'd caught the impression of a tall stone monument towering above a gray plain. Off to one side he'd seen row after row of great black sluglike forms that, somehow, he knew were starships. Beyond, a dusky orange sun lay low in the sky.

The second time Zandro's mind had been more chaotic.

He'd scarcely entered it when he became aware of a hideous monster, almost exactly like the one he'd seen in his nightmares. Its dark body pulsating with life, its reddish, hate-filled eye seemed to stare at him.

Frightened, he'd started to withdraw when a strange voice in his mind said, "*Iku 214J to Iku 998W, Subcommander Gobit to Mind Master Zandro.*"

"*Iku 998W,*" another voice responded. "*Hold.*"

"*Silence!*" Danny recognized the single word, screamed in his mind, as coming from Zandro. The silence swept back, ominous and frightening. Quickly he withdrew. What could he do? He had penetrated Zandro's mind, and Zandro knew! He waited fearfully for Zandro to come. That night he did.

"*Sleep, Danny, sleep,*" Zandro said. His voice, as always at night, was comforting and lulling. Danny

fought desperately to cling to a shred of consciousness.

"Sleep, sleep. Sleep and forget today, Danny." The words held a powerful hypnotic effect. *"There is no Iku 214J, no Iku 998W, no Subcommander Gobit. That was all a dream, Danny. Now sleep."*

As if in a trance, Danny resisted the soothing words, clinging to a vestige of consciousness until, finally, he felt Zandro slip away. Now, pondering the memory, he fought his fears.

Who was Iku 214J? Iku 998W? He had never imagined such names. Who was Subcommander Gobit? And why were they calling Zandro? What was it all about? He weighed the questions thoughtfully. One thing was clear: Zandro wasn't alone. No matter what he said, there were others on the planet. But who? Where? The questions burned in his mind. Perhaps he should challenge Zandro.

Staring through the thick trees toward the plain, he wondered again who Zandro was. And why did he befriend him?

"Danny?"

Startled at Zandro's unexpected call, he tried to mask his thoughts. *"I'm hunting in the forest,"* he answered lamely.

"I have a surprise for you," Zandro said.

"Surprise?" He felt a quick suspicion.

"I have arranged for you to talk with others of your kind."

"My kind? Where are they?" he asked eagerly. *"Have they come to Wenda?"*

"They're not on this world, Danny."

"Not on this world?" A great dismay gripped him. *"Then how can I talk with them?"*

"Like you talk to me, Danny—telepathically."

"What world?" he persisted. The whole idea seemed crazy. Talking to Zandro was one thing, but to talk to someone on another planet. . . .

"A planet your people call Makal," Zandro explained. *"It circles a pinkish-gray sun called Apar."*

"Can I talk with them now?" he asked eagerly.

"Not yet, Danny. Arrangements are still being made."

"When?"

"Soon, very soon."

"Thank you, thank you," he cried fervently.

"It will be wonderful," Zandro said. *"You won't be lonely anymore."*

"I don't want to be lonely."

"We could learn about your world together, Danny. Would you like that?"

Danny felt a sudden stillness inside him. *"I guess so,"* he assented finally.

"I would like to see your world, Danny."

"See it?"

"Through your mind," Zandro explained.

"How will I know what to ask?"

"I'll tell you when the time comes."

"But I want to know now," he exclaimed.

A long silence ensued before Zandro said, *"We can find out about the city where your friends will be—how the people live, travel, what they think. We can learn about your spaceports, what kind of starships they have. Oh, we can learn a lot about them."*

"Would they know all that?" he asked dubiously.

"I believe so," Zandro answered gravely.

"My people . . ." He had another thought. *"You told me about my own planet once . . . Earth. Can they tell me about that?"* He waited expectantly.

"There are libraries, Danny."

"Libraries?"

"Places where they keep the written and visual records. Yes, there would be a lot about Earth there."

"But would they know? My friends, I mean?"

"We could send them to the library."

"Send them?"

"They will go wherever we send them," Zandro replied.

"Why would they do that?" he asked wonderingly. No answer came; Zandro had withdrawn from his mind.

Standing indecisively in the shade of the trees, he felt a great joy, yet with it sensed a tinge of unease. If Zandro could arrange for him to talk with people on one of his own worlds, why hadn't he done it a long time ago? And why was he doing it now? It was all very strange; quite disturbing when he thought of it.

Who were Iku 214J and Iku 998W? The question came back, adding to his unease. It was almost as if Zandro were playing some kind of game with him. That was foolish, of course. But still. . . .

He looked across the meadow toward the swamp, remembering his dream of the monster in the pool. The same monster he had seen in Zandro's mind! And the metal bird? Did it really exist? At times he found it difficult to separate truth from imagination, dreams from

reality. Which was which? There was really no way of knowing.

"Zandro?" He whispered the name in his mind, listening. When no answer came, he repeated the call. Again there was silence. Assured that Zandro was gone, to wherever it was that he went, he called silently, "Iku 214J?"

Listening, there was only the silence of the mind.

"Iku 998W?" he called.

"Iku 998W . . ." The answer came with an abruptness that startled him.

"Who are you?" Danny asked urgently.

Silence.

"Iku 998W?" he repeated.

"Iku 998W . . ."

"Who are you?" he asked again. The silence lay heavier than before. "Iku 998W?" he persisted.

"Iku 998W . . ."

"Can you hear me?"

Silence.

Danny asked desperately, "Who is Subcommander Gobit?"

Silence.

"Why don't you answer?"

Silence.

"Iku 998W?"

"Iku 998W . . ."

"Is that all you can say?" he blurted. When no answer came, he looked at the trees, the meadow, the sky, wondering if it were all a dream. A crazy sense of unreality gripped him, but he shook it aside. The trees were real, the meadow was real, and he was real; so was the

voice in his mind. Pondering it, he tried again. "*Iku 998W?*"

"*Iku 998W . . .*"

"*I want to speak to Iku 214J,*" he said firmly.

"*Iku 998W to Iku 214J . . .*" The voice came like a lonely wind in Danny's mind. Waiting, he clenched his fists so tightly that his nails cut his skin. Was this reality? Suppose it were all a horrible dream?

"*Iku 214J . . .*"

"*I want to speak to Subcommander Gobit,*" Danny quavered.

"*Iku 998W to Iku 214J for Subcommander Gobit,*" the first voice cut in.

"*Hold.*"

The single word, like a faint sigh in his mind, made Danny think of immeasurable distances.

"*Silence!*" Zandro's voice broke into Danny's mind with a roar like thunder. Terrified at the sudden intrusion, Danny broke the contact, shutting Zandro from his mind as he fled toward the ship. Reaching it, he leaped through the narrow hatch, slamming and bolting it behind him. Leaning against it, he fought to regain his breath while, slowly, the terror ebbed from his mind.

At least there was an Iku 998W and an Iku 214J, he reflected. They existed, were real; that much, at least, wasn't imagination. And there was a Subcommander Gobit! Whoever he was, wherever he was, he existed.

Waiting fearfully for Zandro to burst into his mind, he shuddered at what the other might say or do. Suppose Zandro refused to let him talk to his friends? The thought staggered him. But Zandro wouldn't do that. He couldn't, he couldn't. Zandro was his friend.

That night, lying in his pallet, Danny felt a growing tension. Zandro would come again; he knew it. Zandro would come and try to erase his thoughts. Why didn't Zandro want him to know about Ikus 998W and 214J? Well, he wouldn't let him erase his thoughts. He wouldn't!

Staring upward into the blackness, he fought to stay awake. Zandro would come, Zandro would come. The words ran through his mind again and again. Zandro would come; he knew that he would.

Finally he did.



4

RON ERLAND, chief of the Obi Station watch, peered lackadaisically at the cloud-splotched sky of Makal, some 27,000 miles beneath him. With the city of Gylan just sliding into the dusk, the angled pinkish-gray rays of the sun, reflecting off the billowing cloud masses, appeared like giant bonfires raging in a murky valley.

Inasmuch as Space Station Obi revolved around Makal in an equatorial orbit in exactly the same length of time that it took the planet to complete one revolution, his view differed only with the changing cycles of day and

night or as vagrant storms wiped out the Wasach Sea or obliterated the lights of cities.

“Four days till go-down,” he mused. He’d be glad when the shift was ended. Perhaps he’d pick up the wife and kids, rough it in the air-conditioned Herclon Forest for a week or two. The camps there had three-view color screens, pleasure rooms that never closed, and mechanical animals the kids could ride among the trees. It would be good to get out into the open, enjoy nature.

He swung around at the beep of an instrument; a small lighted dot was moving across the grid of a cathode tube. “Incomer,” he remarked disinterestedly.

Deckel, his first assistant, gazed lazily at the screen, then jerked erect. “That baby’s coming in from the Ebon Deeps,” he exclaimed disbelievingly.

“Yeah.” Erland’s mouth suddenly felt cottony; Regulation CO1404B had placed the Ebon Deeps out of bounds to all travel. Military and survey vessels were not excluded. The dot shouldn’t be there; but it was. That baby was coming out of the Ebon Deeps, all right. And she was decelerating at a rate that was all but impossible. That dot spelled trouble.

Gazing perplexedly at the scope, he barked, “Query her.”

Deckel swung toward Prager, the second assistant. “Query her,” he instructed.

Prager fiddled with his instruments before calling into the communicator. When no answer came, he tried again to no avail. He repeated the call several times before he finally looked helplessly at Deckel. “She won’t answer,” he complained.

“She won’t answer,” Deckel repeated.

“Keep trying,” Erland instructed. He felt his perturbation grow; he’d never had a ship fail to acknowledge a station call.

Deckel glanced at his assistant. “Keep trying, Prag.”

Prager flipped a switch to transfer the vessel’s course and velocity data into a computer that returned a constant trajectory profile while he queried into the mouthpiece. A low crackle of static rose and died, leaving an ominous silence. “No use,” he said at last.

“No use,” Deckel echoed.

“Regulation 4L3325 requires them to answer,” Erland snapped.

“But they don’t. You can see for yourself.”

Erland studied the scope, wondering what to do. He’d never before faced a situation like this. Regulation SR426LX specifically stated that all incoming vessels had to be identified and reported, but how could he identify a vessel that wouldn’t respond to interrogation? Could he report the vessel without giving its identification? Not according to Reg SR426LX. The language was clear on that point. To complicate matters, the ship was in violation of Reg CO1404B, which prohibited penetration of the Ebon Deeps. That made double trouble. He stared at the blip.

“She’s headed toward Gylan,” Prager offered, “and baby, she’s really decelerating.”

“Decelerating fast,” Deckel confirmed.

“Yeah.” Erland weighed his predicament and struggled to a painful decision. “Pass the word to the Gylan Tower,” he instructed.

“Without the identification?” asked Deckel.

“How can we identify her if she doesn’t respond?” he demanded irritably.

“We can’t notify Gylan without the identification,” Prager objected. “Reg SR426LX states that clearly. It’s your decision, of course.”

“That’s right,” Deckel confirmed. “We can’t violate Reg SR426LX. Do that, and we’ll be up before the board.”

“Not me,” Prager exclaimed quickly. “I just follow orders.”

The price of command, Erland reflected bitterly. He’d always heard the expression; now he knew what it meant. Why did it have to happen to him? He fidgeted uneasily. “Is there anything in the book that might cover this?” he demanded.

“Check the book,” Deckel instructed Prager.

“Which one? We have twelve of them.”

“Which book shall I have him check?” Deckel asked.

“Doesn’t one of them cover unidentified spacecraft? I seem to recall the heading.”

“Yeah, but which book?”

“Try the index,” Erland snapped.

“Good idea,” Deckel agreed. “Try the index, Prag.”

Prager flipped through the index, then ran a finger down a column. “Book Five,” he finally reported.

“Does it give the section?”

“Just a moment.” He returned his gaze to the page.

“Yeah, Section Three. At least it’s headed ‘Unidentified Spacecraft.’ I imagine that’s the one.”

“Sounds right,” Deckel acceded. “Check it.”

Erland waited tensely as the second assistant pulled

Book Five from the information file and began thumbing through it. If anything went wrong, it could cost him a neg in his record; ten negs and he could lose his automatic pay increase. He could appeal it, of course. Civil service regulations provided plenty of protection in that respect. And if the board turned him down, he could carry it to higher review—all the way to the top, if necessary. It wouldn't be the first time.

“We can do it,” Prager finally announced.

“Without violating Reg SR426LX?” asked Deckel.

“Under certain circumstances, yes.”

“What circumstances?”

“If the challenged vessel fails to respond.”

“That fits.” Deckel swung toward Erland. “We definitely can do it.”

“Good, then do it.” Erland felt relieved.

“How about the violation of Reg CO1404B?” asked Deckel. “Should I have Prag report that or just give the vessel's course?”

“The violation would complicate it,” Prager observed. “There's nothing in the regulation that requires us to report it.”

“Isn't that implicit in the wording?” Erland asked uneasily.

“It might be interpreted that way,” Deckel conjectured.

Erland stared disconcertedly at the scope. The ship's captain certainly wouldn't have penetrated the Ebon Deeps without a proper clearance from someone somewhere. If he didn't report it and the fact became known, it would be the board for sure. He debated it anxiously. “We'd better report it,” he finally decided.

"My thought exactly," Deckel agreed.

"Good, then report it." Erland felt relieved at his decision. Putting him in command of the station hadn't been a mistake; his superiors would realize that soon enough. He looked at his subordinates. "No, I'll do it myself. I don't want this one fouled up."

Taking Prager's place at the communicator, he adjusted the seat and called, "Obi Station to Gylan Tower . . . come in, Gylan Tower." He tried several times without response.

"You have to open the switch," Deckel finally reminded.

"Yeah, sure." Erland flipped the switch and tried again, with the same result. "They don't answer," he fretted.

"They're plenty incompetent down there," Deckel offered.

"They sure are."

"A fortune in equipment and no one manning it." He snickered.

"If I pulled that, they'd yank me before the board," Erland complained. He tried several more times, then got up. "See if you can get them, Deck. I'm going for coffee."

"Sure." Deckel glanced at his assistant. "See if you can raise the Gylan Tower, Prag."

Ralph Gorman was in the lounge pouring a cup of coffee when the communicator in the control tower bleated to signal an incoming message. "Obi Station to Gylan Tower . . . come in, Gylan Tower." The words crackled suddenly from a wall speaker.

“Right in the middle of your coffee break,” Jackson, the station engineer, observed. Sprawled comfortably in an easy chair facing the three-view, he smiled smugly. “That’s twice they’ve hooked you today.”

“Yeah, it’s a madhouse with Colley off.”

“Seems to me he’s always off.”

“Well, you’re allowed fifty sick days a year.” Gorman shrugged. “Can’t say that I blame him.”

“I’m letting mine accumulate.”

“So am I.” Gorman nodded wisely. “One of these days I’m going to hit them for a whole year, do nothing but loaf.”

“My idea exactly,” Jackson agreed. “This grind gets you after awhile.”

The wall speaker burped, and Gorman growled, “They can wait.”

“Those guys up in Obi got it plenty soft.”

“Yeah, we handle ten times the amount of traffic down here.”

“They can have it,” Jackson commented. “I don’t like that two weeks at a crack business. I like my days off.”

“It’s not bad,” Gorman reflected. “They get a full month off between duty cycles. That two-for-one policy makes it plenty nice, especially with the sick leave benefits.”

“They still have it,” Jackson affirmed. “They tried to transfer me to satellites some years back, but I wangled out of it.”

“Oh, how’d you manage that?” Gorman eyed him interestedly.

“Dug up a regulation.”

“What kind?”

“Well, I’m a stationary engineer. That’s how I’m carried on the books. So when I got the assignment, I dug around until I found a regulation that stated I couldn’t be assigned outside of my classification.”

“What’s that got to do with satellite duty? I don’t get it.”

Jackson smiled knowingly. “There’s nothing stationary about those birds,” he declared.

“But that’s not what stationary engineer means,” Gorman objected. “There’s no connection.”

“That’s what Wilton—he was my chief at the time—tried to claim,” Jackson acceded. “When I told him I’d take it to the board, he backed down. That board threat gets ’em every time.”

“It sure does. I’ve worked that one myself.”

“You’ve gotta know your regulations,” Jackson asserted.

“If you don’t, they sure take advantage of you.”

“Yeah, every time.”

“Go by the book, I say. It’s the only way.” As the wall speaker crackled, Gorman glanced at his watch and lazily got up. “Time to see what Obi wants,” he remarked.

Refilling his coffee cup, he started leisurely toward the stairs. Obi was still calling when he entered the control room. Setting the cup on the edge of a console, he sat down and flipped a switch. “Gylan Tower to Obi . . . come in,” he responded.

“Where have you been?” the Obi operator asked querulously. Gorman recognized the voice as Prager’s.

“Coffee break,” he explained. “Colley’s on the sick list. What’s doing up there?”

“We’ve got an unidentified incomer on the scope,” Prager explained.

“Unidentified?”

“Yeah, but we can report it under Section Three of Book Five, covering unidentified spacecraft. That’s Page 286.”

“Does that override SR426LX?”

“Yeah, I checked it out,” Prager acknowledged. “The language is clear enough.”

“How come it’s unidentified?”

“It won’t respond.”

“No response, eh? The captain can get stuck with a violation of Reg 4L3325,” Gorman warned.

“I hope he does,” Prager asserted. “It’s been a real headache. I’m sure glad it’s not my responsibility.”

“Those spacers are all the same, Prag. They all think the regs were written for someone else.”

“The penalty could cost him half a dozen negs,” Prager declared. “On top of that, he’s coming in from the Ebon Deep.”

“In violation of CO1404B?” Gorman asked. “I don’t like that.”

“It’s a violation, all right.”

“What does Erland say about it?”

“He ordered me to report it. He’s going by the wording of Section Three of Book Five.”

“I can’t see where that covers Reg CO1404B,” Gorman objected.

“Neither can I, but it’s his decision.”

“Well, they can’t hang me, Prag. Let’s have it.”

“One second.”

“Take your time. We’ve got plenty of it.” Gorman sipped his coffee while he waited.

“Whaddya know, we lost her,” Prager announced a moment later. “She’s off the scope.”

“Already?”

“She was moving pretty fast. She must be lost in the ground pattern. There must be a hundred blips down there.”

“What was her vector?”

“She was headed your way, Gorm. You might pick her up on the low-level sweep.”

“With all this traffic?”

“You might give it a try.”

“Okay, will do.”

“Thanks, Gorm. Obi out.”

A buzzer sounded on Samul Smith’s desk; he flipped a switch, watching the wall screen come to life. Sol Houston’s craggy face took form. The first glimpse of the Overlord’s grim expression alerted him.

“Good morning, sir.” Samul’s voice betrayed none of his speculation.

“I’m not so certain that it is,” Sol Houston rebutted. “An unidentified vessel from the Ebon Deeps came in yesterday around dusk—apparently made a run above Gylan or perhaps landed on the outskirts. We don’t know. The report just reached my desk,” he added wryly.

“The aliens?” Samul queried softly. So the aliens had crossed the gulf; he accepted the fact even as he asked.

“That appears to be the case,” the Overlord acknowledged.

“The trackers lost them?”

“Apparently the ship’s captain failed to abide by the approach regulations,” Sol Houston explained crisply. “By the time the Obi and Gylan operators got together on procedures, the vessel had merged with the ground pattern.”

There was no condemnation in the Overlord’s voice, nor did Samul expect any. The vast civil service bureaucracy, operated strictly by the book, had stultified personal initiative almost to the point of nonexistence. Although the system worked well enough in day-to-day operations, its inflexibility prevented swift response to emergencies. And an emergency, as Samul knew, was any situation not fully covered by the regulations. That was the price of bigness.

“Do we know what became of the ship?” he inquired.

The Overlord nodded. “Ark Station tracked an unidentified vessel lifting into the Ebon Deeps from above the western shore of the Wasach Sea. That was thirty-six minutes later. We have to assume it was the same ship.”

“Then it could have been in the vicinity of Gylan for nearly thirty minutes,” Samul mused. His mind flew ahead. “It wasn’t a reconnaissance flight. They could have accomplished that from orbit.”

“I believe their purpose was to land someone or something . . . or effect a pickup,” Sol Houston returned.

“A kidnap mission?” Samul digested the possibility. “I’ll run a missing person check.”

“I don’t believe it’s that simple, Samul.”

“Neither do I, but it’s a possibility we have to cover.”

He added more slowly, "It strikes me as significant that they came directly to Gylan, the administrative heart of the sector. It's scarcely conceivable that it was by chance."

"Are you suggesting previous penetrations?"

"It's possible," Samul answered. "At the very least we'll have to concede them some knowledge of our system."

"From the *Golden Ram*?"

"It's a working hypothesis," he declared.

"I've assumed that," the Overlord acknowledged. "While I don't want to prejudice your thoughts, I still favor the idea that they came to land someone . . . or something."

"Are you thinking of mechanical artifacts—scanners and pickups and such?"

"Yes and no."

"I can't imagine that any alien life form would be sufficiently like ours to enable them to plant agents among us," Samul reflected. "Even though they had a physical likeness, the barriers of language and custom would present almost insurmountable problems."

"Unless they had an opportunity to study us earlier," Sol Houston suggested.

"Everything leads back to the *Golden Ram*."

"It appears that way, Samul, but frankly I don't know what we gain from the knowledge. You'll be working in the dark."

"Isn't that the usual case?"

"It seems that way." They spoke for several moments longer before the Overlord cut off. Samul sat unmoving for several minutes after his image faded from the

screen. So the aliens had come and gone, but to what purpose? To land someone or something; Sol Houston could be quite correct on that surmise. But if that were so, it indicated that the aliens, whatever their strength, weren't prepared for open hostilities; their need of information revealed that.

He walked to the window. Small aircars darted like birds among the graceful towers piled against the pinkish-gray sky. He watched the scene contemplatively. For generations the Terrans had marched through space, carving an empire from the vast worlds of glittering suns. At times they had halted, stagnated; but like buds of spring, they had blossomed anew to march again.

It was inevitable that some day they would encounter another form of life imbued with the same purpose. Could two interstellar races live side by side in harmony, sharing the galaxy between them? Considering the bitter wars that once had raged among humans of differing beliefs and skin color, he scarcely believed it possible.

The aliens—he pondered the term wryly. Somewhere across the Ebon Deeps another life form, scrutinizing the humans, undoubtedly was branding them as aliens. What did the term really mean? It meant, he reflected, that form of life that was on the other side of the fence. He smiled ruefully at the task in hand.

As Sol Houston had predicted, he would be walking in the dark.



5

TORN BETWEEN expectation and despair, Danny clenched his fists desperately as he projected his thoughts into the void. For two days, to no avail, Zandro had been guiding his efforts in the mental attempt to span the starless deeps to that distant world where people like himself lived. Tommy One, Tommy Two, Tommy Three . . . Altogether there were six Tommies who would answer him, tell him all the wonderful things he wanted to know, if only he could make contact.

"Tommy One? Can you hear me?" Danny rubbed his eyes, aware he was perspiring as he listened into the void. The silence was awesome. *"Tommy One, Tommy One . . ."*

"You are not maintaining total concentration," Zandro cut in. His voice came into Danny's mind in a quiet aside. *"Fragments of your thoughts are elsewhere."*

"They're not," he cried crossly.

"You are too excited," Zandro counseled patiently. *"Remember, you have to quell all emotion, subdue all physical response."*

"Perhaps they're not listening," Danny objected. He felt his despair well anew.

"They're always listening," Zandro replied enigmatically.

"Then why don't you call them, tell them what to say?"

"No!"

"But perhaps if you contacted them once . . ."

"No!" This time the denial was cold and final.

Undaunted, Danny cried, *"But why not? You can do it. You had to talk to someone or you wouldn't know about the Tommies."*

A long silence ensued before Zandro replied, *"I can't talk with them, Danny."*

"Can't?" He was stunned.

"Their minds are different."

"But they're like mine," he objected. *"You said that yourself."*

"Yes."

"And you can talk with me."

"Here on Wenda, yes, but not over a great distance." Zandro's answer held a defeated note.

"Then how did you know about the Tommies?"

"You are trying to learn too much at once," Zandro replied. *"All this is quite distracting to you."*

"But . . ."

"Do you want me to teach you to talk to your friends?" Zandro interrupted. *"If so, you'll have to learn to concentrate."*

"I'm trying," he answered desperately.

"You have to shut out the meadow, the sky, your awareness of yourself, everything—focus your entire mind on making contact."

"I will," he promised hurriedly.

"And you will have to stop being emotional."

"I'll try." Danny closed his eyes to eliminate the distraction of the landscape and concentrated. With the view shut out, he became aware of the posture of his body and one by one relaxed his muscles, feeling the tension subside.

"Tommy One, this is Danny. Can you hear me, Tommy One?" Listening with his mind, he became conscious of the gurgling of the stream and shut his ears to it. *"Tommy One . . ."* He sent out the call again.

"Tommy One . . ." The response, like a faint echo from somewhere deep in his brain, jolted him. For an instant he thought the words had been his own, then realized they had come in answer to his call.

"This is Danny," he cried eagerly. *"Can you hear me?"*

"I . . . hear you."

"Tommy One can hear me," he exclaimed joyfully. The moment he'd uttered the words he knew he'd broken the contact, but he didn't care; he'd projected his thoughts across the void! Hurtling the starless depths, they'd reached a being like himself. Oh, the wonder of it!

"Tommy One, can you hear me?" This time there was only silence, vast and muted, deeper than the silence of the forest when the wind was stilled.

"You broke the contact," Zandro reproved.

"But I reached him, I reached him. He heard me!"

"You have to keep practicing."

"I will, I will."

"It will take awhile before you really learn to project your thoughts over such a great distance," Zandro

warned. *"It's not like talking to me. It's a matter of control."*

"Control?"

"Establishing absolute mastery over your mind."

"Shall I try Tommy Two?"

"It doesn't make much difference which one you try," Zandro explained. *"Once you learn to establish contact, you can talk with one as well as with another."*

"I want to talk to all of them," he cried eagerly.

"In time, Danny."

"I'm going to try again."

"Rest your mind. We will try again tomorrow."

"But I'm not tired," he protested.

"Tomorrow," Zandro answered with finality. *"And don't practice when you're by yourself. You can cause more harm than good."*

"Please," he begged. But even as he asked, he felt the silence. Zandro had withdrawn. He stared indecisively at the sky, feeling elated. His mind had hurtled that gulf; he'd talked with a boy just like himself. Tommy One wasn't his real name, of course. Zandro had explained that the name "Tommy" and the designations "One" through "Six" were simple codes to aid in identifying one from another and to make communication easier. He didn't care; talking with them was all that mattered.

