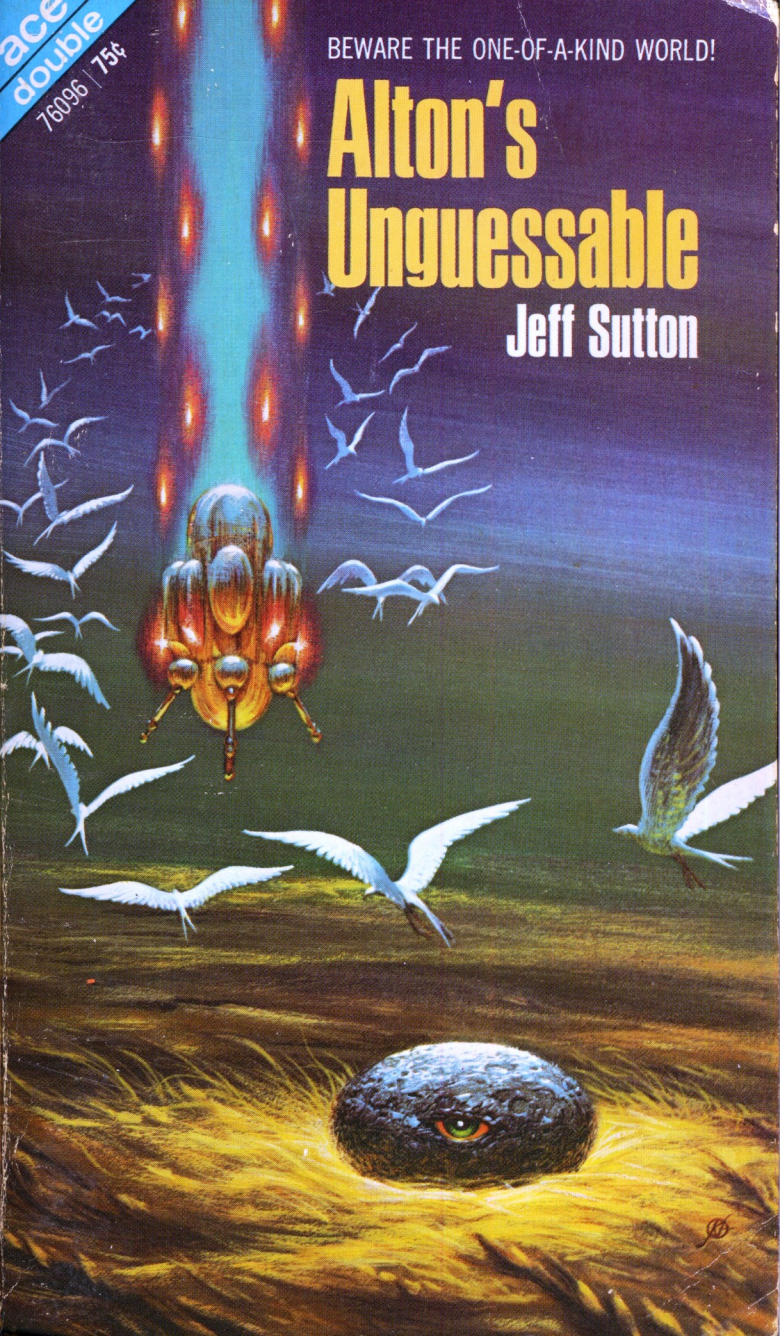


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BEWARE THE ONE-OF-A-KIND WORLD!

Alton's Unguessable

Jeff Sutton



To the crew of the exploratory vessel *Alpha Tauri*, Krado 1 was a planetary paradise waiting to be taken. But had nature gone wild? Was evolution non-existent there? No one could understand why, of all the forms of life that might have populated Krado 1, only one species of bird and one species of rodent existed.

The explorers could not have known what lurked behind the thousands of bright, beady eyes . . . what manifested itself to the telepath Roger Keim as a soundless roar in the corridors of his mind . . . what was waiting to be released. . . .

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Alton's Unguessable

Jeff Sutton

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ONE

THE BIRDS WATCHED the strange ship from space come down.

Scores of bright beady eyes gazed upward into the sapphire blue sky as the huge, cylindrical vessel drew closer and closer. The birds had known the ship was coming; they had sensed its vibrations in the atmosphere long before it became visible. Immediately they had settled in the tall grass, their eyes turned expectantly in the direction from whence the vibrations came.

They had not long to wait.

As the big ship descended slowly, passing off to one side, the birds rose and followed it. After a while, the ship ceased its forward motion, hovering at low altitude before finally settling toward the flat, grassy plain.

By then, the birds were very close.

It had been a tense moment when the big spaceship first came into view—the most intense the birds could remember in more than fifty thousand revolutions of the planet around its blazing blue-white primary. Before then, time was a memory of incredible space, of the edge of the universe where nuclear fires had banked, of nine small shapes hurtling through the awesome chasms of the sky, and of a race now dead for more than a hundred billion years.

Not that these same birds remembered back through that lonely, empty time. It was the *thing* in the minds of the birds that remembered. In reality, the *thing* that lived in the minds of the birds was a unity—a oneness—that could fragment its mind into innumerable parts in which each fragment could enter and subjugate a host, acquire its thoughts and memories, see and hear and feel through its sense organs, and direct its actions while its own weak and immobile body lay securely hidden. More, through its hosts, it could exert the *mind power*. But all the while, it re-

mained a unity. Each and every mind fragment was tied telepathically to each and every other mind fragment and to Uli, the thing itself.

Uli! Only blind chance had brought him to this remote planet more than fifty thousand years before. With a hard-shelled body protecting him from the harshness of space, and his life sustained by the weak radiations between galaxies, he'd landed here during one of his many millennia-long periods of sleep. Had he been awake, certainly he would have bypassed this planet for one closer to the dense region of burning stars. Sleeping, he'd had no choice; his mind had been programmed to seek a world having the physical characteristics favorable to his kind. As it was, he'd awakened in the hills close to this same grassy plain, which in those long-ago years had formed the basin of a shallow inland sea. Not that Uli was a "he" nor even a "she," for reproduction by fission is sexless, but the strange bipeds he'd found on the planet had worshipped him as a god and had thought of him as a "he"—a male thing—so he had come to think of himself as male.

Despite the sprawling cities and strange mechanical contrivances which marked the promise of intelligence, Uli quickly perceived that the bipeds (such ungainly forms!) would never reach the stars; their blue-white sun was too remote from its neighbors. Neither did they exhibit the potential for the intelligence necessary to solve the problems inherent in such travel. Because they never could serve him, he quickly decimated them (even while enjoying their worship, which he had found quite ego-satisfying). It had not been an act of cruelty, but of necessity, for the law of the Qua stated quite clearly that no major life form could be allowed to survive except those directly beneficial to the Qua. At times he'd wondered why, but his memory banks returned no answer.

Later, annoyed by the sight of their silent cities, he had erased almost every vestige of their civilization from the face of the planet. Occasionally, through the eyes of a host, he would discover yet another remnant and would quickly obliterate it. Not even its rubble would remain.

By the same reasoning, he had annihilated every major life form on the planet save that of one species of bird. The sharpest of eye, the keenest of ear, the greatest in mobility, this species also possessed a fecundity that guaranteed he would never be without hosts. In that regard they could serve him—until a proper host came.

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Came? The word grew to haunt him.

As a small part of his consciousness measured time by the planet's rotations and its revolutions around the sun, and alerted him to the thousands of years that were passing, he'd become more and more uneasy. To reach the great central star-swarms that most certainly would abound with suitable worlds, he required a host with an interstellar technology. When would such a host arrive? Through the eyes of the birds—ten thousand birds that girdled the globe—he watched the skies. And waited.

Millennia passed.

He had to reach the heart of the galaxy! The knowledge, screaming up from his memory banks, became a frantic pressure. Only then could he safely fission, to commence anew the chain of life through which his kind eventually would rule the countless star islands that comprised the Middle Universe. That purpose had been instilled in his consciousness before the First Awakening—before he and eight companions had been propelled inward from the dying edge of the universe by the combined mind power of the Qua.

The Qua! Whenever Uli thought of his race, which was often, it was with fierce pride. Had not the Qua risen in the Dawn of the Prime Creation to rule more than a million sun systems through the mind power alone? The First Life, the greatest. . . . It was all there in his memory cells. The immortal Qua!

But the nuclear fires had been banked; the edge of the universe had died. And the Qua, their bodies immobilized in the millions of generations they had ruled through lowly life forms, had died with it. Their last attempts to separate their minds from their bodies—to exist as pure, immortal thought in absolute space—had failed. And by then, night was falling over the stars.

Uli had been one of nine chosen for the final desperate effort to project a new Qua culture into the incredibly remote central realms of the still fiercely-burning star islands. Propelled inward with his companions by the combined mind power of their race, he alone had reached this remote planet. Now the glory of his race lived only in his mind, and he would fulfill their destiny. Here, in this billion-star galaxy, the Qua would rise anew. That was the prime purpose of his being.

Still, he had begun to discern the day when the planet would die, as all planets must. Certainly it would be cin-

dered in that distant time when the great blue-white sun passed into its nova stage. When that time came, he would die. *He would die!* And Death was a haunting specter. His own death meant the death of the Qua. . . . The prospect was frightening. Then, miraculously, vibrations had come from the top of the atmosphere.

Watching through scores of eyes as the huge ship settled toward the grasslands, he exulted that his liberation was near. The geometry of the ship bespoke the intelligence of its builders. To reach this planet at the very edge of the galaxy where stars were sparse, its builders must have solved the complex problems of space discontinuities and the multiple nature of time, for he was certain that such beings were too short-lived to move between the stars otherwise. Only the Qua were immortal! But this was a ship with a race that could carry him afar.

Idly he wondered how long it would take to conquer the galaxy.

Roger Keim, the T-man, gazed uneasily at the banks of telescreens. Tall and dusky of skin, with the yellowish eyes characteristic of the second planet Klasner from the golden sun Korak, his lean face showed none of his perturbation. But it was there; and he wondered why.

Vast grassy plains, forested mountains, a plenitude of fresh inland water, three immense oceans with two large moons in the sapphire sky to raise their tides—a waiting world with no major life of its own—it appeared ideal for human development. A one-of-a-kind planet that might be found but once in the exploration of a hundred random star systems. And *they* had found it! The knowledge lay in Captain Woon's weathered face, in Myron Kimbrough's intent eyes, in the tautness of the group of scientists who had come to the command bridge to witness planetfall. All were quiet, intent.

A world in a thousand! Still a faint and eerie sense of impending peril persisted. A prickling, vague and indefinite, screamed alarm from somewhere deep in Keim's subconscious. The first inkling had surged upward into his awareness shortly after the survey ship *Alpha Tauri* had broached the planet's atmosphere. *Something about the planet was wrong!*

Several times, starting to speak, he had refrained; the uneasiness was simply too nebulous for him to define. Too, every safety precaution had been taken; Captain Woon had

made certain of that. Following the standard procedures for landing on a strange planet, the *Alpha Tauri* had circled the world time and again while scores of sensors recorded every aspect of its surface, seas, and atmosphere. Scores of minisats, launched into varying low-level orbits, had failed to detect the presence of a single energy source save those provided by nature itself. In effect they said: *no danger, no danger*. The information from the sensor complex, fed into a computer and converted into a micro-simulacrum of the world now unfolding below, had revealed absolutely nothing of a perturbing nature. Even the banks of biosensors, probing for the existence of major life forms, had found only birds.

A world created for the evolution of higher life in all its varied forms, yet all but devoid of such life. Was that the cause of his alarm? Had evolution somehow passed this world by? The questions baffled him.

With the *Alpha Tauri* moving slowly above the grassy plain, he became conscious of the sensation of pressure within his brain—a pressure that resolved itself into a low, muted thunder like the crash of waves on a lonely beach; it waxed and waned in that selfsame way.

He cast a quick glance at the others: Harlan Duvall the psychmedic, Sam Gossett of Chemistry, Alton Yozell of Biology, Robin Martel, the pert blonde meteorologist. All were absorbed in the scenes unfolding on the telescreens. The thin, gentle face of Arden, the astrophilosopher, did have a speculative expression; but no one else appeared unduly worried. To the contrary, Astrogator Ross Janik looked slightly bored. So did Paul Rayfield, the physicist. Myron Kimbrough, the gaunt, stoop-shouldered chief scientist who stood alongside Captain Woon, had the impatient look of a man whose guests were late for dinner. Dark-haired Lara Kamm of Alien Cultures, wrapped in her own introspection, stood slightly apart from the others with a pensive expression on her oval face. Only the dusky eyes of Karl Borchert, the ecologist, were frankly puzzled.

"A real winner," someone murmured. The group stirred at the break in silence. Keim placed the voice as that of Ivor Bascomb, the botanist. Although no one answered, Keim knew that Bascomb had reflected their hopes; this world *did* look like a winner. Although the small part of the galaxy that had been explored teemed with planets, only an exceptional few had proved suitable for human development. On the present expedition—officially designated as

Survey 92—this was the first of dozens of worlds that held a potential for mankind. But why his worry?

As his eyes inadvertently caught those of Lara Kamm, she quickly shifted her gaze. He was used to that. Although he'd found her pleasant enough during their occasional encounters in discussion groups or in the staff wardroom, she had taken more pains than most to avoid him. Few men or women, especially women, felt at ease in the presence of a telepath. He'd learned that lesson well while still a small child. On his world, Klasner, his few close friends were restricted to those like himself. But that was par for a T-man.

Captain Woon spoke briefly into the communicator. Keim sensed an immediate deceleration; with it he became conscious that the thunder in his mind had increased. Anxiously he scanned the telescreens. To the rear, above the waving grasses, he saw a far-away flock of birds. Studying them, he realized they were flying toward the ship. The telescreens that displayed the view to either side and ahead revealed nothing but grassland. What churned in his mind? What screamed deep down in his subconscious that made him so edgy? He returned his gaze to the rear screen. Sky, birds, grass—under the blue-white sun, the scene held the serenity of a pastoral painting.

The thunder increased, punctuated by static-like cracklings that whipped at his brain; a soundless roaring tide contained within his own skull. Yet it gave the impression of a vast sweep of sonic energy assaulting him from all sides.

Captain Woon spoke again into the communicator. Hesitating, Keim swung toward him. "Don't go down," he warned.

"Hold altitude," Woon barked. He whirled toward the telepath. "Why not?" His heavy face mirrored the antagonism he so often failed to conceal when in the T-man's presence.

"Something isn't right."

"Danger?"

"I sense it, yes."

Kimbrough, the chief scientist, stepped forward and asked sharply, "Of what nature?"

"It's like thunder," he explained.

"Thunder?"

"Silent, crackling thunder; that's my impression."

"Is it a threat?"

"I feel very strongly that it is. Not that I can define it."

"Did you just notice it?"

"The onset came shortly after we commenced planetfall." He explained his earlier uneasiness, how it had increased, and the static-like cracklings that now whipped in his brain.

Kimbrough shook his head slowly. "There's not a single structure, road, or artifact of any kind on the entire planet."

"Are those things concomitant necessities for the presence of intelligence?" asked Keim.

"In our experience, yes."

"Must they be?"

"Logically, yes." Kimbrough glanced at Lara Kamm. "But I'll defer the answer to Alien Cultures."

"We can only draw from history," she reflected. Eyes averted from the T-man, she continued, "We've never encountered even the most primitive of intelligence without it having something in the nature of artifacts. Especially at a level sufficiently high to be threatening, can true intelligence exist in the complete absence of artifacts? My impulse is to deny it. In essence, we measure intelligence by performance and by what a race creates. How good that criterion is, I hesitate to answer. After all, we've touched but a small corner of the galaxy. Perhaps. . . ." She shrugged.

"Perhaps what?" Kimbrough prodded.

She smiled slightly. "I only meant to convey how little we really know."

"The biosensors didn't indicate a single life form higher than birds," he observed. "And still don't."

"What is a major life form?" interrupted Alton Yozell. As attention turned to the biologist, he continued. "Is the criterion size, structure, intelligence, the tool-making ability, a combination of all that, or is it something else?"

Kimbrough asked, "What do you have in mind?"

"Only that when we speak of a major life form, we define it in our own terms, by what we know. Because we do, we rule out other possibilities."

"What other possibilities?"

Yozell shrugged. "Everything that lies within the realm of the unguessable, if I can put it that way. Or perhaps I should say whatever lies beyond our senses. We define that which is perceptible, nothing more. While that's quite understandable, should we accept our sensory limitations as the ultimate of possibilities? When we transcend such senses with instruments, we accept their findings. But why

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should we stop there? I don't know, but I'm not at all certain that what knowledge we have constitutes the ultimate authority. Perhaps far more than we suspect lies beyond the threshold of our awareness."

Kimbrough smiled patiently. "I wouldn't worry about the unguessable, Alton."

"Perhaps we should." It took Keim a moment to place the speaker as Karl Borchers, the ecologist.

"Would you amplify that?" asked Kimbrough.

"Like Roger, I've sensed something quite wrong, although I hadn't thought of it in terms of threat," explained Borchers. "But the planet's ecology bothers me; it doesn't make sense. The environment screams for animal life, an abundance and a diversity of it, but it's not there. Only birds and small rodents. And if the readings on the biosensors are right, that life is restricted to but one species of birds."

"I hadn't noticed that." Kimbrough was startled.

"Their lifegrams are the same."

Kimbrough walked over to the readouts and scanned them. "I'll grant you that," he admitted.

"There's a lack of harmony, a lack of balance, at least as we know it," persisted Borchers. "If major life forms haven't developed, why not? If they have, what became of them? How could a single species of bird develop to its present high order, but not others? Evolution, for all its random nature, is quite an orderly process. We've cited our experience, but have we experienced this situation before? Never. We'd better take a second look before we go down."

"The instruments have shown us all they're ever going to show us," Kimbrough remarked wryly.

"Shouldn't we expect new situations?" interrupted Arden, the astrophilosopher. Keim switched his gaze. The fragile bone structure of Arden's face, with the high brow and sensitive mouth, gave him a perpetually inquiring look. He continued, "Should we expect all of the galaxy to obey the same laws, follow the same lines of evolution? I don't believe so."

"It's the absence of evolution that bothers me," Borchers returned.

"Or is it just that we don't perceive it?"

"You're saying?" asked Kimbrough brusquely.

"Not saying, merely suggesting," Arden corrected.

"Suggesting what?"

"I'm inclined toward Alton's suggestion. Perhaps our sensory apparatus is too limited for this world."

"You're postulating the existence of life down there?"

"Speculating."

"Even speculation should have a basis in fact."

"I don't hold to that view, but in this case it does." Arden swung his gaze to the telepath. "Roger is gifted beyond most men. His alarm is my alarm."

"Would you have us write off this world?" demanded Kimbrough.

"I haven't recommended that."

"Karl?" He switched his attention to the ecologist.

Borcher rubbed his jaw. "No," he said finally, but his face held a defeated look.

"I believe you're unduly worried," Captain Woon interrupted. "What possible threat could prevail in a world completely devoid of artifacts? If an alien form of life exists that we can't sense, we can at least sense material things, and they're just not down there. Not artifacts."

"We still have Alton's unguessable," Kimbrough remarked dryly.

Woon shook his massive graying head. His face, scorched by the radiations of scores of suns, mirrored incredulity. Gesturing toward the telescreens, "We can throw a force field around the *Alpha Tauri* that no weapon known to man can penetrate," he said. "If necessary, we can scorch the life from the face of that planet, right down to the last single-cell organism. Alien or not, the danger is negligible. My recommendation is that we land." His eyes challenged the T-man.

Keim smiled soberly. "The decision's not mine," he answered.

"Anyone disagree?" asked Kimbrough. When no one answered, he directed his attention to the telepath. "Still sense the thunder?"

"As strongly as ever," he admitted.

"But nothing specific?"

"Nothing." He shook his head reluctantly.