Why couldn't he try to contact them when Zandro wasn't present? He pondered it while returning to the ship. Zandro had warned him of it before, had said that it might cause difficulties which would prevent him from ever again establishing the contact. How could that be?

He debated the question uneasily. There was so much

he didn't know. When he put the questions to Zandro, he was either coldly rebuffed or promised that he would "learn in time." Yet there were so many things Zandro did tell him. Perhaps, as Zandro said, everything was for his own good.

When the long dusk turned to darkness, he walked to the edge of the meadow and stared at the sky. A swath of orange stars bordered this edge of the great black gulf. He looked long into the ebony rift. At incredible distances through that blackness lay a sun called Apar; around it circled the planet Makal, on which was the wondrous city of Gylan. There, people like himself lived; he had talked with one of them! Why couldn't he now? What possible harm could it do? None, if he just called the name. Oh, to hear that voice again!

Clenching his fists, he felt his determination grow. If he tried to establish contact only as Zandro had taught him and if Zandro didn't know, nothing could happen. He stared across the dark meadow.

"Zandro?" He projected the name telepathically, listening with his mind. Only the silence answered him. He tried again, with the same result. Why did Zandro hear him only at times? Did Zandro, like himself, sleep? The thought startled him, for he'd always associated sleep with a physical body; and Zandro had no body. No body? He felt an inner disquiet. If Zandro had no body, who were Iku 214J, Iku 998W, and Subcommander Gobit? Were they, too, bodiless? There was so much he didn't know.

"Zandro?" He called the name again, reassured at the silence that followed. Sprawled comfortably on the

meadow, he let his body relax. Breathing through his mouth to shut out the scents of the world around him, he closed his eyes, forced his mind to blankness. Gradually he felt a deepening peace—a sense of floating as if, somehow, he were suspended in midair.

He lay for a long while, drifting in a world of nothingness. It was as if his mind and body were two separate things—separate and far apart. His body was there on the meadow, inert and apparently lifeless; his mind was free, unfettered, uncluttered. He felt no sensation, for all sensation had been left behind on the meadow; it resided in the inert form. This must be what Zandro had meant by the total emancipation of the mind.

He stirred, envisioning the vast gulfs through which he must pass. Black, black, black—a firmament unknown to any star.

"Tommy One . . ." He projected the thought with the whole of his mind, directing it into that blackness. *"This is Danny. Can you hear me?"*

"Tommy One . . ." This time the echo in his mind came almost immediately. He felt a fierce pang of joy that he instantly regretted, for he knew the emotion had broken the contact. Lying quietly in the tall grass, he waited until the tumult inside him had subsided.

When the sense of peace came again, he projected the call into the void. *"Tommy One, can you hear me?"*

"I hear you."

"I'm Danny. I live on the planet Wenda that goes around the sun Aura Rawn." He fought to keep down his excitement. *"Where are you?"*

"The city of Gylan of the planet Makal of the sun Apar." The words came into Danny's mind with a stilted precision that puzzled him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Tommy One."

"No, your real name."

"Tommy One."

"But it can't be," he protested. *"That's just a means of identification. What does your mother call you?"*

Silence.

"You have to have a real name," he exclaimed.

Silence.

"Say something," he urged.

Silence.

Danny had the sudden fear that the contact had been broken, then realized that it hadn't, for he had the same sensation of presence he experienced whenever Zandro entered his mind. He tried a different approach.

"What do you see?"

"Buildings, people, aircars, lights." The words came in the same stilted fashion as before. But Danny was delighted; Tommy One, in faraway Gylan, was naming the wonderful things that his eyes fell upon. Tommy One was telling him all about it.

Danny started to ask another question when suddenly he felt a second presence in his mind. Zandro! The knowledge came so sharply that he recoiled in terror, instantly breaking the contact with Tommy One. Trembling, he waited for some awful pronouncement. When none came, he fled back to the ship, barring the metal door behind him.

It had been Zandro! He knew that with certainty. What would Zandro do? He might cut him off from the Tommies forever. No, he wouldn't do that! He wanted to call out to Zandro, promise that he would never talk with the Tommies again when he was alone. He fought the impulse. But he couldn't afford to alienate Zandro. Not now!

Danny was almost asleep when he felt the sense of presence in his mind again. It was like a touch that had no physical counterpart.

"Sleep, Danny, sleep." Zandro's words come soothingly. Danny started to rebel but thought better of it.

"Yes," he murmured. He allowed the drowsiness to steal over him while fighting to retain a spark of consciousness in which memory could live.

"Sleep, sleep," Zandro intoned.

"Yes . . ."

"It is bad to contact the Tommies when you are alone." The words were soft and persuasive.

"It is bad," he murmured.

"You will not contact them unless I am with you, Danny."

"I will not contact them unless you are with me," he drowsily agreed.

"You will tell me what the Tommies say."

"I will tell you . . ."

"You won't wonder about the Tommies anymore, Danny. They are there. That is all you have to know."

"I won't wonder . . ."

"Now sleep, Danny. Sleep, sleep, sleep."

With the last spark of consciousness fading, Danny

felt Zandro withdraw from his mind. One moment he'd had the sense of presence; the next it was gone, leaving a curious blankness. But he remembered!

He struggled to bring himself to full wakefulness, then fell back exhausted. "I will contact them," he vowed. "I will, I will."

In the darkness of the ship, he slept.

She came down the Street of the Shopkeepers in Gylan, a thin wisp of a girl with deep-blue eyes and dark tangled hair that fell almost to her shoulders. Her faded pink dress, several sizes too large, and worn sandals gave her the appearance of a ragged urchin. She was fifteen; her name was Arla Koy.

Sauntering slowly, she gazed wistfully at the displays in the window. Ornate jewelry from Mokla, colorful scarves and skirts from the mills in Jedro, bright metallic slippers and sandals from Cardon—products from all Makal were to be seen behind the glass. Passing an open-air market, her eyes glowed at sight of luscious yellow polloms from the orchards beyond the mountains.

At the main intersection she boarded a moving belt that carried her toward the heart of the city. It wound through a garden lane devoid of ground vehicles. Occasionally it carried her through small parks, each with a central fountain and pleasant walkways, where older people, warming themselves in the sun, fed scarlet hela birds from small sacks of grain dispensed by the vending machines.

The stores grew bigger and gaudier, the window displays more lavish as she approached the central shopping area. Aircars darted among the graceful towers

that pierced the pinkish-gray sky or landed or took off from heliports situated a hundred or more stories above the ground. Occasionally a pair of eyes would fasten inquiringly on her shabby clothes. She didn't mind; she was used to it.

Her eyes lighted with anticipation as she approached the central library, the one place where even the poorest could share in the richness of books, tapes, and visual displays. The store windows, while filled with wondrous things, held nothing by comparison. In print, art, music, and voice the library held the wealth of 6,800 sun systems—wealth that spanned time and distance, encompassing all that was known of matter as well as the abstract knowledge of the mind. She believed the library to be the most wonderful place in the Universe, for within its ninety-eight stories it encompassed the Universe itself.

She stepped off the belt and crossed a plaza, entering the cool lobby through the ornate Francon IV entrance. Inside, she paused to decide which treasure trove to visit first. Perhaps she should finish *The Life and Death of Lampert I*, the benevolent tyrant who had founded the Second Terran Empire.

Suddenly she stiffened, a quick, tense look flooding her face. "Tommy One"—the name had popped into her mind, then "Danny June." She automatically threw up a mental barrier to block any penetration of her own mind, then glanced nervously around, attempting to discern if anyone had witnessed her fright. Everything appeared normal.

Danny June had been calling Tommy One—that much she had gotten; and the call had been loud and

clear. She considered it. Because of public fear and scorn, most of the registered telepaths on Makal had chosen to dwell apart in a colony across the Wasach Sea. There were few such in Gylan. But there were others—a larger number, she guessed—who had chosen to break the law rather than submit to the indignity of registration. Hidden in the larger cities, they seldom communicated telepathically for fear of disclosure. She was one such.

Had the call been put out by a registered telepath? She thought not, if only for the reason that few such sensitives resided in the city.

More to the point, had the call been put out by a telepathic police agent hoping to trap an unregistered sensitive into answering or revealing himself by his reaction when receiving the call? She had heard of such tactics. It was that possibility that instantly had caused her to close her mind. She debated it, then cautiously lifted the barrier.

“*I hear you, Tommy One*”—the words crackled with such clarity in her consciousness that she immediately threw up her shield, trembling as she gazed furtively around. No one seemed in the least concerned.

Feeling her fright pass, she considered the situation more calmly. The call *could* have been put out by an agent, yet she sensed that Danny was young or at least too young to be an agent. It had something to do with the so-called mental fingerprint, by which many telepaths could sense both age and sex.

The names probably were code covers, she reflected. Unregistered telepaths occasionally did communicate

that way. The name Tommy One, in particular, held an unnatural ring.

Moving between the stacks where she would be unobserved, she cautiously opened her mind. "*Third Rigel Dynasty*" . . . "*Kalkal of Brotok*" . . . "*the music of Troon*"—the thoughts of those around her swirled through her consciousness. Then, "*I want to know about the big starships.*"

She caught her breath. That had been Danny June's voice; she knew it. Glancing nervously around, she listened intently.

"Starships . . ."

"You will have to go to the library."

"Go to the library."

"Do it now."

She listened a moment longer, then erected the barrier again, isolating her mind from intrusion while she probed her own perturbation. There was something unreal about the conversation, something puzzling. Both voices had seemed to originate from the same source; that was it. And both held an odd, mechanical quality.

But it was more than that. Despite the oddity of the voices—the sameness!—she sensed again that Danny was young, probably around her own age; but the voice of Tommy One revealed nothing. Nothing at all. It was lifeless; that was the only way she could think of it. And his words were little more than echoes.

The library! Tommy One was coming to the library! The impact suddenly struck her. That information, picked up by the telepathic police, could spell disaster for Tommy One. Didn't he know that? Didn't Danny

June know it? Someone had to warn them. Or was this a trap? The possibility chilled her.

She edged out from the stacks and glanced around the lobby. The few people wandering here and there or browsing through the catalogues appeared intent in their own pursuits; she saw no one who fitted her mental picture of an agent. But there *could* be an agent, and he *could* have heard. She had to take the chance, intercept Tommy One—prevent him from entering the library.

She returned outside and found a bench near the entrance. Sitting in the warm sun, she felt tense and edgy—not the tenseness of danger but the tenseness of anticipation.

Waiting, she wondered at the risk she might be taking. Yet she really hadn't sensed danger, not to herself. But to Tommy One, certainly. He couldn't be very smart to run that kind of risk, she reflected. Neither could Danny June. Yet Danny had been so positive in his directions.

Why had the two voices seemed to emanate from the same source? Why their identical mechanical quality? How could one such voice suggest life, the other lifelessness? The questions nagged her. Of the two, Tommy One was the strangest, she thought, if only because of his stilted, echolike speech. Could she hear his vocal cadence, she knew it would be exactly the same, for the telepathic and vocal qualities were analogous in the mind of the sensitive. The telepathic communication *was* speech.

As the sun climbed higher, she grew impatient, yet suppressed the urge to open her mind for fear of a trap.

Clearly none of the people passing could be Tommy One. Most were middle-aged or elderly, and the few children were accompanied by adults.

She was looking across the plaza when she saw a tall, slender youth step from the moving belt. Gazing toward the library, he started toward it.

Tommy One!—she knew it! Fascinated, she watched him come closer. He had tousled yellow hair and was huskier than she had first supposed. Approaching the stairs leading to the lobby, he looked neither to the right nor left. He walked, she thought, like he talked—mechanically.

As he passed her, she opened her mind. "*Tommy One?*" Projecting the name telepathically, she kept her gaze fastened on him. He halted, staring ahead, then turned slowly in her direction. Again she had the impression of a stiff, unliving thing. And the space suit! Younger boys dressed like that at times, but this one must be close to her own age—fourteen or fifteen. Seeing his blank stare, she suppressed the urge to close her mind and withdraw. Instead, she forced herself to repeat the call.

"*Tommy One . . .*" The acknowledgment came in a stiff, formal manner.

"*Don't go into the library,*" she warned.

"*Don't go in . . .*"

"*Go back, go back where you came from.*" She stifled her exasperation. "*Go back, go back.*"

"*Go back . . .*"

"*Now,*" she exclaimed peremptorily. Didn't he have a mind of his own? She saw him turn haltingly toward the moving belt.

"Tommy One?" Danny's voice crackled in her mind. "Are you talking with someone?"

"Tommy One," the yellow-haired figure echoed. Her throat constricted as she saw him halt.

"Danny!" She hurled the name with all the telepathic force she could muster before rushing on. "Don't let Tommy One go into the library. It might be dangerous."

"Who are you?" The question held a start of surprise.

"My name is Arla . . ." She halted, conscious of the risk she was taking.

"Arla?"

"Please don't use my name," she instructed. "It's dangerous."

"To you?"

"Yes," she acknowledged hurriedly, "and to you and Tommy One if you're not registered."

"Registered?"

"You don't know?" she exclaimed disbelievingly. A telepath who didn't know about registration was beyond her comprehension. "Where are you?"

"I'm on Wenda."

"Wenda?" She repeated the name, trying to place it.

"Second of the sun Aura Rawn," he explained.

"Another planet?" She contemplated the answer incredulously. No, he was too close! He could be no farther away than Tommy One! He was trying to fool her.

"It's across the gulf you call the Ebon Deeps," he explained.

"Across the Ebon Deeps?" She caught her breath bewilderedly. A telepath who didn't know about registration, who lived across the Ebon Deeps . . . It was fantastic, impossible! His voice pattern had originated

from somewhere nearby. Yet she felt no sense of presence! But neither did she from Tommy One, and she could see him.

She asked firmly, "*Who is Tommy One?*"

"*He's . . . he's just Tommy One.*" As if sensing her disbelief, he added, "*There are six Tommies.*"

"*How can that be?*" She thought again that he was fooling her.

"*I don't know,*" he confessed, "*but there are.*"

"*If you don't know, how do you know there are six?*" she demanded.

"*Zandro told me.*"

She sensed the hesitancy behind the admission and prompted, "*Who is he?*"

"*I don't know.*" The words held a note of perplexity. "*I've never seen him.*"

"*You're fooling me,*" she cried.

"*No, honestly,*" he protested.

She started to repeat the accusation when she became aware that Tommy One had started up the stairs leading to the lobby. "*Tell Tommy One not to go into the library,*" she exclaimed urgently.

"*Why not?*"

"*If telepathic agents are listening . . .*"

"*Telepathic agents?*" he cut in.

"*The police,*" she warned. "*I've got to close now.*"

"*Don't go,*" he pleaded.

"*I have to.*"

"*When can I talk to you?*"

"*Later, later.*" She closed her mind resolutely, her eyes riveted apprehensively on Tommy One. He halted, staring stiffly toward the ornate Francon IV doors. To her

relief, he slowly turned and started back toward the moving belt. Watching his slow, mechanical steps, she wondered again who he was. And why didn't she feel a sense of presence? That, she realized, bothered her as much as anything. Even when he had faced her, answered her, she had felt nothing. Nothing at all.

He had scarcely seemed human.



6

DANNY TREMBLED with excitement.

There was a girl named Arla; he had just talked with her for the second time! His heart pounded at the wonder of it. But their conversation, like the first, had been brief and disconnected, for she had been fearful. And so was he, for he instinctively knew that Zandro would be extremely angry at the contact. He might even cut him off from the Tommies! He grew frightened; he couldn't reach her except through them. He'd just learned that.

Following their initial contact, he had tried to call her back. His telepathic cry had brought only the deep, utter stillness that comes with vast emptiness—a stillness that seemed almost more than he could bear. "*Arla?*" Her name echoed futilely in his mind. Despairingly, he

wondered if he hadn't conjured the whole thing. Perhaps there was no Arla; that thought was worst of all.

Then, surprisingly, she had entered his mind when he was calling Tommy Three.

He remembered how it had been.

"*Danny June calling Tommy Three*"—he had sent the call into the void.

"*Tommy Three . . .*" The answer came almost immediately; and then, "*Danny?*" The last, anxious and whispery in his mind, came so suddenly that he believed it a trick of the imagination. But it came again, stronger.

"*Arla!*" He shouted the name in his mind. "*I hear you! I hear you!*"

"*I've been calling . . .*"

"*I've been trying to get you,*" he interrupted hurriedly. "*I've tried and tried. I've been trying since last night.*"

"*I've been listening. Your voice just came.*"

"*When I called Tommy Three?*"

"*Yes, just now. It's strange.*"

"*Strange?*"

"*That I didn't hear you before.*"

"*But I was calling . . .*"

"*Did you try to call Tommy One . . . any of the Tommies earlier?*" she cut in.

"*No, just you. I was trying to call you.*"

"*But I heard you when you called him,*" she exclaimed wonderingly.

"*Clearly?*"

"*Not as clearly as when Tommy Three answered.*"

"*That's strange.*" He paused, an idea nibbling at the periphery of his mind as he recalled his contact with the

Ikus. In some strange way they formed transmission relays—would have put him through to someone called Subcommander Gobit had not Zandro intervened. Could the Tommies be serving the same function? But how had Arla heard him the first time? Of course, she hadn't heard him! The explanation burst starkly clear in his consciousness. She had heard the echo of his call in Tommy's One's mind! That's what she was hearing now—the echo of his thoughts! She was reading them from Tommy Three's mind! The Tommy was a relay! He explained the idea.

"That could be," she answered tentatively.

"It must be it," he declared. *"I'm going to break the contact."*

"Now?"

"Listen, don't go away."

"Is Zandro . . ."

"No, just listen." Abruptly he closed his mind, feeling again the absolute silence. He let a moment pass, then called, *"Danny June calling Tommy Three . . . do you hear me, Tommy Three?"*

"Tommy Three . . ." The answer came as quickly as before.

"Danny June calling Arla," he said.

"Tommy Three . . ." The voice echoed dully in his mind. *"Danny June to Arla."*

"Tommy Three, I hear you." This time Arla's voice was loud and clear.

"We did it," Danny cut in gleefully.

"But . . ."

"Can't you see?" he interrupted. *"The Tommies act as relay stations. As soon as we were connected, Tommy*

Three stopped talking. Now we're talking to each other through his mind."

"How does that differ from before?"

"Then you were reading Tommy's thoughts as he listened to me—sort of a mental echo. But when I direct my message to you, he retransmits my words. That's what we're hearing, his retransmissions."

"Of course," she exclaimed, "that's why both voices seemed to come from the same place—why they sounded alike."

He felt jubilant; it was like with the Ikus. He told her about them—how he had learned of the existence of Subcommander Gobit, how Iku 214J and Iku 998W had been preparing to put through his call to the subcommander when Zandro had destroyed the contact. *"The Tommies must be like the Ikus, operate in the same way,"* he explained.

"Who are the Ikus?" she asked wonderingly.

"They are"—he groped for an explanation—"just minds," he ended lamely.

"Like Zandro?"

"Yes." The admission made him suddenly uncomfortable. *"But you've seen the Tommies,"* he rushed on.

"Only Tommy One," she corrected.

"Show me what he looks like."

"Show you? You mean transmit a mental picture?"

"Yes, of Tommy One. You can, can't you?"

"No." Her hushed answer was filled with awe. *"I never knew it could be done."*

"Zandro does." He felt her silence. *"He uses images to reinforce his words."*

"Can you transmit images?"

"I do with Zandro."

"Can you with me?"

"I don't know. I'll try." He stared at the meadow—the stunted trees, the tall grasses, the light of the emerald sun reflected off the blue-green stream. Concentrating, he tried to project the scene telepathically, as he would words. *"Did you get anything?"*

"I'm not certain." The answer was awed. *"I had the impression of a large open space with dark blobs on it."*

"That was trees on a meadow," he answered excitedly. *"Why don't you try? Concentrate on Tommy One."*

"Tommy One," she echoed. *"I'll try."*

"Send it exactly as you do with words." He held his mind open during the long moment that followed, hoping to catch her answer.

"Did you get anything?" she asked finally.

"Nothing, it was just blank." He felt a keen disappointment.

"I didn't think I could," she said practically. *"I've never before heard of a telepath who could do it. That must take a special talent."*

"Perhaps," he answered dubiously.

"Maybe I could learn to receive. Do you think I could?"

"We could try." He pushed the speculation to the back of his mind and asked, *"What does Tommy One look like?"*

"He's about my age, fourteen or fifteen, tall and slender. I think his eyes are blue. I didn't see him that

closely, but I'm sure they would be. His hair was long and yellow, all tangled."

"He looks like me," he exclaimed. His reflection in the stream was just like that: blue eyes, tall, yellow hair, and the age would be about right, at least on Wenda. The similarity perturbed him.

"He's dressed in a space suit," she offered.

"A space suit?"

"Well, it looks like one. I've seen them on the three-view."

"What's that?"

"A three-view? It's a screen that shows pictures of what's happening at a distance."

"I'd like to see one," he exclaimed.

"He moves strangely."

"Tommy One?"

"He walks like he talks—mechanically."

"In what way?"

"I'm not sure. There's just something about him." She hesitated. *"I have the feeling he isn't human. What is he, Danny? Do you know?"*

"Not human? But you said . . ."

"I know," she cut in, *"he looks human. But he acts . . . automatic. Kind of dumb,"* she added.

"If you could see Tommy Three . . ."

"To see if he looks like Tommy One? I'm certain he does. All six probably look exactly the same."

"He's at the space terminal," he suggested.

"How do you know?"

"I sent him there."

"Sent him?"

"He goes wherever I tell him," he explained.

A long silence swept in before she asked, *"If you've never been off Wenda, how do you know where to send him?"*

"Zandro tells me." The admission brought a quick discomfort.

"Zandro . . ." The name came from her like a feathery whisper.

"But I talk with the Tommies when Zandro's not in my mind," he rushed on, fearful she would think he was like the Ikus. *"I talk with them just like I'm talking with you."*

"What does Zandro want to know?" she asked tautly.

"All about Gylan, the people, their work, and about the aircars and spaceport. Just things in general."

"But he's an alien," she exclaimed.

"Alien?" He let the word form in his mind, grasping its meaning from the way she had used it. *"I guess so,"* he finally admitted.

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"In what way?" He felt a sudden dread.

"Telling him all about us. Why does he want to know those things?"

The question left Danny appalled. *But one race could rule the Universe—his race!* Zandro had said that, and then he'd tried to wipe the memory from Danny's mind. He'd tried to wipe out lots of memories, like those of the Ikus and Subcommander Gobit.

Danny struggled with his thoughts. *"He's been awfully kind to me,"* he said finally.

"I wouldn't tell him a thing," she declared.

"But he might get angry, cut me off from the Tommies," he cried. "If he did, we wouldn't be able to talk to each other."

"Couldn't you fool him, tell him harmless things?"

"Not if he's in my mind at the time," he protested. "Even if I didn't tell him, he'd know. He'd hear the echo in my mind, the same way you heard me talking with Tommy One."

"How could he cut us off?"

"How?" He debated it. "I don't know."

"Even if he did, I could still call you through the Tommies."

"That's right," he answered excitedly.

"Except that I wouldn't know when Zandro was there."

"We'll figure a way," he promised. He felt suddenly uneasy, then became aware of the sense of presence. Zandro! He instinctively closed his mind, breaking the contact.

The silence of nothingness rushed back.

Now, remembering the conversation, he felt an elation that was greater than his fear. He wouldn't let Zandro stop him from talking to her. Never! Fiercely he made the vow. Besides, what could Zandro do? He was nothing.

Nothing but a mind.

Samul Smith was threading his aircar toward a landing atop the Space Administration Building when his

visiphone beeped. He punched a button and watched Sol Houston's face come to life. The tight set of the mouth and jaw alerted him.

"Get over to Medical Administration immediately," the Overlord barked peremptorily. "Contact Chief Medician Paulker."

Samul swung his aircar into a new traffic pattern while asking, "What's the trouble?"

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you, Samul."

"The aliens," he murmured.

"This might be the break we need." The Overlord's image abruptly faded from the screen. So they had come! Samul peered up into the pinkish-gray sky, pondering who "they" were. Whence had they come? An infinite Universe presented infinite possibilities; the prospects were not encouraging. He pushed the thought aside as the twin spires of Medical Administration rushed toward him.

Chief Medician Paulker, the sector's foremost neurologist as well as administrator of its medical facilities, greeted him nervously. His usually saturnine face wore a puzzled, irritated expression. But there was also something akin to fear; Samul glimpsed it in his eyes.

"What's the story?" he asked.

"Follow me," Paulker instructed obliquely. He escorted Samul down a lift to the basement morgue and gestured toward a slab. Samul saw what appeared to be the body of a youth in the early teens.

"So?" He glanced at Paulker.

"It's not human." The medician's voice was strained and wondering.

"Not human?" Samul suppressed a start, returning

his eyes to the naked figure. Tall, slender, yellow-haired, it appeared human enough. The face held a rigid, stoic look, suggestive of deep introspection.

"It's synthetic, a robot, an android—call it what you will, but it's not human," Paulker repeated. "But it looks so human it scares you, right down to the last surface detail."

Samul asked softly, "How did it get here?"

Paulker moistened his lips. "It was struck by a surface vehicle while illegally crossing a freight lane. The impact would have totally destroyed a human body, but as you can see . . ."

"Android," he murmured. So that was what the alien ship had brought.

"The skin, muscle tone, eye color, hair—everything looks normal." The medician spoke professionally. "It appeared normal in every respect, right down to the breathing rate and heartbeat. It even possesses finger and retinal prints."

"Is that possible . . . in an android?"

"Scientifically unbelievable but true. It even has a name."

"Which is?"

"Tommy Six." Paulker's eyes grew puzzled. "It was still alive, or perhaps I should say functioning, on arrival. It gave that name in the receiving ward."

"Did it give any other information?"

"Nothing. It stopped functioning immediately afterward."

"An android that speaks," Samul mused. "Did it have any identification?"

"None whatever."

"It had to live somewhere."

"Did it?" Paulker grimaced. "Does a thing like that eat or sleep?"

"Probably not," he agreed.

"It was stoic, almost sullen, gave no indication of pain," the medician stated. "It was dressed in a space suit."

"Oh, what kind?"

"Like they wear in the Survey Service," Paulker explained. "It even had the star burst on the shoulder patch. Of course, that's not unusual. That was quite a fad among the younger set a few years ago."

"I remember," he answered absently. For some reason his thoughts reverted to the *Golden Ram* and the boy named Danny June. The age appeared about right. But the *Golden Ram* hadn't been a survey ship.

"Despite the impact, the outward damage was so slight that an autopsy was commenced to discover the cause of death," Paulker said. "That was when the medician discovered the nature of the, uh, thing."

"What did he find?"

"Well, nothing."

"Nothing?" Samul raised an eyebrow.

Paulker eyed him reluctantly. "When Garron—he's the autopsy specialist—discovered it was an automaton, he halted the proceeding immediately."

"Why?" he demanded quizzically.

"His license is limited to human practice."

"In a situation like this?" he exploded.

"Regulations," Paulker returned primly. He saw the ire in Samul's eyes and added hurriedly, "How-

ever, I've called in several top automation engineers. The work will proceed immediately."

Samul asked coldly, "When will the records be available?"

"Within a few hours, I hope. Of course, they will be tentative."

"I'm speaking of the complete report."

"The engineers undoubtedly will have to make lab tests, analyses of materials, hold consultations, things like that," Paulker replied. He drew himself up and stated more firmly, "After all, we are on alien ground. We don't know what factors might be encountered."

"I realize that." Samul held his eyes. "I want the retinal pattern, fingerprints and photographs—front, side, and back views."

"Yes, certainly."

"As soon as possible."

"We can have those within the hour," Paulker promised.

"I also want to know its potential, its capabilities. Did it exhibit human emotions? Could it feel, sense? We have to determine that."

"I'm afraid an automation engineer . . ."

"I know, there's a regulation against it," Samul cut in wearily, "but we need the answers. Could a human corpse yield information about the victim's emotional potential before death?" He eyed the medician sharply.

"Perhaps from a study of the endocrine structure," Paulker ventured.

"I also want to know if it could transmit and receive."

"You believe that it did?" Paulker looked startled.

"I feel certain that it did." Samul let his anger subside. "Does a telepath's brain differ from that of a normal?"

"There's no biochemical or cellular difference, no."

"Is there any way of telling whether Tommy Six—we'll call it that—was telepathic?"

"I can't see how."

"If Tommy Six duplicates the human body as closely as you believe it might, you should be able to match systems."

"I'm not sure that I follow you."

"Suppose you found extra systems?"

"You are speaking of the automation engineers, of course."

"Yes, certainly."

"I should imagine that they would investigate them."

"They'd better," Samul said grimly. "Incidentally, this must be kept absolutely secret."

"Secret?" Paulker frowned. "Are you asking us to violate the antisecrecy act? We can't do that. The right of the public to know . . ."

"Just keep it quiet," he urged.

"A thing like this? An android that talks and passes itself off as a human? Someone certainly will want to do a paper on it. And there most certainly will be an official investigation for any infringements of patent rights."

"Any information detrimental to the government can be withheld from the public for thirty days," Samul rebutted sternly. "That's written into the regulation."

"Well, yes."

"This is extremely dangerous." He underscored the words.

Paulker eyed him searchingly. "This thing didn't come from any human world," he said slowly. "Perhaps not even from this galaxy."

"That's possible," Samul admitted.

"What is it?"

"The android? A machine."

"But so human," Paulker breathed.

"In looks, yes, but there's more to the human body than that. There's the soul."

Paulker shook his head. "What is the soul? It doesn't have a physical basis. None whatever."

"Does a thing have to be measurable to exist?" he countered. "I believe not."

"Life is biochemistry," the medician declared. "Life is the interaction of things that are measurable. It is the flow of blood, the action of enzymes, the response of nerves . . ."

"Low animals answer that description," Samul interrupted. "Do they have souls?"

"The variable is intelligence," Paulker declared.

"Is it?" He gestured toward the figure on the slab. "There was intelligence to an unknown degree and systems that probably match all those of the human body, but it has no soul; that's the difference."

"But what of its builders?"

"I don't know."

Paulker switched his gaze to Tommy Six. "Its construction might be utterly beyond our comprehension. You can't expect too much."

"Do what you can." Sensing the other's predicament, he spoke more kindly. Paulker was a good man, perhaps the best in his field. But his orientation was on the hu-

man body—muscle, bone, nerve trunks, vascular systems. Protoplasm was his domain. His extensive knowledge of psychology was founded in human structures—the cortex and endocrine system. Action and reaction—the psychomedicians had never quite broken away from the concept of man as a mechanism of response to the stimulus field in which he dwelt. The inner life was governed by the outer. The human mind itself was inert until acted upon by exterior forces. Even the processes of creation were fueled through the sense organs. In that respect, the mind was a parasite feeding on the stimulus ocean surrounding it.

Samul didn't entirely believe that. Man responded, yes, but he was more than response. The greatness of life was more than a measure of protoplasm, more than a bombardment of stimuli. The mind itself was a creator, awesome in its potential. He saw the question in the medician's eyes and waited.

"Where did they get their model?" Paulker demanded. His voice had become hoarse and strained. "The . . . beings who sent them?"

"That's what I'm attempting to discover."

"But who or what are they?"

"Another form of life," he replied. "An intelligent one."

"They had to have some knowledge of our world—its geography, sociology, cultural artifacts. And of our language. It talked! It talked!"

"At least enough to identify itself." Recognizing the note of hysteria that had crept into the medician's voice, he spoke placatingly.

"Tommy Six . . ." Paulker spoke the name won-

deringly. "Why such a strange name? What could it mean?"

"It might mean there are at least five more of them," he answered.

"You believe so?" The medician's head jerked up.

"Or five hundred or five thousand."

"Do you really believe . . ."

"I have no basis for belief," Samul cut in. "All I know is that we have an android who lived and talked and died."

"And came from the stars," Paulker whispered.

"Yes, it came from the stars." As the medician led him from the room, Samul turned back at the door to look at the slender figure on the slab. It came from the stars, yes, but who were its masters? That was the question.

Who were its masters?

Tommy Six was Danny June!

Samul stared at the matching retinal prints. Not Danny June, he corrected, but a duplicate of Danny June, the young son of Gordell and Wenda June whose ship, the *Golden Ram*, had been destroyed years before in the vicinity of Aura Rawn, the emerald star.

So there had been survivors! At least one. If Tommy Six were an exact duplicate of Danny June, as the retinal patterns indicated, then Danny had lived at least until the age of fourteen or fifteen—perhaps still lived. Samul felt a tremor of excitement. Somewhere beyond the Ebon Deeps . . . Knowing the futility of the speculation, he shook it from his mind.

But the *Golden Ram* had been a colonist ship; ergo,

the aliens must have gotten their concept of dress from the uniforms of the lost survey crews. That explained the fate of the *Nomad* and other vessels which, over the years, had vanished in that vast emptiness across the deeps.

Had any of their crewmen survived? He thought not, for otherwise the aliens more likely would have duplicated an adult rather than a boy. Or would they? Debating the question, he thought that a definitive answer wasn't possible. Not yet.

Following the same line of reasoning, it seemed highly probable that no other members of the *Golden Ram's* crew or passengers had survived, otherwise the aliens most certainly would have patterned the android's clothes after those of the colonists. By that logic Danny June, alone, had fallen into alien hands.

Samul speculated on his deductions. If he were correct, then any other androids landed in Gylan—he felt certain that at least five others existed, else why the name "Six"—would be replicas of the first one. All garbed in the uniform of the survey crews! They should be easy to locate.

But how did the Tommies—plural?—get their information back to their masters? He had suggested transmitters to Paulker; now he realized its implausibility. Transmissions to or from an alien vessel orbiting Makal would have been detected. Neither could the aliens hope to land and pick up the androids as blithely as they had landed them. That, unlikely as it seemed, left telepathy.

There was no other way, he concluded. But telepaths who could span the stars! He shuddered, feeling small

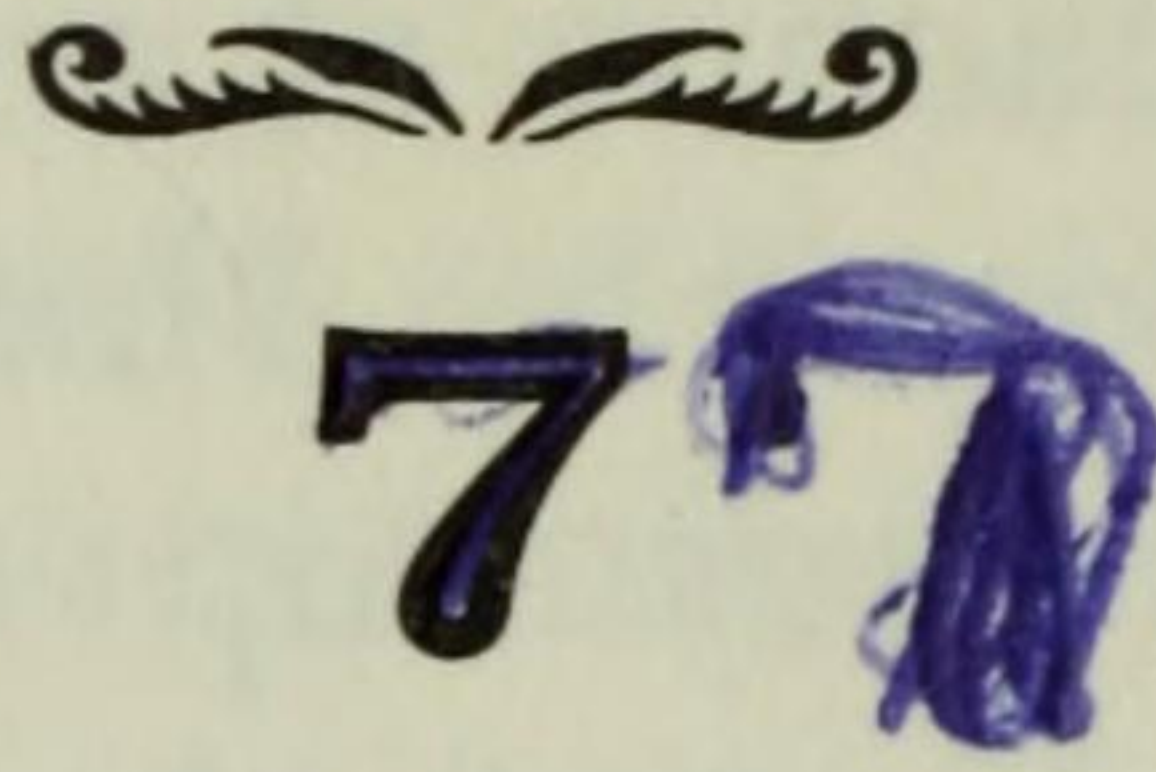
and insignificant. The empire with its 6,800 sun systems diminished in his mind until it was but a mote in space.

But that was foolish! He pulled himself together. They were facing a race of undoubtedly greater science, at least in the manufacture of androids. But that didn't mean they were invincible. Hostile, yes. The wanton destruction of the survey ships proved that. But they were still feeling their way, almost cautiously. Instead of terror bolts, they were sending androids to report on human strengths and weaknesses.

The empire was weak, all right. He contemplated it musingly. But it was the weakness of opulence, of lack of challenge, of too many centuries in which man had lived by the clock, by regulation, secure in his eminence. In the process, personal initiative had been all but stifled.

But it was also strong. History had proved that a thousand times since the first men had sent their frail craft careening among the stars. There had been long eras of somnolence; but the giant had always awakened. Each generation had bred men like Sol Houston; they were the sinews behind the fat.

The reflection made him feel better.



"Tommy Three—Arla to Danny."

With the nightshades closing over the meadow, the voice tinkled in Danny's mind. He started fearfully, for Zandro only moments before had withdrawn. Tensely he concentrated, relieved when he felt no sense of presence. Zandro was gone!

"Tommy Three—Arla to Danny"—the message came again.

"Danny June, I hear you, Tommy Three." He let the message flow outward. *"Come in, Arla, come in."*

"Danny . . ." Her voice came as a breathless whisper in his mind.

"I hear you, I hear you."

"Are you alone?"

He hesitated, testing for the sense of presence again and finding none. *"I was talking with Zandro, but he's gone."* The thought was husky in his mind.

"I heard you talking with Tommy Five."

"Zandro was with me," he replied guardedly.

"I know. You were asking about the starships at the military port."

"He wanted to know." The admission brought a rush of guilt.

"Do you think that wise . . . telling him things like that?"

"I don't know." Her evident disapproval made him squirm. *"I guess not,"* he finally admitted.

"I wouldn't tell him anything like that," she declared.

"I won't," he promised.

"There's something wrong, Danny."

"Perhaps, I don't know." He felt confused.

"I'd feel better if you knew more about him."

"But he's nothing," he protested, *"nothing but a mind."*

"No, he's there," she rebutted. *"There's no such thing as a bodiless mind."*

"But I've searched. I can't find anything." As the denial spilled from his lips, he had the fragmentary memory of staring into a dark pool; beneath its surface a hideous pulsating shape squirmed atop a nest of writhing snakes. And that baleful eye! Red and frightening, it glared up at him through the dark water. He trembled. It was the same scene that came in his nightmares.

"He's there," she insisted. *"Perhaps you haven't seen him because you're looking for someone who looks like you."*

"What should I look for?" he asked desperately.

"He could have any shape, any size. He might have two legs or four, or crawl or fly. There are all kinds of life," she stated firmly. *"He might even be a plant or a tree."*

"A tree," he blurted.

"There was a man on Cugno who spoke with trees. That's one of the Deneb worlds."

"A talking tree?" he exclaimed. *"I don't believe it."*

"Not words but thoughts," she insisted. *"I was told."*

"By a telepath?"

"Yes, and by other people. It was in the news."

"Sounds crazy," he declared.

"Most people thought so."

"Didn't you?"

"No, it's possible. Everything is possible."

"But trees?"

"Yet we're talking across the gulf of the Ebon Deep."

Her thoughts came stronger. *"Think how crazy that would sound to most people."*

"I guess so. I'm used to it."

"There are other things just as wonderful," she declared.

"Such as?"

"Well . . ." Her voice faded from his mind, then came back more firmly. *"I'd find out who Zandro is, Danny. I wouldn't delay. Why does he want to know all those things about us? And those Ikus you mentioned, and that Subcommander Gobit. Who are they? I get scared just thinking about them."*

"Don't get scared," he counseled. *"I'm not."* His words made him feel very brave and adult.

"I'm scared for the world."

"But what could he do?" he protested.

"Zandro? You don't know his power."

"He doesn't scare me!"

"You don't know the power of the mind, Danny. If you did . . ."

"You mean telepathy?"

"No, there's more. Much more."

"What do you mean?" He was startled.

"I . . . I can't tell you. Not now. Not yet." She added hurriedly, *"But that's not why I called you."*

"Then why?" He felt a sudden premonition.

"I've been checking on the Tommies."

"Checking how?"

"Talking with them. I can locate them that way."

"Talking about what?"

"Just calling them. They won't talk with me. They'll answer, put me through to you, but they won't tell me anything."

"How can that be?"

"I don't know. Maybe they're attuned to you."

"How do you mean?"

"Their minds might be locked to yours. Zandro could do that, you know. Or perhaps they'll only obey when you're in the circuit."

"You kept Tommy One from entering the library," he reminded.

"But you were present, at least in his mind." She said more urgently, *"I've seen five of them. I couldn't locate Tommy Six. He wouldn't answer."*

"I was trying to get him, too."

"For Zandro?"

"I couldn't reach him," he replied evasively.

"That's strange." He felt her hesitancy. *"Have they ever before failed to answer?"*

"Not till this time."

"Do you think the police agents might have caught him or something?"

"I don't know," he admitted uncomfortably.

"If so, they might find out about the rest of them."

"How?" He couldn't conceive how a police agency might operate.

"Through telepathic agents. Or through Tommy Six, if they've caught him. I really don't know." She paused. *"Perhaps they should know."*

"The agents?" He was startled. *"Why?"*

"I'm afraid of the Tommies. That's what I was going to tell you, Danny. I've seen them all but Tommy Six, and they all look exactly alike. It's not natural. They all have the same mechanical walk and voice, and they're dressed exactly alike, in space uniforms."

"Their faces and everything are exactly alike?"

"Exactly, Danny. It's frightening. Even their movements, the way they stand, their blank stares." She hesitated before rushing on. *"You know what I think? I think they're machines."*

"Machines?" He gulped.

"I think so," she answered gravely.

"But . . . couldn't everyone tell?" The prospect was bewildering.

"Not unless they really studied them, Danny. They look normal enough. But when you get inside their minds . . ."

"What about their minds?" he cut in anxiously.

"They are blank, like vacuums—lifeless except when they are listening or answering. But between times there is . . . nothing. It's not natural."

"But when they're not thinking of anything in particular . . ."

"That's not it," she interrupted. *"The mind's never*

totally blank, not even when a person sleeps or is unconscious. It's always responding. But the Tommies—it's as if someone pulled a switch, disconnected them. It's the same with every one of them. It's frightening."

"What should we do?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I should tell someone."

"Why?"

"That Zandro! He sent them here, I know it. And those other things."

"The Ikus?"

"And that Subcommander Gobit you told me about. Oh, can't you see? They're dangerous. I know it."

"Perhaps," he answered dubiously.

"You said you'd learned something of Zandro's language."

"What has that got to do with it?"

"A language implies a race, a civilization, Danny. Oh, he can't be alone, can't be just a mind."

"I guess not," he answered reluctantly.

"Besides, if I told someone, they might go get you."

"Get me?" He clenched his fists, feeling a wild excitement. *"Take me back to Gylan?"* He conjured a vision of soaring buildings, aircars threading between tall towers, small parks, and sunny walks—all things he knew only from her words. And people! People like himself!

"They might, Danny. Oh, wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"We could see each other," he exclaimed.

"I could show you Gylan."

"Do you think they might come get me?" he asked hopefully.

"Perhaps, because of what you know."

"About the Tommies?"

"And Zandro."

"I want to go to Gylan," he exclaimed.

She said faintly, *"You'd have to be registered."*

"I don't care about that!"

"We'll have to think it out," she cautioned.

"Please, see what you can do."

"All right." She hesitated. *"Be careful of Zandro."*

"Don't worry," he retorted bravely.

"If only you knew what he looks like."

"I'll find out."

"I'm afraid, Danny. Don't take any chances."

"I won't." He'd scarcely broken the contact when he became aware of an intrusion in his mind. Zandro! He felt a touch of fear and pushed it aside.

"Danny?" The voice came soothingly.

"I don't want to talk," he answered sullenly, then resolutely shut his mind. He could block out Zandro; he'd learned that. Except when he slept. Often, when he woke, he had the dim memory of presence that told him Zandro had been there.

What did he learn on such forays? Did he suspect the contact with Arla? He felt the terror again and fought it. Still, what could Zandro do? Nothing, he decided. Nothing at all. Unless he could cut him off from the Tommies—from Arla! He groaned. Zandro couldn't do that. He wouldn't let him!

But who was Zandro? Her warning perturbed him. And why, if she were right, had he sent the Tommies to Gylan? All at once it seemed imperative to know. Well, he would know. He'd find out right away.

Before entering the ship, he stared up through the clearing at the black gulf in the sky. Somewhere across that gulf was the planet Makal—the wonderful city of Gylan where Arla lived.

He wondered what it was like.

Danny halted at the edge of the swamp, gazing perplexedly at the tall green rushes and stunted trees that sprang from the black mud. The dark water lying at the roots of the grasses emitted a putrid odor.

He let his eyes rove. Noisy birds, insects, small animals that scampered or crawled—the swamp abounded with life. Yet it held a curious stillness, a strange sense of desolation denied by the multitude of life forms visible on every side.

Why had he come here? To search for Zandro, of course. But why in the swamp? He gripped his bow tightly, trying to piece together his nightmares; or were they fragments of memory? At times they seemed one, at times the other. The trail, the pool, the monster with the baleful red eye—occasionally they were etched starkly clear in his mind.

But there were fierce animals in the swamp; Zandro had warned him of them time and again. "*Never go near the swamp, Danny*"—the admonition reached far back in memory, always accompanied by a feeling of dread. The swamp was a place of death; that warning had been firmly implanted.

Staring at the gnarled trees that rose like ghosts above the marsh grass, he puzzled over the warning. What animals? He'd never seen an animal that reached higher than his knees—neither in the forest nor in the

meadow. But the monster in the pool! He shifted uncomfortably. Despite its nightmarish quality, the vision held a fearsome reality.

He shut his eyes and ears to close out the distractions of the swamp, concentrating until he achieved the eerie sensation that his mind, free and uncluttered, was floating apart from his body. It was the feeling of total isolation.

“Zandro!” He projected the name telepathically, listening for an answer or the sense of presence that would tell him Zandro was listening without answering. The silence that answered him was unbroken; no touch came into his mind. He repeated the call several times. Finally certain that the other was nowhere present, he shook himself back to reality and peered at the swamp. The familiar sounds of small life reassured him.

He drew an arrow from the quiver slung at his side and fitted it into the bow. Moving stealthily forward, his hand on the weapon was warm and sweaty. A bird fluttering wildly from his path caused his heart to quicken. He halted, breathing deeply before going on. He would find Zandro, discover who he was; he had promised Arla that.

The rushes abruptly opened ahead, revealing a muddy passage winding between sheets of dark water. He studied it, conscious of the prickling of memory, the haunting sense of familiarity. The broad path, the strange patterns in the mud, the reeds flattened at the edges. . . . He stared ahead. He had been there before! He knew it with certainty.

But when? Somehow it was part of the dream; and yet it wasn't. Else why should he know that the path led

to the dark pool? And he *did* know it; he could visualize exactly what lay ahead. The pool and the monster—he felt his hands shake.

He edged forward, ankle-deep in the slime, conscious of a growing inner tension. Little tremors played up and down his spine, and his body was wet with sweat; it ran in little rivulets from his brow, stung his eyes. The air was so still that not a blade of grass moved. And the silence! Only the soft gurgling as he pulled his feet from the ooze broke the quiet—that and the low hum of insects, chirpings, slithery noises among the rushes.

The pool came suddenly into view. A circular black surface hemmed in by reeds and gnarled trees, it lay just ahead. He halted, gazing nervously at it. The crushed rushes, the flattened trail leading to its edge—it was just as he remembered in his dreams. Only this was no dream! He hesitated, fearful of what he might find if he went on. But he had to know. He forced himself to move forward.

Hzzzzz . . . He jerked his head around nervously at the sudden sound, his throat constricting. Controlling himself with effort, he cocked his head to listen. *Hzzzzz* . . . The sound was repeated. Again, from memory, he sensed a haunting familiarity.

Moving his eyes to locate the source, he spotted a small bird hovering above the trail. A bird! The sight jolted him. In another time, another place, he'd seen such a bird. Stilled wings, beady red eyes . . . He remembered; the bird had stalked him!

He retreated several paces without shifting his gaze. The hissing came again as the bird followed, its wings

absolutely motionless. The sight was unnerving. There had been something about the bird! He groped with his thoughts. The bird had been . . . Wire and metal, that was it! The bird had been wire and metal!

The remembrance shook him. Forcing himself to calmness, he stared at the small form hovering above the rushes. Its beady red eyes, fixed unflinchingly on him, made him shudder. What was its purpose? That it was connected with Zandro he had no doubt. Zandro had sent it. Why? Was it . . . telepathic?

A machine! That's what Arla had called the Tommies. He hadn't quite believed it; but now, looking at the bird . . . Was it an Iku? Or were the Ikus something else again? How many life forms did Zandro command? Perhaps they were on all sides of him. Even the trees, the plants. He felt the fear rise in his throat and pushed it down. He had killed the bird once. . . .

He raised the bow, sighting along the arrow as he pulled back on the drawstring. As before, the beady red eyes, watching him steadily, showed no alarm. Of course not; it was a machine! Releasing the arrow, he felt the drawstring whip against his wrist.

Thunk! It struck squarely, hurling the small form violently backward into the rushes. He stood absolutely immobile, not knowing what to expect. Suppose the bird had been in communication with Zandro? He hadn't thought of that. The fear brought the taste of bile to his mouth as he cast a quick glance at the pool. Trembling, he listened to the sounds of life around him.

When his heartbeat began to subside, he searched cautiously for the bird. He found the crumpled form

lying amid the reeds, the arrow through its middle. The beady red eyes, malignant and unblinking, stared at him. The remainder was wires and torn metal.

He jerked erect, terrified as a loud, roiling sound broke the stillness. Whirling toward the pool, his first impression was of water erupting upward, sending waves crashing against the shore. A huge, dark globular body thrust above the surface, the gigantic eye at its apex rolling wildly. Two powerful tentacles shot up, snaking toward the shore.

He screamed. Terror-stricken, he whirled and plunged toward the meadow, heedless of the branches that whipped at his body. His breath whistled through his teeth.

"Danny!" Sudden, violent and commanding, the call exploded in his brain, spurring him to more frantic efforts. Zandro! The hideous monster in the pool had been Zandro!

"Danny!" It came again, a silent thunder that shook his entire being. Despite his terror, he closed his mind, hearing only the faint echoes of his name before they died away altogether.

What could he do? Nothing! Nothing! He couldn't lock himself in the ship; those powerful tentacles could shred it to bits. He had to hide! But where? Where?

Bursting from the swamp, he sped across the meadow, the fear heavy in his throat. He had to run! He had to run and run and run! The thought was a desperation in his mind.

He had to keep running!



8

SO, THERE was more than one Tommy!

Samul Smith stared at the photo that had just arrived from one of the field agents via his desk duplicator. Taken in the vicinity of the central library, it apparently was that of a youth the exact image of Tommy Six. Even to the space suit.

This would be Tommy what? One, Two, Three, Four, or Five? Or could it be Tommy Seven or Eight, or some higher number. How many androids had the aliens landed? Perhaps the empire was crawling with them. Well, no matter. With photographs and a description in the hands of every agent, they'd all be unmasked soon enough.

He was preparing to leave the office when a buzzer sounded. He flipped a switch; the face of one of his agents took form on the wall screen.

"I've spotted one," the agent said.

"Where?" Samul concealed his excitement.

"Near the Military Star Port. I put a bioscan on it. It doesn't return a human wave."

"I didn't believe it would."

"It certainly looks human," the agent reflected. "All but its movements. They're kind of stiff."

“Keep him in sight, photograph him from as many angles as possible, but don’t alarm him,” Samul instructed briskly. “Watch for any contacts he might make.”

“He?”

“It,” Samul corrected. When the image faded from the screen, he took the atomic lift to the roof port and flew in his aircar to meet the agent who was watching the android near the library. He set the vehicle down in a small parking square near the building and switched on his wrist communicator. “Kelton?”