Kimbrough asked carefully, "But the threat is definite?"

"I have that feeling, yes."

Kimbrough sighed and looked at the captain. "I believe we should land. With weapons ready," he added. Borcher started to demur, but refrained. Keim saw his troubled glance return to the biosensor readouts.

Woon barked several commands into the communicator and the *Alpha Tauri* began settling toward the grassy plain. Keim noticed how quickly, how intently, all eyes returned

to the telescreens. He noted, too, that Kimbrough's formerly impatient look had given way to a frown of concern. Keim felt the desire to read his mind, but didn't. It was an ethic he'd always observed and had to observe if he were to remain among his kind. It was only through their trust that he could be tolerated. That had been drummed into him since early childhood when his rare talent first had been discovered. He'd chosen to live among scientists in the belief they were more understanding; and on the whole he'd found them to be so. Still, many of them (perhaps unknowingly) had exhibited their wariness of him. Like Lara Kamm. A T-man . . . The ship's pariah, he reflected ruefully.

But he could appreciate Kimbrough's feelings. And Captain Woon's. A planet with such seeming potential scarcely could be abandoned in the face of an intangible threat. But did they realize that the mind of a total telepath often constituted a sensor that man otherwise could never duplicate. Time and again, surprised at his own abilities, Keim knew that his special sense by far exceeded that of any telepath of his acquaintance. Because he suspected that Kimbrough had long since assessed that capability, he was certain the chief scientist would be extremely cautious. He also had to admit that Captain Woon, if anything, had understated the *Alpha Tauri's* destructive capabilities. The ship not only could scorch all life from the land, sea and air, but could also reduce the entire planetary surface to rubble.

He returned his attention to the crackling static in his mind. His eyes closed to the telescreens, he tried to decipher its meaning. While the jumble seemed absolutely unintelligible, not so the sense of threat. *Danger! Danger! Danger!*

The alarm screamed from deep in his mind.

TWO

KEIM BLINKED in the glare of the blue-white sun. Following the long adaptation to the ship's lighting, the natural radiation momentarily pained his eyes. This sun, blazing in a violet sky, was brighter than most. Its rays felt pleasantly hot against his skin.

Myron Kimbrough, the chief scientist, had named the blue-white sun "Krado" in honor of a distinguished former director of the Survey Service. Thus the planet merely was designated as Krado 1, and the two large moons that lazed placidly in its sky as K-1.1 and K-1.2. Keim realized that any name given at this time had no official sanction. Later, when the new system was drawn to the attention of the Emperor and Council of Overlords, the official designations would come. He held scant doubt but that they would reflect the names of the Empire's politically great. Still, to the scientists, the sun would remain as Krado. They had that doggedly insistent way of honoring their own.

A dozen independent teams were preparing to bleed Krado 1 of its secrets. Working smoothly and efficiently, each member of the science staff would conduct his own specialty. For Keim, the scene held a long familiarity; it was one he'd witnessed on more than a score of planets.

Off to one side, blonde meteorologist Robin Martel was launching a high-altitude radiosonde. Although quite primitive, the method returned a quick analysis of short-term weather. Later, the more sophisticated minisats would return complete meteorological data. From this, the computers would extrapolate seasonal forecasts including temperature, humidity and prevailing winds, that could be expected to jibe within a narrow margin of reality.

Ivor Bascomb and Alton Yozell, the botanist and biologist, took off in a twin-seat skimmer for a quick look-see of the surrounding area. Keim watched the vehicle climb into the blue before leveling off. The geologist, Burl Ashford, was tentatively examining the soil. Short and slender Henry Fong, the brown-faced historian whose ancestral home had been in the Asian world of Old Earth, was photographing the activities as he spoke into a recorder. Scores of birds wheeled overhead. A pleasant scene.

Keim's thoughts turned inward. The muted thunder punctuated by the crackling noises still filled his brain. So did the sense of threat. If anything, the inner tumult was greater than ever. He had the feeling that if he could concentrate deeply enough, search the inner corridors of his mind, he could discern the meaning of his disturbance or at least glimpse some clue to its source. As it was, it was just a *something* that lurked beyond the borders of his consciousness.

He speculated, as he had before, on why he could usu-

ally penetrate the subconscious of other minds, yet never his own. When he tried, he had the sense of encountering what seemed a physical barrier. It was that way now: a partitioning of his mind into the conscious and subconscious, with no avenue between. Nothing but the feeling that his subconscious knew what the crackling thunder was all about—knew but couldn't project that knowledge into his awareness. He was a man cut off from himself.

Could this world actually be as peaceful as it seemed? Or, as Arden had suggested, were they looking without seeing? He wondered what his impression of this world might be were it not for the conflict in his brain. Looking over the sea of grass, he tried to assess it.

A quiet planet. Hospitable. It could be Klasner, Jondell, Tarth, or Old Earth. A waiting world. An all but lifeless world. Why? Life springs from a common cell and diversifies into all its thousand million forms. It was so throughout the known galaxy—but not here. Why? We reason, we analyze, we deduce, yet we always circumscribe our thinking by the basic laws we call truths; we start from what we know, and usually end there. Alton Yozell's words. But why must we judge this world by the worlds we have known, and judge life by the life we have known? More pertinent, how could we understand that which is beyond our power to perceive? A basic question: can intelligence exist without artifacts? Lara thought not, but was doubtful. Why? Because of his own reaction? But Alton had been doubtful too. And Borchers. And Arden. Equally important, how could he interpret his uneasiness in terms he could understand? Or had man finally come face to face with the unguessable? We should get out, get out while we can!

Get out? Keim had to scoff at his foreboding, more so because he had never been one to scare. Yet, with more than a score of alien planets behind him, he had never felt the intense disturbance that gripped him now. He took stock of the grasslands, of the birds wheeling above, of the sapphire sky and the single moon now drifting through it, of the cloud banks with their pastel tints that edged the horizon. Peaceful, yes. Nothing to negate it but the crackling thunder in his mind and the prickling that lay deep in his subconscious.

Lara Kamm emerged from the ship, pausing to glance around. Despite the emerald-green field suit designed strictly for utilitarian use, Keim thought her a striking figure.

Yet, even at the distance, he could discern that strange, pensive expression that was so much a part of her. Or was it just that she was more introspective than most? Whatever the reason, her only close friend seemed to be Sam Gossett, the aging chemist.

His musing was broken as Captain Woon came toward him. In Keim's view, Woon symbolized the prototype of the deep spacer: blunt, straightforward, quick of decision, a man to whom a planet was just a way station, a place to pause while skipping between stars. Likewise, in the manner of spacers, he held a slight contempt for the planet-bound trillions who had never known the glory of the stars. He held a thinly-veiled contempt, too, for things he failed to understand, such as T-men. Contempt and antagonism. But he was "lord and master" of the ship, just as Myron Kimbrough was "lord and master" of all exploration and research. While Keim had never felt more than passably cordial toward either of them, he had to admit that they made an excellent team.

Woon paused a few steps away. "Still feel the same?" His tone suggested an attempt to disguise his deeper feelings.

Keim nodded. "But I still can't say why."

"Everything appears in order." Woon glanced musingly around. "Kimbrough believes it's a natural for colonization."

"We can hope so."

"Nothing's certain," Woon conceded. "I've seen strange things occur."

"Let's hope not here," he answered dryly.

"I don't expect to, but we're ready." Woon squinted at the sky, his weathered face taking on a nostalgic look. "We're at the very rim of the galaxy, Roger, the farthest man has ever been in this direction. Beyond this sun lies nothing."

"It's a big jump," he acceded.

"Too big." Woon's voice held a faint regret. "It'll take another million years to fully explore this galaxy, but I feel the barrier all the same. I suppose that's the mark of a spacer."

"And the scientist," Keim ventured. "The unknowable always haunts us."

Woon mopped his brow. "There are scores of plains that would afford equally good bases. Do you believe we should try another?"

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He shook his head. "I don't believe it would make much difference."

"What you sense isn't local, is that it?"

"That's my hunch."

"That's not much to go on, Roger."

Keim smiled wryly. "I'll be the first to admit it."

"I hope you're wrong. I'd hate to have to scorch this world."

"Or any world," added Keim. "That's a rough solution."

"Battles are won by weapons, or perhaps that's just the spacer's attitude."

"That's your province," he conceded.

"Keep plugged in, let me know if you pick up any ideas."

Woon waved airily and turned toward the ship.

The day passed swiftly.

Something wasn't right!

Keim awoke, presentiment flooding his mind. The muted thunder and crackling, the warning screaming in his subconsciousness, none of that had changed. Yet with it he had the feeling of some ominous presence. Something *alien*? If it was his imagination, he didn't believe so.

He dressed, breakfasted early and went outside. The blue-white sun, still balanced on the horizon, flooded that part of the sky with the pale shades of dawn. A fleecy cloud, pink-tinged, floated above him in splendid isolation. The grasslands, the purplish hills in the distance, and the sky all seemed gorged with an oppressiveness that filled his being. This world was the home of what?

He gazed moodily around. Almost alone among the scientists, he had no official duties, nor did anyone often solicit his aid. Watching the few early risers proceed with their tasks, he contented himself with the knowledge that there had been times when his contributions had been of extreme value. As on the planet Kale of the dwarf sun Gribbous.

There he'd sensed intelligent thought almost immediately, and traced its origin to the remote village of a pygmy race of stone-age bipeds. Even the *Alpha Tauri's* all but infallible sensors had failed to detect their presence in the exceptionally heavy jungle growth. More, he'd been able to repeat the mental sound impressions onto a tape and run it through a decoder, producing a vocabulary sufficient to enable Hester Kane, the linguist, to establish verbal contact. Acquiring the language with an amazing fa-

cility, Lara Kamm had learned their social organization, legends, theosophy, the scant word-of-mouth history they'd possessed. In turn, she and Hester had presented the natives with the gift of writing which, in almost certainty, would advance the race by thousands of years in a few generations.

He mulled the value of it. The inhabitants of Kale, segregated into a few, small and widely scattered tribes, apparently had lived happily under the dwarf sun Gribbous; but would they be happy henceforth? Now that they had discovered the power of the written word, had seen what tools could accomplish, their lives never again would be the same. Their contentment was gone, past. Now they shouted into the wilderness of the future. Good or bad? He wasn't certain. Insofar as the Empire was concerned, the value of the expedition would be restricted to a few central memory banks, libraries for scholars and astrohistorians. Officially, as happened in such cases, the planet was decreed off bounds for colonization or exploitation, with only trade necessary to the civilization's growth allowed. In time, perhaps after millennia, the planet might prove an important economic resource. That was what made the Empire great—its ability to plan for ages yet unborn.

Myron Kimbrough dropped his skimmer a few feet away and said, "I'm going to make a quick sweep around. Like to come along?"

He nodded, pleasantly surprised. While cordial enough, the chief scientist had seldom sought his company. As the skimmer rose above the spearlike grasses, Kimbrough asked, "Still feel the same?"

Keim laughed. "Captain Woon asked the very same question."

"We're concerned, Roger."

"Nothing has changed."

"Still waxes and wanes, eh?"

"And crackles," Keim amended.

"Could it arise from a natural source?"

"Possibly, but I doubt it."

"How can you doubt it when you have no idea what it is?"

"It's not so much the mental tumult as it is the sense of impending danger," explained Keim. "Bells are ringing, gongs are sounding. . . ."

"Bells and gongs?" exclaimed Kimbrough. He cast a swift glance at the telepath.

"Figures of speech," smiled Keim, "but I sense a danger all the same. It's like the prickling of the hair at the nape of the neck, an awareness that stabs at you before full consciousness. Intuition? Or is something deep down really pushing that panic button? I can't say, but I'm certain that there is far more to this planet than we know."

"Could it be the newness of this world?"

He shook his head. "I've touched down on a score of new worlds. It's not that."

"Yet we've scanned the entire planet continuously since entering the atmosphere. There are rodents in the grasses, the birds. Nothing more."

"That's the puzzler."

"Damn strange," Kimbrough agreed. "Borcher insists that nature couldn't produce such a lopsided ecology, and I have to say he's right. What does that leave? This planet purposefully has been denuded of life."

"And selectively."

"The birds? That's a puzzle." Kimbrough commenced a slow turn toward a range of low-lying hills that lay like a smoky blur on the horizon before continuing, "But it might have happened long ago, many thousands of years ago. Jungles can swallow cities, erase the worst of scars. Perhaps we're not the first visitors from space."

"Why denude a planet and leave it?"

"A fair question, and the honest answer is that I haven't the slightest idea. Neither has Borcher. The only thing wrong with the 'dim past' theory is how you feel, what you sense." Kimbrough cast a sidelong glance at him. "If I pinned you down, demanded that you identify the threat, what words would you use?"

Keim closed his eyes, searching his mind. Almost immediately the tumult came to the fore, carrying with it the heavy, pervasive sense of threat. Were the crackling thunder and threat related? He concentrated on the rumbling that seemed to surge upward from the deep grottos of his brain; again it reminded him of the crash of waves on a distant beach. Waves crashing, rolling in, the sibilant hiss of water sucking at the sands as it rolled back down the tidal slopes. . . . But the odd geometry of crackling, although a variable scatter, wasn't altogether random. Pattern? If so, it was as intricately constructed as the music of the classics. Noise, but not discord; not when he sensed certain associations. The tides held pattern, but not intricacy of pattern; that was the difference.

All at once he recalled how he'd first sensed the thoughts of the pygmies on Kale. The memory jolted him. It was like this, but with the stimulus amplified a thousand times, the complexity a thousand times greater. It was as if he'd tapped into a vast alien network. Communication? He felt a sudden chill. It was impossible! Yet, deep down, he knew that it wasn't. To the contrary, once he'd made the connection, the answer seemed self-evident. *Aliens!* Where, and what kind? Alton's unguessable! He caught Kimbrough's expectancy.

"It's a form of communication," he said.

"Communication!" The word held shock.

"I suspect I've known all along, but the realization just surfaced."

"Aliens." A shiver ran through Kimbrough's gaunt frame. He asked, "Can you tape what you sense, run it through a decoder?"

Keim shook his head. "The language of Kale was primitive, restricted. This is a roar, a thunder, a crackling tumult that can't be broken into phonetics. Not our kind. I couldn't begin to repeat any part of it."

"What makes you so certain it's communication?"

"The pattern." And gazing at the sky, he wondered what lay ahead.

Unlike the first night, at the onset of dusk Captain Woon ordered the skimmers docked and a force field thrown around the ship. Clearly he thought it entirely unnecessary and a waste of power, but Kimbrough had insisted. The precaution told Keim that the chief scientist hadn't taken his words lightly.

After supper, most of the scientists and crewmen remained inside, but a few—including Keim—ventured out to watch the sky blacken. The faint and lonely stars emerged. Moon K-1.2, on its downward trajectory, gleamed with a cold bluish light that cast an eerie sheen over the grasslands and gave an illusory sense of depth.

Keim studied his companions. Ivor Bascomb, Burl Ashford and Karl Borchert stood in a tight knot talking heatedly. Ashford's voice came as a hoarse croak. Occasionally Borchert flung out an arm to emphasize some point or other. The biologist Yozell stood alone, staring into the darkness. Off to the other side, Lara Kamm was scrutinizing the sky as if trying to discern some familiar part of the galaxy. As they stood on this strange planet of the blue-white sun

that lay at the very edge of nowhere, were their thoughts of danger? Of awe that man had come so far? Or were they wishing they were home? Keim wondered.

Alton Yozell was first to move. Turning toward the ship he saw the telepath, hesitated, then came toward him. Keim sensed that he was deeply troubled. Yozell gestured toward the sky and said, "Dozens of birds are flying around."

"I'd noticed."

"Not one has flown into the force field."

Keim jerked his eyes upward. Here and there he glimpsed a bird in the gleam of the nightlights, but no flashes that marked death. He was all too familiar with the sight of birds and other small animals being scorched from existence as they encountered the screen. Here, with scores of birds wheeling through the velvet night, the flashes should occur with regularity, but they weren't. What were the statistical odds against that?

He shifted his gaze to the base of the screen. A brief flare broke the darkness and, immediately afterward, another. At least the small rodents weren't so wary. He asked in a strained voice, "How do the birds know?"

Alton Yozell's face appeared white in the night. He said, "Many animals possess senses far more acute than man's, and senses of which we know only through deduction. How does the prokell wend its way back through ten thousand tributaries to spawn in exactly the same backwater from which its eggs were taken, even after being hatched in a far different place? How, when deprived of all their known senses through surgery, can the herk birds of Kalanda fly unerringly back to the white cliffs where they nest, back to the same nests from which each came? Answer me that, Roger, and I'll venture a guess at how the birds yonder sense the force field."

"I was under the impression that a sense organ, any sense organ, is developed to meet a specific condition," answered Keim. He looked toward the grasslands. "If so, how can these birds sense such a thing as a force field?"

"I can't imagine."

"I was watching them earlier. They resemble the gulls of Klasner, of Tarth, of Old Earth."

"That doesn't necessarily mean they have the same or even similar sensory capabilities," Yozell countered. "But these birds are peculiar in other ways. Most birds of a di-

urnal nature come to roost with the onset of darkness, but not these."

"Most have," he observed.

"True." Yozell's assent held skepticism. "It will be interesting to trap a few." He looked at the night sky for a long moment, then bade the telepath goodnight and returned inside. Watching the birds, Keim contemplated the strangeness of this world. The more man learned, the more remained to be learned. Each opened door revealed a new maze. The universe was a puzzle box, and this world especially. The race that had begun its upward climb from the brackish tide pools of Old Earth and by Galactic Year 4005 had found itself master of more than four hundred star systems had, in the process, fallen heir to a million imponderables. But here. . .

He looked at the solitary figure of Lara Kamm, at the lonely sky, then abruptly went inside.

Keim awoke during the night, groggily at first, but suddenly fully alert. Puzzled and tense, he drew himself up in bed to listen, then it came to him.

The crackling thunder in his mind had died.

THREE

Small shadows hurtling at mind speed through the awesome chasms of the universe. Tlo, Glomar, Xexl, Zimzi—nine of them—each moving out radically from the planet of the purpling sun. Stars being born, collapsing, flaming in death. Aeons of forgotten time, the passage of forgotten gulfs. The dying edge of the universe receding farther and farther. Whispery thoughts passing from shadow to shadow, whispery thoughts from the planet of the purpling sun—thoughts that grew fainter and fainter with the incredible distances, with incalculable time. Zimzi dying in a collision with a vagrant wanderer of the intergalactic gulfs, Yilill in the collapse of a dying galaxy, Omegi in a nucleonic storm. Death striking again and again and again. Silence from the dying edge of the universe. Silence from Tlo, Glomar, Xexl—from all of them. A silence more immense than the universe, more durable than time. His own thoughts screaming out into the silence. Galaxies aborning, flourishing, dy—

Uli's attention jerked back as the mind fragment that had lived in the brain of a bird died. Just as instantly he knew that the bird had flown into some type of invisible barrier, had been incinerated. Simultaneously the knowledge was transmitted to the mind fragments in thousands of other birds.

An invisible barrier! Incineration! Reconnoitering through the myriad eyes of his hosts, he watched the great ship. Eyes everywhere. A flare, and another, told him of the deaths of several unwary rodents. While the exact principle behind the screen was not entirely clear, Uli understood it sufficiently well to feel a caution akin to respect.

Dimly, like a faint drum tap in memory, he had the recollection of similar devices used to protect the sleeperies on the planet of the purpling sun in those last days when his race was dying—when the spawn of the hosts, not yet old enough to serve as hosts, had fled to become the renegades of those darkening worlds. Those same renegades destroyed the great automatic factories in which the Qua were building huge ships they hoped would bridge the abyss that led to still-living star islands. It was then that the Qua attempt to separate mind from body, to exist as pure thought, had failed. And it was then, in those very last days, that Uli and his eight companions had been propelled forth into that same abyss. Ah, so long ago. Now he, alone, lived. And his hosts were here.

But a force field! Unbelievable that this race of ungainly bipeds could have erected defenses similar to those of the Qua; but they had! The proof lay in the small flares as the rodents died.

Had they the mind power? The question smote him with staggering force. It was inconceivable; he had only to tap his memory banks to know that. No life form other than his own had ever been able to use its mind in ways that made the most gigantic of tools and weapons hopelessly obsolete; the proof had lain in the conquest of more than a million sun systems. If only the Qua had achieved their final goal, had been able to discard their bodies entirely and exist as pure thought untied to either sun or planet. . . . He felt a sadness. Still, he was immortal.

Shortly after dawn a number of the bipeds emerged from the ship. He watched them carefully, as he had the day before. No hurry; the equipment they had set up on the plain told him there was no danger of the ship's imminent departure. He was startled to note that several of

the bipeds appeared quite uneasy. Could they have sensed his presence? No, for as yet he'd made no overt move, had done nothing that might alarm them. But he'd have to be careful lest they flee the planet before he could acquire a proper host. The possibility that they might filled him with dread. Perhaps he shouldn't delay. A sudden urgency flooded his mind. But there was the strange energy screen! He waited.

Uli knew the protective screen had been removed when several small skimmers, each carrying two occupants, rose and started across the plain. Birds were dispatched in their wakes. Another was sent to wheel close to the ship to make certain the invisible barrier hadn't been erected again.

He studied the figures around the ship curiously. Except for their much larger size, they physically resembled the planet's former bipedal inhabitants, but with a difference: this race was far more advanced. Yet that too was relative. In his own measure, the newcomers were quite primitive.

Other bipeds emerged from the ship. Big doors in its sides slid open, ramps were lowered, additional equipment was brought outside. He eyed it interestedly. The use of some of the equipment was apparent from its geometry; other pieces were quite baffling. The need for such tools to do what his mind alone could accomplish made him feel quite smug. Still, there had to be lower life forms. Hosts were imperative.

He waited patiently. Finally one of the creatures walked farther out into the grass, halted to watch the birds. The others continued their work.

Uli acted quickly: a bird winged forward to meet the solitary biped. At the last moment it halted in midair, hovering a scant distance from its prey. As their eyes met—a necessary condition in order to effect a mind transfer—a fragment of Uli's consciousness entered its new host.

The biped screamed hoarsely and clutched at its throat. The creatures nearest it straightened from their work and ran toward it. Panicky at the stricken cry, the alarm it had raised, he twisted the biped's head toward the bird; but the bird, no longer a host, had begun to fly away. Uli used the mind power to whip it back, to place its beady eyes close to those of the biped and retransfer the mind fragment. As he did so, he also used the mind power to efface any memory of the incident that the biped might

have retained. He accomplished this by snapping the creature's neck. With the crack clearly audible, the biped collapsed just as the others reached his side. The whole affair ended almost as quickly as it had begun.

It was then that Uli realized how precipitate his action had been, how unnecessary. He could have rushed in other birds, made hosts of all the creatures. No matter; the day was young.

Although Uli's mind fragment had been in the biped's brain for but a few scant seconds, the time had been sufficient to acquire the creature's language and skills and, more importantly, his store of memories. They would take time to assimilate, for the mind of the human, the name by which they called their race—was far stronger and more complex than he had expected. Not that this particular mind was strong, it was that of a worker, a *crewman*; but it harbored many memories of things which the creature itself had failed to understand.

The big ship was the *Alpha Tauri*! Already on this expedition—Survey 992—the planets of a dozen stellar systems had been explored. The humans were seeking new worlds for development and habitation. Until now, Survey 992 had been unsuccessful, which indicated fewer habitable planets than Uli had suspected.

More tantalizing were the memories of the Empire from which the *Alpha Tauri* had come. *The Third Empire!* Hundreds of planets, each with vast cities, each tied to the others through a huge web of government, commerce, travel. . . . While not overwhelming, the visions were deeply satisfying. Even so, the complexity of such a civilization, even its bare structure, had been far beyond the dead human's ability to comprehend. It had known that the complex of sun systems, the Third Empire, was governed by the Emperor through a Council of Overlords. There were also Lords of planets and Megamayors; higher-up in government were the IE, the *Intellectual Elite*. The *Alpha Tauri's* science staff (the crewman's term) was of the IE. Some of the offices—Emperor and Overlords, and often Planetary Lords—were hereditary. Others served at the convenience of the Emperor, and still others were awarded as the result of achievement. But the crewman hadn't been quite clear on any of those things. Low in intelligence, it had perceived but hadn't understood. The mind was merely an echo. But all that was quite unimportant. What

was important was the Third Empire and the inexhaustible supply of hosts it represented. Uli exulted.

This surely was a race through which to conquer the galaxy!

"It isn't possible," Harlan Duvall declared. "Weber's neck was broken with a torque movement, a violent twist. That couldn't happen from a fall."

"But it did." Captain Woon leaned forward in his seat. "Half a dozen men saw him fall."

"After he screamed," the psychmedic countered. "Merker, your own man, stated that Weber's head was twisted at a crazy angle before he fell. He heard Weber's neck snap."

"Merker." The captain sniffed.

"He has eyes," Duvall retorted. "Besides, a fall doesn't explain the bird."

"He probably was trying to catch it."

"Not according to the eyewitnesses. The bird was inches from Weber's face, but he wasn't holding it."

"Why try to compound the problem?" snapped Woon. His face showed his annoyance.

"I'm trying to clarify it."

"With a bird?"

For a while, silence hung heavy in the captain's lounge. Roger Keim, seated slightly apart from the others, had been surprised when Kimbrough first summoned him to the meeting. He wasn't now, not with the odd revelations that had come up. *Weber's neck broken before he struck the ground*—the evidence seemed all but indisputable despite the captain's skepticism. He'd heard the rumors earlier, of course, but the accounts had been so garbled that he'd considered the death a bizarre accident, nothing more. But not now. And the bird. Birds that could sense a force field! Small wonder Kimbrough wanted him in on the session. He felt a vague uneasiness. Why didn't Kimbrough mention what he was thinking? Or was he weighing the facts, attempting to make certain that it wasn't just another odd accident?

A quiet planet, beautiful, but something was here—something that screamed in his mind, that caused birds to sense force fields, that had stripped the planet of virtually all its animal forms, that snapped necks. What in God's name was it?

Kimbrough broke the silence. "You're satisfied with the

autopsy findings?" His gaze rested on the psychmedic's face.

Duvall gestured wearily. "Brain, heart, lungs, vascular system, stomach contents, bladder—I combed the body from head to toes. Weber was thirty-three, healthy, in the prime of life; he collapsed because of a broken neck."

"You absolutely rule out a fall?"

"Positively. I've stated that, five or six times as I recall. The ground was soft, spongy."

"If I'm repetitious, it's because I have to be sure, Harlan."

"I am positive."

Woon asked stonily, "If it wasn't the fall, how did he break his neck? You haven't explained that."

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Roger?" Kimbrough glanced at the telepath.

"Totally in the dark," he confessed.

"Could it be related to this sense of threat you've mentioned before?"

There, it was out, the thing that was in Kimbrough's mind, in his own mind. But still he had to hew to the facts. "This was an overt act," he answered.

"Don't tell me you're going to try to hang Weber's death on that," Woon interrupted testily.

"We have to explore every avenue," replied Kimbrough. His eyes measured the telepath. "I realize you didn't see the accident but what's your impression of it from what you've heard?"

"None directly related to the accident."

"Is that evasive?"

"I didn't intend it that way, but there has been a new twist." He held the chief scientist's gaze. "Last night the thunder stopped."

"Entirely?"

"For the night. It's back again."

"Had your blood pressure checked lately?" asked Woon. "I've heard it can cause such things."

"I had Harlan check me out the first day."

"Blood pressure normal," the psychmedic confirmed. "He's in tip-top shape."

Woon looked pained. "Thunder can't break a man's neck."

"Something did," countered Kimbrough.

Keim said, "There's one other thing." As Kimbrough's head snapped up, he continued, "The birds avoid the force field."

"Alton told me." Kimbrough sighed wearily. "I'll be

damned if I can conceive of even the slightest relationships."

"Between Roger's thunder and the birds' actions?" demanded Woon.

"And Weber's death."

"I can't conceive of such relationships," Duvall ventured, "but neither can I conceive of a man breaking his neck as Weber did."

"Could I offer a suggestion?" asked Keim.

"Certainly." Kimbrough nodded.

"I don't believe that anyone should venture out alone, even in the vicinity of the ship. I'd recommend that we stay in pairs, at least. That would include all field trips. I also believe that anyone going outside should be armed."

"Dangerous," objected Woon. "I don't want the crew fooling around with bolt guns or lasers. The ship's too vulnerable. That's why we keep them locked up."

"It could be the lesser of two dangers," rebutted Keim.

"I agree with Roger, at least until we know more about this planet," observed Kimbrough. "You can issue strict orders on the use of the weapons." While the captain's eyes refuted the argument, he nodded reluctantly. Clearly he believed the cause of the crewman's death was being blown out of all proportion. Neither did he place much credence in the testimony concerning the birds. But Keim could appreciate his feelings; the whole thing did ring of the fantastic. But as Arden had remarked, "*Shouldn't we expect something new in the universe?*" Well, they had something new. The damnable thing was that they didn't know what it was.

When the meeting broke up, the chief scientist detained the telepath in the corridor. "I'd like you to remain awake tonight," he said.

"To chart the thunder?"

"Whether it diminishes, ceases entirely and, if so, when it begins to return," confirmed Kimbrough. "I'd like the time and duration of each stage, if it has stages. I don't know what that might tell us, but we have to start somewhere."

"A statistical spook," agreed Keim, "but it's worth a try."

"Spooks don't exist, Roger. Whatever this thing is, it has a tangible presence somewhere. I'll admit that I can't connect whatever it is with Weber's death, but I feel certain that such a connection exists." He smiled wanly. "I'd

hate to have to repeat this story to a Board of Inquiry some day."

Later Keim went outside and stood with Jonley, the gaunt Chief of Maintenance, in keeping with the captain's orders that no man be alone. He noted that while the members of the science staff worked in pairs, the crewmen tended to cluster in groups of three or four. Their voices and actions were guarded, tense; all wore sidearms of one kind or another.

Jonley put it into words. "They'll be damned glad to see the last of this planet," he observed.

"Because of Weber's death?"

"Partially."

"What else?"

"They feel that there's something they haven't been told, some danger." The maintenance chief phrased the words in a questioning manner, his eyes baffled.

Keim shook his head. "There's nothing we can discern."

"Except a broken neck and smart birds," retorted Jonley.

"You have a point."

"Yeah." Jonley scowled. "I just want to live long enough to enjoy it."

When night came, Keim concentrated on the tumult in his mind. The muted thunder rose and fell, sporadically punctuated by crackling outbursts. Again he tried to pinpoint the source with his directional sense and failed. The stimuli seemed to assail him from all sides, but of one thing he was positive; the tumult didn't originate from within his own body, as Woon had suggested. It came from outside, from beyond the force field. He had the sensation that it was conveyed to him through that same unknown sense that gave him telepathy. He was also certain that the source wasn't one of nature; the intricate pattern, with certain odd repetitions, ruled that out. What did that leave? The answer was almost too unbelievable to contemplate.

By late evening the rumble began to subside; in less than an hour it was gone. The only sensory stimuli remaining were those from inside the ship—fragments of thought from both those awake and those asleep. While he'd never purposefully tapped the thoughts of his companions, they often came unbidden, especially in the late hours when the environmental stimuli were low. Now, in the silence of the late evening, whispers filled his mind. Usually he shut them out. Tonight, he didn't.

He didn't attempt to identify the sources; that struck him as too gross an invasion of privacy. Yet he often sensed both the thinker's identity and his location. At times the perception became so acute that it took the form of mental imagery. Telepathy was extremely rare, clairvoyance was nonexistent. All the books agreed to that. Keim knew better.

"It's a hell ship," a voice from the crew's quarters whispered. *"Weber. . . ."*

Another voice saying, *"They know, all right."*

"They can't tell me. . . ."

Keim partially closed his mind to the chatter, trying to concentrate on what might come from beyond the force field. The damnable part was that he didn't know what to expect from beyond the force field.

"T-man knows. . . ." The fragmented allusion to himself caught his attention. This time he concentrated on the speaker. The silent voice in his mind impressed him as being high, querulous, taut with emotion and. . . . Burl Ashford! There, he had him pinned. The geologist was talking with. . . Ivor Bascomb. The botanist's visage flamed briefly in his mind. Burl was asserting that Keim knew all about what was happening, or at least knew the true nature of the danger. Bascomb, not so certain, was deeply troubled nevertheless. They both were. Their emotions, heavy with apprehension if not downright fear, surged into his mind along with their words. Ashford's face, round and pink-cheeked, flared photographically in his mind, then vanished. His imagination? No, he'd pictured the geologist as clearly as if he'd been standing in this very room.

". . . get the hell off the planet." New words, a new source, again from the crew's quarters. Damn, how could he concentrate with the medley of voices? He'd never felt such an awareness, such accompanying emotion. But there was none of the muted thunder, none of the crackling, none of the threat; he was certain of that. The alien, whoever or whatever it was, had signed off for the night.

Later, there was a light tap at his door and Myron Kimbrough entered. "Any change?" he asked tautly.

"Gone." Keim described his mental impressions of the phenomenon and added, "I've taped everything for the record." He didn't mention the snatches of conversation from within the ship; such things were the secrets of T-men.

"Any closer to an explanation?" asked Kimbrough. His face denied the hope.

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"Nothing more than the impression of being plugged into a vast alien network."

"That goes off the air in the late evening," mused Kimbrough. "At least it's not entirely nocturnal."

"A sun-loving alien." Keim smiled feebly at his joke.

"We're walking in strange territory, Roger."

"Alton's unguessable?"

"Possibly, although I'm reluctant to say that it can't be explained. All things can be explained."

"Given the data," he countered.

"We're getting the data." Kimbrough paused reflectively. "Perhaps I'm not being honest with myself, I don't know. It might be more honest to admit that we're against something entirely new. Up till now I've been looking for—hoping for—some explanation understandable in terms of our own definitions, of our own experience. I've assumed that we'd be stretching reality to go beyond that, but perhaps not. Whatever the answer, we have to find it or get off the planet. We can't justify that at this point, which means we're stuck with the problem."

Keim viewed the other appreciatively. Ordinarily Kimbrough was a man for whom science held all the answers, or almost all. Now he wasn't so certain. The admission made him seem much more human. Almost humble. Against that, he had scant choice but to admit the dilemma. Birds that avoided force fields didn't fit any of the neat categories of expectancies; neither did necks broken with no apparent cause. But those were only two things. The tumult in his mind was another. Perhaps more significant was Borchers's "impossible ecology," as he termed it.

Keim said, "I've considered all that, Myron."

"So what do we do?"

"Wait."

Kimbrough nodded. "Keep listening, Roger. See if you can pick up something you can tape."

"Like the growl of thunder in the sky?"

"If it makes sense, yes."

"I think the alien will come to us," Keim reflected.

"God, I hope not."

He grinned. "It might make a good paper some day."

"Just so it's not an obituary."

When the chief scientist left, Keim selected a tape of classical music, tuned it down until it was barely audible, and settled in a deep chair to wait out the night. Shortly

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before dawn, his eyes heavy with sleep, he became aware of the first faint rumble in his mind.

Within an hour it was back at full blast.

FOUR

IVOR BASCOMB, the botanist, was first to discover the ruins. Making a sweep over the distant hills with the biologist Yozell, he caught the barest glimpse of what appeared part of a structure among a tangle of vines and giant trees before it became lost to view. "Spotted something," he said tightly.

As Yozell twisted in his seat to look back, Bascomb brought the skimmer slowly around, dropping lower to the lush growth that appeared all but impenetrable. He was beginning to think he must have been mistaken when Yozell cried, "Hold it!" and threw a hand out in gesture.

Bascomb brought the skimmer to a halt, hovering a hundred or so feet above the treetops. His eyes, following the biologist's pointing finger, fixed on the broken but still geometrical outlines. It appeared to be an ancient building almost completely shrouded by trees and vines. Excitedly he reached for the communicator.

His brief message brought a swirl of excitement to the *Alpha Tauri*. Caught with a sense of expectancy, Keim rushed outside hoping a skimmer would be available. He found himself sharing one with Sam Gossett, the elderly chemist. Gossett's face was tight with anticipation when the T-man edged in alongside him.

As Gossett lifted the vehicle from the plain, a second skimmer followed close behind. Through that inner sense that he'd never understood, Keim knew that its occupants were Myron Kimbrough and Lara Kamm.

The communicator crackled. Kimbrough's voice came on, instructing the remainder of the science staff to remain with the ship. The action told Keim that the chief scientist's main concern was still the possibility of an alien threat.

"I can't imagine it," Gossett reflected. His words brought back the telepath's attention.

"A ruin?"

"How can a single ruin exist?" Gossett's tone was queru-

lous. "A ruin implies builders, either past or present, and that means other buildings. But where? Even crude architecture isn't a one-time thing. But I thought the minisats have combed every inch of this planet."

"Not quite every inch," Keim corrected. Gossett didn't answer.

With the skimmer hurtling low above the grass, it struck Keim how few birds he saw. Why had hundreds of them congregated in the vicinity of the *Alpha Tauri*? Not food scraps certainly. The atomic furnace took care of that. Curiosity? Possibly. Not that he'd put anything past these particular birds, he reflected sourly.

He pushed the speculation back into his mind as they drew close to the edge of the grasslands. Beyond, as far as the eye could see, lay rolling, forested hills. A stream flowed out from a gully, sparkling under the blue-white sun. Farther to the east, it emptied into a small lake.

Gossett lifted the skimmer above the hills and homed in on a beacon set up by Bascomb. Keim was surprised to discover that the hills were covered with unmoving, peaceful trees that towered to awesome heights. The immediate ground cover appeared like a wild tangle of vines.

From what or where in this peaceful, sunny world could danger possibly come? He couldn't imagine. Yet a man already had died, killed by *something*—a something that lurked beyond the human ability to perceive, or perhaps even comprehend. A *something* that brought the crackling thunder to his mind? Perhaps the ruin was the key that could tie together such diverse things as a broken neck, birds that sensed a force field, an unbalanced ecology, and muted thunder that seethed in his mind. He had to smile at his fancy, and yet. . . .

The skimmer began to decelerate and a moment later he spotted a small clearing ahead. The botanist's vehicle was parked at one edge. Keim saw him wave. Gossett hovered momentarily above the clearing before starting down. Kimbrough landed the second skimmer immediately behind them. Bascomb and Yozell were waiting impatiently.

Kimbrough leaped from the vehicle and shouted, "Where is it?" Suddenly remembering, he turned and helped Lara Kamm from her seat.

"A few hundred yards," Bascomb gestured with a thumb. "We couldn't land any closer."

"You said a ruin?" Kimbrough looked hard at him.

"A ruin, all right, but it's pretty well shrouded."

"Let's go," Kimbrough instructed tersely. Bascomb drew a laser and commenced to cut a path through the thick tangle of vines while attempting to avoid damage to the trees. Keim fell in at the rear of the column behind Lara Kamm.

As if by common consent, they moved in silence; progressing slowly as the botanist swung the beam from side to side. Keim marveled at the silence. He would have expected the flutter of wings, the screech of brilliantly-plumaged birds, the occasional rustle of small animals, but there were none. Except for the sound of their own passage, the forest held the stillness of death.

"There!" Bascomb suddenly halted and gestured with his laser. Keim looked past him, felt a clutch of wonder. Grayish, ghostly, tree-shrouded and entangled in vines, stood an ancient building. They gazed at it in rapt wonder.

Finally Bascomb said in a hushed voice, "It resembles pictures I've seen of ancient temples." He glanced at Lara Kamm for confirmation. Her face was a study in concentration.