“Kelton,” the agent acknowledged. His voice, small and tinkling in the diminutive transceiver, came immediately. “I’m on Minerva Lane approaching Pala. The subject is pursuing a path with the library as its center. I’ve made no attempt to contact it.” Kelton was telepathic.

“Did you try a bioscan?”

“Negative on the human system,” Kelton responded succinctly.

“I’ll come up behind you,” Samul decided. “I don’t want it to see me in case it reads me.”

“I get no impression of a telepathic mind,” Kelton offered.

“Perhaps it works on an on/off signal, active only when its masters contact it.”

“Could be.” The agent’s voice came more loudly. “It’s turned on Pala toward Apra.”

“Be right along.” Samul broke the contact and turned briskly toward the gardened lane the agent had mentioned. A sprinkling of elderly citizens, as always it seemed, were sitting on the shaded benches admiring

the golden lucca trees and scarlet kashba lilies for which Gylan was famous. Perhaps, when he was old. . . .

Or would the empire even exist at that time? Yes, if it passed the test, he reflected. He couldn't help but feel that the test, somehow, was embodied in the tall, slender androids now stalking the city. They were extensions of their masters, certainly; but how mighty were their masters? That *was* the question.

Spotting the agent on Apra, he drew up behind him. A hundred or so paces ahead he saw the tall, slender figure whose features had become so indelibly engraved in his brain. It did have a curious gait, yet not so curious that it would attract attention unless one were to study it. "Mechanical" was the word that came to Samul's mind.

He fell into step at the agent's side. "Does it ever look back?"

"Never." Kelton's voice was grim. "It couldn't care less about being followed."

"Evasive tactics would be out of the question," he reflected. "Its masters most likely realized that. It probably depends on protective coloration."

"In that suit?"

"With the almost perfect duplication of the human body," he explained. "Whoever made it apparently didn't know how we dressed. Except for the space crews," he added.

"Well, kids do dress that way sometimes."

Samul eyed the android speculatively. "Try to contact it."

"By the name Tommy?"

“Try Tommy One. We’ll go through the numbers.”

The agent’s expression didn’t change, but a moment later he murmured, “It answered.”

“What did it say?”

“Just the acknowledgment ‘Tommy One.’”

“Could you read anything else in its mind?”

“It was blank.” Kelton cast him a glance. “Ordinarily I would sense an undercurrent, what we call the echo of the subconscious, but it’s not present. I can’t recall such a deep sense of . . . nothingness.”

“It didn’t change pace or show any surprise when you called it,” he observed musingly.

“Would an android react?”

“It indicates the limitation of the duplication,” he replied. “At least they’re not our emotional or psychological blood brothers.”

“For which I can be thankful, I suppose.”

“Ask it who it’s in contact with,” Samul urged.

A long moment of silence ensued before Kelton said, “It doesn’t respond.”

“Were you still in contact?”

Kelton nodded. “I called it by name, had it acknowledge before I asked. I had the same impression as before—a voice pasted on a blank background.”

“Try Tommy Two,” Samul instructed crisply.

The agent stared ahead again. “Tommy Two responded,” he reported a few seconds later. “It sounded exactly like that thing ahead. It’s mind is just as blank. Directionally, it’s somewhere to the east of us.”

“Ask it the same question—who its masters are,” Samul ordered. He held scant hope of getting an answer.

"It won't talk," Kelton reported.

"Try Tommy Three."

Within a few moments Samul knew the answer: There were five Tommies left, at least within the agent's telepathic range. None would respond beyond acknowledging their call. Kelton reported that all the voices were stilted and mechanical; none displayed any thought patterns at the subconscious level.

"Machines through and through," Kelton concluded. Suddenly he halted, his head cocked, then resumed his stride. "I sense someone."

"Another android?"

Kelton shook his head. "A telepath, over near the library. It was just a touch, then it was gone."

"What does that mean?"

"She sensed me."

"She?"

"I'm positive." Kelton's face was studied. "A woman's telepathic processes differ from a man's. Don't ask me in what way; I don't know. It's just one of the things we learn. An analogy might be the difference in voice."

"Could it have been a random connection?"

"I don't believe so. The touch was too specific, if I can use the word."

"Specific?"

"Directed at me. The kind of scan I would use when trying to detect another telepath." Kelton's head jerked up. "The android's turning."

"Toward the library," Samul murmured.

"It'll skirt the front of it," the agent predicted. "It keeps following the same path."

“Can you probe for that other telepath?”

“I’m trying.” Kelton glanced at him. “They pretty quickly learn to block their minds. The only hope of locating them is when they’re trying to make another contact.”

“Keep your scanner out,” Samul warned.

“I’m sweeping. There’s nothing beyond the usual noise.”

“Noise?”

“Crowd thoughts,” the agent explained. “It’s like a rumble. You have to learn to focus, isolate one from the mob mind around it before it’s decipherable. It’s something like tuning a three-view.”

“How about the one that alerted you?”

“That’s strange.” Kelton frowned. “We must have been locked on the same channel.”

“The android?”

“It’s possible. I can’t explain it any other way.”

“Keep locked on it,” Samul urged. “Perhaps she’ll come in again.” They fell silent as they followed the slender figure along the broad walkway that skirted the front of the library. The android, its pace unchanging, looked neither to the right nor left. Samul unobtrusively watched the passersby; none of them paid Tommy One the slightest heed.

“I sense her again,” the agent suddenly remarked. His voice was flat and expressionless. “There’s no doubt about it, she’s focused on Tommy One. There, now she’s gone. She sensed me for sure.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She withdrew too suddenly.”

“Is she close by?”

“Very close.” The agent moved his head. “Somewhere on the plaza in front of the library.”

“Stay tuned,” Samul murmured. His eyes swept the square. Perhaps two dozen people were visible, most of them sitting on the benches along its borders.

“There, that girl,” Kelton said suddenly. “I got the touch again.”

“Girl?” Samul shifted his gaze.

“The youngster with the long dark hair and pink dress.”

Samul picked her out instantly. Thin, poorly dressed, she ostensibly—forcedly, he thought—was holding her face averted from them. “Are you certain? She’s just a child.”

“Dead certain,” the agent retorted grimly. “She’s blocked her mind completely. That’s a sure giveaway.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“By focusing my attention on her, I should be able to read her mind, but I can’t. And the only reason I can’t is because she’s closed her mind. Only a telepath can do that.”

“Could she be an android?”

“Not a chance,” Kelton declared. “She’s human, all right.”

Samul drew a microcamera from his pocket, enclosing it in his palm so that only the diminutive lens peeked out through the circle formed by his thumb and index finger. “I’m going to take pictures of her.”

He turned his steps along a path that would take him within a few yards of the girl. As he drew closer, he noticed that she studiously averted her gaze from the android; and from Kelton, he reflected. But she didn’t ap-

pear conscious of his approach. Her slender face, in partial profile, held a taut, expectant look; yet strangely, there was also a faraway expression, as if she were completely oblivious to the world around her.

Activating the camera, he rotated his hand to get both a front and side view of her as he passed. She gave no indication of having observed him. A dozen paces beyond, he turned to rejoin the agent.

“Shall I grab her?” Kelton asked.

Samul smiled wryly. “I doubt very much that she’d talk.”

“She’s not registered.”

“How do you know?”

“There aren’t that many of them,” Kelton answered. “I know all the legitimate ones.”

“The girl’s a puzzle,” Samul commented. “How does she tie in with the androids? She’s certainly not an alien. Yet she has a strong interest in them.”

“So let’s grab her.”

“No.” Samul shook his head. “But it’s imperative that we establish her connections. I doubt very much that she’d cooperate if we were to take her into custody.”

“With drugs and hypnosis?”

“Perhaps she could close her mind to even that.” He glanced at the agent. “Is that possible?”

“Not to my knowledge, but I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“Meaning?”

“The power of the mind is an awesome thing,” Kelton answered reverently. “If some of the reports are true, telepathy is just the first act. The big drama is yet to come. I have the feeling that we’re nudging the threshold.”

“The beyond powers?”

“I believe in them,” he asserted. “I really do.”

“But we don’t know.”

“It’s that word ‘we’ that fools us,” he responded somberly. “Someone knows.”

Samul grimaced. “Let’s hope it’s not the aliens.” He patted his pocket. “With these photos, we can pick her up anytime.”

“We’re going to let her walk away?”

“She’ll be back,” Samul declared. “I have a strange feeling about that girl.”

“So have I,” Kelton responded sourly. “I’m the telepathic agent, so what did I get from her mind? Nothing. But I have the unholy feeling that she’s probed me from *A* to *Z*; both of us, when it comes to that.”

“But she was only in your mind for an instant,” he remonstrated. “Just a touch, you said.”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean,” Kelton returned wryly. “It didn’t take any longer.”

“Don’t worry, she won’t escape us,” Samul said. “She’s just a child.” He turned to glance back at the girl, then swung around. Gone! He scanned the plaza rapidly but saw no sign of her. Strange that she could vanish so quickly. When he turned back, the agent was eying him glumly.

“As I said,” Kelton intoned, “you have to grab them while you can.”

The film was hopelessly fogged!

Samul studied it through the viewer, trying to discern some pattern; there was none. The fog was of opaque density. It wasn’t a defect in the film or cam-

era; the laboratory had assured him of that. It was the girl; he knew it.

Thin, long dark hair, finely chiseled facial bones, pink dress several sizes too large, worn sandals—he resurrected a picture of her in his mind. Although he hadn't looked directly at her while passing, he had the impression of deep-blue eyes, a rather wan expression. A street urchin. But a street urchin who, in some strange way, was connected with the androids. A street urchin who could fog film! He'd never heard of such a thing.

Where did that leave him? He musingly pushed the viewer aside. An alien ship had landed six androids—androids who spoke the human tongue, who carried the retinal pattern of a child lost years before in deep space, who wore the uniform of the survey crews. They stalked the streets of Gylan.

But that would be an exercise in futility unless they possessed some means of getting information back to their masters. Telepathy, of course; it had to be. But telepathy directed to whom? One of the aliens, whoever or whatever they were, had to be in Gylan to receive it; or at least on the planet Makal. The alternative was that they could communicate telepathically between stars. He wasn't prepared to believe that. Not yet.

If the first surmise were true, who was the agent? The girl? It was inconceivable. Or was it? Nothing was inconceivable. Nothing at all. Not in this galaxy or any other, he reflected. The power of the body was limited, but not that of the mind. Kelton had stated that emphatically.

He walked to the window, gazing unseeingly at the

pinkish-gray sky. In the short time since he'd left Kelton, his field agents had located the remaining four androids. The photos of Tommy Six and the distinctive space uniforms had made it simple enough. He wasn't surprised that they were stationed at key points around the city, at least from the information-gathering standpoint. All, like Tommy One, displayed the same blankness of mind. He felt certain that they were keyed to answer but to a single master.

What lay ahead? Clearly the masters of the androids came from a superior civilization—superior, at least, in the technology of mass-producing robots. But a civilization was more than a technical structure. It was art, music, literature, drama; it was economics, sociology, psychology. And it was law; above all it was law. How did the aliens weigh when measured against those criteria?

Or was he taking the sophisticated view? Perhaps the real question concerned the number of warheads they possessed and their ability and willingness to deliver them. The thought wasn't reassuring.

His desk buzzer sounded, and he flipped a switch, watching the wall screen. It remained blank.

"Mr. Smith, please." The voice of a young girl came over the communicator. It was, he noted, low and apprehensive.

"Mr. Smith speaking," he answered. "You're holding a handkerchief over the visiscreen." As he spoke, he pressed two buttons: one to record the conversation, the other to alert his secretary to trace the call. He had scant doubt but that it was the girl Kelton had identified as a

telepath. So she had read his mind! The agent had been right on that score.

"The machines come from Wenda," the girlish voice whispered hurriedly. "That's the second planet of Aura Rawn."

"Machines?" He feigned ignorance while groping with his thoughts.

"The machines you call the Tommies," she explained.

"Where is Aura Rawn?"

"It's across the Ebon Deeps, an emerald star." She added worriedly, "I don't know its exact location."

"Who is this speaking?"

"I . . . can't tell you, Mr. Smith."

He tried a kindly tone. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I think you should know," she replied more firmly.

"About the machines?"

"And Wenda. There's a boy there named Danny June." Her voice grew distressed. "Somebody has to go get him, Mr. Smith. I'm afraid he's in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"With the people who make the machines," she answered breathlessly.

"Do they live there?"

"One of them does. His name is Zandro."

"Just one?"

"I don't know. I really don't. He mentioned something about the Ikus . . ."

"Ikus?" he cut in.

"They're just voices. That's all he knows."

"What do they do?"

"They're . . . telepathic," she answered guardedly.

"How do you know all this?"

"I can't tell you, Mr. Smith. But you have to get Danny."

Sensing that she was preparing to cut the connection, he said, "Tell me one other thing."

"What is it?" she asked hesitantly.

"How do you fog film?" The speaker suddenly crackled and went dead. He stared musingly at it before buzzing his secretary. Jotting down a few notes, he leaned back. Contemplating the pinkish-gray sky through the windows, he put the facts in order. The call had come from a public booth on the Street of the Shopkeepers. The girl was aware of the nature of the androids, probably was in touch with them. She knew something of their masters; and she was in touch with Danny June.

Danny June was alive! Or was he? Would the aliens allow him to live once the androids had been completed? It seemed unlikely, yet the girl had been so certain. She knew! Danny was alive!

Samul marveled. Scarcely more than a child at the time, Danny somehow had escaped the disaster which had overtaken the *Golden Ram*, had fallen into alien hands. Now androids of him were gathering information to use against the empire. How could they return the information to that distant world? He had chased that answer before.

He began evolving a theory. At first it seemed utterly fantastic, then not so fantastic. The girl was telepathic; so were Danny and the androids. The androids had been made in Danny's image, now were sending infor-

mation back, not to the aliens but to Danny. The boy, then, was the heart of the system, at least on the receiving end.

Could telepathy carry over such vast distances? It was inconceivable; but then so was much in the Universe. Nature was rampant with the inconceivable.

The girl? Somehow she had tapped into the system, had contacted Danny through the androids. In that sense she was the key, for the androids were but mindless links. He had to find the girl, through her contact Danny June; or whatever it was that lived under the name of Danny June.

He reported to Sol Houston. "I'll pick up the girl right away," he finished.

"Do you believe she'll cooperate?"

"I feel certain she will, or would were it not for her fear of the registration laws."

"We'll waive them in her case," the Overlord responded promptly.

"Could you?" Samul asked dubiously.

"In an emergency, yes."

"Her main fear is what might happen to the boy." He stared into the hard gray eyes on the screen. "I feel it's imperative that we send a cruiser to Wenda, bring him back."

Sol Houston shook his head. "That's out of the question. The Regent Administrator won't permit it. He's scared stiff."

"We have a cruiser standing by," he protested.

"I haven't the authority to order it into the Ebon Deeps, Samul. You know that."

Samul took a deep breath. "We have to create the authority."

"Create it?" Sol Houston asked sharply.

"Or find an enabling regulation." Samul eyed him unflinchingly. "We have millions of regulations. We have libraries and computers stuffed with them, and more every day. Your legal staff should be able to dig up the right one."

"That I could throw into the Regent Administrator's teeth? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, exactly."

"You're counseling defiance," Sol Houston sharply reproved.

"Regent Administrators come and go, but we have only one empire," Samul replied simply. The hard gray eyes on the screen watched him piercingly, then abruptly the craggy face showed the shadow of a smile.

"That's why I have you on my staff, Samul. You like to get things done."

"Then you'll . . ."

"I'll see what I can do," Sol Houston promised.

"One thing more."

"What is it?" the Overlord asked warily.

"I want to be on that ship."

"Absolutely not."

"Absolutely yes," Samul returned. He abruptly flipped the switch, watching Sol Houston's image fade from the screen.



9

GULTUR, Lord of the Stars, towered in rage. His powerful globular body balanced on the tips of his seven tentacles, his single red eye glared balefully at Gobit, his second-in-command. "You say the humans are aware of the presence of the robots?" he thundered.

Gobit trembled. "That is so, my lord."

"And the human has blocked Zandro from his mind?"

"Except when he sleeps," Gobit admitted reluctantly.

"What manner of creature is this that can shut out a mind master?"

Gobit said tactfully, "It has to do with differences in the mental structure."

"Such a thing is unheard of," Gultur rasped.

"Mind Master Zandro can't explain it, my lord. The human is more powerful than we had suspected."

"More powerful than a mind master? Is that what you're saying?"

"Assuredly not," Gobit answered quickly.

The Lord of the Stars drew himself up higher. "Why was I not informed of this sooner?"

"I was just made aware of it, my lord."

"What else were you made aware of?" Gultur demanded coldly. It pleased him to see Gobit flinch.

"The human has contacted one of his kind across the black abyss," the second-in-command confessed.

"That shall be counted against you," Gultur promised. "How was it allowed to happen?"

Gobit squirmed uncomfortably. "One of the humans, a telepath, chanced to overhear a conversation with one of the robots," he explained.

Gultur felt a quick dread. "Is the entire race telepathic?"

"Only a few freaks."

"Freaks?"

"That is the way the humans regard them," Gobit hastened to say. "That is my understanding."

"Based on what?"

"Mind Master Zandro assures me it is so, my lord."

"Then it is so," Gultur stated peremptorily. The statement of a mind master was beyond question. He regarded his aide contemptuously. "Do the humans suspect our intent?"

"Zandor says not, my lord. They appear a very obtuse race."

"In what way?"

"A race that doesn't believe greatness can exist outside itself," Gobit humbly explained. "They are blind to such greatness, even when presented with the evidence. Mind Master Zandro describes it as a culture-centered psychology. Its characteristic is a denial that anything born outside of the culture can be great or even have meaning."

"They have yet to learn," Gultur promised coldly.

"Assuredly, my lord."

"The young human must die immediately."

Gobit trembled anew. "He has escaped, my lord."

"From Zandro?" Gultur attempted to contain his rage.

"He has fled from the ship where he was nurtured."

"Why has not Zandro destroyed him with the mind power?"

"He is making the attempt."

"Is there any doubt but that it can be done?" Gultur demanded. Again he felt a twinge of apprehension.

"The young human has learned to erect powerful mind shields," the second-in-command explained tactfully. "Zandro says he has never encountered such phenomenal mental growth."

"Mind shields!" Gultur shuddered. "What of the tracker birds?"

"He has destroyed two of them, my lord."

"How was that possible?"

"With a primitive spear that is hurled by the elastic power of a bent bough. You might recall that the animals of Xentop tried to use such devices against our nucleonic bolts."

"What is being done about it?"

"Other tracker birds are following him now."

"Take no chances," Gultur curtly instructed. "Have sky hounds dispatched to Zandro immediately."

"Yes, my lord." Gobit lowered his front tentacles, dipping his vast body in a humble bow.

"Now, this very hour, and report to me when the human has been destroyed," Gultur thundered. When Gobit had departed to do his bidding, the Lord of the

Stars slithered out to the balcony to eye the monument to Dort. Towering against the dusky sky, the giant eye at its apex symbolically scanned the stars.

Usually, when he viewed the black needle rising from the bleak plain, he would mentally triple its height, conjuring his own record in mokols of stone. Until eternity ended, it would proclaim his own glorious conquests as Lord of the Stars. A billion generations yet unborn would whisper his name with awe.

But at the moment he felt uneasy. *An alien who could erect mental shields against a mind master?* Unbelievable! How common were such among the race? Few in number, according to Gobit, but even a few such could pose formidable problems.

He stared at the fuzzy patch of orange stars, beyond which lay the Planet of Birth. He would like to discuss the possibilities directly with Zandro, but that was not possible. Since his elevation to command of the Eighty-Third Star Army, the prerogative of rank precluded that his mind should ever be searched, hence he never again could speak with a mind master. Not even through the Ikus.

It was just as well, he reflected. He would hate to have Zandro discern the unease—dread?—which at times, like now, tormented him. Not that dread—fear?—was a weakness; it was the challenge that gave rise to courage. He clung fiercely to that belief.

But now was the time for action! The resolve strengthened him. The sky hounds would dispose of the young alien quickly enough; and his fleet was ready. He would sow the Wind of Death among the stars; each sun sys-

tem would add one mokol of stone. Mokol upon mokol upon mokol; billions would die.

At the entrance to the Hall of the Glorious Dead, he turned back to gaze at the monument.

Seventy-four mokols were very high indeed.

Danny's heart beat furiously. Exhausted and hungry, he desperately clutched his bow as he scanned the rugged country through which he had fled. A twisted rock jungle dotted with gnarled trees, it fell away to the dark blur of the forest plain far below. Off to one side a small stream gurgled musically; his need for water had kept him close to it.

He searched the scene with anxious eyes, attempting to discern movement. Somewhere down there were the metal birds! From time to time he had spotted them hovering low above the rocks. Several times they had come so close that he had heard the sibilant whisper of whatever it was that powered them. Their small red eyes were a horror in his mind.

How long had he been running? Forever, he thought. The emerald sun had set twice since he'd fled the meadow; now, again, it was hanging low above the horizon. He'd been running, running, running. He had to escape the metal birds! But how long could he go on?

He looked ahead. The ground rose rapidly, broken by great stone outcrops that gleamed greenishly in the light of the setting sun. It was a tortured scape, twisted and broken, in which every tree and shrub fought for survival.

High up in the distance a jagged ridge crawled against the endless sky. His eyes began to ache, and he

turned them from the scene. He couldn't go on, he thought dully. His legs were too tired. Each step was a torture of bone and muscle. He had to rest. Forcing himself wearily to the edge of the stream, he plunged his head into the cold water, drinking it in great gulps.

Refreshed, he looked wearily around. Only the gurgling of the stream broke the silence. His eyes swept over a black shadow on the canyon wall opposite him and swept back. A cave! The realization brought a tingle of excitement. He could hide! He forced himself to calmness as he studied it. The entrance was small; he could block it behind him with stones. Rest, sleep—escape from the metal birds! His excitement rose.

Leaping the stream, he scrambled up to the entrance. It was smaller than he had supposed, scarcely large enough to wriggle into. A cool draft coming from the dark opening told him it had another outlet. He reached in gingerly; the floor was smooth and sandy. He guessed that in time of flood it served as the bed for an underground stream.

He laboriously dragged several large rocks next to the entrance, then wriggled in feet first, fitting the bow alongside him. The coolness felt good on his skin. Reaching out, he pulled the stones against the opening, banking sand against them until but a sliver of sky remained.

The cave held a dank, musty odor that was curiously invigorating. Lying in the darkness, he felt the tension drain from his body. The cave was like the ship—small, cool, secure. Water was close at hand, and somehow he would find food. He could live there as long as he had to; the thought was reassuring.

Hzzzzz . . . His eyes heavy with sleep, the first

sibilant whisper reached him. The sound brought him to instant alertness. Frightened, he stared into the darkness, listening. The wind? He pushed the hope aside. *Hzzzzz . . .* The sound came again, echoing in the cave like a muted sigh.

He peered fearfully out through the narrow opening. Gnarled trees cut a jagged silhouette against the orange stars; off to the side lay the utter blackness of the Ebon Deeps. The nearby rocks and shrubs, caught in the blanket of night, revealed nothing. He sensed movement in the periphery of his eye and jerked his gaze back to the sky; a small shadow glided against the stars.

A metal bird! His throat constricted in sudden terror. The birds had found him! *Hzzzzz . . .* The hissing grew louder; he caught the shadow again, then a second one. Hovering low, they glided in narrowing circles that centered on the mouth of the cave. He fancied that their beady red eyes glared down at him.

Hastily he scooped sand against the rocks until the last sliver of sky was shut out. They couldn't get him. Lying in the darkness, his nerves taut and edgy, he realized he had also shut out the sound; the dreadful whisper was gone. His tension subsiding, his tiredness swept back. But he was safe; it was his last thought before he slept.

"Sleep, Danny, sleep." The voice came as if in a dream; he struggled to close it from his mind. *"Sleep, sleep, sleep."*

"No!" The shout was torn hoarsely from his lips.

"Sleep, sleep, sleep."

"No!" he shouted again.

"Now you are sleeping, Danny, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping." The soothing voice caressed him. *"You are fast asleep, Danny."*

"No, no . . ." He felt his resistance seeping away.

"You are fast asleep, Danny, fast asleep."

"Asleep," Danny murmured. Sleep, he needed sleep. Sleep to banish the awful tiredness.

"Sleep, sleep," Zandro murmured in his mind. *"You are sleeping, sleeping."*

"I am sleeping . . ."

"You will sleep the sleep of death, Danny."

"Sleep of death . . ." A small fragment of Danny's mind told him to rebel against the thought, but he found himself helpless. Death was peace. . . .

"I will tell you how, Danny."

"Tell me how . . ."

"You will focus your whole mind on your heart, Danny. You must will it to stop beating, stop beating, stop beating. Then you will have eternal peace."

"Peace . . ."

"There will be no more tiredness, only rest."

"Rest . . ." Oh, to rest and sleep. How good Zandro was.

"Now you will focus your mind."

A small protest gathered in the fragments of Danny's consciousness. *"Why do I have to die?"*

"It has been ordered by the Lord of the Stars, Danny."

"The Lord of the Stars?" He sensed a touch of awe and wonder. How great he must be. The small protest came back. *"But why must I die?"*

"All humans must die, Danny."

"All humans?"

"It has been ordered."

"But why?" he protested weakly.

"That is the decree of the gods, Danny. The Universe belongs to the Kroons."

"Kroons?"

"My race." Zandro's words were heavy with pride. Danny sensed a deep alarm. *"How can he order that?"*

"He speaks for the gods, Danny."

"The gods?"

"The Lord of the Stars is but a servant of the great Kroon Spirit, which in the Dawn of Time rose from the slate-gray seas of Munga," Zandro intoned. His mind was a gentle caress. *"The Kroon Spirit is the personification of the gods. They live in us, act through us."*

"But I don't want to die," he protested.

"Death is eternal peace, Danny."

"No!" He fought to resist.

"You will die, Danny."

"No!" He sensed the edge of consciousness and grappled to retain it. He wouldn't die! He wouldn't! The Lord of the Stars couldn't make him die!

"Sleep, Danny, sleep."

"No!" This time the word came as a scream torn from his lips.

"Sleep, sleep. You must sleep and focus your mind."

"I won't! I won't!" He threshed wildly, feeling the terror blossom in his mind. If he died, he'd never see Gylan, never see Arla. Arla! The name exploded like a bombshell in his consciousness. If he could reach Arla . . .

"Tommy One! Tommy One!" He screamed the name in his mind.

"Stop!" Zandro roared.

"Danny June to Tommy One, Tommy One . . ." He fought to close Zandro from his mind while at the same time leaving it open for Tommy One. The awful silence! Why didn't he answer? *"Tommy One!"*

"Stop!" The order came like a roaring wind that filled his entire being.

"Tommy One . . ." The answer echoed faintly.

"Danny June calling Arla . . ." He struggled to hurl the message outward, conscious of Zandro's overpowering presence. It filled the cave.

"Break that contact!" Zandro thundered.

"Danny June calling Arla!" He sent the cry wildly.

"Break it immediately!" The voice was harsh and strident in his mind. In vain he sought to close it out.

"I won't! I won't!" Danny felt the battering of wills and fought to bolster his strength. *"I won't!"* he shouted defiantly.

"You must break it and die." Zandro's voice reverted to a persuasive tone. *"Break it, break it."*

"I won't die!"

"Sleep, Danny . . ."

"No!" He hurled the word violently outward, conscious of the trembling in his body. *"Tommy One—Danny June calling Arla,"* he screamed.

"Sleep, sleep," Zandro urged. The words were soothing.

"I won't!" He battled to prevent himself from sinking back into the deep lethargy he'd known earlier. Rest, sleep, peace—oh, if he could only sleep. Why fight? It was all so futile.

"You are falling asleep, Danny."

"Sleep . . ."

"Danny!" The call, high and faint, pierced his mind.

"Arla, I hear you." He forced the reply with effort.

"Danny, what's wrong?" The question held a frantic wail.

"I have to die . . ."

"No! No!"

"Break that contact!" Zandro's roar engulfed him.

"Shut him out, Danny. Shut him out quick!"

Shut him out! Yes, that's what he had to do—shut Zandro out. He struggled to close his mind to the overwhelming sense of presence. Shut him out! Shut him out! Shut him out as he'd shut out the birds. Build a barrier.

"Danny!" Her voice held a desperate ring.

"I'm trying!"

"Break that contact immediately," Zandro roared again. *"Break it! Break it!"*

"Get out of Danny's mind! Get out! Get out! Get out!" Arla's command came piercingly.

"Please get out of my mind," Danny begged.

"Don't say please to that thing!" Arla's thoughts were stormy. *"Make him get out!"*

"Get out! Get out!" Danny shouted. *"Get out of my mind!"*

"Get out of Danny's mind, Zandro. Get out! Get out!" Arla's command echoed sharply, reinforcing his. *"Get out! Get out! Get out!"*

Abruptly the silence came. Trembling apprehensively, Danny realized that the overpowering sense of presence was gone. There was just the stillness of the cave.

"Danny?"

"He's gone! He's gone!"

"Don't ever let him come back," she urged fiercely.

"He was trying to make me die! He said that all humans had to die. The Lord of the Stars . . ."

"Lord of the Stars?" she interrupted apprehensively.

"He's the one who ordered it. That's what Zandro said." The memories rushed back. *"And I found Zandro!"*

"Who . . . what is he?" she asked faintly. He described what he'd seen at the pool.

"You can't let him come back," she exclaimed forcefully.

"I can't keep him out when I sleep."

"I'll stay with you. Together we can keep him out." Her thoughts rushed excitedly. *"Don't you see? We did it together."*

"Together . . . we pushed him out." He contemplated it wonderingly. *"But I can't stay awake forever."*

"I'll have the Tommies keep calling you. I'll have them fill your mind, even when you're asleep. That might keep you aware."

"We can try."

"If two of us can shut him out, think of what seven of us might do."

"Seven?" He groped stupidly for her meaning. The tiredness . . .

"Our minds and the five Tommies," she explained excitedly. *"We could link them together. We've never tried that. Oh, I've got another idea!"*

"What is it?" He grasped eagerly at her words.

"Perhaps I could contact him through the Tommies."

"Zandro?" The idea bewildered him. *"He can't contact the Tommies directly. He admitted that."*

"But how about the Ikus? If the Tommies could reach the Ikus, I could put the call through them."

"They couldn't receive it unless their minds were stronger than Zandro's," he protested. *"I can't imagine it's possible."*

"Is it the receiving or transmitting end that's important?"

"What do you mean?"

"If I linked my mind to the five Tommies, then called. Think of the mind power, Danny. Perhaps I could get through."

"To the Ikus?"

"I could try."

"The same thing might work with Zandro," he reflected.

"He'd shut me out. I feel certain he would. But he might answer the Ikus. If he does, I'll keep bombarding him."

"Bombarding him how?" He felt a surge of excitement.

"Telling him to stay out of your mind."

He asked eagerly, *"Do you think it might work?"*

"We could try. How did you reach the Iku?"

"The Iku . . ." He groped foggily at his memory. *"Iku 998W, that was it."*

"Iku 998W," she repeated. *"I'm going to call him."*

"You said you were going to warn someone, tell him about me." He felt the tiredness sweeping back. *"I want to go to Gylan."*

“Mr. Smith. I told him.”

“Is he”—Danny paused, afraid to hope—“going to do anything?”

“He will. I’ll make him. Now you must sleep, Danny. Sleep while you can.”

“Sleep,” he echoed.

“Now,” she said firmly, *“I’m going to call Mr. Iku.”*



10

SHE LIVED in an orphanage on the Street of the Shopkeepers.

Samul gazed at the notes he’d scribbled during Kelton’s call. “Childhood Retreat”—the name was pleasant. He recalled the place—an old plastiglass building set behind a high grillwork fence bordered by tall sprays of scarlet kashba lilies. Golden lucca trees shaded the spacious grounds.

It was privately endowed, perhaps the only privately endowed orphanage on Makal, he reflected. The state-owned orphanages were luxurious affairs, replete with libraries, educational facilities, triscreens, swimming pools, and game grounds, for under social welfare regulations, the state had to provide every parentless waif opportunities equal to those afforded the children of

even the wealthiest. As Sol Houston once remarked, "It pays to be an orphan."

But apparently the Childhood Retreat didn't offer the same advantages—not to judge by the girl's faded pink dress and worn sandals. It was understandable, of course; private institutions were not allowed to compete on equal terms with public ones, hence were not tax exempt. That made a difference.

Samul studied the picture Kelton had sent him over the duplicator. Thin, nose slightly snubbed, dark tangled hair, the too-large pink dress—the agent had drawn it from memory, distributing copies to every police official in Gylan. He had also used it to jog the memories of merchants along the Street of the Shopkeepers.

The tactic had paid off. A number of merchants had recognized her. Several immediately had identified the drawing as "that girl from the orphanage." None had known her name. But that was of no consequence; he would learn it soon enough.

How much did she know? Quite a lot, to judge from their brief conversation. Would she talk? Recalling the thin face and faded pink dress, he smiled; she was just a child, scarcely more than a waif. Chances were that she had stumbled into something by chance that was far above her ability to comprehend. Oh, she was telepathic, all right, but the trait definitely wasn't related to intelligence; he had that on the best of authority.

A bit of psychology, he reflected. Once he located the girl, calmed her fears, he would be able to draw from her what she knew. Perhaps what little she did understand would provide the clues he needed. But he wished

the initial contact with the Tommies had been made by a telepath like Kelton instead of the girl. Kelton would have known how to handle the situation.

He frowned at the thought. Odd, the Tommies would respond to Kelton, but he couldn't establish communication through them. He had tried to reach the boy again and again, to no avail. He could hear the Tommies repeat the call, but there it ended. Could the girl's mind be that superior? Kelton thought it was.

"She scares me," he had said.

Perhaps superior telepathically, Samul mused. But she was still a child, still limited in comprehension. He would have to simplify his questioning, be careful not to awe her.

Humming, he tapped the legal computer for the information he thought he might need, then slipped the picture into a pocket and rode the atomic lift to the ground floor. Striding out under the pinkish-gray sun, he boarded a belt that carried him toward the Street of the Shopkeepers.

The orphanage appeared as he had remembered it except that the grillwork fence was higher and the golden lucca trees all but hid the ancient plastiglass structure. No children were visible; he thought perhaps they were in class. The scene held an aura of quiet unreality.

The high metal gate was locked. Peering through the grillwork, he spotted an elderly gardener working around the roots of the kashba lilies. Samul called to him. When he paid no heed, he shook the metal gate vigorously and called again. This time the gardener rose reluctantly and shuffled toward him. His ancient eyes peered at Samul through the grillwork.

“No visitors allowed on weekdays,” the old man said. His voice was creaky with age.

Samul played the police role. Producing his credentials, he displayed them with a flourish. “Official business,” he snapped.

“Official?” The old man eyed the credentials dubiously.

“Police,” Samul said briskly. The old man hesitated before reluctantly bringing a key from his pocket and turning the lock. Samul pushed the gate open and stepped inside. Drawing the picture from his pocket, he thrust it under the gardener’s face. “Know this girl?”

“Y-yes.” The old man’s eyes clouded with anxiety.

“What’s her name?”

“Arla . . . Arla Koy,” he mumbled.

“Thank you.” Samul nodded pleasantly and continued along the winding path that led to the front entrance. Closer inspection proved the building to be far older than he first had supposed. The interlocking arch that formed the porch had been adapted from the ancient Temple of Kennedy XXVII, a hereditary president of the First Terran Empire; the style had been out of vogue a good fifty years. The dormered windows of the upper story were from an architectural age older still.

He ascended the steps, searching for a bell. Finding none, he rapped loudly. He sensed movement from somewhere inside, then the door swung open. Momentarily he was disconcerted to find himself facing a slender brunette girl with the clearest hazel eyes he’d ever seen. She appeared several years younger than himself.

“Good morning,” Samul said. He offered a tentative smile. “I’d like to speak with Arla Koy.”

“No visitors are allowed on weekdays,” she answered primly. She moved as if to close the door.

“It’s official business,” he said hastily. He extended his credentials.

“What is it?” She eyed him bemusedly.

“I’m Samul Smith, with the Space Administration. I would . . .”

“Space Administration?” she cut in. “What has the Space Administration to do with an orphanage?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk about.”

“To an orphan?”

“Well, yes.” He fidgeted uneasily.

The hazel eyes rested calmly on him. “Are you all right, Mr. Smith?”

“Certainly,” he answered indignantly. The suspicion that she was secretly laughing at him ruffled his feelings.

“I’m afraid she knows very little about space, Mr. Smith.”

“Oh, I’m not here to talk about space.”

“No? What is it you want?”

“I was getting to that.” The hazel had a touch of yellow in the irises he found intriguing. “Uh, I’m not certain I caught your name.”

“Yoshi Penn. Miss Yoshi Penn.” She dimpled slightly.

“Yoshi,” he exclaimed. “The name’s from the Middle Empire, the Dannholt Period. Princess Yoshi of Karn. A beautiful name.”

The dimple deepened. “My father chose it. He was a historian.”

“A fascinating period,” Samul said inanely. The girl facing him was every bit as lovely as the princess must have been.

“I’m surprised you know of it,” she murmured. “Few people do.”

“The study of the Middle Empire is a hobby,” he replied proudly. “Especially the linguistics. Did you know that the name means flower?”

“I’ve heard that.”

“I’ve seen pictures of them. Much more beautiful than the kashba lily.”

“Nice of you to say, Mr. Smith.” Her expression grew severe. “What is it you wished?”

“Oh, the business.” Samul awkwardly crammed his credentials into a pocket. “I would like to speak with Arla Koy.”

“That’s not permitted, Mr. Smith.”

“Samul, I like it better,” he explained. “It’s official business.”

“With a child of minor age?” she asked archly.

“This is more in the line of an investigation,” he protested.

“Investigating a child?” She cocked her head inquiringly.

“Only in a sense,” he said hurriedly.

“Regulation SW1414B was enacted to protect the child against such invasions of privacy,” she reprimanded.

“That regulation doesn’t apply to staff members for masters or above,” he corrected, glad he’d consulted the computer.

“Not if you have an order from the Board of Justice,” she replied demurely. “Do you have such an order?”

“Well, no.” He felt flustered. The computer hadn’t indicated that contingency.

“Then you can’t speak with her, Mr. Smith.”

“Can’t? Not even a few words?” he asked helplessly. She wasn’t using any reason whatever.

She raised her eyes. “What is the nature of the inquiry? As her guardian, I have the right to know.”

“Guardian?” He was startled.

“I’m in charge of the orphanage,” she explained. “It’s the same thing. Parent-surrogate is the wording in the SW code.”

“Yes, certainly.”

“A parent-surrogate is arrogated the same rights as a parent,” she said severely.

“I’m not denying that,” he protested.

“Would you enter a private home and make such a demand of a real parent?”

“Well, uh . . .”

“It’s the same thing,” she asserted.

“But I just want to speak with the girl!”

“What is it you wish to know?”

“Well, she’s been talking to a boy.” He groped for words, flustered again. Her hazel eyes and slender face threw him off balance. Did she realize how attractive she was? Princess Yoshi couldn’t have been half so lovely. He became aware that she was staring at him. “Talking to a boy,” he repeated stupidly.

“And the Space Administration is investigating that?” she asked disbelievingly. “I’ve heard some odd tales about it but . . .”

"He lives on another planet," he blurted. He caught the incredulity that swept her face and hurriedly added, "Across the Ebon Deeps."

"You *are* all right, Mr. Smith?"

"Yes, I said so."

"It sounds quite strange."

"Of course it does." He felt a quick relief. He could understand her attitude exactly.

"You still need an order from the Board of Justice," she answered pointedly.

"Well, I could get one."

"It's my responsibility to see that you do."

"I understand your position," Samul said, "but I was hoping . . ."

"That I would be lax in my responsibilities? Is that what you mean?"

"Not at all," he exclaimed hastily.

"I'm glad we agree on that," she murmured.

"I'll be right back," he promised. "Will you be here?"

"Yes, of course."

"And Arla?" He caught the question that sprang into her eyes and explained, "She goes to town quite often."

"To town?"

"Wandering around," he added lamely.

"The children aren't allowed in town. Not unaccompanied," she replied firmly. Samul sensed an evasion in the answer and started to protest, but the door had shut. He stared at it with a feeling of bewilderment. Somehow he sensed that she had been laughing at him all the time. At an aide to Sol Houston, the Overlord of Space! And she certainly had been evasive about the girl. Small wonder the government discouraged private institu-

tions. He could never have that trouble in a public one.

Turning from the porch, he thought of the hazel eyes again. And the slender face and graceful poise. Yoshi! A lovely name. He reached the garden gate and rattled it. As the gardener shuffled toward him, he remembered something else. Her evasion.

"Is Arla in there?" He jerked his head toward the building.

"I . . . think so." The old man sucked nervously at his lip. "The children aren't allowed outside."

"She goes out." Samul adopted the stony tone of officialdom. "How does she get out? Do you let her out?"

"No," the gardener mumbled.

"Do you leave the gate unlocked?"

"That's against the regulations." He shook his head.

"Then how does she get out?" Samul demanded. He gazed sternly at the other.

"I don't know."

"Don't know or won't say? Come, this is official!"

A frightened look came into the old man's eyes. "I think she walks through the fence," he muttered. Before Samul could answer, he turned and shuffled away, disappearing among the golden lucca trees.

A girl who could walk through metal fences!

Samul smiled grimly as he turned onto the Street of the Shopkeepers toward the moving belt. A likely story. The old man probably had been letting her out, was trying to cover up; he'd been too worried for it to be otherwise. But to dream up a fantasy like that!

Samul halted almost in midstride.

But she had fogged film! That appeared a certainty. And she could transmit and receive thoughts across the Ebon Deeps. That *was* a certainty. Her knowledge of the existence of Danny June proved that. At the very least, she had gotten the information from the Tommies; that was more than Kelton could do.

Aware that several people were eying him curiously, he resumed his step. Nothing was impossible, not in this Universe or the next; he'd always held to that. But to walk through a metal fence! He felt a touch of humility.

There had to be a more logical explanation, he told himself, one that fell within the province of natural laws. Still, he'd heard strange things—like the man on Thurmond who could levitate himself vast distances into the sky. Or the boy on Jekyll who reportedly foresaw the future. Some of the stories were almost as weird as the stuff they showed on the triscreens.

Did Yoshi suspect anything strange about the girl? Possibly; she was quite protective. His face brightened. Yoshi didn't interest him, of course, but still . . . Picturing the hazel eyes in the slender face, he felt a warm glow. She was nothing like the girls he'd known; nothing at all. Not that he was really interested.

"Mr. Smith?" The call was so low that it took a second or two for it to penetrate his consciousness. When it did, he spun around to look back, knowing who it was even before he saw her. She stood a few paces away, regarding him apprehensively.

"Hello, Arla." He gave her a friendly smile in an attempt to put her at ease. "I was looking for you."

"I knew you were, Mr. Smith."

"You knew?" He wondered that he felt no surprise.

"Did Yoshi . . . Miss Penn tell you?"

She shook her head mutely.

"Were you reading my mind?" he asked severely.

"I wouldn't do that, Mr. Smith."

"Then how did you know?"

"I . . . I sort of felt it."

"Felt it?"

"I can't explain how."

"Are you afraid of me?" He spoke in a kindly tone.

"Because of being a telepath?" she whispered. She nodded slowly. "Yes, I think I am."

"Don't be," he encouraged. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"I'm not registered," she answered almost inaudibly.

"No one will bother you," he assured her. "I've arranged that."

"They won't make me register?"

"No." He smiled cheerfully. "Don't you trust me?"

She studied him for a long, silent moment. "Yes, I trust you."

"Why don't we go to my office, talk in private."

"Oh, no." Her eyes widened. "I couldn't do that, Mr. Smith."

"No?" He cocked his head quizzically. "I noticed a small ice cream place down the street."

"That would be fine," she said.

Walking toward it, Samul remarked carefully, "You said you wouldn't read my mind."

"Well, no," she answered hesitantly.

"But you have."

"At the library," she whispered, "but that was because I had to know."

"I don't mind," he answered cheerfully, "but please don't make it a habit."

"I won't, Mr. Smith."

He said casually, "Your Miss Penn seems like a very nice person."

"She's wonderful, Mr. Smith."

"Does she know about your being, ah, telepathic?"

"She doesn't mind." The girl stared straight ahead. Samul had a horrible suspicion. "Is she telepathic?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Smith."

"Ah." He felt better.

"You're really interested in her, aren't you, Mr. Smith?" She gazed sideways at him.

"Nonsense," he retorted gruffly.

"But you are. I can tell." Her young face wore a mischievous smile. He flushed. Was it that obvious? Obvious? What was he thinking of? He really wasn't interested, not as the girl suggested. It would be nice to see her, of course. He felt the warmth of anticipation.

"It's in here," Arla said suddenly. "You're walking past it."

"Oh, the shop." Samul turned and followed her inside.

Over the ice cream, he asked, "How do you fog film?"

"I don't know," she answered shyly.

"You don't?"

"I knew you were going to take a picture. I saw it in your mind. I didn't want you to."

"So you fogged the film but don't know how, is that it?"

"There's a lot I don't know," she answered thoughtfully.

"Like how you walk through a metal fence?"

"Oh, that. I don't really." Her quick smile was that of a little girl. "Mr. Denton—he's the gardener—just thinks I do."

"Why would he think that?"

"Well, I have a key, and I don't want him to see me."

"So he doesn't see you, is that it?"

"He thinks he doesn't," she corrected. "There's a difference."

"But it's still a mental influence, like fogging film."

"I suppose." She smiled again. "I really don't understand it."

Samul relaxed, somehow glad that she didn't walk through metal fences. That would have been too much. He felt better, too, that she didn't fully understand the powers available to her mind. But she was just a child. He couldn't expect her to reason like an adult.

When they finished their ice cream, he leaned across the table and said, "Now tell me about the aliens—who and what they are."

Her eyes grew wide. "I really don't know, Mr. Smith."

"You don't?"

"Only what I told you about Zandro . . . and those things called the Ikus. I mentioned them on the communicator."

He nodded. "Did you find out what they are?"

"Just voices. Of course they're more than that, but that's all Danny knows. I talked with one of them."

"You did?" His head jerked up. "Do they speak our language?"

She shook her head. "But Danny knows their language, or quite a bit of it. He told me how to call them, what to say. They put me through to Zandro. I guess he's the main alien."

"He speaks our language?"

"He learned it from Danny a long time ago." She caught his puzzled look and explained, "He learned it from Danny's memory cells—the things Danny heard and sensed even before his own conscious awareness."

"Is that possible?" he asked disbelievingly.

"I believe it is. Danny says so."

"What did you say?"

"To Zandro? Nothing. He shut me out." She shivered. "He has a very powerful mind."

"Perhaps he was afraid to listen," Samul mused. It struck him that he had misjudged the girl; she was far more comprehending than he had believed.

She lifted her head suddenly. "Oh, yes, there's another one."

"Another Iku?"

"The Lord of the Stars." She barely whispered the words. "From what Danny says, he's even more important than Zandro. He sounds it, doesn't he, Mr. Smith?"

"The title's quite impressive," Samul acknowledged. "Is he on Wenda?"

"I don't believe Danny knows." Her eyes grew troubled. "He said that all humans had to die."

"He said what?" He stared at her.

"We had to die. Everyone. He said the Universe belonged to his race. Do you really think he meant it, Mr. Smith?"

"Perhaps . . ."

"But that's not the most important thing. It's not the reason I had to see you."

"Oh!" Samul studied her.

"Danny's in danger. I guess I told you that, but it's worse now. Zandro's trying to make him die."

"Make him die?" He felt a sudden alarm. "How can he do that if he's just a voice?"

"By mental power," she explained gravely. "He's trying to make him stop his heart."

"Why does he listen?" he exclaimed. It didn't make sense.

"Zandro comes when he's asleep. I think he hypnotizes him."

"Can't Danny run away, hide?"

"He did," she said urgently, "but he has to sleep. That's when Zandro comes. The birds keep finding him."

"Birds?" He stared at her.

"Metal birds, that's what he calls them. They have beady red eyes, and their wings don't move. They keep following him. He was hiding in a cave, but they found him. Now he's running again and—oh, yes!—he saw Zandro."

"He did?" Samul was startled.

"He lives in a pool, and he's got tentacles."

Samul gulped. "You mean he's a fish?"

"Well, no, or yes. He doesn't know. But that's where he saw him—on the bottom. There was a gigantic eye staring up . . ."

"Through the water?"

She nodded solemnly. "It was glaring. Then he started

coming out of the pool. He . . . it was monstrous—huge and black and slimy. Danny got frightened and ran. That's when the metal birds started following him."

"Sounds weird," Samul said. He drew a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow, wondering how much was the girl's imagination. Perhaps she had stayed glued to the triscreen too long.

"It is weird, Mr. Smith."

He gazed severely at her. "Fish don't operate spaceships or conquer star systems," he said pointedly.

"How do you know?" she demanded. "There are a billion, billion, billion stars—billions of kinds of life. Do you believe it's all like this?"

Awestruck, Samul gazed at her. She was just a child, fourteen or fifteen at most, yet she had measured the Universe, at least in her young mind. She had contemplated the possibilities. It was fantastic, almost as fantastic as what she was saying. He nodded mutely.

"If a fish can build an android, it can build a spaceship," she declared.

"I believe you're right."

"And if it has a concept of the Universe, it's smart, Mr. Smith."

"I'll have to admit that," he acceded.

"Those things out there—Zandro, the Lord of the Stars, the Ikus—are dangerous, Mr. Smith. It scares me to think of them." She looked solemnly at him. "That's why you have to go there, get Danny before something happens."

"Go there?" he echoed.

"I told him you were coming."

“You told him that?”

“That’s why you have to go, Mr. Smith. He’s trying to hide, stay away from Zandro till you get there.”

“But I can’t go,” he exclaimed.

“Why not?” She looked calmly at him.

“Well”—Samul grew flustered—“the Regent Administrator has put a prohibition against it. That’s Regulation CO1404B.”

“Is he afraid?”

He smiled weakly. “I believe he is.”

“Can he act in opposition to the law?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that.” Her thoughtful gaze made him uneasy. “If the law empowers a person to do something, can he prohibit it?”

Samul contemplated her, thinking the question a sharp one. Too sharp. What was she driving at? The question perturbed him. He saw her waiting expression and said, “I don’t believe so. Certain regulations were enacted to curb administrative power—safeguards against despotism, you might call them. No, he can’t override a law. Only the Supreme Board of Justice can do that and then only when the law has been challenged.”

“Then his power isn’t absolute?”

“It is for all practical purposes.” Samul smiled. Such a conversation with a child was quite amazing; but then she was an amazing child.

“But you said . . .”

“His power is absolute unless it conflicts with the law,” he interrupted. “I stated that.”

"Yes, you did." Her eyes searched him. "You still have to go, Mr. Smith."

"That's out of the question."

"Oh!" The single word escaped her lips softly. She looked away, her thin face sad and plaintive.

He said hastily, "But don't worry, we can help him."

"How?" She fought to control her emotions.

"Well, we can advise him."

"I'm doing that now, Mr. Smith."

"Yes, certainly, but I mean at a high military level." Samul's words tumbled out. "After all, we do have a Master of Defense, a Defense Council. And there's the Senior Admiral of the Seventeenth Fleet . . ."

He halted, abruptly realizing the futility of his argument. They were just words, empty of meaning. Good grief, he sounded exactly like Ghengin Kaan. What had he told Sol Houston only a few days before? "We have to send a cruiser to Wenda, find the boy. I feel it's imperative." And he'd counseled defiance of the Regent Administrator! Now he was groping, procrastinating, looking for the easy answer! He'd even quoted the regulations. He shuddered. What was the system doing to him? He became aware of the thin, taut face turned toward him.

"I felt certain you'd help Danny," she said. Her large eyes mirrored her disappointment.

"But how?" he exploded helplessly.

"Miss Penn thought you would find a way."

"Yoshi . . . Miss Penn thought that?" he exclaimed.

She nodded. "She said you were resourceful."

"She said that?"

"She said you were the kind of man who wouldn't let the system beat you. She was certain of it. She has confidence in you, Mr. Smith."

"But I scarcely know her!"

"She's very discerning," the girl said. Samul gazed at her, fascinated. Behind the youthful face he fancied he glimpsed unplumbed depths, a vastness of knowledge and understanding that certainly exceeded her few years. None of the child lay in those deep-blue eyes; none in the intelligent face. The too-large faded pink dress masked an urchin's body, but that was all.

"I'll try," he exclaimed hoarsely. He pulled himself together. "I'll find a way."

"Miss Penn said you would," she murmured.

"Of course I will." Samul sat straighter.

Her voice grew firm. "I would have to go with you."

"You?" He looked at her with astonishment.

"You can't talk with the Tommies," she explained.