"It does bear that resemblance," she said finally. "It's reminiscent of the Dravidian style of architecture of Old Earth, around the Eleventh Century of the old calendar. The strongly contrasted horizontal and vertical lines and the upthrust below the main dome suggested that. It's also reminiscent of the Othmarian style of Glade in the Benwar system. Both were houses of worship," she added.

Caught by some strangeness about the structure that he couldn't identify, Keim scarcely heard her. Then Lara put it into words. "Note the smallness of the doors, the closeness of the window lines to the floor. That suggests that the inhabitants, whoever they might have been, were of quite small stature."

"Bipeds?" asked Kimbrough.

"Most certainly. The front steps suggest that. Also, note the lowness of each step." Her voice grew speculative. "By human standards, everything is scaled down by about fifty per cent."

"A temple in a world with no people," Yozell murmured. His voice held awe.

"The presence of this single ruin is more baffling than nothing at all," declared Bascomb. "This planet gives me the jitters."

Sam Gossett removed a knife from his pocket, flicked open the blade and stepped forward to scratch the an-

cient wall. Examining the marks under a glass, his face wrinkled in a frown. He scraped a bit of material loose, wrapped it carefully in a sheet from his notebook and deposited it in his pocket before saying, "It's not stone."

"A cement of some kind?" asked Kimbrough.

He shook his head. "Offhand I'd say some type of non-cellulose plastic, but I can't be certain until I submit it to chemical test."

Kimbrough emitted a low whistle. "That suggests a fairly high level of civilization." He looked inquiringly at Lara.

"Synthetic plastics came rather early in human history," she observed. "As I recall, around the Nineteenth or Twentieth Century of the old calendar. That would be, by our reckoning, some seven thousand years ago."

Kimbrough said irritably, "A civilization that advanced should have left considerable ruins."

"Perhaps they did," Bascomb cut in. "We don't know what the jungles hide. Look at that." He flung a hand toward the ancient, tree-shrouded structure.

"Most of the continent is open grasslands. Why are there no ruins there?"

"Civilizations on Old Earth vanished in less time," observed Yozell.

"Not that completely." Kimbrough swung toward the telepath. "Do you still have that feel of something alien?"

"Definitely." Keim saw the startled look in Lara's face.

"Here? Is it stronger here?"

"There's no life here."

"But there has been," exclaimed Kimbrough. "When a civilization vanishes, does it vanish entirely, or does it leave some lingering sense of that life form itself?"

"That would be looking beyond the grave," Keim protested. "What I sense is living . . . here . . . now."

"Living?"

"Could I sense the dead? Not except through their records, the artifacts they leave behind. What do you have in mind?"

"Nothing I can pin down." Kimbrough looked baffled. "I suppose I'm subconsciously trying to relate the odd things that have happened to the builders of that." He gestured toward the ruin.

"Do you believe some of them may still be alive?"

"Possibly, I'm not certain. Perhaps I'm resurrecting ghosts."

"Ghosts that break necks," said Gossett, but his voice held no humor.

"Perhaps we might find clues inside," suggested Yozell. "I'm the smallest. I'll crawl through the doorway." As he turned toward the ruin, Lara moved to follow. He waited till she reached his side, then started up the steps. As they did, the muted thunder in Keim's mind rose to a howling shriek that all but staggered him. He had the wild impression of a thousand banshees loosed in his brain.

"Wait," he shouted. Leaping forward, he grasped their arms and jerked them backward so violently that the biologist lost his balance and tumbled down the stairs. Only Keim's firm grip kept Lara from falling. At that instant the structure in front of them collapsed with a roar into a pile of rubble. The reverberations rolled through the forest.

"Good God," someone exclaimed. Yozell scrambled to his feet and gazed disbelievingly at the debris. Lara's face was white with shock.

"What happened?" Sam Gossett managed to ask.

"Earthquake?" asked Yozell dubiously.

"Not a quake." Gossett shook his head. "A plastic structure wouldn't collapse in that manner."

Kimbrough spun toward the telepath. "You shouted the warning!" The words were both accusation and question.

"I sensed it." Keim struggled to assess just what it was that he had sensed. The roar in his brain, the awful shriek. . . .

"Before it began to collapse?"

"I believe so. I'm not certain."

Kimbrough demanded harshly, "Exactly what did you sense?"

"Danger . . . that there was danger. The thunder in my mind rose to a shrill screech." Keim eyed him steadily. "I believe I saw it collapsing in my mind."

"Saw it?"

"A vision, I'm not certain. Or perhaps I constructed the vision in retrospect. Everything happened too suddenly to pin down a time sequence."

"How could you have a vision of an event beforehand?"

"I don't know. I can't quite put the pieces together."

"Did anyone else have a premonition?" Kimbrough glanced quickly around the circle of faces. When no one answered, he looked back at the telepath. "Something warned you? Try to dig it out, Roger, it's important. Can you relate this to the other things you've sensed?"

"No more than what I've told you. Whatever happened, the action was too fast for me to follow."

"You suggested the element of . . . prescience."

"The vision could have followed the actuality," reminded Keim.

Kimbrough shook his head. "You wouldn't have had time to pull them to safety if the structure already had begun to fall."

"This is like Weber's death," remarked Gossett. "Half a dozen witnesses and no one knows what happened."

"Weber's death." Kimbrough's eyes fixed the rubble.

Bascomb asked, "Aren't we overlooking the possibility of coincidence?"

"Explain that."

"The temple's age, its disrepair. It had to collapse someday. Perhaps this was the day."

"We can't accept such a coincidence," interrupted Gossett. "That's the easy way out. We have to look elsewhere."

"You explain it," invited Bascomb.

"I'll make a stab." He looked broodingly at the debris. "Someone or something didn't want us to go inside, possibly because of what we might have found; or perhaps that something doesn't even want us on the planet. A mention has been made of aliens. Who is the alien? On this planet, we are. I'm convinced that there's another high form of life here, perhaps a life that's now fighting for its homeland. Nonsense? A few days ago I would have said so, now I'm convinced otherwise. But what form of life? Obviously it's beyond our ability to perceive. Alton once suggested the unguessable. Perhaps we've found it." He eyed the biologist.

"Unguessable or not, we have to dig it out, know what it is that we're faced with," said Yozell.

"I would welcome any suggestions, Alton."

"Is the thing Roger senses necessarily the same thing that built this temple?"

"A good point," Kimbrough conceded.

"The thing might have been the successor to the temple builders, the reason they vanished," suggested Yozell.

"What, specifically, do you have in mind?"

"If Sam is right, the building material suggests a fairly high civilization. There almost certainly are other buildings, perhaps a great number of them. It isn't logical that this would be the last one standing. We have to find them."

"And if we do?" asked Keim.

"We have to explore them, unearth their artifacts, try to resurrect the culture of their builders, determine why such a race vanished. Perhaps that will tell us what happened here, what it is that Roger senses. What killed Weber," he added.

Keim shook his head. "I don't believe that's possible."

"That other buildings exist?"

"To enter them," he corrected.

"Why not?"

"I believe they'd fall."

A shocked silence followed before Yozell said, "I never believed in the supernatural, at least until now."

"It's not the supernatural," interrupted Lara. "I don't know what it is, but it's not that."

"No, it's not that," agreed Keim.

"This building is part of the dust of history," Kimbrough mused. "If we could hazard a time line, I might place its age at twenty thousand years, perhaps far longer. If we agree that its collapse was purposive, how was it accomplished?"

"I wouldn't attempt to guess," replied Keim.

"The act required the release of energy," persisted Kimbrough.

"I still wouldn't hazard a guess." He looked at Gossett. "Perhaps we are the aliens, but I can't look at it from that viewpoint. At least I haven't the impression of a form of life merely trying to protect its homeland."

"What is your impression?" asked the chemist.

"A sense of malignancy, a something that would destroy us. I believe Alton is right; whatever destroyed the temple builders is still here. Weber, this temple—that's a confrontation of sorts. Don't ask me the basis for my belief; I don't know. But the planet reeks of death. The feeling is a scream in my mind."

Gossett twisted his head upward. "There's a bird." Keim jerked his gaze to the sky. Hovering high above the treetops off to one side, the bird appeared absolutely motionless.

"What about it?" asked Bascomb testily.

"I hadn't noticed any in this area before. Come to think of it, I haven't seen many anywhere except around the ship."

"I'd noticed that," murmured Yozell. "It's a type of gull."

"Gull?"

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"In external structure. At least we can call it that until we make a final classification."

"A gull, I like that," declared Lara. "It's reminiscent of the beaches of Lorn—oh, a thousand beaches. A gull spells sand and breaking waves and blue-green water."

"Then a gull it is," declared Yozell.

Gossett switched his gaze to the chief scientist. "Why would that one gull be up there now, looking down at us?"

"Is it?"

"I have that feeling."

"It could be a coincidence," offered Yozell, "or perhaps it might have been attracted by our movements, or by the collapse of the temple. That certainly sent enough shock waves through the air."

Although the explanation sounded plausible, Keim knew that none of them believed it. Not with gulls that sensed force fields, gulls that hovered a scant few inches before a man's face just before his neck was snapped!

"You were going to trap a few," reminded Kimbrough.

"I was about to do it when we got word of the temple."

"Don't put it off, Alton."

Gossett brought their thoughts to the surface, saying, "I really can't picture a gull as an alien intelligence, but assuming it is, how could it have destroyed the temple?" No one answered. When they returned to the skimmers, Keim twisted his head upward.

A single gull hovered against the sapphire blue of the sky.

Uli fought to stifle his terror as he watched the humans gather around their skimmers. A tumult seethed in every fragment of his mind that dwelt within every host. Its intensity was far beyond anything he'd ever experienced. That, alone, was frightening. He had to banish the emotion, to bring his thoughts into order, and to assess—with the absolute logic of his kind—his exact situation. Perhaps his alarm was unreasonable. He forced himself to review the incidents that had brought the terror to him.

Thanks to the knowledge and language skills he'd acquired from the now dead crewman, he'd been able to probe the minds of the small group below and understand not only their words, but many of the nuances behind them. He'd been able to sense their fears and frustrations, their wonder and determination.

But they verbalized so little of what they thought and

almost nothing of what they felt. They seemed to fear their own thoughts and attempted to keep them capped, to disguise them so that they came into the awareness in a different form. How could a mind hide from itself in what they termed the "subconscious"? That was stranger yet. Later, when he had time, it would be interesting to study several of them more closely.

With the humans making so many idle sweeps over the grasslands and adjacent forested hills—"reconnaissance" was the expression they used, a word he interpreted from his newly-acquired memory bank as meaning "just looking around"—he had neglected to keep every flight under observation. As a consequence, the discovery of the ancient ruin had escaped his attention until, by whimsy, he had dispatched a host to follow the last skimmer to the scene. But the humans quickly had vanished under a thick cover of trees and vines and his host hadn't sighted them again until after they'd reappeared at the site of the temple.

Temple! A place of worship to a being called a god. A supreme deity. He remembered such structures from long ago. The earlier bipeds had worshipped him in just such places, even as he had blotted their cities and towns from the face of the planet, had sought out and annihilated the last of them. He had been the God of Death! Ah, he would be again! But how had these bipeds known that this had been a temple? Remarkable!

His own shock had come with the discovery that the male creature named Roger Keim was a telepath. A "T-man," as the others thought of him. Uli's first reaction had been to reject the knowledge on the basis that telepathy was restricted to the Qua alone. But there was no mistake. Although the creature had made no attempt to probe his companions, many of their thoughts had appeared as mirror images in his mind.

But the telepath had never revealed that he knew their thoughts. Stranger yet, he often had deliberately tried to block them out. There was something called an "ethic" involved. Ethic? The crewman had never heard of the word.

Suddenly wary, Uli had focused his attention on the telepath. Keim's mind roved, incessantly. It probed, analyzed, deduced; it theorized, weighed, discarded, theorized again. His reasoning, most of which he kept to himself, was startling in its logic.

Were there other telepaths? Once or twice Uli suspected the presence of a second one, but the mental probes had

been faint, uncertain, subconscious in origin—so masked by the more powerful mind of the man called Keim that their source had been unidentifiable. Or had the secondary probes also emanated from Keim, sort of a mental echo as it were?

He was debating it when two of the humans started toward the temple. Instantly fearful that they might discover some clue that would reveal his presence, he had destroyed the structure with a single discharge of mind power. It was then that his terror had come, for the creature called Keim had glimpsed a mental image of the temple falling *before it had begun to fall!*

To look into the future—what kind of power was that? Uli was appalled. He'd never heard of such a thing. His own mind could look into the past for more than a hundred billion years, could range to the edge of the universe. But to see into a time yet unborn? More, to see it starkly, to isolate its separate events, that was utterly incomprehensible. And just as instantly, the telepath had coupled the collapse of the temple with the fate of its builders—had linked the event, from the standpoint of causation, to the death of the crewman. What manner of creature was this? A cold apprehension swept out to the mind fragments in ten thousand hosts; it ran like rivers through his entire being.

What if this creature were the least of his kind? The possibility had brought a new burst of terror. Suppose there were others with the power to uproot forests, level mountains, tear asunder an entire planet and hurl its atoms into the emptiness of the universe? What might he find in the galaxy's planet-rich interior? Minds equal to his own? No, there was nothing in the minds below to suggest that. Such a possibility was unthinkable.

His first impulse to destroy the small group of humans had been deterred by the fear that it might frighten the others into prematurely leaving the planet. If that should happen before he could gain admission into the ship, he might be condemned to remain for another fifty thousand revolutions of this planet around its lonely sun. Perhaps other hosts would never come! A terrifying thought.

He had to gain immediate access to the ship! Although he could quite easily acquire a host from the humans working outside, he reflected that it could be risky. The screams of the first crewman proved that. Now, with the alarm raised by the destruction of the temple, he couldn't

risk any action that might panic them into precipitate flight.

The best time to acquire a host would be just at the onset of sleep, when a man's eyes still would open at the slightest disturbance, yet when his mind would be drugged by lethargy. And it could be done; the human called Alton Yozell had pointed the way. But the humans suspected the birds. He pondered that. Not that they could confirm their suspicions; not at least until it was too late. But it did point up their level of intelligence which was much higher than first he had supposed.

When the skimmers started back toward the ship, Uli turned his attention to the temple's rubble. Would the humans return to sift through the debris? Quite likely. But while there was scant chance they'd discover any evidence of him that might frighten them from the planet, he decided not to take the risk. Unleashing a bolt of mind power, he watched the debris stream upward into the sapphire-blue sky, breaking down into its constituent atoms until absolutely nothing remained of what had been the temple. Nothing but the hideous scar in the forest.

Ruefully he realized that the scar could be more damning yet. Why had he acted so precipitantly? He never had until the advent of these strange creatures. They were quite alarming, particularly the T-man. What awesome powers might he have? No matter, he would die soon enough. And the other humans, if they returned to the scene. But he would have to kill them in such a way that it would appear as an accident to those remaining.

Perhaps he should fission.

The thought came unbidden, as so often it had, bringing the same perturbation that always accompanied it. Why should the thought occur now? He debated it uneasily. To fission was part of his nature, his goal—the very reason he had been hurled inward from the dying edge of the universe. Why then the deep-rooted dread whenever the thought occurred?

He forced himself to review his feelings, the consequences of the act itself. What did fission mean as applied to himself? Would he become a duality, retaining his conscious self as two selves, thus doubling his power? Or would each part become a completely new entity, each endowed with its own ego, each possessing its own racial memories. If the latter, then fission was tantamount to death.

Death! The mere thought was frightening. Yet he was immortal! His whole being screamed of the fact; the life-

time of a star was but a passing moment in his day. The immortal Qua! That came from deep within his memory banks. *But did immortality apply to the individual as well as the race?* There, the question was out! Hadn't his own awakening been as an entirely new being?

He mulled the question uneasily. He'd had his racial memories, they were part of the self; that was beyond denial. *But were they the same as the self?* What if he didn't fission? Then an eternity lay ahead. That, too, was undeniable.

But if death were to be his fate, then certainly he couldn't fission until he reached a planet occupied by hosts having an interstellar technology. Hosts such as the humans. When he reached an appropriate planet, he would fission readily enough. Through him the Qua would spread throughout the galaxy and, ultimately, throughout the Middle Universe. But he had to wait—wait for the proper time. For that reason, he hadn't fissioned since his arrival on the planet of the lonely blue-white sun.

That, and the fear of death.

FIVE

HUNCHED OVER a desk in his stateroom, Captain Woon told the T-man, "I can appreciate your feelings, Roger, and I know that reporting them is your job. Nevertheless," his voice became deliberate, "I'm asking you not to discuss any of the things that are happening, or that you believe might be happening, except with Kimbrough or me."

"Why?" demanded Keim.

"It's causing some unrest."

"It's what's happening that's causing the unrest."

"That's beside the point."

"Who's bothered?"

"Burl Ashford, for one."

"Ashford?" Keim wasn't really surprised. The geologist had openly displayed his uneasiness since the crewman's death. He'd also displayed considerable fear when first they'd detected intelligent life on their previous trip to Kale. Not even the later discovery of the intelligence being confined to a stone-age culture had completely allayed it.

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There was a private joke that he'd joined the survey service only to escape a nagging wife. Whatever the reason, Ashford clearly held a not-so-secret fear of anything that smacked of the alien. "What's his complaint?"

"He suggested that we write off the planet. Leave."

"I suggested that the first day."

"Planets like this are not easily come by," Woon reprimanded. "What could I put into a report to justify abandoning it?"

"I'm no longer advocating that course."

"Why the change?"

"I believe there's a form of life on this planet completely alien to us, to our way of thinking; an intelligence that might constitute the greatest threat the human race has ever known. If the possibility exists of a future confrontation, we'd better start learning what this thing is."

"My question would be, where are its weapons?"

"It has a mind."

"Oh?"

"I wouldn't underrate that point."

"Nonsense, Roger. We could incinerate this planet. I can't say that a few unusual coincidence justifies the assumption that such a being even exists."

"The collapse of the temple wasn't a coincidence," he retorted.

"Possibly not, and I'll have to admit that Kimbrough agrees with you on that point." Woon regarded him speculatively. "But I still want you to quit voicing your beliefs. We want to approach this problem scientifically, not emotionally."

"I'm emotional?"

"Not you, others."

"Besides Ashford."

"Some of the crew are disturbed."

"I'm speaking of the science staff."

Woon hesitated. "Hester Kane and Robin Martel," he said finally.

Keim took the time to digest that. Robin, a brilliant young meteorologist, was new to the service. Survey 992 was her first deepspace operation. But Hester Kane, the linguist, was a veteran, and definitely not the nervous type. Still, women were prone to view things in a different light.

He asked, "Anything in particular bothering them?"

"Female intuition."

He grinned. "I wouldn't discount that. How about Lara?"

"She'll do." In the spacer's idiom, the answer constituted high praise. Keim wasn't surprised. On Kale, she'd insisted dwelling alone among the natives was the only real means of gaining more than a superficial insight into their culture. Although Kimbrough had opposed it as highly dangerous, she had been adamant. As it turned out, she'd dwelt in a native village for most of their stay.

"Is the unrest restricted to those three?" he asked.

"It's sweeping the crew, I mentioned that. Weber's death shook them. Now, with what happened at the temple. . . ." Woon gestured eloquently. "We can't operate efficiently unless we cap the fear."

"I agree, but we still have to explore what is happening."

"I intend to."

Keim felt ruffled as he left the captain's quarters. The only time he'd voiced his real convictions was immediately following the collapse of the temple, and then only when the group had tried to assess what had happened. But rumors were spreading; the whispers nibbled at his mind and, at night, he could all but taste the fear that pervaded the ship. Woon was dead right in his contention that they couldn't operate efficiently under those conditions.

Outside, he found Alton Yozell preparing to move several small cages into his laboratory. Keim noticed that they held the rodent-like creatures that inhabited the surrounding grasslands. "Look like field mice to me," he commented.