"What have they to do with this?" he demanded. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being manipulated.

"The regulations."

"What are you talking about?" He fought to control his exasperation. The girl was flitting from subject to subject, driving at something. He had the feeling of a net closing around him. Her go to Wenda? The idea was crazy.

"Miss Penn was looking in the legal code," she explained. "She found a regulation that provides the Overlord of Space—that's Mr. Houston, isn't it?—the power to deport undesirable aliens to the planet of their origin."

“Undesirable aliens?”

“The Tommies. They are undesirable, aren’t they?”

The deep-blue eyes regarded him steadily.



11

“*DANNY?*” The voice was a whisper in Danny’s mind. “*Don’t run, Danny.*”

Danny thrashed wildly in his sleep.

“*You must return to the meadow.*”

“No!” Abruptly he awakened, the scream on his lips, conscious of the terror in his mind.

“*You must return.*”

“No!” Shouting, he closed his mind. Zandro was evil! Conscious of his stiff, aching body, he rolled his eyes watchfully. The thicket into which he had crept the night before was heavy with dew. Morning light brushed the tops of the nearby trees.

The metal birds! He remembered. He had escaped them, had been found, had escaped, had been found. Running, dodging, hiding—the days had been nightmares. Zandro’s birds! Visualizing their beady red eyes, he shivered.

How long had he been running? How many times had the emerald sun risen and set? He couldn’t remember. He’d passed through forests, meadows, rocky hills.

He had run, run, run; but the birds had always followed. Small shadows low in the sky, their wings motionless, haunted his trail. Were they watching him now? He looked cautiously around.

A crackling in the distance brought a sudden alarm. He rose hurriedly, a strange odor assailing his nostrils. Pushing out of the thicket, he halted, aghast to see a dancing orange blanket covering the slope behind him. Plumes of black smoke swirled into the sky. The crackling came from there!

Fire! He remembered lightning once striking the trees, setting the forest aflame. This was the same. The entire upper slope was ablaze. Other orange tongues, lower still, were roaring toward him. He gazed fearfully at them, then whirled and raced down the slope, heedless of the brush and sharp stones. He had to escape, get into the open!

He twisted frantically through the thick foliage, conscious that the crackling had grown louder. It seemed on all sides of him. Heat—he could feel it! The realization brought a surge of fear that caused him to dash recklessly ahead. Far in the distance, where the valley widened, he glimpsed a vast sea of rock devoid of trees. Swerving, he raced toward it.

A flickering tongue of flame lanced through the foliage off to one side, then the entire slope exploded into a seething, crackling orange sheet. A blast of searing heat enveloped him. Other flames leaped into the path ahead of him. Dodging around them, he raced ahead.

Another tongue of flame—another fire! Dully he wondered how such a thing could be. There had been no storm, no lightning. But the world was on fire; the

world was burning. *Rocks couldn't burn!* The thought clawed at his mind. He had to reach the rocks!

The jumbled, barren area opened before him, far larger than he'd first supposed. Greenish-black slabs rose eerily from a stone meadow, jutting upward at crazy angles. Ledges, spires, fields of jagged rock—it was a stone jungle such as he'd never dreamed. His breath whistling harshly in his throat, he hung his bow from his shoulder without breaking his stride.

With the fire at his heels, he reached the first outcrop and scrambled up the rough slope. Slivers of rock tore the skin from his fingers. Reaching the top, he leaped a crevice, then picked his way through the craggy escarpments that thrust upward on every side.

As the heat grew less intense, he slowed his pace to catch his breath. Gradually the burning in his chest and nostrils subsided. At a safe distance, he clambered atop a rocky pinnacle to look back. Lying under a pall of black smoke, the entire valley behind him was a bowl of flame. Only the forests flanking either side of the stone jungle remained unburned.

How had it happened? He gazed uneasily at the orange inferno, a suspicion nibbling at his mind. Somehow the fire was related to his flight. To Zandro! How could that be? He saw no sign of the metal birds. Had the flames destroyed them? Heartening as he found the speculation, he realized that it simply wasn't true. They would show up soon enough; they always did. The knowledge was chilling.

He gazed at the unbelievably bleak panorama ahead. Here and there he saw a stunted tree, a patch of brush, but mostly it was rock. Rock and a smoky sky through

which the sun was but a pale disk. A vast, quiet world, absolutely without sound or motion, it held an air of terrifying unreality. He'd passed through barren areas before but this was different. A desert! He regarded it with awe. A great stone desert.

Aware of a gnawing hunger, he contemplated the scene in despair. Usually in the morning and again at evening he'd managed to snatch a few wild berries or the edible forest plants which for so long had formed a staple part of his diet. But he wouldn't find them out there; he'd be fortunate to find water.

He inspected the flanking forests at his left. If he hurried, he might find nourishment, escape again before the flames came. He glanced back; the fire was moving fast. Scrambling down the rocky pinnacle, he broke into a run.

"*Danny?*" The voice came into his mind, but he instantly shut it out, wondering why he hadn't felt the sense of presence. Perhaps he felt it only when Zandro was near. Did Zandro know where he was? The birds, he thought. The birds told him. He had to outrace the birds.

From time to time he shot worried looks at the flame line; each glance showed it closer. Finding his path blocked by an escarpment too steep to climb, he was forced to detour. Again he entered a narrow ravine, racing along its twisting floor for long agonizing moments before bursting into the open. When finally he did, the forest was very near; so were the flames.

Gazing at them in dismay, he caught movement in the corner of his eye and jerked his head around. His first impression was of a black blob hovering just above

the tree line. The instant surmise that it was a metal bird was quickly dispelled; it was far too large for that.

He studied it fearfully. Squat, ovoid, with curious antennae that jutted out from one side, it gave him the impression that it was feeling its way through the sky. An odd snout protruded from between the antennae. Artificial like the birds! Zandro had sent it! He saw a silver thread shoot out from the snout, reaching downward to the trees; an instant later the entire area below it burst into flames.

He gaped at it, appalled. Whatever it was, it was firing the forests! His terror grew. How could anyone fight a power such as Zandro's? Perhaps Zandro was right; perhaps the Universe did belong to his race. How mighty must be the Lord of the Stars! He trembled.

A second squat ovoid came into view above the tree-tops, then a third. They moved slowly, spaced an almost equal distance apart. As they drew nearer, he saw they were far larger than he had first supposed. Large and deadly.

Suddenly conscious he was standing in the open, he began a cautious retreat without taking his eyes from them. As they moved over an unburned stretch another silver thread shot down; again the forest erupted in flames.

He stifled the impulse to call Zandro, beg him to stop the horrible machines. But that would be surrender! He'd never surrender. Not to Zandro. Not if he had a million machines. Not if he burned the Universe. Zandro was . . . a monster! But what could he do? If he could talk to Arla.

Arla! He couldn't call her! He remembered as if in a

bad dream. The Tommies wouldn't answer—hadn't answered in days. Zandro, he thought. Zandro had destroyed them. Now Arla was gone; he could never talk with her again! He looked bitterly at the black shapes in the sky.

To his horror, the black ovoid nearest him swung around, moving toward him. Instantly the other two followed. Whirling, he plunged back into the labyrinth of rock. Finding his path blocked by a towering spire, he raced frantically around its base.

Darting across a clearing at the far side, he cast a frightened glance behind him. The first ovoid, moving ponderously through the sky, was approaching the spire. He gazed at it, fascinated, thinking a collision inevitable.

A silver thread shot out from the snout, and a billowing mushroom-shaped cloud enveloped the rock. A thunderclap rolled out, reverberating in the stone canyons. Passing into the cloud, the ovoid emerged unscathed at the opposite side. It took him an instant to realize that the rock was gone, obliterated as completely as if it had never existed. Horrified, he wheeled and sped toward the heart of the great stone desert.

By late morning his steps were faltering, his hands were ripped and bleeding, his legs leaden. With the smoke far off to one side, the sun blazed intolerably in the emerald sky. He failed to locate the ovoids but knew they were not far behind; two whitish mushrooms, drifting upward from his trail, were proof of that.

Lurching into the shade of a rocky ledge, he slumped to the ground while wearily searching the scene ahead.

Ravines, jagged ridges, great slanting green-black slabs that notched the sky—the rocks went on and on; they never seemed to end. But he had to cross it. Behind lay only fire, the metal birds, ugly black ovoids that burned the world.

There was no retreat.

He forced himself to his feet and stumbled ahead. His lungs burned, his legs ached, sweat filled his eyes, stinging and blurring his vision. Aware he was moving in a zigzag course, he fixed his sight on a distant ridge. He had to hurry. . . .

The ridge blossomed from the desert floor, growing larger and larger. Rather than attempt to scale it, he shifted his course to pass around its base. Staggering, he fell, rose again, and plunged ahead.

The sky was emerald. No, it was white, a brilliant white, white and red with flame. The sun was a crazy dancing thing that bobbed from side to side. Visions of the meadow flooded his mind. Tall grasses, the blue-green stream—he had to reach it. The pool where Zandro lived; he'd drink it dry, then what would Zandro do?

He tried to run but fell again. Struggling to his feet, he stared dully around. There was no meadow; there was only the horrible trickery of his imagination. No meadow! The thought was staggering.

"Zandro!" The name, torn from his lips, filled his mind.

"Danny?" The answer came immediately.

"Zandro!" He hurled a great telepathic shout. Why was he calling? He felt a quick befuddlement. He didn't

want Zandro. No! No! He was trying to escape Zandro. Zandro had sent the birds—the burners of worlds! He had to escape.

“Wait, Danny.” The words were gentle and beguiling.

“For what?” he croaked.

“For the sky hounds, Danny.”

“Sky hounds?” He had a horrible suspicion. *“Those things that are burning the world?”*

“They will bring you safely to the meadow.”

“They’re trying to kill me,” he screamed.

“They could do that quite easily,” Zandro corrected. *“No, Danny, they’re guiding you. Hadn’t you noticed? It was necessary to fire the forest to turn your steps back toward the meadow. Why don’t you wait, let them return you safely?”*

“You want to kill me!”

“No, Danny.”

“You said so. You tried to make me die. You said the Lord of the Stars had ordered it.”

“Not now, Danny. Things have changed.”

“Changed?” He clung to the word, feeling a ray of hope.

“It is not necessary that you die.”

“What has changed? I don’t believe you!”

“A strange vessel from one of your worlds has entered into orbit around Wenda,” Zandro confessed. *“Others of your kind are coming.”*

“My kind?” he asked wonderingly.

“Your people have come for you.”

“My people.” A great hope flared within him.

“Their detectors undoubtedly will locate the lifeboat

by the meadow, Danny. That's where they will center their search. But they won't land unless their bioscans show you are there. That is why you have to return."

"Why do you want them to land?" he demanded. "It's a trick! I won't go to the meadow. I won't! I won't!"

"Then the sky hounds will bring you back," Zandro replied haughtily.

"You said once that I had to die, that all humans had to die," he shouted. "You're a . . . monster!" He felt a chilling moment of silence.

"You can't escape the sky hounds." Zandro's words, when they came, were cold and ominous.

"You want to kill them," he accused.

"When I am through with them, they will die. So will you."

"But why? Why do you want them?"

"To drain their minds," Zandro returned loftily. "We need to know more about your race."

"Why do you have to know?" he whispered fearfully.

"To annihilate them."

"You're a monster," Danny screamed, "a monster."

"No," Zandro rebuked coldly, "you are the monsters."

"Monster!" he shouted wildly. Trembling with rage and fear, he shut his mind. Zandro couldn't kill them. They wouldn't land unless he went to the meadow, and he wouldn't go to the meadow. He wouldn't. Zandro couldn't make him! The sky hounds couldn't make him! Not even if they breathed fire, burned worlds.

Hzzzzz . . .

He jerked erect, looking frantically into the sky. A small bird hovered off to one side, its wings motionless.

Red eyes glared down at him. Terrified, he stared past it; in the distance, three black blobs were pasted against the emerald sky.

The sky hounds! He retreated backward, unable to tear his eyes from them. Strangling a cry in his throat, he turned and plunged toward the heart of the great stone desert. He had to run, run, run. He couldn't stop! They couldn't take him to the meadow. Couldn't, couldn't, couldn't.

He stumbled . . . walked . . . stumbled. Great green-black slabs seemed to spring from the ground like grass; somehow he twisted through them. He dragged along a ravine, squeezed through a crevice, crawled along a ledge. He fell again and tried to rise. Digging his fingers into the rocky ground, he attempted to pull himself forward.

Hzzzzz . . .

A metal bird! He rolled over, gazing upward toward the emerald sun. A black blob was coming down! It grew larger and larger until it filled the sky. Strange metal arms came down and scooped him up. He tried futilely to resist. Then somehow he was enclosed in blackness. *The belly of the sky hound!*

He fainted.

Gultur, Lord of the Stars, shook with rage as he eyed his subordinate. "You say the young alien yet lives?" he demanded.

"Mind Master Zandro has decreed it," Subcommander Gobit replied fearfully.

"For what purpose?"

“An alien vessel has entered into orbit around the laboratory world . . .”

“The humans?” Gultur interrupted. There was something terrifying about this soft-fleshed race. At first they had appeared merely as small bipeds who had chanced to discover the secret of the interstellar drive, thus consequently had occupied a few thousand sun systems; but the first one captured had proved telepathic, had succeeded in erecting mental shields against a mind master. Now they were crossing the black abyss! He felt a quick trepidation. “Have they knowledge of our intent?”

“Mind Master Zandro believes not, my lord.”

“Do you believe this happenstance?” Gultur demanded. “Is that what you are trying to say?”

“My lord, I . . .”

“Quick, explain!”

“There is but a single vessel, my lord. Were the humans suspicious, they would have sent a hundred ships—a thousand.”

“A single vessel can destroy a planet,” Gultur rebuked.

“Assuredly, my lord. I am conveying the mind master’s conviction.”

“Can he explain its mission?” he demanded.

“He believes it was sent to find the young human. As you might recall, the human had made contact with his kind on . . .”

“I recall quite well,” Gultur cut in. “I also recall having viewed the entire project with disfavor.”

“You were quite right, my lord.”

"Sending robots to do the work of warheads!" Gultur grimaced. "Have the alien vessel destroyed immediately."

Gobit trembled. "Mind Master Zandro does not wish it, my lord."

"For what reason?"

"The robots sent to Makal have not proved very fruitful . . ."

Gultur silenced him with the imperious wave of a tentacle. "I know that very well. A single scout cruiser could have accomplished far more." He regarded his subordinate grimly. "Go on."

"With more specimens, the mind master believes he could obtain the knowledge to enable the Lord of the Stars"—Gobit lowered his front tentacles and bowed humbly—"to commence the annihilation process in the very near future."

"It should have begun years ago."

"Your wisdom is evident, my lord."

"And should the specimens prove unproductive?"

"He will destroy them immediately, my lord."

"He must destroy them in any case."

"Yes, of course, once their minds are drained."

"Station a cruiser into orbit around the laboratory world immediately," Gultur curtly instructed.

The ridges of Gobit's tentacles blanched, an indication of his inner terror. His eye jerked wildly. "The mind master does not wish it," he managed to say.

"Does he believe the alien vessel to be unarmed?"

"He believes the presence of our vessels around the laboratory world would frighten the humans away, my lord. He . . ."

"Answer me," Gultur thundered.

"He believes the alien vessel might be armed," Gobit admitted.

"How does he intend to cope with that?"

"Three sky hounds were dispatched . . ."

"Sky hounds against an armed space vessel?" Gultur roared wrathfully. "What kind of military logic is that?"

"Our greatest weapon is the mental power of the mind masters," Gobit murmured. "It is written in the Book of the Conqueror."

"I prefer the nucleonic bolt," Gultur returned acidly.

"Your military judgment is unsurpassed, my lord." Gobit repeated his humble bow. "I, too, prefer immediate devastation."

"At times the High Council places entirely too much credence in the power of the mind."

"Entirely too much," he assented.

"That is all." Gultur waved a tentacle in dismissal. When his subordinate had departed, he slithered out to the balcony and gazed at the distant patch of orange stars. The arrival of the alien vessel perturbed him far more than he wished to admit. If the young human had contacted his kind across the black abyss, what had he told them?

He regarded the stars musingly. Yet there was but a single vessel. Given his choice, he would destroy it immediately, and the young human with it. How many star systems had the delay cost him? How many mokols of stone? He writhed inwardly. But a mind master's orders were law; not even he, Lord of the Stars, could offer challenge.

But he much preferred the military way.

The Wind of Death. The virulent microorganisms sown into an atmospheric system would rid a world of all life within the space of several of its days. There were drawbacks, of course. Such a world would not be safe for habitation for several generations to come. There also was the problem of establishing a new ecological balance. But no one could deny the fright factor.

The nucleonic bolt. That was the warrior's weapon. True, it totally obliterated every trace of the civilization which fell victim to it; however, none but the scholarly mind masters were interested in such records. For pure destruction, it was without parallel. It also offered the advantage of making its effects forever visible. The devastated planet itself was the greatest monument to conquest. The sight never ceased to inspire him.

He remembered the culture of Gurth. Mechanically minded creatures who were beginning to probe their orbital space, they dwelt in strange subterranean cities on the low-lying islands that dotted the planet's liquid face.

He had attacked by sowing the waters with great hydrogen warheads. Vast tidal waves created by the thousand simultaneous explosions had hurled the seas over every vestige of land. Victory had been achieved without the loss of a single ship. In many respects, that had been his greatest victory. The memory brought a quick satisfaction. It was not often that a planet was so cheaply won.

He moved his single eye, contemplating the vast black abyss that split the firmament. The mind masters were wrong, he reflected. In the secrecy of his thoughts,

he could say that. *Only total annihilation ensured total victory.*

It was written in the Book of the Conqueror.



12

SAMUL STARED wonderingly at the planetary surface rushing past some hundred miles below. Yellows, tans, pale greens, the twisting purples of great mountain ranges—the colors blended into a patternless mosaic that offered no geometry he could discern. The detectors had identified the black smudges off to one side as smoke.

“Forest fire,” Captain Garron had briefly explained.

Samul shifted his gaze to the sun; even through the protective filter it was an intolerably brilliant disk. Most of the suns of his own sector were white, yellow, bluish-white, red, or far more rarely, pinkish-gray like Apar. On this side of the Ebon Deeps they ran more to orange colors. But not this sun. Alone among the visible stars it shone a pure emerald.

He didn't like interstellar travel. On the occasional trips he had made to other systems in the 17th Sector, he had been uncomfortable. This jump was no different. The swift acceleration through Apar's planetary

field; the great, black, silent, seemingly motionless vault through hyperspace; the sudden emergence into the gravitational domain of this emerald giant—it had been both fascinating and fearsome.

He glanced at Captain Garron. The captain stood straight, almost primly, a hand at his pointed jaw. His thin face held the acid look of disapproval.

A speaker crackled to life. "The bioscan confirms the presence of a human system near the previously reported lifeboat, sir."

The captain sniffed. "How about the other pattern?"

"Still present." The voice on the speaker hesitated. "It's like nothing I ever saw."

The Captain looked irked. "All life forms above the vertebrate level have certain patterns in common," he snapped.

"Not this one, Captain." The denial was emphatic.

"I don't believe it's a vertebrate," Samul offered tactfully.

"Not a vertebrate?" The captain was startled.

"It's a sort of octopus," he explained.

"On that desert down there?"

"Well, it lives in a pool."

"You mentioned an intelligent alien . . ."

"That's the octopus," Samul hastily explained. "It's quite bright."

"A smart octopus," the captain grated. "Is that all?"

"Well, there are some mechanical birds."

"Oh?" He arched an eyebrow incredulously.

"Apparently quite a few. The boy's shot several down with a bow and arrow."

"How did I ever get this assignment?" the captain

asked bitterly. Glaring, he snapped a look at the first officer and demanded querulously, "Mr. Lang, why isn't detector reporting?"

"Detector?" Lang sang into a tube.

"All clear, sir."

"All clear, sir," Lang repeated.

"Are we going down?" Samul asked hopefully. He'd had enough of this seemingly endless orbit into which the *Pioneer* had entered the previous day.

"Hmmmph." The captain snorted and turned away. Samul eyed him unhappily. Plainly the captain wasn't enthusiastic about the idea, but then he had opposed the trip from the first. He'd made that quite clear.

Samul could understand his perturbation. The *Pioneer* wasn't a cruiser; it wasn't even armed. It was, in fact, an old Colonial Operations immigration vessel. Sol Houston had won his point in forcing the deportation of the Tommies, but the Regent Administrator had steadfastly refused the use of a cruiser, citing the regulation that prohibited aliens from boarding an armed vessel. To make matters worse, this was the captain's first crossing of the Ebon Deep.

That was part of the captain's discomfort; there was also the matter of his passengers. The Tommies, as mechanical artifacts, couldn't properly be classified as aliens; on receipt of his orders he'd argued that long and vociferously but unfortunately had been unable to produce a regulation to support the contention.

But he'd had a measure of revenge: As nonhumans, he'd denied the androids cabin space. He'd been quite gloating about it. As a consequence, the Tommies were stacked in a small storage bin adjacent to the galley,

with the hatch locked to prevent them from wandering. Samul didn't believe they minded.

The captain also was unhappy about having to transport Miss Yoshi Penn and Arla Koy. Samul could appreciate that. While he couldn't deny his pleasure at the presence of Yoshi aboard, he'd fought the idea on the basis of the possible danger. He'd had to take Arla, of course, to communicate with the Tommies. But an orphan couldn't travel without the permission of a parent-surrogate; SW1804M was quite explicit on that point, as Miss Penn had proved. And she wouldn't allow Arla to travel alone.

Sighing, Samul headed toward the lounge. He'd be glad when he could take the Tommies down, pick up Danny, and start home. If the octopus wanted this world, it could have it. Not that it was really that simple, he reflected. Not when the whatever-it-was came from a race that spanned the stars and seemingly was bent on a course of conquest. Not when that race had destroyed four survey cruisers, including one of the might of the *Nomad*. He only hoped Danny had some answers.

He found Yoshi alone in the lounge. Her quick smile brought a palpitation to his heart. "Where's Arla?" he asked.

"Resting." She moved unobtrusively to provide room on the lounge beside her. "She's worried."

"Over her inability to contact Danny?" He hesitated, then sat across from her. "Perhaps the system doesn't work in space."

"Telepathy?"

"Yes and no. The Tommies are androids, so essentially we're talking about a physical system."

"Only in a sense," she suggested. She smiled brightly at him. "I don't understand such things, of course, but they *do* receive and transmit telepathically. That doesn't sound like a total machine."

"Well, no." He had to concede that.

"Of course, they might work differently in hyperspace, even though the telepathic mind can bridge it."

"Isn't that extremely rare?"

"A mind that can bridge hyperspace? How do we know? It has seldom been put to test, at least as far as we're concerned. Aside from Arla's link with Danny, I've never heard of a telepath bridging even interplanetary space. Have you? But perhaps the aliens do it all the time."

"It's possible." Samul marveled at her astuteness. Despite her denial of any special insight, her perception continued to amaze him. Beauty, it was said, seldom walked with wisdom; but that certainly didn't apply in her case. She had both. Odd, when she looked at him as she was doing now, he came all apart inside. If he ever got married. . . .

He stifled the thought with a start. That, he reflected grimly, was the way bachelors were caught. He forced his mind back to the problem and said stiffly, "But we're not in hyperspace."

"That's what worries her," Yoshi confided. "She should be able to contact him by now."

"We'll have to wait and see," he counseled.

"When are we going to land?"

"The captain didn't say, or wouldn't."

"Wouldn't?"

"He's worried."

“That’s understandable.”

He said impulsively, “I worry about you . . . and Arla.”

“The danger? Poof!” She regarded him from under lowered lashes. “But it’s good to know that you worry, Mr. Smith.”

“Samul,” he urged.

“Samul. It’s an attractive name.”

“Well, Smith is sort of common.”

“I think it’s a fascinating name.”

“You do?” He gazed in awe at her.

“Historically,” she corrected. “Did you ever read about Elias Smith? But, of course, you’re a student of the Middle Empire. I think his exploration of the planet Kren was absolutely captivating. And there was George Smith, the general who won the Battle of Napat. And Lewis Smith, one of the signers of the Declaration of Intent, which led to the formation of the Third Terran Empire.”

Samul glowed happily. She certainly knew her history.

She caught his eyes and held them. “The Smiths are men who get things done.”

Samul rose, feeling flustered. The hazel eyes—yes, there was a touch of yellow in the irises—did strange things to him. “I’d better check with the captain,” he muttered.

“I believe you should, Samul.” She watched him demurely. He turned hastily, bumping into a chair, and awkwardly skirted around it. Hastening into the corridor, he fancied he heard a low giggle behind him.

The captain was waiting. Rubbing his hands briskly,

he stated without preamble, "I've decided to send you down in a lifeboat, Mr. Smith."

"Lifeboat?" he blurted.

"I can't risk landing the *Pioneer* on an unknown planetary surface. You can understand that."

"But the screens are clear!"

"That's our safety . . . up here. At the first blip I could accelerate for hyperspace." He craned his neck, eyeing Samul severely. "But did you ever try to accelerate into hyperspace from a desert?"

"It's more forest and meadow where Danny is," Samul expostulated.

"Forest and meadow—it's all the same," the captain snapped testily. "I'm responsible for taking all measures necessary to ensure the safety of this vessel. Would you like to see the regulation that states that?" He peered caustically at Samul.

"But I've never operated a lifeboat," Samul protested.

"Oh, I'll send a crewman with you. Carney, a very capable man. He operates them all the time." The captain rubbed his hands again.

Samul stared at him in dismay. To land in the *Pioneer* was one thing, but to go down in a lifeboat! The captain caught his apprehension and smirked. "Of course, if you'd prefer not to . . ."

"But we have to land the Tommies," he exclaimed.

"Oh, those things. I could send Carney down with them."

"We still have to locate the boy," he protested. "That might take some time. If we have to communicate through the Tommies, the girl would have to go."

"I could send her along with Carney."

“In a lifeboat?”

“They’re quite safe, Mr. Smith. We seldom lose one.”

“I’ll go down with him,” Samul raged.

“And the girl?”

“We’ll have to take her.” He made the decision reluctantly. He hoped she wouldn’t be too afraid. “When do we, uh, embark?” he asked icily.

Captain Garron’s eyes traveled from the instrument console to the chronometer. “We’ll be at the float-off point in exactly twenty-seven minutes.”

“We’ll be ready,” he grated. He spun on his heel and strode back toward the lounge.