"Very similar," the biologist agreed. "Gulls and field mice. . . . It's strange how nature tends to parallel itself across the galaxy."

"Krado 1 doesn't appear much different from Klasner or Jondell or Old Earth, if you except the blue-white sun," he reflected.

"I'm not prepared to render a verdict, Roger."

"Neither am I," he confessed. "Actually I sense a vast difference, but I can't say what it is."

"Each planet is different," replied Yozell, "yet very little exists that can't be explained. Given time and opportunity, of course."

"Have you tried trapping the birds yet?"

"I caught one this morning with my bare hands." Yozell looked pleased with himself. "I just walked over and picked it up."

"That simple?" Keim felt a stab of uneasiness.

"Fear is a learned thing." The biologist adopted his lecture voice. "Having no natural enemies, they haven't learned what fear is. Note how they congregate around the ship. I suspect that we're objects of curiosity, Roger. Remember the striped herbivores on Trypton? It was the same there."

Keim nodded reluctantly. "They still bother me."

"The birds? I can understand that." Yozell looked wistfully toward the grasslands. "I only wish we could take several home with us, study them under long-term conditions. Perhaps we could identify the special organ that enables them to sense the force field. That would be a real triumph, Roger."

Keim agreed, fully understanding the longing in the biologist's voice and manner. Yozell could observe his specimens, photograph them, test and dissect and analyze them, record all that he learned about them; but he could never carry a single specimen above its own atmosphere. Men long ago had learned that the introduction of a new specimen into a strange environment could wreak havoc with the ecological balance. Stringent regulations and laws had been enacted to prevent it. When the *Alpha Tauri* lifted from this world, compartment by compartment would be subjected to decontamination processes designed to eliminate whatever stray microorganisms or bugs that might have been acquired during the visit. Likewise, each crewman and member of the science staff would undergo a series of injections and medication to eliminate any stray life form that might have chosen his body as a host. While not perfect, the system was the best that man yet had devised.

Keim looked up, seeing Lara Kamm. "I never thanked you for yesterday," she apologized. "I was too excited."

"You didn't appear to be."

"But I was. I was simply terrified."

He grinned. "We all shook a bit. Actually I suspect I overreacted. Next time I won't be so rough."

"I hope there is no next time. Not that kind. Do you believe there might be?"

"I can't say. I have a lock on my lips."

"Why?" She regarded him curiously.

"Woon believes I'm an alarmist."

"Nonsense!"

"But he has a point," he admitted. "The rumors are flying."

ALTON'S UNGUESSABLE

"A lot of us are jittery," she confessed, "including me. I had that feeling, even before the temple, but that really shook me."

"Why before the temple? Weber's death?"

She wouldn't answer. "And the way you feel?"

"I'm not prescient," he replied soberly. "I could be wrong."

"I doubt it. You sense things that are . . ." she paused, "beyond most of us."

"Mainly impressions."

"Not at the temple."

"It was still an impression, an impression of danger—"

"Before it happened," she cut in.

"There's a question there." He smiled soberly. "Visualization after the fact is natural, but when it happens, do we always realize it was 'after the fact'? I'm not so certain that our time sequences are as well ordered as we like to think."

"Possibly." Her face held doubt.

"The bigger question is what happened to the temple builders."

"Civilizations come and go," she replied. "Look at our own ancient history. Scores of civilizations have vanished, and we can only conjecture why."

"But they usually were succeeded by higher civilizations," he objected.

"Usually is not always."

"I'll grant that. But the Emperor and the first man still are linked by a common thread. Somehow we always manage to bridge the discontinuities. But I'm getting into your area."

She laughed. "It's not a monopoly. The best we can do is guess. We can't cite precedents. I never before realized how much we lean on history."

"We still have to destroy what makes this planet tick."

"That scarcely seems possible unless we find buildings sufficiently preserved to yield records, even if just in the form of art or statuary. Alton's right on that." She tilted her head, eyeing him speculatively. "I'd like to return to the temple, sift through the rubble."

"I wouldn't."

"You believe it would be dangerous?"

"We were warned once," he answered. "I'm convinced the temple was destroyed to prevent just that."

"How was it destroyed? That's what disturbs me."

"Energy source unknown."

"But you have an idea?"

"I'm keeping my mind open," he denied.

"Evasive." Her eyes searched him. "I'd still like to return."

"You'll never get permission."

"Why not?"

"Woon wants to forget that temple; so does Kimbrough." He laughed wryly. "They believe it's spooked."

"Isn't it?"

"In a sense, yes; but even spooks can be found."

"We'll find it." She nodded briefly. "I feel certain of that."

"That should be interesting." He thought his voice sounded slightly hollow.

Alton Yozell stroked his jaw, his eyes on the captive bird. With a few variations in color and structure, it bore a striking resemblance to the common gull which was found on nearly all oxygen-rich planets possessing seas, moons to raise their tides, and a not-too-severe climate. The plumage was pure white, the legs black, the tail feathers conspicuously forked.

But it wasn't those things that had caught his eye so much as the bird's manner. It was the only word he could think of to describe it. Most caged birds simply hopped around, pecked at food, or perched complacently. While occasionally they might show alarm at the presence of humans, they had never—in his experience—riveted their attention on a human for any prolonged period.

This bird did.

He had noticed from the first that the small black eyes seldom left him. When he circled the cage, the gull turned to keep him in view. When he set himself to some small task, as several times he had, the gull watched him intently. *Intently?* How could he attribute expression to eyes as blank as polished stone? And yet the word fitted.

He was intrigued. Birds, all birds, fell low on the scale of intelligence. Creatures of stimulus-response, they acted out their lives along purely instinctual patterns. Reaction replaced reason. Yet this bird gave every indication of intelligence. Not that it had performed intelligently; he had yet to devise stratagems to test that. But the appearance of intelligence was undeniable, as was a certain wariness. *Yet the bird had allowed him to walk up to it, pick it up, but had exhibited not the slightest alarm at being*

placed in the cage. Was the wariness his own imagination? He was certain not.

He wished again that he could return a pair of the birds to Cappelle, the sector capital, for display to his colleagues. But that was impossible; not even the Director of the Survey Service could waive that restriction.

When he retired, he lay awake watching the bird in the dim glow of the night lamp. Its eyes, catching and reflecting the light, remained fastened directly on him. Not once did they look away. Neither did the bird show any inclination to sleep. Yozell grew uneasy. There was something unnatural and ominous about the bird, an intelligent bird, that could sense a force field!

Apprehensively he sat up. Perhaps he should get rid of it, keep it outside. As if reading his mind, the bird lifted a wing, tucked its head under it in the manner in which many birds sleep. Yozell watched it for a long moment before his uneasiness began to subside. He was letting the planet get to him, he decided. He had to control his emotions, discipline himself. The creature in the cage was simply a bird, nothing more.

After a while he slept.

He awoke to a faint clucking noise. Groggily he sat up and switched on the night lamp. The bird's small beady eyes were fastened on him. He was wondering about it when that fragment that was Uli made the transfer.

Yozell shuddered, crying out hoarsely. He tried to spring from the bed, but his body failed to respond. He shuddered once again. The psychic part of him that constituted the *inner self* was helplessly imprisoned, utterly subservient to the new being which possessed him. Yet he could perceive, feel, *think*. That last was the worst of all, for he finally knew the secret of the birds. And of Uli.

He felt a great sorrow for mankind.

Uli exulted.

He possessed the biologist's memories, knowledge, vocabulary, mannerisms—everything necessary to enable him to function as Yozell for as long as necessary. And, for a short while, he would need Yozell totally. He could make the biologist's body do exactly as he wished; he could wear him as a mask. Alton Yozell was the key to the ship, the galaxy, the entire Middle Universe.

While the biologist slept, the fragment of Uli—which for all practical purposes was Uli—contemplated the immedi-

ate future. He had to get his own body into the ship, have Yozell hide it in a secure place. Next, he had to have Yozell bring more birds into the ship, one for each key member of the crew and science staff. And he had to kill the telepath.

He debated that. His inclination to dispose of the telepath now, held elements of risk. But in a few days, when he controlled the ship, he could kill him at will. Ah, how easily the humans would fall! The prospect made him feel infinitely superior.

The galaxy was open! Where first? Yozell's knowledge told him that perhaps a less populous planet would be best—one that lay at the outer fringes of commerce and travel—where government was less rigid, less organized. In Yozell's mind, "where life was more individual." The biologist had neatly categorized a score of such planets. He had but to find the proper one and fission.

Fission!

But if fission meant personal death—he shuddered at the idea—would his descendants one day know who had given them the galaxy, the Middle Universe? No matter, he was acting in accordance with his kind, following a destiny deeply imprinted in the cells of his being. Still, he would like the Qua of that distant day to know the name of their benefactor; he would like the name "Uli" to ring throughout the corridors of time.

When the biologist awakened, outwardly much the same person as when he had retired for the night, Uli directed his activities in accordance with the habit patterns ingrained in Yozell's memory. Uli had him rise, care for his bodily needs, depilate his face, shower, dress—the things Yozell had done almost every waking morning. Afterward, as the biologist's memory told him to do, he directed him toward the wardroom for breakfast.

As the biologist walked down the corridor, Uli experienced a frightening thought: Suppose the telepath were there, scanned the biologist's mind, and sensed something amiss? He couldn't read it, of course, but that in itself could alert him.

He was about to have Yozell turn back when he realized that such a course could have equally disastrous consequences. If Yozell broke his customary habit patterns, attention might be focused on him; especially with the present tense atmosphere. He couldn't risk that. Yozell had to go, step by step, through his usual routine. But Uli

made one resolve: he would keep the telepath under constant surveillance . . . until he killed him.

Yozell entered the wardroom, nodded to the few persons present, obtained his breakfast from an adjoining cubicle, and took his customary seat. Through the eyes of his newly acquired host, Uli scanned the others quickly. The ponderous, ruddy-faced man at the head of the longest table was Vernon Woon, the ship's captain. Woon's mind was a reservoir of stellar pathways through *unspace*, a mysterious realm that he failed to understand, but which he had traversed in many directions. His subconscious sang with the knowledge of a thousand planets. Yozell had considered him a necessary evil.

The gaunt, stoop-shouldered man (Yozell's impression) next to Woon was Myron Kimbrough, the chief scientist. His thoughts were organized, disciplined and, at present, riding uneasily on a sea of subconscious fear. *There was danger, danger*—The fear leaped upward in stabbing spikes, breaking through into his awareness, thoughts he rigidly tried to suppress. Yozell's feelings about him had been neutral. Sam Gossett, Burl Ashford, Ivor Bascomb, Paul Rayfield. . . . He let Yozell's eyes roam the room, relieved to find the telepath absent. A slender olive-faced man (of Asian ancestry, Yozell's memories revealed) was Henry Fong, a historian. A female of the species, a meteorologist, sat next to him. Her name was Robin Martel. At the moment, she was contemplating Harlan Duvall, a psych-medic who sat across from her, as a potential mate; but her face revealed none of that.

Kimbrough suddenly lifted his head, his gaze riveted on the biologist. "What about the bird?"

"It's . . . similar to the gull family." Uli had the biologist speak hesitantly, as was his habit. "It bears a remarkable resemblance to the ivory gull—*pagophila eburnea*—except for the forked tail. That particular gull breeds high in the Arctic regions of Old Earth. Or did before the nuclear exchange," he added.

Kimbrough scowled. "Anything unusual about it?"

"It appears quite ordinary."

"There's nothing ordinary about any part of this planet," Paul Rayfield growled.

"The sooner we leave, the better," Burl Ashford cut in. His moon-shaped face, turned toward Woon, all but quivered.

"We have a job to do," snapped Woon. Silence fell over

the table. Yozell's eyes rested on the geologist. Ashford's mind seethed with fear. Despite himself, it dominated almost every thought and action. *Aliens! Aliens!* The word screamed from the depths of Ashford's brain. Most of the others felt fear in varying degrees, but exhibited it in various mental manifestations. Paul Rayfield was tense, jittery, because he sensed danger but not its source; Ivor Bascomb clung to the hope that "it would all pass;" Sam Gossett entertained a quiet resignation. Robin Martel, when her thoughts weren't centered on Harlan Duvall, felt certain that something terrible was about to happen. Only Henry Fong, the historian, exhibited an odd mental detachment; whatever might happen, his chief interest lay in recording it.

Later, Uli directed Yozell outside to procure a skimmer. Although he was aware of the prohibition against leaving the ship alone, he decided he would have to risk the violation. When no one was watching, he had Yozell take off in the direction of the rising sun, toward a distant range of hills that edged the grasslands.

Yozell felt no desire to watch the strange lands that fled past beneath him. He felt no wonder, no emotion, no consciousness of self; neither did he know that he felt none of those things. The last spark deep in his brain, that had enabled him to think, had died. He no longer felt the sorrow for mankind.

He brought the skimmer down in a rock-brimmed clearing far beyond the borders of the hills. Before him rose a jagged slope, awesome in its lithic protuberances and overhanging ledges. A deep gorge, cut by the million-year passage of a swiftly-flowing river, wound through the heart of the tangled scape.

Yozell scanned the scene blankly. Higher up, he spotted the black mouths of caves. Uli contemplated them through the biologist's eyes. They appeared little changed from that day, many thousands of years before, when he had selected one for his hiding place. But that particular cave no longer was visible; it was blocked by a huge granite slab that measured greater in volume than the *Alpha Tauri*. Uli had placed it there.

Guided by Yozell's eyes, he exerted the mind power. The granite slab lifted, moved far to one side, and settled into a rocky gorge. Now the mouth of another cave was visible in the scar. Uli gave more directions.

Yozell scrambled up the slope to this new cave. Although

quite blind in its dark interior, he walked straight ahead. At the rear of the cave, he paused; groping upward, he located a rocky ledge. He moved his hand carefully until his fingers encountered a small, oval-shaped object that was smooth to the touch. Gingerly he lifted it.

Out in the sunlight again, Uli examined his body through Yozell's eyes. It was the first time he'd seen himself in . . . how many thousands of years? Ah, the polished beauty of it. The symmetry. The small crease at one end that could open to expose the dark eye beneath. He remembered when last he had opened it.

His first host, a biped, had exhibited him to another biped, and to another and another. To each, his host had called attention to "the thing that looked like an eye in the egg-shaped stone;" and each in turn had become a host. The drama had been repeated ten thousand times before he'd had himself hidden in the cave, had securely blocked it with the gigantic slab. Since then, he'd had no use for the eye; he'd used those of his hosts as visual funnels through which to transfer his mind fragments at will. But the beauty of his being, the exquisite form . . . it was pleasant to look upon himself again.

With the memories flooding back, he gave thanks that his deliverance from this particular planet was near. How he ached for the stars, the waiting worlds. *Tlo, Xexl, Zimzi, Yilill*—the names from long ago flowed like sweet honey (Yozell's term!) through his mind. Alone of his kind, he had crossed the gulfs; ahead lay his destiny.

He returned his attention to the biologist.

Yozell slipped the strange object into a specimen bag and returned to the skimmer. When he landed alongside the *Alpha Tauri*, Myron Kimbrough was waiting, his face a mixture of anger and relief. "Where have you been?" he demanded.

"Making a sweep." Yozell blinked owlshly in the morning light. "Why?"

"The orders are that no one goes out alone," snapped Kimbrough.

"Good Lord, I forgot." Yozell feigned the proper amount of startlement.

"Why didn't you answer your communicator? We've been calling you for two hours."

"Communicator?" Yozell blinked again. "I never thought to turn it on."

ALTON'S UNGUESSABLE

"This isn't a planet on which one can afford carelessness, Alton."

"I'll remember," he apologized.

"We can't set bad examples."

"I'll apologize to Captain Woon."

"I would if I were you." Kimbrough's tone changed. "See anything interesting?"

"Nothing new." Yozell shook his head. When the chief scientist turned away, he proceeded immediately to his quarters. Uli plumbed the borrowed mind for a safe place to hide. Finally, because it appeared so innocuous, he had the biologist place him in a small drawer that held personal effects. It would be but for a day or two at most!

Secure in his new quarters, Uli dispatched the biologist outside to bring back five or six of the host birds, a number which he knew wasn't large enough to attract attention. Later he could have him make a second trip. Tonight, while the ship slept, he would have Yozell distribute the birds in strategic places—the quarters of the captain, the chief scientist, and those of other key men. Within a short while he would have as many hosts as he would need.

It was, he felt, a good beginning for the conquest of the galaxy.

SIX

ROGER KEIM glanced at the sky; a few patches of white cloud sailed toward the rising sun. Otherwise it was clear, the morning warm—a climate that Robin Martel, the meteorologist, had predicted would prevail at this latitude throughout the greater part of the year. In that, at least, he couldn't fault the planet.

He transferred his gaze to the birds wheeling above the grasslands. Yozell's description of them as "gulls" seemed exactly right. He'd seen tens of thousands just like them on Klasner and TARTH and Jondell, on a score of planets he'd known. The graceful way they soared, the slow rise and fall of their wings, made them appear born more to the sky than to the land.

But were they just gulls? The question returned, nibbling uneasily at his mind as he squinted to bring them into sharper focus. Gulls that could sense force fields. And why did they tend to congregate in the vicinity of the *Alpha Tauri* when no food was available? Neither could he forget the gull that hovered inches from Weber's face just seconds before the crewman's death, nor the single gull in the sky when the temple had collapsed. Coincidence? If so, it was the kind of coincidence which throughout history had given rise to a million superstitions.

But there were other questions. What was the thunder that filled his mind by day and vanished by late evening? Why the ominous sense of foreboding that seldom deserted him? Weber's broken neck and the temple crash were more unanswerable "whys." Small wonder that panic was building in the ship. First Burl Ashford, now a dozen others wanted to leave. Even Sam Gossett. It was worse among the crewmen; he could see in their faces and sense in their actions a restlessness which but thinly veiled their fears.

Perhaps Lara was right. Perhaps they should sift through the temple's debris, to ascertain something of the nature of its builders and why they had vanished. A civilization at the plastic level simply didn't disappear without a trace unless the cause was cataclysmic. War? Then there should be ruins of cities, roads, a scattering of artifacts. But there weren't, and that struck him as the most damning of all; yet he wasn't exactly certain why.

An alien intelligence? He let his mind play with the term. If so, what was its nature? He couldn't associate the gulls with such intelligence by any stretch of the imagination. Yet what did that leave? Demons, harpies, ghouls, ghosts—he grimaced at the things his mind conjured. But such supernatural beings didn't cause ancient temples to crash. He had to look elsewhere. Return to the temple? It could do no harm. At least it couldn't fall on him, he thought wryly. And now was as good a time as any. He realized he had been edging toward that decision all morning.

As a precaution, he returned inside to exchange his bolt gun for a more accurate laser weapon. Debating whether or not to enlist Kimbrough's sanction, he decided against it; he would face the wrath of Woon and Kimbrough later.

When he returned outside, he noticed that one of the skimmers had departed in the few moments that he'd been

gone. Entering another vehicle, he pointed it toward the site where the temple had stood. Although he had no beam to guide him, he was certain he could find it.

The golden-hued grasses, a stream sparkling in the morning sun, the purplish blur in the distance that marked the forested hills—his eyes drank in the emptiness of the scene. With the patches of ragged cloud now behind him, there was only the sapphire blue of the sky, a sense of immensity, of desolation. Silence. Nothing moved.

He did not see the bird that followed far behind.

Despite the crackling thunder and pressure in his mind, he felt momentarily at peace. For most of his life, it seemed, he'd dwelt in solitude. Not solitude in a physical sense, but in the invisible barrier that separated him from his fellow men, but not from other telepaths. But the T-men were few and widely scattered. As for the world of non-telepaths, he was not their kind; their attitude seldom failed to convey that. Scientists were more liberal, more understanding, but. . . . It was the *but* that he always sensed. He was a T-man. Period. As such, he lay beyond the social pale.

But the solitude of the moment was different; it came from the emptiness, the stillness, the utter peace. With regret, he realized that one day tall buildings would pierce these serene skies; freight and passenger vehicles would fill the air; the planet would throb and hum as a hive of humanity. He was thankful that it wouldn't come in his day.

Lifting the skimmer to clear the first trees, he saw a light-colored object in the sky far ahead. He studied it, puzzled for a moment until he realized it was the missing skimmer. Lara! The identity of its occupant came intuitively. He realized that her mission probably was the same as his. She was alone; he knew that also. As he reached toward the communicator to call her on the Q band, her skimmer dropped lower. Concluding that she was approaching the clearing, he hesitantly withdrew his hand. Seconds later her vehicle dropped below the treetops.

Would she believe he had followed her on purpose? Probably, but he had no intention of turning back. He dropped lower, watching the forest giants wheel past beneath him. Movement in the periphery of his eye brought his head up sharply. A gull! Its wings motionless, it seemed pinned against the blue of the sky.

His heart began to pound. All at once he had to tear

his eyes away as the clearing rushed toward him. Abruptly decelerating, he felt the small vehicle buck. Even so he overshot the landing area and had to circle back. Hovering, he peered down. Emerging from her skimmer, Lara was turning toward the jungle trail first blazed by Bascomb. A crackling roar filled his brain.

Motion! The realization struck him before he saw its source—a huge tree that inexplicably had begun to sway. Its top whipped violently. He was trying to discern the cause when the gigantic trunk snapped and toppled toward her.

"Watch out!" The shout of alarm leaped involuntarily from his lips. Horror-struck, he saw her jerk her face toward the sky. She seemed rooted to the spot forever before she made a frantic dash to one side. An instant later the forest giant crashed and splintered over the spot where she had stood.

Another treetop whipped. Her frightened face turned upward, she saw the huge trunk arcing toward her. Again she bolted to safety with just a split second to spare. Keim dropped his skimmer straight down, striking the ground so violently that it bounced.

"Lara," he shouted frantically. Leaping from the vehicle, he raced toward her. She whirled, saw him, screamed a shrill warning as another tree came crashing down. He reached her, grasped her hand and yanked her to safety. One branch smashed her skimmer to a mass of wreckage.

"What's happening?" she cried wildly.

"Temples are toppling."

"What?"

"Into the forest, quick!" He pulled her toward the sanctuary among the thick trunks.

"They'll fall on us," she screamed.

"They'll protect us," he shouted, wondering if they really would. One small part of his mind screamed that there was no safety anywhere. Not on Krado I! Halting between two gigantic trunks, he glanced back.

The tree that had struck the skimmer rose from the ground. Hanging parallel as if floating, it began to rotate about its long axis until the massive trunk was pointed directly toward them. Keim sensed the danger and jerked her to safety behind the forest giant next to them. With the suddenness of an arrow unleashed from a bow, the suspended trunk hurtled toward them. A splintering roar

told him that the big tree had been stopped, at least momentarily.

His mind spun. A devastating fear flamed inside him. With a terrible awareness he knew that the entire forest—every tree, shrub, and vine—was a potential killer. He wanted to race wildly away, regardless of direction. Only the iron discipline of his will told him he had to think clearly; the panic could come later. Could they reach the remaining skimmer, get it into the air? Or was that also disaster?

Her hand clasped tightly in his, he threaded his way toward the clearing. The trees around them whipped, crackled, fell. The roaring that assailed his ears gave the impression that a tremendous gale had struck the forest. Twice he managed to pull her to safety as trees whistled past like feathers in a high wind. They reached the edge of the clearing just as the remaining skimmer was torn to shreds—ripped asunder by monstrous invisible hands.

"What's happening?" she cried hysterically.

"The alien!" His eyes darted around, seeking an avenue of escape.

"Alien?"

"Whoever or whatever it is." The corner of his eye caught the violent whipping of another treetop; he jerked his gaze upward to judge its fall. As he did, he saw the gull, then a second one, circling the clearing intent on the scene below.

His hand streaked to a pocket, came out with a laser. Automatically setting the beam to maximum coverage, he swung it toward them; his finger came back on the firing key. A small flare in the sky, and then another, told him the gulls were no more. Almost instantly the roaring ceased, the swaying trees grew still, the silence swept back.

Lara started to totter and would have fallen had he not caught her. "It's all over," he consoled.

"I'm frightened." She raised her eyes. "How could the gulls do that?" she whispered.

"Psychokinesis."

"The mind power? It's not supposed to exist," she protested.

"So they tell us."

"But gulls. . . ."

He shook his head. "I can't believe it was the gulls. They were the lookouts, if I can use that term; but the intelligence behind them is something else."

"But how?" she asked perplexedly.

"I can't answer, but I'm certain the gulls are only agents, that the alien—or aliens—can exert the mind power through them."

"That's unbelievable!"

"Not the way those trees were whipping around." He scanned the sky, relieved to find it clear. "But we're safe, at least for the moment. Whatever the power is, we've blinded its eyes."

"If it could do that. . . ." She watched him, the fear flooding her face anew.

"It could destroy the *Alpha Tauri* just as easily, if that's what you're thinking." He caught the dilemma posed by his own words and continued, "But why hasn't it? And why, of the entire crew, did it just now try to kill us?"

"Because we came here?" she asked faintly.

"No, it's something more. Why didn't it kill us when it destroyed the temple? Why did it exert its power against the building rather than us? It could have killed the six of us then." His head jerked up. "I just remembered. . . ."

"What?" she cut in edgily.

"Yozell caught one of the birds, took it aboard."

"Oh God!" Her face turned ashen.

"That's why it hasn't destroyed the ship. It needs it!" He caught her hand. "We've got to get back." He jerked erect as a low whooshing filled the sky. The sound grew, seemingly rolling toward them like the approach of a thousand thunderstorms. The trees edging one side of the clearing trembled. Almost instantly they began moving skyward, dissipating, vanishing.

Lara screamed.

"Follow me," shouted Keim. He plunged through the forest, half pulling, half dragging her along with him. Jerking up the laser, he blazed a path ahead. The whooshing behind grew louder. A swift backward glance revealed an entire area of trees, bushes and clinging vines streaming upward, vanishing into nothingness. The clearing in which they had landed was growing bigger and bigger. Racing toward the distant grasslands, he felt the terror sear his mind.

Lara regained her control, ran swiftly at his side. He slashed their way through thickets, across small knolls, fled along the edge of a gully. Once, when she commenced to falter, he pulled her ruthlessly ahead.

The mind power! The mind power! The knowledge flared in his consciousness. My God, what had they stumbled on-

to? Where did man go from here? They had to reach the ship, escape the planet. *And a bird was in the ship!*

"I can't go on," Lara gasped. She stumbled, her breath a harsh whistle in her throat. He caught her arm, stooped, flung her over his shoulder and plunged ahead. The gully intersected a deep gorge that appeared all but uncrossable. Scrambling along its edge, he twisted through the thicker growth to preserve the power of the laser. The *whoosh* behind had grown to an ear-splitting howl.

The gorge veered and he glimpsed the plain, a shimmering band of yellow slashing the horizon. My God, how far was it? He must have been running in circles, he thought dully. He tried to fix a point to guide him as he staggered ahead. Conscious of the growing ache in his legs, he wondered how much longer he could go on.

"The forest! Everything is vanishing!" Lara's scream rang in his ears. Now he knew what had happened to the temple, to the cities and towns that must have existed long ago. *The mind power!* What frightening thing had been loosed in the universe? But it wasn't a native of this planet; it had come! How? When? Why? He sobbed with the agony in his chest.

It had come to kill, to denude a planet . . . this "something" from the stars that man couldn't see, hear, feel. What if it reached the Empire? Oh God, oh God, oh God. . . .

His lungs aflame, he finally burst from the forest and out onto the plain. His aching muscles and tortured breathing told him he had to stop; the terror in his mind told him he couldn't. He had to run, run, run. . . .

Behind him, suddenly, came a vast stillness. He knew what it meant; the entire forest had been consumed. A world had died! The thought was like a crazy wind in his mind. He managed to run another few hundred yards before his legs buckled, sent them sprawling into the tall grass. Scrambling to Lara's side, he realized she'd passed out. He rolled her into a more comfortable position before staggering to his feet.

Beyond the border of the grasslands he saw nothing but barren ground that appeared to have been forever devoid of life. No stump, no rock, no rise broke its surface. It looked exactly as if it had been leveled by a gigantic blade—leveled and melted and fused into the smoothness of glass. His mind shouted the impossibility of such a thing even as his eyes beheld its truth. But the grass

remained! Apparently whatever had destroyed the forest hadn't believed it necessary to destroy the plain. He gave silent thanks for that.

He gazed down at the girl. Breathing heavily, soft moans escaped her lips. He knelt and gently touched her shoulder, then mopped her brow and pulled the grass closer to shield her face from the hot sun. She jerked convulsively, and all at once her eyelids snapped open. As she started to struggle to a sitting position, he restrained her. "Rest," he counseled, "we're safe."

"The trees!" She blanched at the memory.

"Our alien friend."

"Everything . . . just vanished," she exclaimed in a hushed voice. Fear and awe filled her face.

"He couldn't see us," he explained. "That's why he destroyed the forest . . . to kill us. I said *he* but perhaps it's a *she* or an *it*. The pronoun makes small difference. Or there might be a thousand of them, or a million; I don't know."

"What difference do numbers make, with that kind of power?" She propped herself up on an elbow, gazing at him. "But the gulls, I can't believe it."

"I'm certain they were merely its eyes."

"But for one mind to take over another, control it from the inside—what kind of a monster could it be?"

"A terrifying one." He anxiously scanned the sky. "Or perhaps it's not a monster. Alien, yes, but it might be acting in harmony with its own nature, its own values. Perhaps to it we are the monsters. Are we monsters to the germs that we kill?"

"That's not the same thing," she protested.

"How do we know?"

"Aliens." She shivered.

"We always knew there would come a time," he observed. "It's a specter that's haunted us since first we reached the stars."

"Yes, but here. . . ." She glanced around. "It seems such a peaceful world."

"Aliens have to live somewhere."

"Please."

"We have to face it, have to get used to the idea," he replied soberly.

"Can we ever?"

"After the initial shock, yes." He regarded her thought-

fully. "When I flew over the clearing and saw the tree begin to topple, I shouted. You looked up, saw it, ran."

"Yes." She eyed him steadily, a faint flush coming to her cheeks.

"You couldn't have heard my voice from the distance."

"I . . . But I did."

He smiled faintly. "Telepathically?"

"Ridiculous," she blazed.

"What's the matter, ashamed of it?"

"You're, you're. . . ."

"Don't bother to deny it," he cut in. "I know better."

"Please. . . ."

He asked gently, "Has it been a burden?"

For a long moment she looked away before she forced her eyes to meet his. "More than you could know," she said.

"Feel better now that it's out?"

"I . . . don't know. I'm not certain how much of a telepath I really am. I've never consciously used the talent since I first suspected I might have it."

"Why not?" he asked harshly. "Did you believe it might make you less than human?"

"I didn't say. . . ."

"No, but you've felt that way," he interrupted. "Well, get it out of your head. A telepath is just a human with an extra sense. Is that bad? I'm a T-man and I've never denied it, never wanted to. Neither do I think that I'm less than human. Or more," he added.

"No one said that," she flared.

"No?" His eyes mocked her. "Lots of people believe so."

"Why are you doing this to me?" she cried.

"I'm trying to make you realize that you are what you are, that all the hiding in the world won't change it. And really, it's not that bad."

"I didn't say that it was," she denied heatedly. She dug her nails into her palm. "I could hate you!"

"Why? We're of a kind."

"Please." Sobbing brokenly, she turned away again.

"Get it out of your system," he advised. "You'll feel better."

Watching her shoulders move convulsively, he could sympathize with her. Being a telepath was one thing; having the world know it was something quite else. It meant closed doors, few friends, hostility and outright hate. It

also meant, on the part of many, envy. Most nontelepaths believed that the talent meant an open look into every mind, a peek at every secret. But it wasn't that way at all. Telepathy came in varying degrees. Most telepaths were quite limited. A few could only grasp the essentials of thought, and then only at a very short distance and under the most favorable conditions. He was the exceptional telepath. How exceptional, he wasn't certain, but he knew his ability far transcended the textbook limits. And there had been other episodes beyond telepathy. That was one of the things he had kept to himself. So how could he criticize Lara? He felt a touch of guilt.

Finally, when she dabbed her eyes and turned, he said, "Why not talk about it? I'm certain you'll feel better."

"It's a shock for someone to know." She tried a smile. "But I'm still not certain how much of a telepath I am. I haven't tested it, haven't wanted to. Even though, thoughts often come through quite clearly. I hear things that I don't want to hear, if I can use the word."

"Hear? It's a good word. Telepaths use it all the time."

"It's like hearing, yes. Sometimes even at a distance the telepathy comes through almost as clearly as if the person were talking directly to me. Background thoughts often come through in much the same way."

"I'd say your telepathic sense was quite strongly developed. Only the more gifted ones pick up the background chatter."

"I really don't understand it—the telepathy, I mean. You said that when you called from the skimmer I couldn't hear you, that I had read your mind. How could I when I wasn't even aware that you were there?"

"The same way you pick up background thoughts. At the subconscious level your whole mind was probably attentive, listening."

"It seems more logical that you projected the warning into my mind," she insisted. "I've read theories to that effect."

"It's possible, but I don't believe anyone really knows. But you still read me. That makes you telepathic."

"Read?"

"Another term."

"Is distance a factor? I've heard that it is."

"It usually is when a telepath is reading a nontelepath," he told her. "The reception is usually rather poor unless he is quite close to the subject."

"And between two telepaths?"

"Quite often communication can be established over vastly greater distances, although there are many variables. There also are wide differences in ability." He saw that she was avid for answers to questions that had nagged her for years, and went into the subject in more detail. "Actually the number of telepaths is too limited to provide any sort of reliable data," he ended.

"I've always wondered." She glanced away. "Right now, I want to forget all about it."

"I don't believe you should."

"Why not?"

"The alien," he answered softly.

"What has that to do with it?"

"The birds are its eyes," he reminded, "therefore they must be telepathic. How else could they receive orders, transmit back what they see? Or perhaps, as you suggested, he invades their minds, and for all practical purposes becomes one with them."

"But when you killed the birds?"

"He must have withdrawn." He debated the possibilities. "He couldn't see us, that's why he destroyed the entire forest in the attempt to kill us. He was hurling the mind power in the blind."

"That's frightening."

"He—I keep thinking of it as a *he*—must exist in his own body somewhere. While he undoubtedly controls the minds of the birds by telepathy, it scarcely seems possible that the birds could know what to look for or what to report. I believe your surmise was right; he actually must invade their minds—become part of them."

"There were two birds above the clearing," she reminded.

"I've considered that. Either there are a number of aliens, each of which can project its mind into a bird, or there's a single alien which can fragment its mind, perhaps even become a part of a large number of birds at once. Perhaps. . . ." He snapped his fingers. "That's it, the roaring I've sensed."

"What about it?"

"A communication network. I've theorized that one existed." He felt a sudden jubilation. "It's the thing, whatever the thing is, talking with the birds."

"That is frightening," she whispered.

"With the mind power, yes."

"What can we do?"

"That's why we need your telepathy. We need every weapon we can get."

"I can't see. . . ."

"What might we find when we return to the ship?" he interrupted. "What of the bird Yozell captured? If the alien can penetrate the minds of birds, control their actions, perhaps it can do the same to a human. Perhaps Weber's death was an abortive attempt. At least the pk, the psychokinesis, could explain his broken neck."

When she remained silent, he continued, "He has the power to destroy the ship, but hasn't. Why not? I puzzled over that when I realized he has the mind power. It struck me that he hasn't destroyed the ship because he needs it."

"Good Lord!" Her face showed shock.

"Can you imagine what might happen if a creature like that managed to penetrate the Empire? Man would be relegated to second place overnight; in time, he would be eliminated. I'm certain that's what happened to the temple builders."

"You keep using the singular." Her eyes held a question.

"Perhaps there are thousands of them, millions. I made it the singular form because that's how I hope it is. I'd hate to think the planet was filled with them."

She forced a smile. "I'll buy the singular, but how can we stop it?"

"I don't know." He shook his head wearily. "But I do know that we have to escape from this world, and without an alien on board. That's why we have to scan the minds of every person on the ship, make certain the alien isn't parading in human form."

He saw the protest in her face and added, "I don't like it any better than you, but it's necessary. The stakes are that high."

She raised her head. "And if we find someone?"

"We'll resolve that when we come to it," he said grimly.

Half-erect, she struggled to look out over the top of the grass. He knew her thoughts; it would be all but impossible to return to the ship during daylight, especially since all the birds around it might be telepathic. And they would be; he held scant doubt of that.

He said, "We'll keep a sharp eye. We might have to crawl when we get closer."

"I'll crawl." She laughed nervously. Starting to lower her body, she suddenly stiffened. "The birds—they're com-

ing!" He saw them at the same instant, a distant line of small dots against the sky.

"Down," he urged. As she dropped to his side, he pulled the grass together above them, but not so much as to be noticeable. "Don't move a muscle," he warned. He felt her shiver and patted her shoulder reassuringly before rolling over to watch the sky.

After what seemed an eternity, the birds came.

Their wings flapping slowly, they flew in a long line that extended laterally to their flight path. Scarcely daring to breath, Keim momentarily expected the grasslands on which they lay to erupt into nothingness. When finally they passed, he rose to a crouch to study the sky. The birds again had become small white blobs in the distance. "Safe," he murmured.

She moved to a sitting position. "I don't know how much more of this I can take," she confessed. "It's nerve-racking."

"But it tells us something; they didn't sense us."

"Because they couldn't see us?"

He nodded soberly. "At least it has some limitations, or the birds have."

"They'll keep looking," she asserted. He nodded. The chance of reaching the ship safely during daylight appeared extremely remote. They'd have to hide, wait for the fall of night, hope for the best when the protective force field was lifted at dawn. It also was likely that when they failed to return, Kimbrough would dispatch skimmers to look for them. He most certainly would reason their destination. Suppose someone on a reconnaissance flight spotted what had happened to the forest? He stirred uneasily. The *Alpha Tauri* would abandon the planet within minutes. *And with a bird on board!* Still, they'd have to kill it; that order was rock hard. But he couldn't worry about all that now.

He looked at Lara. Her steady blue eyes showed none of the fright they'd displayed earlier. She'd do, he thought.

"Thank you," she murmured. Remembering her telepathy, he colored, then laughed.

"That'll take some getting used to," he offered.

"For us both."

"It's not unpleasant once you accept it."

"Does one ever get used to it, Roger?"

"In time."

He looked over the top of the grass in the direction in which lay the *Alpha Tauri*. Calculating its distance, he

realized that the night scarcely would be long enough to shield them all the way. They'd have to cover as much distance as possible by day. And when they reached the ship? He was almost afraid to think. But one thing was certain, the battle between man and alien had begun.

Were the telepaths dead?

The question filled Uli's mind as he watched the grasslands unfold through the eyes of the birds. With it he felt a fear that all but verged on terror. It was an emotion he'd never known until the coming of these bipeds; since then, he had experienced it with disturbing frequency.

Why should he fear? The word implied that the bipeds were a source of danger—a patent absurdity! Nothing in the entire universe could threaten a Qua. *Hadn't they conquered a million sun systems?* But he couldn't deny his uneasiness. It had been a shock to discover that the female biped—Lara Kamm was the name he'd dredged from her mind—also had been a telepath. *Had been?* Yes, for most certainly she was dead now, along with the telepath Keim.

Still Uli fretted. When first he'd discovered the female biped enroute to the site where the ancient temple had stood, his immediate impulse had been to kill her. It would have been simple then, but he'd delayed to probe her mind—quite a good mind, at least by human standards. She had wanted to know what had caused the temple to collapse, what had happened to its builders. More, in the dim recesses of her mind, she'd held a worry about a possible threat to her own civilization. It seemed incredible that she could link the collapse of an ancient temple on this remote planet to the possible annihilation of a stellar civilization, yet that had been the direction of her thoughts.