Leading Arla to the lifeboat, Samul gazed at it, appalled. It was even smaller than he had supposed. Tucked into a bubble on the ship’s side, its oval shape held a fragile look, especially when measured against the immensity in which it must ride.

Arla’s eyes glistened. “It’ll be exciting, won’t it, Mr. Smith?”

“Yeah.” Gazing through the open hatch at the lighted interior, he found someone had already delivered the Tommies; they stood rigidly in a group at the end of the cabin, their eyes vacuous. Abruptly they sat on a narrow bench that extended three-quarters of the way around the inner wall.

“I told them to,” Arla whispered. “They look more comfortable.”

A slim young man with a boyish smile came in. “I’m Carney,” he announced. “I’ve been assigned to run you down.”

“You make it sound easy,” Samul remarked hopefully.

“Oh, sure, nothing to it as long as you don’t get hung up.”

“Hung up?” Samul swallowed.

“You know these old jobs. They’ve always got bugs. But don’t worry, I can always get on the communicator and have them send down another one.” He gazed interestedly at the Tommies. “They sure look alike.”

“Same manufacturer,” Samul said.

“Their eyes look kind of glassy.” He switched his gaze to Samul. “I hear there’s an octopus down there.”

“Well, sort of.”

“I used to catch them in the rocks off Otrup. That’s on the Wasach coast. They’re funny critters.”

“Funny?”

“Squiggly. The crab fisheries pay a bounty on ’em.” Carney grinned at the remembrance.

“Do you have any weapons on board?” Samul asked hopefully.

“Naw, it’s against regulations.” Carney tossed his head disdainfully. “But don’t worry about that baby. You just got to know how to grab ’em.”

“Yeah,” Samul said dolefully.

“You trying to get it alive?”

“Not exactly,” he admitted.

“If you are, let me know. I like to tussle with ’em.” Carney glanced at his watch. “Four minutes till float-off.”

Sensing movement at the hatch, Samul glanced around. Yoshi came in, smoothed her skirt, and sat primly on the bench.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded. “You’re not going.”

“SW1804M,” she answered demurely.

“I don’t care about SW1804M,” he cried heatedly. “You’re not going.”

She said calmly, “I have the captain’s permission, Samul.”

“He said you could go!”

“He realizes he has to abide by the regulations, even if you don’t,” she answered archly.

“Regulations,” he groaned.

“They’re basic to law and order,” she reprimanded.

“All right, all right.” He admitted his defeat. “But don’t blame me if you get frightened.”

“With you along?” She smiled sweetly.

“Three minutes till float-off,” Carney announced. “I’d better check the controls. I haven’t looked at them in some time.” He closed the outer hatch, secured it, and passed into a small forward compartment, shutting it behind him.

Samul sat grumpily at one of the small ports, gazing at the emerald sky. It wasn’t nearly as pretty as pinkish-gray. Several minutes later he felt a faint lurch, then immediately afterward saw the *Pioneer* floating off to one side. It looked old and decrepit. A door in the vessel’s side slid shut, closing off the dark interior of the life-boat’s bubble.

“Isn’t it thrilling?” Arla exclaimed. She clapped her hands.

“Yeah,” he grunted sourly.

Samul studied the face of the planet sweeping past below him. Rolling amber hills, purplish forests, flat yellow-green plains—it looked nothing like it had from

orbit. A twisting mountain range sped into view, becoming lost in a black smudge.

"The forest fire," Carney called, over the communicator.

Samul leaned toward the speaker box. "I hope that's not where we land."

"Quite a ways beyond it," he retorted cheerfully.

"How do you know where to let down?"

"I don't really, but the flight profile's set in the programmer," he answered cheerfully. "The ship handles herself. Nothing for me to do unless something goes wrong."

"Glad to have you along," Samul replied. He fervently hoped the programmer was in good working order. Gazing at Yoshi and Arla, he wondered how they could appear so unconcerned. But of course they didn't realize the danger, he reflected. They probably viewed the whole thing as a lark. Neither could have given much thought to the possible perils.

He watched the black smudge whirl past. Ending, it revealed an immense stone desert. The long shadows cast by the morning sun disclosed its bizarre architecture. Etchings in rock stretched away on all sides, unbroken by any sign of plant life. The desolation was appalling.

"I expected to see a sea," Carney yelled.

"Sea?"

"The octopus."

"Oh, it lives in a pool."

"Must be quite a small fellow."

"I'm not certain," Samul said. The desert suddenly ended; an unburned forest wheeled past beneath. The

changing forces on his body told him they were dropping fast. Individual trees, rocky outcrops, and winding ravines became discernible. The scene held a wildness he knew was untouched by any hand. Straining to see ahead, he glimpsed a faint, blurry yellow line rushing toward him from the horizon.

“That yellow—I think that’s it,” Carney shouted over the speaker. “It looks like a big splotch of grass.”

“I see it,” Arla shouted. She clapped her hands. “Is that where we’re going to land?”

Samul nodded, unable to speak. Didn’t anyone worry about that octopus? An octopus that spanned the stars wasn’t a laughing matter—particularly not a telepathic octopus. Of one thing he was certain: He’d warrant it wasn’t the kind the crewman used to catch in the rocks off Otrup. He felt a slight lurch and sensed the nose dipping lower.

“That’s the place, all right.” Carney’s voice held satisfaction. “Looks plenty smooth.”

“Watch out for the pool,” Samul yelled. He peered out, aghast at the speed with which the grass whirled past. It appeared close enough to touch.

“There’s a swampy area,” Carney called, “and—oh, yeah—I see a stream.”

“Stay away from that swamp!” Samul felt a quick alarm.

“Naw, we’ll land on this side of it.”

“Any sign of life?”

“The kid? Not yet.”

“Keep watching,” Samul urged. “If you spot him, land as close as you can. We want to unload, pick him up, and get out of here as soon as possible.”

“How about the octopus?”

“Forget the octopus,” he snapped. He returned his attention to the port, aware they had slowed considerably; the ground appeared very close. A continuous retrothrust tugged at his body. He glanced at Yoshi and Arla; their eyes were riveted intently on the meadow.

“Touching down,” Carney yelled. A distinct thump followed his words. Samul sat, feeling the stillness. It was as if all of creation had come to rest. Following the forces of entry into the atmosphere and retrothrust, the sensation was that of being in a complete vacuum.

“We’re there,” Yoshi said in a practical voice.

Samul glanced at Arla. “Can you contact Danny yet?”

“No”—her voice was small and plaintive—“but he has to be here, Mr. Smith. He just has to be. They said the bioscan showed him here.”

“He’s around,” he replied, with a nonchalance he didn’t feel. “We’ll find him.” He rose as Carney came from the forward compartment.

“Good air,” the crewman said cheerfully. “The barometric pressure’s fairly close to Makal’s. Shall I open her up?”

“Go right ahead.” Samul wasn’t worried about the atmosphere; Danny had been breathing it for most of his life. Carney undogged the hatch. As he started to leap out, Samul stopped him.

“Stay near the controls in case you have to take off suddenly,” he advised.

“Why? There’s nothing out there.”

“I’ll see.” Samul leaped down into the tall grass.

Walking a few paces toward the stream, he stopped and peered around. The forest ended several hundred yards to one side. Tall, graceful trees, unmoving in the still air—the scene was peaceful.

He looked slowly around. Glinting in the emerald sun, the blue-green stream wandered among the grasses. Several hundred yards beyond, stunted trees and bulrushes marked one border of the swamp. It, too, appeared quiet and peaceful.

Turning back toward the lifeboat, he instructed Arla to order the Tommies outside. He watched them descend from the hatch. Stepping out one by one, they gathered in a rigid group, staring unseeingly across the meadow. The knowledge that they were completely unaware of the existence of one another, or of anyone or anything else, was perturbing.

Yoshi emerged next, followed by Arla, then the crewman leaped out to join them. For a moment they were silent, testing the new world with their senses. Quiet, unmoving, it reminded Samul of a painting.

“Mighty peaceful,” Carney finally observed.

“Beautiful,” Yoshi breathed.

The crewman looked upward. “Never saw a pale-green sky before.”

Samul turned to the girl. “Any contact yet?”

“No.” Her voice was hushed.

“Keep trying.”

“I am, Mr. Smith.”

“What’s that?” Carney asked suddenly. He jabbed a finger toward the swamp. Samul’s eyes followed the gesture. A small object was moving toward them just above the level of the bulrushes.

"It's a bird," he said uncertainly.

"Its wings aren't moving," Carney objected.

"No, they're not." Samul suppressed an inner tumult.

"Perhaps it's one of the metal birds Danny mentioned," Arla ventured. "He said their wings didn't move."

"It's a bird, all right."

"There's another . . . two more," Carney exclaimed.

Samul studied them with a dire foreboding. Approaching in a line, they paused in midair, hovering a short distance away. Their eyes were small, red, glaring, and like their wings, unmoving. "Zandro's birds," he murmured. He felt a touch of wonder.

"That's what Danny said." Arla scarcely moved her lips as she spoke.

"They're . . . telling Zandro about us?"

"I think so, Mr. Smith."

"They must be telepathic, like the androids," Yoshi observed quietly.

"You mean they can read our minds?" Carney asked incredulously.

"It's unlikely." Samul spoke without moving his gaze from them. "They probably report telepathically on what they see . . . like the Tommies."

"That Zandro—that's the octopus, isn't it?"

Samul nodded. "If it is an octopus."

Carney whistled softly. "Boy, is it smart."

"What should we do?" asked Yoshi. A note of anxiety had crept into her voice.

"We have to wait, see if Arla can contact Danny," Samul advised. He gazed at the birds, wondering at

the artificers who had created them. They came from an entirely different civilization, he reflected. Not only their life forms but their societal patterns, economics, psychology, history, legal codes, and spiritual values must differ radically. How could one predict what kind of civilization might be spawned in the remoteness of the galaxy? Could two civilizations, alien to each other in all respects, ever reach any accord whatever? He doubted it.

“Look!” Carney croaked. His finger shot out again, and Samul whirled, appalled to see three huge black shapes moving toward them above the forest.

“Get in the lifeboat,” he shouted urgently. “Yoshi! Arla!”

“They’ve stopped,” the crewman yelled.

Samul jerked his gaze back and saw that they were hovering above the trees at the edge of the meadow. Squat, oval in shape, they possessed ugly black snouts protruding from one end. Slender antennae quivered against the emerald sky. He shot a fast look at Arla.

“Did Danny describe anything like that?”

“No, Mr. Smith.”

“They’re artificial,” Yoshi said. She appeared calm again.

“Artificial?” Carney gaped at them. “I’d rather tangle with the octopus.”

“You might get the chance,” Samul gritted. He studied the black ovoids, relieved they hadn’t approached any closer. “Think they’re telepathic?”

“I think they’re like the birds,” Yoshi said.

“Get in the lifeboat.”

She shook her head. “We’ve come to get Danny.”

"I'll get him."

"You'll need Arla. I'll stay."

"Be ready to jump," he warned. He looked around slowly. Four humans, five androids, three metal birds, three ugly black blobs in the sky, Danny somewhere out of sight . . . and a giant octopus in a pool; he thought it a quite unusual collection. He studied the swamp, then turned back toward the forest. The silence was awesome.

The alien was watching them, he reflected. He was watching them through the eyes of the metal birds, perhaps through the eyes of the three black blobs in the sky. What was *he* thinking? He? It? The pronoun made small difference; what mattered was the intelligence. He had scant doubt but that the alien possessed it aplenty.

"Danny!" Yoshi shrieked. "He's coming!"

Startled, Samul spun around to see the figure of a youth emerging from the swamp. In the startled tableau that followed, he had the eerie impression that the Universe had ground to a halt, that nothing moved save for the boy coming toward them. The sweep of stunted trees and rushes, the emerald sun beating down, the solitary figure—in Samul's mind they symbolized the stark loneliness of this world.

Danny, for Samul knew it was Danny, walked slowly, stiffly, showing no awareness of them. Samul caught his breath. The face, the hair, the body build—the youth could be a blood brother to the Tommies. Was it another Tommy? No, it had to be Danny. He shot a glance at Arla; she was watching, wide-eyed.

Danny was tall, bronzed, with tousled yellow hair,

flat, wide cheekbones. His feet were bare. He wore the tattered remnants of crudely made garments fastened around the waist with vines. Halting several paces away, he regarded them incuriously.

Samul looked into his eyes. They were deep blue like those of the Tommies.

Blue and wide and blank.



13

“DANNY!” Samul recovered his presence of mind and sprang forward with a glad smile. “You must be Danny June!”

“Danny June.” The echoed answer held a strange mechanical sound.

“I’m Samul Smith. This is Miss Penn and Arla Koy. You’ve spoken with Arla.”

“Arla,” the youth intoned.

“And crewman Carney.” Samul spoke swiftly, gesturing to each in turn as the words spilled out, at the same time attempting to discern what was wrong; the youth acted exactly like a Tommy. “We’ve come to take you back to Gylan.”

“Gylan,” Danny echoed.

“On Makal. Arla’s told you about it, I am sure.”

“Danny!” Arla caught her voice. Danny glanced in-

curiously at her. Her lips trembling, she moved her gaze slowly to Samul. Her face was stricken. "I can't reach him telepathically," she whispered tragically.

"Nothing at all?"

"His mind is blotted out."

"Let me try." Samul gestured casually toward the hovering birds. "What are those?"

Danny raised his eyes. "Metal birds," he answered dully. Samul felt a surge of relief, the fear banished that Danny could do no more than echo the words put to him.

"Zandro's birds?" he persisted.

"Yes. . . ."

"What do they do?"

"They . . . talk with Zandro."

"What about?"

"On what they see."

"And those?" Samul gestured toward the three black blobs in the sky.

Danny moved his head slowly. "Sky hounds," he answered. Samul sensed something akin to a shudder passing through the youth's body.

"What do they do?"

"They burn worlds."

"Burn worlds?"

"With fire."

Samul held his eyes. "Where is Zandro?"

"There . . ." Danny turned, pointing toward the swamp.

"Enough of that!"

Samul whirled at the unexpected voice behind him, at the same time glimpsing the startled looks on the

faces of the others. He as quickly realized the voice had come from one of the Tommies. He stared speechlessly at the androids.

"I am here," one of them said suddenly.

"Here?" Samul echoed the word incredulously.

"Here in a vocal sense," the voice corrected.

"You are Zandro?" he whispered.

"Mind Master Zandro." The answer held a lofty note. "Unfortunately you have undeveloped minds, hence I can't speak telepathically with you."

Samul pulled himself together. "What have you done to Danny?" he demanded.

"Danny is subservient to my will."

"I knew it," Arla cried. "He's hypnotized him."

"A similar state," Zandro agreed.

"You . . . you fish," she screamed.

"Octopus," Samul corrected.

"That octopus?" Carney, who had been following the conversation incredulously, gaped at the Tommy. "Is it talking through that thing?"

"It's like a communicator," Samul agreed. He fought to control his shakiness. "We're taking Danny back to his people."

"No," Zandro corrected, "he'll never leave Wenda. None of you will."

"Never leave?" Carney exclaimed. Samul silenced him with a gesture.

"We're leaving now," he stated firmly.

"You are?" Speaking through the Tommy, Zandro's voice held an inflection Samul didn't like. He glanced quickly at Yoshi. Her face taut with anxiety, she tried a reassuring smile that didn't quite come off.

“Get in the lifeboat,” he instructed tersely. “All of you.” He saw Yoshi clasp Arla’s hand and start to move, then stand as if rooted to the ground. She looked strickenly at him.

“What’s wrong?” he blurted.

“I . . . can’t move my legs.” Samul started to spring toward her but found he couldn’t. He felt no sensation in his legs; it was as if they simply failed to respond to his will.

“None of you can move,” Zandro proclaimed imperiously.

“What have you done?” He battled his rising fear.

“I have taken command of your bodies,” Zandro replied. “Now I shall take command of your minds.”

Samul subdued his terror. “You can’t,” he stated firmly.

“You dare challenge a mind master?” The Tommy’s mechanical voice held anger.

“You’re not a mind master to my race,” he rebutted.

“Your race soon will feel our power.”

“It might be the other way around,” he answered bravely.

“Be logical,” Zandro counseled. “I have studied your race through Danny for almost his entire life. What is your culture? It is a puny thing restricted to sixty-eight hundred sun systems. Do you believe that a significant power? Yes, I see by your mind that you do. But it is a belief born of ignorance, the inability to comprehend the scale of life. That is a measure of your inadequacy. My empire contains the planetary systems of more than one million suns.”

"A million?" Samul gulped. That took a lot of paperwork. "What do you want with us?"

"Your minds."

"Why?" Not daring to look at the others, he fought to keep the tremor from his voice.

"For what knowledge they might contain."

"To what purpose?" he whispered.

"Conquest! Certainly you realize that by now."

"What does that octopus think it is?" Carney cut in angrily. His face livid, he struggled to move his feet.

"Silence!" Zandro thundered.

"Octopus," the crewman shouted. "I used to catch 'em just like you in the rocks off Otrup."

"Silence or you die!"

"Quiet," Samul admonished. As the crewman subsided into angry mutterings, his glance fell on Arla. Her eyes half closed, her thin face held a faraway look. His swift perturbation was washed away in the realization that she was lost in some strange telepathic world. Why hadn't Zandro detected it? Could she erect a mind shield against him? Suddenly he realized he had to keep the alien's attention from her—keep him distracted, keep him talking.

"And when you get our minds, what then?" he asked.

"You will die. I have explained all that to Danny."

"Explain it to us," Samul entreated. "If we have to die, we'd like to know why."

"But one race can rule the Universe," Zandro replied. "It is written in the Book of the Gods."

"Could one race dwell alone in all this vastness?" He gestured around wonderingly. "That would be in-

tolerable to any form of life. It would shrivel up and die.”

“You stand at the first step of evolution,” Zandro reproved. “You are shortsighted.”

“In what way? Tell me.”

“Your vision is limited by your comprehension.”

“I don’t understand.” Samul made his words humble.

“What is a Universe? The very word denotes the finite, hence its limits can be exceeded. In the ultimate, the Universe itself will prove but a small segment. The only limiting factor is the mind itself.”

“You hope to conquer this Universe, go beyond it?” he asked skeptically.

“That is a certainty,” Zandro stated loftily. “We will sweep through universes without end, for the simple reason that time is unending—time and space. Destiny is written against those two immeasurables.”

Listening with part of his mind, Samul frantically groped for a clue to action. Danny and Arla—the strange things Danny had told her. He shuddered violently, suppressing the memory. Was Zandro reading his mind now, even while talking through the Tommy? He had to prevent it! Gylan, Sol Houston, the Wasach Sea, aircars, Ghengin Kaan, the wind in the Cardon Hills, kashba lilies, golden lucca trees, the Space Administration Building—he combined mental pictures, words, sounds into a vast mental whirl and said, “Not all of your race believes that is so.”

“No?” The single word from the Tommy’s lips was cold and formidable. “You know nothing of my race.”

“But we do,” Samul retorted quickly. “Our Regent

Administrator has established communication with one of your leaders.”

“That is a lie,” Zandro rebutted icily. “Even through the confusion in your mind I can perceive that.”

“I can prove it,” he shouted. “He’s been exchanging views with a Subcommander Gobit through the Ikus.”

“What was that?” Zandro thundered. Samul detected a quick alarm behind the words and sensed a faint hope.

He said swiftly, “When we tracked your ship coming in from the Ebon Deeps to deliver the Tommies to Gylan, we allowed your captain to discover several of our secret weapons. He realized instantly, of course, that any attack against us would be disastrous. . . .”

“Lies,” Zandro snapped.

“Hear me out,” Samul rushed on. Street of the Shopkeepers, Altair Harbin, public library, the Princess Yoshi of Karn—he had to keep his mind a mishmash. “You want the proof, don’t you? We allowed your ship to land, then tracked it back to its base. Following that, one of our mind masters . . .”

“Your mind masters?”

“We have quite a few of them,” Samul responded quickly. Benkar Redmont, Obi Station, Reg SW141-4B. . . . “Civil service. We use them to communicate between star systems. Quite a bit faster and cheaper than the Zirg band. Anyway, our mind master reached Subcommander Gobit . . .”

“How did you learn that name?” Zandro roared.

“We plucked it from the mind of the captain who was delivering the Tommies. We reached him through Iku 214J and . . .”

“Remain where you are,” Zandro thundered. “The sky hounds will destroy you immediately at any attempt to leave.”

“But . . .” Samul grew suddenly silent, aware of some subtle change. Zandro had withdrawn! He sensed it instinctively.

“You moved your foot,” Yoshi screamed. He looked down, realizing he had taken a step.

“I can move,” she cried. She stepped toward him. “We’re free, we’re free.”

“Let’s make a break for it,” Carney shouted. He wheeled toward the lifeboat.

“No,” Samul yelled hoarsely. “The sky hounds will destroy us!”

“I don’t want to be here when that octopus gets back!”

“Wait!” Yoshi gestured, staring toward Arla and Danny. Samul swung back to look at them. The girl’s face held the same taut, faraway expression, but Danny was trembling; his hands jerked spasmodically. He shot a swift look at Yoshi; her face was a study in anxious concentration. The crewman looked bewildered.

Danny suddenly shook his head; his vacuous eyes took on a glimmer of life. He shuddered violently, then stood straight, blinking with his face turned toward the emerald sun.

“Danny!” Arla came to life, her eyes riveted on him. He stiffened, turning slowly, gazing at her.

“Danny, it’s all right,” she exclaimed urgently.

“You are . . .” He spoke wonderingly.

“Arla Koy. We’ve come for you. Zandro had you hypnotized.”

“Zandro . . .”

“He’s gone now.”

“Gone . . .”

“This is Mr. Smith and Miss Penn”—she spoke rapidly, gesturing with her hands—“and Mr. Carney, who runs the lifeboat.”

“You’ve come!” Danny shook his head again and blinked.

“We’ve come to take you back to Gylan,” Samul cut in, “but we have a problem.”

“Problem?” Danny uttered the word without shifting his gaze from Arla. His bronzed face held a breathless, awestruck expression. Samul started to answer, but Yoshi gestured him to silence. For a long moment the girl and boy regarded each other wonderingly.

Then Arla said, “You have to listen to Mr. Smith, Danny.”

“Is this a dream?”

“No, it’s real.”

“The sky hounds . . .” He looked at the black blobs above the trees and shuddered.

“That’s the problem,” Samul said. “We have to find a way to escape them.”

“You can’t. I tried.”

“We can,” Arla said determinedly.

“How?”

“You said Zandro tried to make you die, tried to kill you by stopping your heart.”

“Yes, he did.” Danny clenched his fists.

“He wouldn’t have tried it unless he knew it could be done.”

“What do you mean?” Samul cut in.

"We're as strong as he is," she exclaimed positively. "I know it. He isn't as powerful as he'd have us believe."

"What are you getting at?" he asked sharply.

"He could control our bodies, keep us from moving, but he couldn't control Danny's, Mr. Smith." She shook her head vigorously. "If he could, he wouldn't have let him run away."

"I still don't see . . ."

"If I can fog film, I can fog his mind. At least Danny and I together can. And we can amplify our power through the Tommies." Her face got a strained look. "We could make him die."

"The sky hounds?" Samul rubbed his knuckles reflectively.

"Perhaps they wouldn't work if you got rid of the octopus," Carney interrupted.

Samul stared at him. "We can't take that chance."

"I could take the boat up for a trial run, see what they do."

"No." Samul returned his gaze to the girl. "Wouldn't it be easier to control his mind than to make him die?"

"Make him destroy the sky hounds?"

"Could you do that?"

"I . . . we could try, Mr. Smith."

"You can do it," Samul stated. He felt a quiet assurance. "I know you can."

"He's awfully powerful," Danny cautioned dubiously.

"So are we," Arla exclaimed. Her eyes glistened. "You don't know yet."

Danny grinned boyishly. "Sure we are," he declared. "Tell me what to do."

"He's coming," Danny whispered excitedly. "I feel him." He gazed at Arla.

"I feel . . . something." She glanced at Samul, her voice hushed, then switched her eyes back to Danny. Watching, Samul could all but feel the telepathic messages flashing between them. He looked reassuringly at Yoshi. She smiled faintly.

"Subcommander Gobit has died a thousand deaths!" The words crackled suddenly from the lips of a Tommy. Samul jerked straighter, groping for words.

Danny murmured urgently, "The Tommies . . ."

Arla nodded violently. "Tommy One, Arla to Zandro. Tommy Two, Arla to Zandro. Tommy Three . . ." She spoke quickly, without glancing at the androids. Samul held his breath, waiting.

"So, the girl is a telepath?" The words, spilling from the lips of one of the Tommies, sent a chill through Samul's body.

"Tommy Four, Arla to Zandro." She murmured the call as if she hadn't heard. "Tommy Five . . ." The instant the last name left her lips, she lifted her head, signaling Danny with her eyes.

"She's one of our mind masters," Danny said. He spoke aloud. "She's more powerful than you. She's driven you from my mind."

"Then I shall destroy her!"

"No, you'll destroy the sky hounds, Zandro. You'll destroy them, destroy them."

"You will die," Zandro thundered.

"Destroy them, destroy them. Destroy the sky hounds, Zandro."

"You will die, all of you!"

“Destroy them! Destroy them!”

“Destroy them!” the Tommies clamored.

“Destroy them!” As Danny hurled the last command, he clamped his lips so tightly that his jaw muscles bulged out in hard, rigid lines. He locked eyes with Arla. Suddenly, too, the Tommies were silent.

Samul's hands sweated. Unable to tear his eyes from the boy and girl, he watched in stark fascination; the battle had entered into a purely telepathic stage. Arla was standing straight and stiff; her thin face, turned toward Danny, held a faraway expression.

“What's happening?” Carney rasped nervously.

“Don't talk, don't move,” Samul commanded. In the absolute silence that followed, he sensed a titanic battle taking place. On one side were Arla and Danny, their mental powers amplified through the five Tommies; on the other side was Zandro.

What could he do? Nothing, nothing at all, he thought. He could do nothing but stand there under the emerald sun and wait. Suddenly it wasn't his war any longer; it was their war! He moved his eyes from one to the other, marveling at what he sensed. In some strange way that he could never know, through some bizarre power that he could understand only at the verbal level, their minds were locked in a mighty struggle with that of the unseen alien.

He glanced at Yoshi. Her hands clasped rigidly together, her lips compressed, she stared at the boy and girl in fearful fascination. He moved his head slightly, glancing at the metal birds. Hovering in the same position as before, their wings motionless, their beady red eyes glared down at him. Did they know what was

transpiring? Or, like the Tommies, were they simple mechanical artifacts, capable only of tracking assigned targets and reporting what they saw? He decided it was the latter. Certainly the beady red eyes portrayed no intelligence.

He shifted his gaze to the sky hounds. They, too, were unmoving. He studied the squat, black, oval-shaped bodies, the snoutlike tube that jutted out from each, the long, sensitive-appearing antennae that quivered against the emerald sky. "They burn worlds!" Danny's words ran hauntingly through his mind.

Destroy them, destroy them! he thought fiercely. He clenched his hands futilely. All the minds like his in the Universe, even when lumped together, couldn't affect the present struggle one iota. In this battle he and Yoshi and Carney were the children; the knowledge made him humble.

His hands sweating, he looked at the boy and girl. Their posture unchanged, their eyes still locked, their faces held a rapt yet unseeing expression. He wondered what tremendous grip of concentration sustained them. It was beyond him, beyond Yoshi—beyond all but a select few, he thought. Most of humanity regarded telepaths as freaks, objects of scorn, yet he had long realized that was but a mask to cloak the secret envy of such a power.

Now, for the first time, he sensed the wonder of such a gift. It wasn't just the ability to penetrate another's mind and discern what was in it; it went far beyond that, at least in the case of Arla and Danny. A mind that could fog film? Could she, perhaps, walk through a metal fence? Despite her denial, he believed it en-

tirely possible. She would conceal such a gift, of course, for otherwise the scorn would be tenfold.

And Danny? He eyed the youth wonderingly. Zandro had immobilized their bodies with ease, even Arla's; but he hadn't been able to prevent Danny's flight. How powerful was Danny? What great, awesome, unbelievable talents did he possess? He had never really been put to test till now.

And Zandro? What power had he? The title "mind master" denoted great eminence among his kind—a race that must number in the millions of billions and had conquered the planets of 1,000,000 suns! To rise above that tide was an appalling feat. He shivered involuntarily.

"I have the uncomfortable feeling that the human race is about to be tested for its right to survive"—Sol Houston's words came back to him. And, "In time it comes to every life form."

Samul licked his lips dryly. That time was now. He—and, yes, Sol Houston—had envisioned that trial as a titanic conflict in which vast space armadas had been pitted, one against the other. They had seen it as one in which entire sun systems would be cindered until, finally, one adversary or the other was forced to retreat—a retreat that would spell eventual doom.

But it wasn't at all like that. Instead, the conflict was being fought here and now, on a lonely meadow under an emerald sun. But the stakes were the same. The fate of empires depended on the outcome of the silent struggle now occurring. One great civilization would expand afresh; the other would wither and die. The knowledge was frightening.

How long had he stood there? He didn't know, but the emerald sun certainly had climbed higher in the sky. He stole a glance at Yoshi. Her stance rigid, her face cast in an anxious mold, her eyes never wavered from the boy and girl.

He moved his gaze to Carney. The crewman forced a crooked grin. For the first time Samul noticed he was freckled; the pigmented splotches were etched sharply against his pale skin. Samul cautiously returned his gaze to Danny and Arla, fearful of any movement that might cause a fatal distraction.

His hands clenched, he waited. For what? What would signal the end? Should Zandro win, they would all die; of that he was certain. There would be no mercy, no reprieve. Worse, the whole of mankind would die. Planet by planet, sun by sun, human civilization would vanish from the Universe. Slowly, inexorably, the aliens would sweep through the stars. Or perhaps it would end in lightning thrusts. He shivered again.

Movement in the periphery of his eye caused him to jerk his head involuntarily. Puzzled, he stared at the forest, at the hovering sky hounds, wondering what had alerted him. He detected the movement again; it took an instant to realize that one of the sky hounds was shifting position.

He watched it, scarcely daring to breathe. Was it going to attack? The sky hound bobbed slightly, wavering in the sky; suddenly a silver streak shot out from its ugly snout, and the forest off to one side burst into flame. A loud whooshing rolled over the meadow.

"We'd better get out of here," Carney rasped. Sway-

ing as if preparing for flight, he eyed the sky apprehensively.

“Don’t move,” Samul commanded tautly. He cast a swift glance at Danny. The youth stood exactly as before, his jaw muscles bunched in great coils, the sweat glistening on his brow, his eyes locked to the girl’s. Samul had the swift impression of a carving in stone. Arla’s face was an undecipherable mask.

“Watch out,” Carney yelled stridently. Samul whirled around in time to glimpse a silver coil shooting down toward the meadow. A vast ball of fire whizzed past a few paces to one side, followed by the crackle of thunder. As the grasses bent under a wall of heat, an acrid odor stung his nostrils.



“YOSHI!” Samul yelled frantically, leaping to her side. Claspⁱng her hand, he pulled her farther from the blazing grass. He heard Carney scream and looked around; a whitish puff of smoke had blossomed in the emerald sky.

“One of them’s gone,” the crewman shouted wildly. Samul stared incredulously; but two sky hounds were left. The smoke in the sky—what was happening?

“Gone . . .” Yoshi whispered tremulously.

“Something’s happening,” Samul barked. The words were inane, and he knew it.

“Look!” Carney screamed again. Samul gazed at the sky hounds as if hypnotized. One of them was swinging slowly around. His scalp prickled as the ugly black snout swung toward them. Pulling Yoshi protectively into his arms, he felt a dreadful hopelessness.

“Samul,” she whispered, clinging to him. His heart skipped a beat as the black snout swung past; an instant later another silver beam shot out, and a second whitish puff blossomed in the sky; a second sky hound vanished.

He gazed in awe at the whitish cloud, attempting to discern meaning from the chaos of his thoughts. The remaining sky hound nosed downward, then suddenly accelerated in a steep dive.

“It’s going in,” Carney shouted excitedly. Spell-bound, Samul saw it crash in the meadow near the edge of the forest. A tongue of orange flame shot high into the sky, followed by a plume of black smoke. The thunder, when it came, was deafening.

Something whizzed past Samul’s head, striking the ground alongside of him. He looked down fearfully; the beady red eyes of a metal bird glared up at him.

“The birds! They fell, they fell,” Carney yelled. He jabbed a finger excitedly toward the grass.

“What’s happening?” Yoshi asked tremulously.

“I don’t know.” Samul clutched her, afraid to hope. Zandro’s sky hounds had been destroyed, his birds had fallen. And then he did know. “We’ve won, we’ve won,” he cried.

"Samul . . ." She gazed up wonderingly at him.

"You mean the octopus lost?" Carney asked disbelievingly. Samul started to answer, then his eyes fell on Danny, and he stiffened, clenching Yoshi close. A wave of apprehension swept him. Danny was shaking his head slowly, as if struggling. So was Arla; her face had turned to a mask of pure terror.

Samul leaped to her side and caught her arm, shaking it roughly. "What's happening?" he demanded.

"Zandro!" She screamed the name.

"Tell me, tell me," he begged.

"His mind! His mind!"

Danny suddenly came to life. "Zandro's mind," he shouted.

"What is it?" Samul asked desperately. "What's happening?"

"I think he's going mad." Danny gazed fearfully at him. "I can't contain it."

"Going mad?"

"His mind's fragmenting!"

"What does that mean?" Samul struggled to contain his fear.

"I don't know." Danny stepped swiftly to Arla's side. "Quiet, quiet," he consoled.

"Oh, Danny." She lifted her face. "It hurt."

"An awful pain," he agreed.

"Pain?" Samul asked.

"His mind seemed to shatter, then the pain came," Danny explained. "Perhaps the knowledge that he had lost . . ."

"Is it dead?"

"No, no."

“But the sky hounds . . .”

“We made him destroy them.”

“Then the metal birds fell,” Samul said wonderingly.

“It was the knowledge that his mind wasn’t supreme,” Yoshi cut in.

“That drove him mad?”

“That must be it.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Carney interrupted.

“Danny!” Arla’s piercing scream brought Samul’s head around sharply. He glimpsed a tree hurtling through the sky an instant before it crashed back into the swamp. A huge black blob seemed to shoot upward, towering high above the bulrushes. A huge tentacle shot out; grasping another tree, it yanked it up by the roots and hurled it far to one side.

“Zandro!” Danny yelled tremulously.

The black blob lurched forward with appalling suddenness, ripping the foliage from its path until it burst free at the edge of the meadow. Samul saw a gigantic, flame-red eye fasten on him.

He stared at the creature disbelievingly. Fully four times his own height, its powerful tentacles, gleaming in the emerald sun, extended out a good fifty feet from its body.

“Samul!” Yoshi’s scream of pure horror broke the spell.

“The lifeboat,” Carney shouted.

“Not the lifeboat,” Samul yelled. “We can’t make it. Spread out! Spread out!” He grasped Yoshi’s hand, seeking an avenue of escape.

“We have to stop him,” Danny croaked.

“Run,” Samul urged. “Get away first.” He glanced

back fearfully at the gigantic black blob, his mind registering the fact that it *was* an octopus, at least in general detail. But the eye, the hideous slash of a mouth! The gleaming, writhing tentacles! Suddenly it moved.

Whirling away, Samul raced a dozen paces, dragging Yoshi with him. Danny's shout brought him to a halt, and he looked back. Danny had caught Arla up and was racing with her in the opposite direction. Carney, crouched behind the lifeboat, was looking wildly around for an escape.

The hideous body, roiling and pulsating, towered higher as the writhing tentacles bunched under it. The forward tentacles snaked out, reaching toward the lifeboat; the entire body moved with frightening speed.

"Carney, get out of there," Samul bellowed. The crewman paid him no attention. He shouted again, then released Yoshi's hand and darted toward the ship. "Run! Run! Get out of there," he cried.

Carney whirled, looking at him, his face twisted with fright. As if suddenly understanding his peril, he turned and dashed toward the forest. Samul cast a quick look at the hideous form on the meadow. The baleful red eye rolled wildly, as if seeking its prey.

Crying a warning, Samul darted toward Yoshi. Before he could reach her, a huge tentacle snaked out, plucking her from the grass. Screaming, she was lofted into the sky. Her body, clasped at the tip of the tentacle, appeared like a small mote in space.

"Put her down," he shouted in an agony of despair. Dashing recklessly forward, he knew only that he had to save her. The thought hammered at his brain. A tentacle shot through the sky, curving toward him; he

felt himself whirling through the air. For one wild instant he thought he had been hurled, then realized that the tip of the tentacle still circled his waist.

The meadow raced past beneath him, then the forest, the sky, the swamp. He was shooting upward and forward and down. He caught a glimpse of Yoshi as she was whirled past, then the motion grew steadier as the huge body glided in the wake of the fleeing crewman.

"Yoshi!" Samul shouted, hoping to give her courage. He struggled to turn, trying to see her, and found he couldn't. For one fleeting second he glimpsed Danny and Arla. Standing in the meadow, facing him, they appeared like two small statues in the distance. The tentacle moved again, and they were lost to sight. Up, down, sideways—he was thrust through space with terrifying speed. He whipped past what he first thought to be a pool of flame, then realized it was a gigantic eye. Glaring, baleful, maddened, it jerked convulsively.

He saw Carney. The crewman, his body bent low, was fleeing toward the shelter of the trees. Samul struggled to release the tight band circling his waist, at the same time frantically striving to see Yoshi. Was this the end? The thought drove him to greater efforts.

All at once he felt his body plummeting downward. The tentacle gripping him heaved and shook. At the same time he became aware that the octopus had ceased its forward motion. Lying astride the meadow, the great body shook convulsively. His feet touched the ground briefly before he was hoisted again; the forest whirled past and he was slammed back against the meadow.

Struggling to regain his breath, he realized that the

tight band encircling his waist had loosened. Fumbling, he grasped the tip of the tentacle and pulled it loose. He leaped to his feet, looking frantically for Yoshi. She was lying in the tall grass, the tip of a tentacle still holding her.

“Yoshi!” He shouted, racing toward her. Reaching her side, he pulled her free, slung her over his shoulder, and dashed toward the forest. At the edge of the meadow he glanced back; it was then he realized Zandro was dead.

He set Yoshi down gently and stroked her face, murmuring her name. Her eyelids fluttered. “Yoshi,” he said urgently. She stirred, and a low moan escaped her lips, then her eyes opened.

“Samul!”

“Everything’s all right,” he breathed. He held her hand reassuringly.

“That . . . thing?”

“Dead,” he answered quietly.

“Samul, you were wonderful!”

“Well . . .” He flushed happily. Sensing movement behind him, he turned. Carney, coming from the forest, wore an abashed look.

“Is she all right?” the crewman asked anxiously.

“I’m all right.” Yoshi struggled to a sitting position.

Carney grinned sheepishly. “That wasn’t exactly the kind of octopus I was thinking about. I guess I was pretty scared.”

“We all were,” Samul answered quietly.

“How . . .” Yoshi turned, staring toward the meadow. Zandro’s body appeared like a vast, gelatinous lump that had been unceremoniously dumped on the

grass. The huge eye was unmoving, vacuous. She shuddered.

"I don't know," Samul replied. He jerked his head up in memory, then leaped to his feet, relieved to see Danny and Arla racing toward them.

"She did it, she did it," Danny yelled, as they drew closer. He waved and pumped his legs faster, drawing Arla along with him. Of course, Samul thought, that was it; they had forced Zandro to destroy himself. He felt a fierce pride in them.

Danny broke his stride. "She did it," he called again. They halted, panting.

"No, we did it," Arla said. She looked at the hideous mass on the meadow and shuddered.

"Let's get out of here," Carney urged. "That thing might have friends."

When they reached the lifeboat, Danny turned suddenly, gazing into the distance. "I'm going to come back some day," he said.

"It is beautiful," Yoshi murmured.

Danny looked at her. "My father discovered this world. He named it for my mother."

"You will want to come back," Samul said huskily.

"There's such a sense of freedom, such a glorious sun," Yoshi whispered. "The children at the orphanage would love it."

"No." Samul patted her hand. "They'll want to grow up among their kind."

"*Their* kind?" She turned, looking gravely at him.

"What do *you* mean?" he asked gently.

"The children are telepaths," she explained quietly. "The orphanage is supported by telepaths."

"Telepaths?" Samul was startled. "Are you . . ."

"Not a bit," she laughed. Her face sobered. "But my parents were telepathic. I should have been, but I'm not. But the telepaths trust me."

Samul lifted his eyes, looking across the meadow. He could see how Danny felt, and Yoshi, too. It was a beautiful world, unbelievably quiet and serene. The emerald sky was much more pleasing than pinkish-gray. "Perhaps we could come back," he said slowly.

"We?" She gazed demurely at him. Samul squeezed her hand in answer. "Do you believe it possible?" she whispered.

"I don't see why not." He felt a sudden assurance. "That falls in Sol Houston's province. I'm certain he'd be happy to start colonizing this side of the Ebon Deeps."

"But could he?" she asked hopefully.

"Of course." Samul patted her hand. "It's just a matter of finding the right regulation."

Gultur, Lord of the Stars, slithered out to the balcony. Looking at the small patch of orange that lay like a smudge among the distant stars, he felt a great sorrow. He would never cross the black abyss, never sow the Wind of Death on the distant worlds beyond. Tomorrow his fleet would rise from the surface of this bleak planet, begin its retreat.

Retreat! Retreat! The shocking knowledge of Mind Master Zandro's mental defeat at the hands of alien telepaths had brought immediate consternation to the High Council. Retreat! Retreat! That had been the essence of the orders flowing in through the Iku-Nukus.

Gultur gazed at the stars. He knew what the order meant. The great Kroon armadas would retreat on all fronts; throughout the ages the periphery of the frontier around Munga would shrink until, finally, only Munga would be left. When that time came, the remnants of his race once again would return to the waters of the slate-gray seas; they would live there, through eternities, until the gods once again called them forth. It had been that way before, for this was the Third Cycle of Life; it would be that way again.

He studied the monument to Dort. Seventy-four mokols high, it cut a slender notch against the sky. But there would be no stone for him. Yet what was stone but a transient thing, fleeting in any given shape? He had viewed the monuments to Grug, Ukul, Zorn; already they had begun to crumble. In truth, the Universe itself was but a fleeting happening in the Sea of Time.

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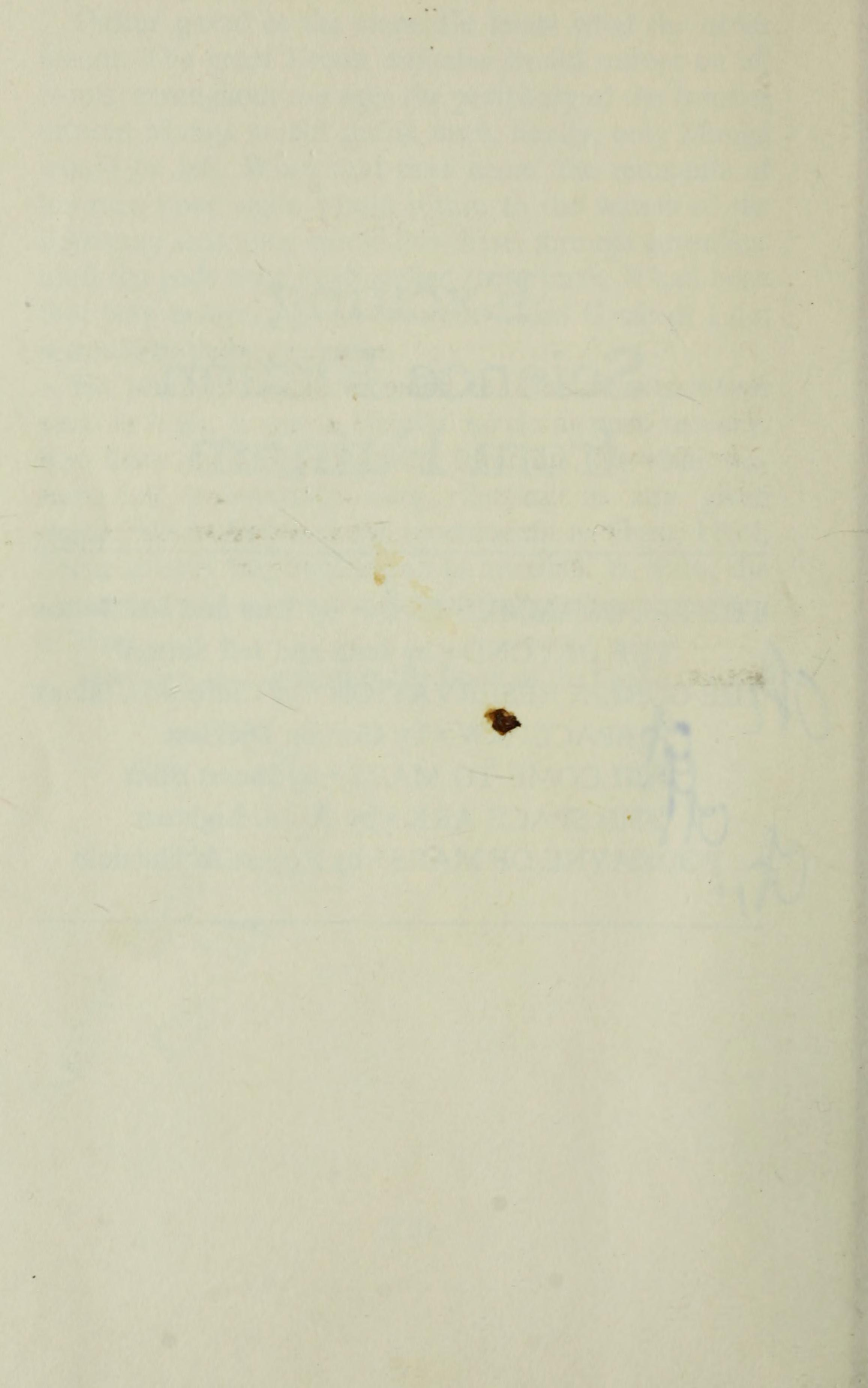
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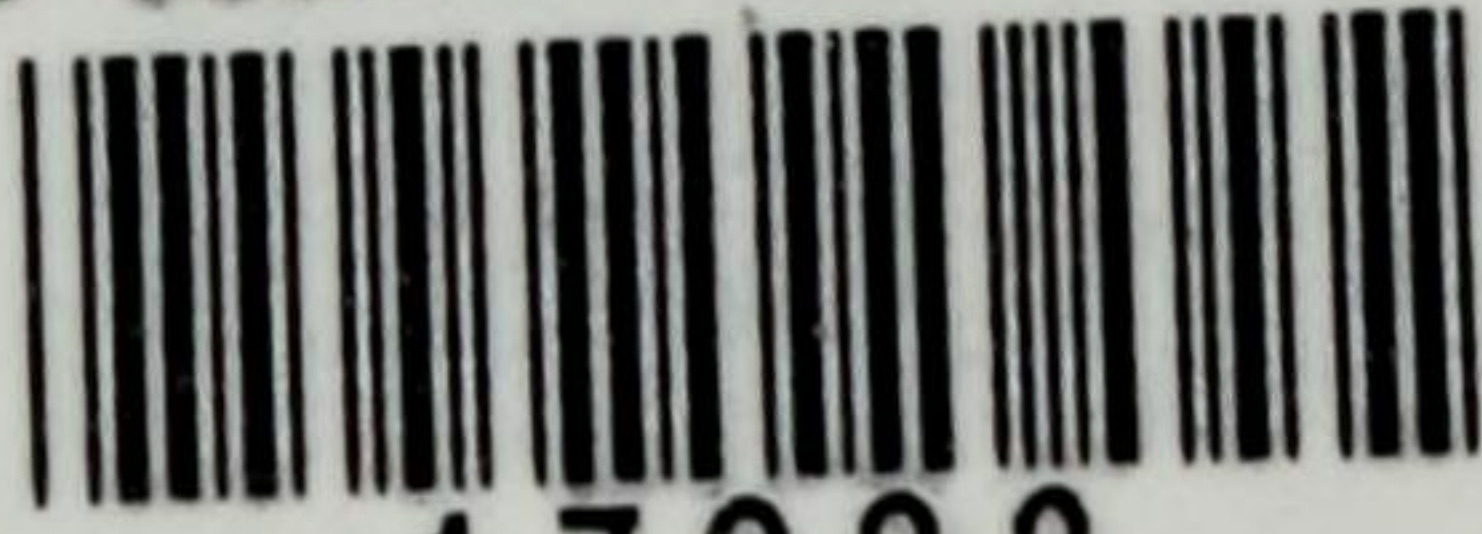


The Authors

JEAN AND JEFF SUTTON are a man-and-wife writing team who make their home in San Diego, California. This is their third novel for Putnam's, the first being *The Beyond* and the second, *The Programmed Man*. Jeff Sutton is also the author of *Apollo at Go* and *Beyond Apollo*, both science fiction. An ex-newspaperman and the author of many novels, Mr. Sutton is an editorial consultant in the aerospace field. Mrs. Sutton teaches high school social studies in San Diego, California.

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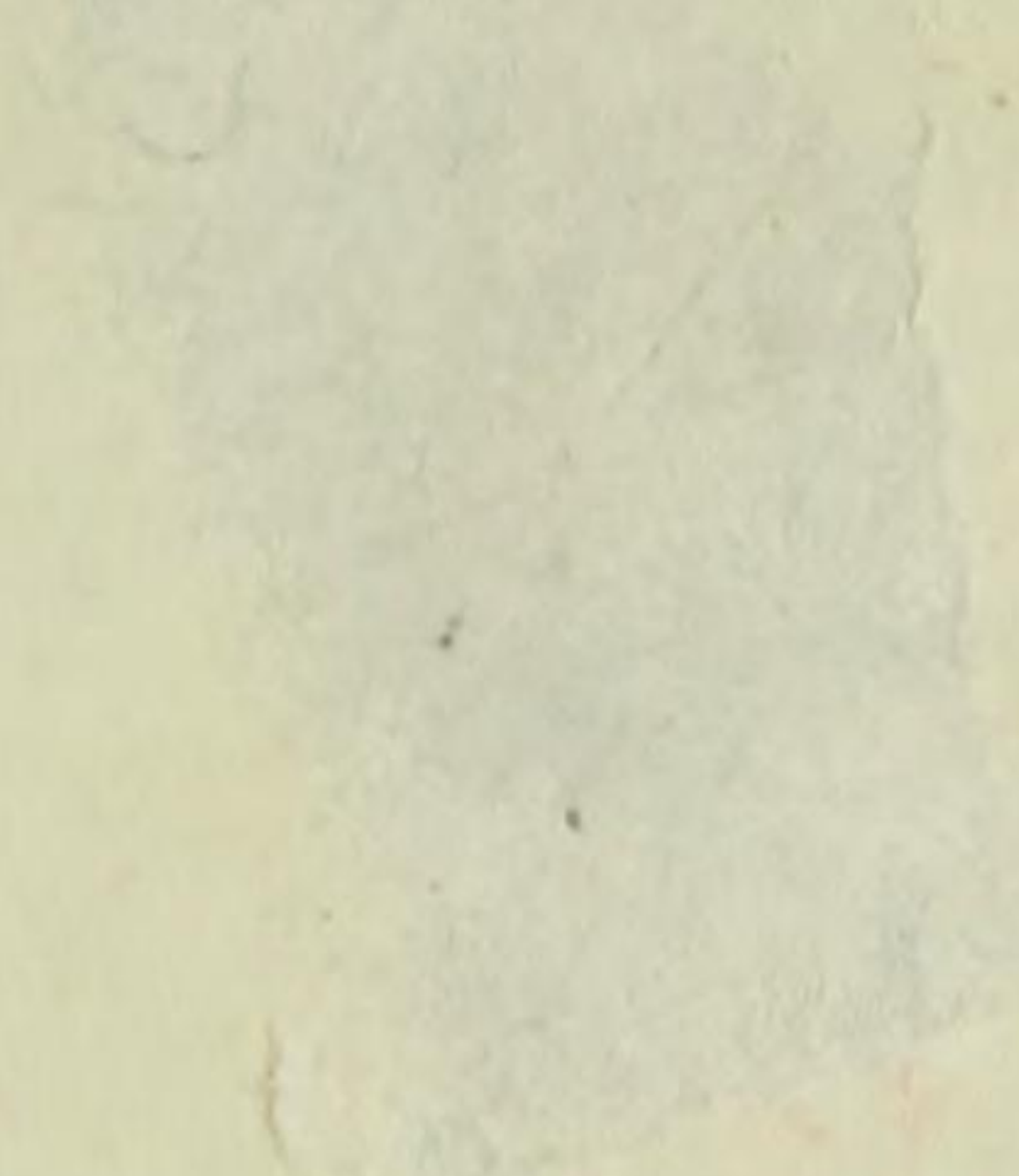
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