More disconcerting had been his failure to detect her telepathic ability. At least at first. Unlike the creature Keim, she'd kept it well concealed, almost from herself, as it were. There hadn't been the slightest indication of it in her consciousness. That alone was remarkable.

His decision to kill her had been followed by the question of *how*. He'd pondered it uneasily. Her death, by any seemingly unnatural means, might easily frighten the others from the planet; he was not yet ready for that. A falling tree? Ah, that was the kind of thing the humans *could* understand.

The arrival of the male telepath had caught him by

surprise. He'd known the instant Keim had left the ship, but he hadn't bothered to consider what his destination might be. There'd seemed nothing imperative about it at the time. The girl had been the immediate problem. Then suddenly Keim was there. Instantly sensing the danger, he'd warned her. And in that same fractional second she had revealed her telepathy. Through Keim's quick action, the falling tree had failed to kill her. It was then that he'd panicked.

But had he killed them? The question obsessed him. Tree nor bush nor vine remained of the jungle. In his frantic desperation—after the male telepath had blinded him by killing the birds—he'd utterly destroyed the forest and every life form in it for vast distances in all directions. The very hills had been leveled, seared; nothing remained but a glassy plain. Only the fear of frightening the other humans into precipitate flight from the planet had deterred him from destroying the grasslands.

Despite himself, he had to marvel at the male telepath. His was, by far, the strongest mind he'd yet encountered. But it wasn't that at which he marveled; it was at the telepath's almost total disregard of death. His calm. His logic. The rapidity of his thoughts. Even in the face of what most certainly was his imminent destruction, he'd immediately constructed a quite accurate theory of what was happening, what might happen, and what had happened to the bipeds of old. He also correctly had interpreted the role of the birds. Incredible! More baffling still, he had understood the nature of what was happening. Psychokinesis, the mind force! *But how had he understood the phenomenon? Had it occurred elsewhere? Did other humans possess the power?* The possibility was deeply perturbing. But Keim's mind, and that of the female telepath, were far more complex than that of the biologist Yozell. Such beings were dangerous.

But were they dead?

Not that it made a difference. He reflected on it uneasily. Before the night was over he'd control the minds of the captain, the chief scientist, all the key humans. He'd control the ship. If the two telepaths somehow had managed to escape from the fury in the forest—if *they had escaped!*—he'd kill them when they returned to the ship. Perhaps he'd have Yozell do it. Or Captain Woon. No matter, he would kill them.

Still, as he watched the grasslands unravel through the

eyes of the birds, he felt a distinct uneasiness. Although he tried to banish his annoyance, it persisted, for whatever reason he didn't know. Yet, inwardly, he did know. It had to do with one man.

That man was Roger Keim.

SEVEN

MOON K-1.2 edged above the horizon.

Its bluish beams, fanning out over the grasslands, gave the night a spectral, illusory quality distorting of distance. A deep, endless, shimmery night.

Keim first became aware of the change in light while slogging knee-deep through a marsh with Lara. He halted so abruptly that she stumbled against him. A hand shot out to steady her, pull her close; he felt her tremble.

Wordlessly they stared ahead. Silent and inert in its man-made cocoon fashioned of a force field, the survey ship *Alpha Tauri* hunched against the dark sky. His first impression was of a gigantic slug sprawled athwart the plain. "*Made it,*" he exulted telepathically.

"*I knew we would.*" Her silent whisper came to his mind as a simple declaration of faith. He hadn't been at all that certain. The hours just past had been plucked from a nightmare—endless, numbing hours of wading through bogs, pushing through grasses and reeds that often reached high above their heads, slogging through the knee-deep muck that nourished their roots; all in a Stygian night in which the few faint stars were but fleeting ghosts in the heavens. And the birds! Scores of times they'd halted, frozen by the wild flapping of wings as feathered creatures rose in alarm from their path. Each time they'd waited—caught with the dread that this might be *one of the birds*—waited for the grasslands to be seared from the face of the planet. Only the knowledge that they had to reach the *Alpha Tauri* before the first birds awakened had kept them pushing relentlessly ahead. The few times Lara had faltered, he'd slackened his pace; but never once had she complained. He felt increasingly proud of her.

Now, eyeing the ship, he knew their danger could increase a thousandfold. He felt the tension in her mind, an

anxiety that communicated itself to him. But he also sensed an insistent determination; she wasn't about to quit.

He listened inwardly for the muted thunder, heard none, and took it as an omen that the gulls were all roosting. How then did the alien watch the night? Or did it sleep? More imperative, *who* or *what* was the alien? What was the nature of a being with a mind so incredibly powerful that it could uproot forests, level hills, reduce them to a seared and glassy plain? That last was the most baffling of all.

"How can we get past the birds . . . through the force field?" Her question, tinkling in his mind, brought him back to the reality of their predicament. It was a question he'd kicked around during the long hours just past. Telling her of his plan, he hoped it would work.

Ahead the ground grew less marshy, the grass scarcely waist-high. Moving toward the black hulk backdropped by the bluish radiance of moon K-1.2, he probed ahead and to all sides, every sense attuned to the night. Rustlings in the grass, the scurrying of rodents—evidence of life all around them—kept his nerves at a taut, raw edge.

To his dismay, he realized that the horizon had brightened, dawn was in the offing. Dreading the moment when the first gulls would waken, he hurried his steps. Lara's breath whistled in her throat. Suddenly the ship loomed immensely.

He had noticed earlier that most of the birds, when not wheeling in the vicinity of the ship, tended to congregate in the grass close to the midship sides where the big freight elevators and passenger hatches were located. Alton Yozell had remarked the same thing. Hoping that the gulls maintained the same pattern during their roosting hours, he circled cautiously toward the ship's nose.

Closer, he crouched, motioning Lara down. Slowly, advancing but a foot at a time, he parted the grass ahead with infinite care. Lara moved like a silent wraith behind him. Their thoughts flowed from one to the other, some deliberately and some not. He was glad, for he felt that he was coming to know her very well. She no longer was the aloof, introspective woman he'd known before. She was, in fact, most feminine. And she held an awareness of him as a man. That was satisfying.

"It's getting light," she warned. He nodded, measured the distance yet to go and calculated where the edge of the force field might be. What he should do if the gulls

awakened and wheeled above him. Do? Quite obviously there was very little he could do. Smiling wryly, he moved ahead. *Carefull! Carefull! Carefull!* The word sang in his mind.

After what seemed an interminable period, he reached a position off the *Alpha Tauri's* bow. High up, the durametal ports—opened to enable direct vision from the command bridge—glinted in the first rays of dawn. *What of Yozell? What of the bird he had taken inside?* He couldn't afford to worry about such things now.

He gripped the laser, unlocked the safety and knelt lower. With the barrel of the weapon held parallel to the ground at a height of an inch or so, he squeezed the firing key, holding it back but a scant fraction of a second during which he moved the barrel laterally to its line of fire. A low hissing filled the air. When it died away a long black carpet appeared to have been unrolled through the grass.

Unmoving, he waited. If the beam had killed one of the gulls, what might happen? Would the alien sense its death, send out its winged hosts to discover the cause? It was a question he'd juggled earlier, a chance he had to take. Now, having taken it, he waited apprehensively. When nothing happened, his tension began to subside.

He shot a mental signal to Lara and started forward along the blackened path blazed by the beam. Despite the coolness of the false dawn, the hand gripping the laser was wet with sweat. He felt it, too, on his brow, his body; sweat and nerves keyed to a high pitch.

At the end of the blackened path he repeated the operation. Again he waited, again sensed no alarm, again stole forward. His nerves taut and frayed, his muscles aching from sheer fatigue, he wondered what hell the girl behind him must be suffering, what hell lay ahead? *What of the bird in the ship?* The question screamed in his mind.

The third time he fired the laser, the path abruptly ended a short distance from the muzzle. The force field! He sensed Lara's tension rise, subside. A glance at the sky revealed but a short time remaining before the blue-white sun leaped clear of the horizon.

He slithered into the tall grass alongside the force field. When Lara had settled alongside him, he reached up and pulled the long blades together to shield them from view. He'd scarcely finished when the low-muted thunder commenced again; it throbbed in his consciousness like the

rapid beat of a faraway drum. He wondered why Lara couldn't sense it. Could there be far greater differences in the telepathic trait than he knew?

Through the thick growth, he glimpsed the first birds rising—half a dozen at first, then more and more. Wheeling, they commenced to circle the ship at a safe distance from the force field.

"There are so many." Lara's silent murmur held awe. Scores of birds in the sky, hundreds more in the grasslands, yet not a single one had ever been seen to fly into the force field! Did the alien control them all? If so, could he exert the mind power through each and every one of them? A being that could destroy a forest, toss its very atoms to the winds! He shivered.

"How can we fight that?" Lara's question held a quiet despair.

"Depends on how many there are."

"Aliens?"

"There might be but one, there might be a million; we don't know. If we're lucky, there's only one."

"And then?"

"We have to kill it." The answer sounded so simple, yet what else could he tell her? The alien could command birds, destroy forests, probably pulverize the planet at will. And, oh, yes, he was invisible. But he had to kill it. He felt the mad desire to laugh.

"We don't have to win, Roger." Startled, he glanced at her. He'd have to remember her telepathy. Having his innermost thoughts exposed was a new experience, at least on the *Alpha Tauri*.

"We don't?"

"We only have to keep it from winning."

"If we both lose, the Empire wins. I've thought of that."

"It's the second best way," she agreed.

He looked at the sky, at moon K-1.2 speeding upward in the van of the sun, at the wheeling gulls plastered against the blue. If the alien—why did he always think of it as singular?—had destroyed the temple builders, then it had been on Krado 1 for a long, long time. If that assumption were correct, why were there no physical manifestations of its existence—no buildings, artifacts, nothing? The only manifestations were of its mind. A being that lived in birds. An it? A he? Keim settled for it.

But if it had destroyed the temple builders, it must have arrived on this planet long after them, else it would never

have permitted them to progress to the temple-building stage. That seemed logical. Yet, if this specific alien had destroyed the temple builders, its life span must measure in the tens of thousands of years. That didn't seem logical; not by human standards. There could be one alien, or many; an extremely old alien or aliens who were born and died in a somewhat normal life cycle. He was prepared to believe almost anything.

From where could such a being have come? And how? One thing was certain, if there were others like it in the galaxy, man was doomed. Hidden in its own small niche of stars, the Third Empire couldn't escape their attention forever. Suppose that somewhere planets teemed with such beings? Good God! But he couldn't afford to think of that now. He had to establish priorities.

The bird in the ship was the overriding problem. Priority One. He had to contact Yozell, warn him, and kill the bird, accomplishing all that, if possible, without getting the *Alpha Tauri* blown off the face of Krado 1. Whatever happened, they couldn't allow such a being to reach the Empire.

Shortly after dawn, one of the big hatches slid open. Headed by Carter, an Assistant Chief of Maintenance, ten or twelve crewmen spilled out onto the plain. The sight surprised Keim. Usually the crewmen didn't commence work until a later hour. Trying to probe their thoughts through the background of thunder in his mind, he got only the impression of fear and confusion.

He focused his attention on Carter. It was like trying to pick the notes of a single instrument from a vast symphony of orchestral sound. Thunder, cracklings, human thought—all were woven together in a single mosaic. He had to. . . .

There, he had it! For a few brief seconds Carter's thoughts emerged in bas-relief from the tumultuous background noise. They had to do with Woon. Woon had decided to abandon the planet immediately. Kimbrough had concurred, but Carter didn't know the reason. Sensing some dire danger, he was worried, fearful. So were his men. Their minds reeked with terror. There was no panic yet, but it was close.

Keim touched Lara's mind. *"Something has happened. Woon has ordered an immediate lift-off. Kimbrough has concurred."*

"*The alien?*" She rolled her head toward him; her eyes wide.

"*Probably. Can you read anything at all?*"

"*Just impressions of worry, fear. Their thoughts all run together. I can't separate them.*"

"*It'll come.*" He returned his attention to the scene as more workers spilled from the ship to help dismantle and store the equipment set up for use by members of the science staff. He caught movements in the periphery of his eye and twisted his head upward; several gulls were flying over the ship. The force field had been lifted! He returned his gaze to the crewmen. In a short while, a group under Carter moved toward Robin Martel's meteorological equipment, which had been set up only a short distance from where they lay.

"Get ready," he murmured, subconsciously reverting to speech. As the workers drew near, Keim pulled Lara to her feet and hurried toward them.

"My God," exclaimed Carter, "where did you come from?" He gazed incredulously at them.

"Had to walk back," explained Keim matter-of-factly.

"We thought you were dead. We tried for hours to raise you on the Q band—right up to the moment we put up the force field." Carter eyed their wet, muddy clothing. "What happened?"

"Accident." He brushed the question aside. "Why so early to work?"

"Getting ready for lift-off, and a damned good thing." Carter scowled. "This planet is jinxed."

"In what way?"

"Every way. No one's saying but the word gets around. They tell me that temple blew up right before your eyes."

"Collapsed," corrected Keim. "Old age."

"That so?" Carter eyed him skeptically. "How come Woon's so anxious to leave?"

"I couldn't say. When is lift-off?"

"As soon as we can make it. Sleep in a swamp?"

"Just about." Keim touched Lara's elbow and started her toward the ship. The thirty or forty paces to the hatch were a nightmare. Momentarily he expected a bolt to reach down from the sky and sizzle them. Certainly the gulls had seen them. Why didn't the alien strike?

"*We're going to make it!*" Lara's words came as a breathless whisper in his mind.

"*We'll make it.*" he nodded subconsciously, stifling the

impulse to quicken his step. What had frightened Woon? The alien? Everything came back to the alien. *Yozell's bird!* He felt a cold sweat. He paused at the hatch opening to cast a last glance at the sky—at the white, circling gulls.

Lara shivered. "*The alien's on board, isn't it?*"

"*I believe so.*" Somehow, now that he'd admitted it, he realized that he felt neither fear nor shock—just the cold fact of what faced them. In whatever form it was, and he was certain it was in a form other than the gull, it had taken up quarters somewhere in this vast vessel called the *Alpha Tauri*. An army of men could search a week with no assurance of finding it. If it were visible!

In the early hour, the corridors leading through the staff quarters were still deserted, for which he was thankful. Lara opened her door and turned, her face lifted toward him. "There isn't much time, is there?"

"I don't believe so," he answered gravely. She retreated a few steps and he followed, closing the door behind him. As he stepped toward her, she came to meet him. He kissed her fiercely, hungrily, felt her body molded against him, sensed the desire that competed with the shortness of time. My God, why couldn't this be another planet, another day, with an infinity yet to live? The question clubbed at his mind.

Finally she pushed herself free of him, brushed back her hair. Her eyes held a new wistfulness. "The alien," she whispered.

"I know."

She looked down at her muddy clothes. "I'll shower, change."

"Keep your door locked," he cautioned.

"And you?"

"I need time to think."

"Think," she echoed. She kissed him quickly and turned toward the inner room. Retreating to the corridor, he wondered how much time they did have. A lifetime wasn't enough. Not now.

He returned to his own quarters, his mind in turmoil. Reluctantly he forced his thoughts to the alien. He had a thousand questions, but no answers. Why had Woon suddenly ordered lift-off? That question plagued him most. Was it because of something the captain feared, or because of something he knew? There was a vast difference between the two. Woon wasn't one to frighten easily, not when backed by weapons that could destroy a planet. Whatever

the reason for the sudden decision, Kimbrough had concurred. Where did that leave him?

He tried probing the ship around him. Fragmentary thoughts flowed in, heavily laden with terror. His attempts to isolate Woon's mind returned nothing. Neither could he locate Myron Kimbrough. The failure brought his anxiety to a sharp edge.

The bird, he thought; *somehow it was all tied in with the bird*. He forced himself to move slowly while he depilated his face, showered, put on fresh clothes. Time, he realized, was a luxury; he wanted to enjoy it while he could. As an afterthought, he dropped the laser in a side pocket. Its feel against his hip was reassuring. Next he considered the possible courses of action. There had to be a beginning.

He'd begin with Alton Yozell.

"Roger, thank God you're back. Is Lara all right?" The flat, metallic quality of Alton Yozell's voice over the interphone filled Keim with a quick perturbation. An inner sense told him that something was radically wrong.

"Safe but tired," he answered. "I imagine she's resting." As he spoke, he tried to probe the biologist's mind, more disturbed than ever when he failed to get a response. Occasionally it was that way, but seldom totally. Yet this time it was; Alton Yozell's mind returned only a curious blankness.

"What happened?" asked the biologist.

"An accident. We lost the skimmers."

"Sorry to hear that, Roger."

"I have to talk with you right away, Alton. May I stop by?"

A brief silence ensued before Yozell replied, "I was just going to the wardroom for coffee. I'll stop by your place on my way." The interphone clicked off. Keim felt a stillness inside him. The strangeness he'd sensed went far beyond the blankness of the Biologist's mind, beyond the emotionless quality of his voice. He'd known Alton Yozell a long time. Gentle, mild of manner, he'd always exuded a genuine warmth. There had been no warmth this time, no life. It had been like listening to an automaton.

The bird! Keim felt a shiver run down his spine. Quite suddenly he knew that Alton Yozell no longer was Yozell; he was someone or something quite different. A horrible suspicion gripped him. And Captain Woon? Myron Kim-

brough? Had the alien taken possession of their minds? The possibility was a shocker.

"Roger?" Lara's voice whispered in his mind.

"Alton Yozell's coming to see me. Are you reading me? Stay where you are."

"I understand." The answer held reluctance.

"Concentrate, keep in contact."

"Please be careful."

"I think Alton. . . ." He broke communication as he sensed movement in the corridor. Movement? It was the sense of someone coming, yet with no identity. A chime sounded at the door. "Come in!" The instant he called he remembered it was locked. When he opened it, his first impression was of the rigid set of the biologist's face. It appeared oddly insensitive, a mask.

"I'm greatly relieved that you're safe," said Yozell. He entered and turned with a curiously mechanical grace. Usually he slouched; now he stood straight, his arms held stiffly at his sides. A swift probe of his mind returned only the same blankness. Feeling a cold chill, Keim dropped a hand to the laser in his pocket.

"Safe?" he asked.

"You've returned, Roger." Yozell's smile was a ghastly parody of its former warmth.

"Didn't you expect me to?"

"Not when you failed to answer on the Q band."

"The instruments were wrecked along with the skimmers."

"How did you escape?"

"From what?" demanded Keim. His nerves leaped and quivered.

"From . . . whatever happened."

"For God's sake, Alton, what's wrong with you?"

"Wrong?" Yozell's expression remained unchanged.

"Your mind—it's blank!"

"No, it's possessed of a greater power than I ever knew."

"The bird?" he grated.

"Not the bird." Yozell shook his head stiffly.

"The alien?"

"Ah. . . ."

"Tell me, Alton."

"We are children in the jungle of life, Roger."

"Children, good God!" Keim stared at him.

"But we are." The awful smile came again. "We've always fancied ourselves as the supreme form of life, but we're not. Does that shock you? This being is infinitely

greater. Time, space, life—all the imponderables of mankind—are quite elementary in the scale of its wisdom.”

“You’re bowing to this . . . thing?”

“Not bowing, Roger, just doing what I have to do.”

“Which is?”

“This.” Yozell jerked a laser from his pocket. Keim triggered his own weapon almost without thinking. The biologist staggered backward clutching at his chest, his eyes unseeing for a long moment before he collapsed. His body twitched once or twice, then was still.

“Roger, what happened?” Lara’s scream rang in Keim’s mind. A moment later she burst through the doorway, her face white with fright. She gazed at the body on the floor. “Thank God,” she exclaimed.

“It wasn’t Yozell,” he said tiredly.

“The alien?” She moistened her lips nervously.

“He’s in the ship.”

“He?”

“He, she, it—I don’t know what it is. But Yozell spoke of it as if it were a single being. We can only hope that’s right. God knows how many others it’s possessed.”

“Captain Woon?” she whispered.

“I believe so. That’s probably why he decided to return to the Empire.”

“With that creature aboard?”

“I don’t believe he has much choice.” He gazed at the biologist’s body. “I don’t believe that Woon is Woon any longer, just as Yozell wasn’t Yozell. Neither can I sense Kimbrough.”

“How does it do it?”

“I don’t know. But I know that it captures their minds, uses their bodies.”

“Telepathic hypnosis?”

He shook his head. “It goes far beyond that. It can see through their eyes, direct the pk power through their minds. I believe your first conjecture was right—that it actually injects its mind into that of its victims, controls them absolutely, lives in them as a host, a mental parasite. It apparently acquires all their knowledge and skills, their memories, their language. It either acquires them or is able to control them, use them, which amounts to the same thing. Not perfectly, of course. Yozell’s speech was flat, mechanical. His choice of words was right, but he lacked the inflection. That was the first thing I noticed, that and his posture. He moved like a robot.”

"Couldn't you sense it in his mind?"

"Yozell's mind was blank. Like Woon's and Kimbrough's," he added.

"Then it wasn't Yozell you were talking to," she whispered. Awe flooded her face. "Not if it was using Yozell's mind."

"It wasn't Yozell."

"You were talking to the alien!" She shivered.

"Face to face," he agreed. He smiled wanly. "It told me how great it was, how inconsequential we were."

"That's frightening. What can we do?"

"If nothing else, we can destroy the ship. That's the Empire's only chance."

"Destroy the ship?" Subconsciously she stood straighter, the fright draining from her face. "Yes, if there is no other way," she said quietly. He felt a quick pride in her, then saw her flush. Remembering her telepathy, he smiled.

He dragged the biologist's body into the adjoining sleeping quarters before stepping back to look down at it. Alton Yozell had been a good man, gentle, considerate of others. He had harmed no one; now he was dead. By my hand, Keim thought sadly. Whispering goodbye in a soft voice, he retrieved the dead man's laser and returned to the outer room.

"Take it." He extended the weapon to Lara. "If I fail, or if the alien gets into my mind. . . ."

"I'll destroy the ship," she answered steadily.

"Good girl! Just slice through the outer bulkheads, big squares that can't be blocked off. And through the automatic doors that seal off the compartments," he added.

"What do we do now?"

"Wait."

"Wait?"

"For Act Two."

She cocked her head. "If it's a single being, and I say *if*, how could it be dangerous to the Empire?"

"Because it couldn't procreate, is that what you mean? How do we know that it's not asexual? Perhaps it reproduces by fission; I don't know. But Yozell spoke of it as a single entity, and I feel that it is. The only thing I can't figure is why it hasn't killed us already. Lord knows it's had the chance."

"It's tried." She attempted a smile.

"Yes, in the forest and through Yozell, but it's had other opportunities. Why didn't it kill us when we ran out from

the grass, before we entered the ship? It would have taken only a twist, or two twists." He saw her shudder and continued, "It could have killed us with the mind power easily enough, but didn't. Perhaps that gives us an edge."

"I don't follow you," she admitted.

"Perhaps it's afraid to use the mind power close to the ship, or inside it, for fear of wrecking it. That makes it all but certain that its prime objective is to escape from this planet."

"I still don't see why it didn't kill you like. . . ." She faltered.

"Weber? Why it didn't snap my neck? It could have, I suppose, but a laser's just as thorough; or perhaps it wasn't ready for another baffling death. A laser spells murder; there would be no questions, and the assumption would be murder by another human. Who would ever suspect an alien of using such a weapon." He had to grin. "I'll have to hand it to whatever it is, it's getting to think just like a human."

"That's grisly," she declared.

"I believe our best chance is to wait, see what happens."

"You think . . . ?" She eyed him expectantly.

"The alien will certainly react to Yozell's death. Having failed to kill me won't keep it from trying again. I seem to be a special target, or perhaps I should say *we*." A startling idea struck him. "Could it be because we're telepaths?"

"Would it know that?"

"If it's had a chance to read our minds, yes." He paused, caught by an idea. "Remember how I blinded it by killing the birds? That's why it had to destroy the entire forest in the attempt to kill us."

"You're ahead of me," she confessed.

"Just toying with ideas. Perhaps it has to see us to use the mind power selectively. That would account for it sending Yozell—to see me through Yozell's eyes."

"That's logical." She nodded.

"Our aim is to keep out of sight, and out of the sight of its victims, or perhaps I should call them hosts. I'm also certain that another emissary will stop by to dicker with us."

"Dicker?"

"A euphemism for murder."

"I'm frightened," she confessed.

"We both are." He held her glance, tried not to read her

mind but the thought came anyway—the desire to hide in his arms.

“Yes, that’s the way I feel,” she said tremulously. She buried her face in his shoulder. Holding her, he realized the awesome stakes they faced. If he failed—they failed—the whole human race could be wiped from the universe as neatly as one eliminated an ant nest. The Third Empire could go the way of the temple builders. The Imperator and Council of Overlords, for all the fleets they commanded, would be as impotent as the mice in the fields. A million nuclear weapons couldn’t alter that. The end of man! Inconceivable, but it could happen. In the scale of time, the probability would become certainty. But not now; not while the human race was still reaching out, still in the bloom of its youth. But it could happen.

If they failed!

But they wouldn’t, he vowed grimly. He could take the laser, slice through the outer bulkheads, hold it downward at the proper angle and destroy the giant energy converters. Oh, there were ways. That’s why the big interstellar ships carried psychmedics—rather than just the garden variety medic—to detect instability. One man with a laser could. . . .

His reflections were jolted as the room around him stirred with a gentle, bobbing motion. Lara jerked her face from his shoulder. “We’re lifting off,” she cried. He released her, sensing the slight forces of acceleration acting against his body.

“Yes, lifting.” He stared at her.

“With the alien on board,” she whispered.

“Still on the passenger list.” He tried a smile.

EIGHT

KEIM SENSED movement in the outer corridor.

“The other room, quick!” He jerked his head toward the small cubicle where he had hidden Yozell’s body. Lara rose hurriedly.

“Be careful,” she warned anxiously. When the door closed behind her, Keim riveted his attention on the passageway. He had the subtle sense of *presence*, nothing more, yet felt

certain this would be another emissary from the alien.

A rap came at the door.

"Roger, I have to speak to you!" Myron Kimbrough's voice, although flat and lifeless, held the certainty that the telepath was inside. Keim's mind spun. Kimbrough couldn't possibly have known that except through Yozell. While it was possible that Yozell previously had passed the information to Kimbrough, it wasn't likely. The implication was that Yozell and Kimbrough had been linked telepathically, either directly or through the mind of the alien. Keim considered the latter more probable.

"Roger!" The call came again. Keim reached a decision. Gripping the laser, he opened the door and stepped behind it. To his surprise, Kimbrough entered with Ivor Bascomb, the botanist. Both paused, scanning the seemingly empty room.

"I'm behind you with a laser," warned Keim. "Don't look around."

"Laser?" asked Kimbrough.

"A precaution," he explained. A quick touching of their minds told him they were deep wells of nothingness. If he could see their eyes, he knew they would be blank, lacking in luster. But their movements were less mechanical than Yozell's had been. Was the alien learning to manipulate his humans? He asked, "What do you want?"

"We were worried about you—you and Lara."

"We lost the skimmers, had to walk back."

"Lost them?"

"A tree fell, smashed them."

"That was quite unusual, Roger."

"Highly unusual," he agreed.

Kimbrough moved his head slowly. "Where's Lara?"

"Probably sleeping. She was tired."

"Ah, yes." He moved his head farther to speak over his shoulder. "Frankly, Roger, we have something to discuss with you. Is it all right if we sit?"

"If you face away from me," he assented.

"That's foolish," chided Bascomb.

"Is it? I'm not that certain." He directed them to turn the couch and sit with their backs to him. As they did, he again noticed that they moved more freely than had Yozell. When they were seated, he asked, "How did you know I was here?"

"We knew," replied Kimbrough.

"The alien?"

"No life form is alien once you know it, Roger."

"It sent you?"

"To make you see reason. You're being very foolish."

"Suppose you tell me about it."

"Killing Yozell—"

"It wasn't Yozell," he grated harshly. "Wearing Yozell's body, perhaps, but not Yozell."

"Murder is murder, Roger."

"Whatever was speaking through Yozell now is speaking through you, is that correct?"

"Essentially." Kimbrough nodded.

"You're a scientist, Myron. Either it's speaking or you're speaking. Which is it?"

"You can't make that kind of a distinction, Roger; but I'm still myself, as you very well can see. Correct, Ivor?"

"Correct," answered Bascomb.

"And what's left of you?" demanded Keim. "Blank eyes, a blank mind."

"Blank mind? No, Roger." Kimbrough shook his head gravely. "I can see back through, oh, I don't know how many billions of years. I've watched madly spinning galaxies so distant they resembled fireflies in a pitch-black night. I've seen the dust of cities at the dead end of the universe—have seen through time and space beyond the ability of the human mind to calculate. I know now what primitives we are."

"Scarcely convincing, Myron."

"The alien, as you think of him—his name is Uli, by the way—is the most advanced form of life in the universe. Not just this galaxy, Roger, but all galaxies. The former inhabitants of this planet worshipped him as a god."

"And died," snapped Keim.

"And died." Kimbrough nodded. "They were of scant use."

"Scarcely a reason for genocide, I would say."

"A primitive view. Compared to Uli, we are less than savages."

"I like my savage state, Myron."

"He's immortal, Roger."

"No life is immortal." Even as Keim spoke he remembered the alien's awesome powers and had a moment of doubt. Immortal? Such a creature would be invincible. "Did it tell you that?"

"We know it, Roger."

"You share its mind?"

"Glimpses here and there. We will share it more fully as we learn and grow, mature sufficiently to take our rightful place in the universe. Think of the tremendous advantage that will be to the human race, Roger."

"You're crazy," he exclaimed. "Can't you see what this means?"

"We've thought it through very carefully."

"With the alien's guidance, no doubt. Did you have an option, or did you just suddenly find yourself a mouth-piece for God-alone-knows-what?"

"We can already count our benefits."

"Name one."

"He's made us telepathic. That's a gift all humans will enjoy."

"Telepathic?" Keim stared at him.

"Assuredly, and it's a magnificent insight. I never realized the added dimensions it can give to life. You have been quite fortunate, Roger. Now all humans will enjoy that fortune."

"Read me," he commanded.

"If you will allow me to turn."

"Is sight necessary?"

"To read your mind?" In the sudden stillness, Keim knew his suspicion was right—Kimbrough, the gulls, perhaps the alien itself, were telepathically limited to the visual field. Yet the alien communicated with birds far beyond its visual field; that almost certainly was true in the case of the lone gulls above the temple. But if the alien actually projected fragments of its mind into its hosts, it undoubtedly could contact those fragments wherever they might be. In that case the mind and all its far-flung fragments could function as a unity, yet telepathically be limited to the visual field when it came to nonhosts. Did that make sense? Keim thought it did. But that didn't hold for the mind power, if he were to judge by the way the alien had destroyed the forest following the deaths of the gulls. Still, the alien had its limitations.

"Well. . . ." Kimbrough paused again.

"It is, isn't it?" He spoke quickly, hoping to keep the chief scientist off balance. Only he wasn't speaking to the scientist; he was speaking directly to the being called Uli. He knew that now. All the rest was just a charade, a crazy game. A pretense.

"No," Kimbrough replied.

"Then read my mind! You can't, not without seeing me!"

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"That's a minor consideration, Roger."

Keim laughed harshly. "Who's the telepath, you or the alien?"

"It's somewhat like a partnership. Right, Ivor?"

"Well stated," answered Bascomb. "You'd be far happier if you joined us, Roger."

"Why should I?"

"For your own good."

"And if I refuse?"

"I can't answer for what might happen."

"I take it that your alien friend doesn't like options."

"Talk sense, Roger."

"How many of you does he control?"

"It's a partnership." Kimbrough's voice was measured, mechanical, devoid of emotion.

"Captain Woon?"

"He's a sensible man."

"How many others?"

"You'll know when you join us, Roger."

Keim hesitated. The more information he got, the better. Or would the alien perceive his intent. "What would be the advantage?" he asked finally.

"Remember how many times we discussed the possibility that one day humanity might encounter a superior form of life?" Kimbrough turned his head farther to the side.

"Careful," snapped Keim.

As if he hadn't heard, Kimbrough continued, "We used to wonder, if that day came, how man would react. Now that the time has come, I'm glad to say that we're acting sensibly and logically. The human race will progress a million years within the space of several months. Isn't that sufficient incentive?"

"Who is this Uli? I'd like to know more about him first."

"He's invisible. You might call him pure thought."

"Nonsense, Myron."

"Why should you doubt it?"

"Because I know what it wants."

"You do?"

"It wants this ship; it wants to get a foothold in the galaxy. It was locked to this planet until we came, now it sees a way out."

"It is the pronoun for inanimate objects, or for reference to lower animals," Kimbrough said. "The correct term is *he*."

"You're evading the issue."

"I am? But he is leaving, Roger. We're enroute to the Empire, now, and all mankind will be grateful to us. He's a superior being."

"He is? Then why was he locked to this planet? Where is his civilization? Good God, Myron, do you know what you're doing? You're courting the destruction of the human race."

"He's pure thought," rebuked Kimbrough.

"No, he's something else." Staring at their backs, Keim wondered why he bothered to argue. Certainly none of it registered in their minds. Besides, he wasn't speaking to Kimbrough and Bascomb; he was speaking to the alien. *And the alien was on his way to the Empire!* The knowledge brought a quiet desperation. How could he fight a being that he couldn't see? Invisible? Pure thought? No, that was a blind. Uli, whoever or whatever he was, existed in physical form, was hidden somewhere on the ship. There were thousands of compartments, any number of places where he might be concealed. But he had to find him, find him and kill him. Or destroy the ship! The resolve burned fiercely in his mind.

Bascomb said, "You'll have to decide, Roger."

"Is that a threat?"

"Take it any way you want."

Kimbrough snapped his fingers. "Uli could kill you like that."

"I don't doubt but that he could rip the planet apart," Keim conceded. "I've seen a few examples. But could he risk unleashing such power on the ship? He'd destroy it. He'd have to know exactly where I was, and he can't know that because he can't see me."

"How little you know." Kimbrough sighed.

"One thing I do know, Myron. He'll never reach an Empire planet."

"How can you say that?"

"I'll destroy the ship first. One small laser can do that."

"You'd kill yourself?"

"The price is small considering the stakes."

"You're being emotional, Roger."

"I am? Don't try to trick me, Myron. There are two of us, both armed. If the alien kills me, Lara will destroy the ship immediately, and vice versa. You can put that in your daily report."

"You'd rob humanity of this great opportunity?" asked

Bascomb. Keim fancied the flat voice held a note of incredulity.

"Opportunity?" Keim gazed at him. "How many of you see it that way?"

"Uli controls the ship, Roger. It makes small difference what others think." He paused. "They'll die, of course."

Keim shook his head slowly. "You're not human, neither of you. You're empty shells, mindless shadow-voices for whatever it is that inhabits you. Do you believe I'll let a thing like that get a foothold in the Empire? I'll destroy the ship first." He raised his voice. "Do you hear that, Uli? You're going to die!"

In the silence that followed, his visitors sat silently, as if in contemplation of some peaceful scene. They weren't human, he thought. In form, yes, but in no other way. Zombies made to walk and talk and act as if alive, but they were soulless. Did any spark of human awareness still crouch somewhere deep in their brains? He hoped not. Gazing at them, he wondered why the alien didn't strike back.

Finally Kimbrough said, "You're not thinking straight, Roger. You've had a hard night. Better catch some sleep."

"I'm thinking straight, Myron."

"We'll talk again after you've rested." He and Bascomb rose simultaneously. His laser ready, Keim was careful to remain outside their visual fields as they retreated from the room. He locked the door behind them, his thoughts in tumult. To what end had the alien sent them? *To kill him, just as Yozell had tried to kill him!* He had scant doubt of that. But to kill him, the alien had to see him! Either that or unleash the mind force as blindly as he had in the forest. That scarcely was possible without risking the destruction of the ship. The ship was the important thing. Not life, but the ship. The ship and the zombies to run it.

"Uli." He tested the name, speculating what its possessor was like. Certainly not invisible as Kimbrough had claimed, or as Uli had claimed through Kimbrough's voice. He felt certain that claim had been projected to discourage any search. Yet how had the alien gotten aboard unobserved? Night was out; the force field took care of that. Yozell's bird? No, the bird was but another host. How then? It seemed all but impossible. Unless. . . .

Keim felt his nerves tingle. Subconsciously he'd thought of Uli as large, perhaps human-sized, but nothing in the

rules said he had to be large. Perhaps he was small—so small he could have been carried aboard in someone's pocket! The possibility rocketed through his mind.

"Roger?" Lara's call came as a whisper inside him.

"They're gone," he answered tiredly.

Uli's terror had flared anew when, in the dawn hour, the two telepaths suddenly had emerged from the grass to mingle with the crewmen. He could have killed them instantly through the mind force, for they were in perfect view through the eyes of a score of birds, but to have done so in the presence of others not yet under control might have been disastrous.

On entering the ship they'd vanished from view, only to have the male telepath contact Yozell. For a while then, his death had seemed certain. Because use of the mind force might have caused a new wave of fear, he'd decided to have Yozell kill him. But the male telepath somehow had anticipated such a possibility; it had been Yozell who had died.

Why hadn't he seen the intent in the telepath's mind? There was a curious blockage there, a something that defied probing. His surface thoughts were mere fragments, his deeper thoughts came through scarcely at all. Yet he communicated telepathically with the female! What was there in Roger Keim's mind?

Worse, upon the death of Yozell, the male telepath again had been lost to sight. Hurriedly, he'd dispatched Kimbrough and Bascomb to the telepath's quarters, but with no better results.

Now, contemplating his failure to kill Keim, he felt the terror anew. Would the telepaths actually destroy the ship? He couldn't risk that possibility. If the death of either would cause the other to act, the only recourse was to kill them simultaneously. Or, if he could get into the mind of one of them, it would be a simple matter to have that one kill the other.

But would either of the two actually destroy the ship? That seemed inconceivable. Survival, the first law of life, transcended all else. That law was as old as life itself. Implanted firmly in his being, it had guided his actions throughout all the empty millennia of his consciousness. Should it be different for this new race? When he analyzed the matter objectively, he was certain that it wasn't; the horror of death had been in every mind he'd entered.

Whether consciously or subconsciously, it was there. To be sure, the fear was masked in many ways. Woon's secret fear was of "growing too old to travel among the stars;" Bascomb's, that one day the *Alpha Tauri* would emerge from *unspace* too close to a strange sun and be incinerated; Yozell's fear had been that "something might happen" before he could complete the work which he felt certain would carry his name into posterity. But it all added up to the same thing—the fear of death.

Were the telepaths any different? He decided not; Keim had been *bluffing*. (The word, dredged from his new vocabulary, fitted exactly.) Still, to be safe, he had to kill the two telepaths simultaneously, or penetrate the mind of one; then that telepath would kill the other.

Keim was extremely dangerous. Uli contemplated the telepath uneasily. The minds he now possessed revealed that Keim—the T-man, as he was thought of—was deeply feared. More, it was a fear that extended to all telepaths. With it were feelings of envy, rank jealousy, the secret desire to be telepathic; some dreamed of probing the minds of others. But the fear was uppermost. With all that, the minds of his hosts told him very little about telepathy itself.

But none of his hosts had known that the female Lara Kamm was telepathic! Kimbrough, Bascomb, Woon, Rayfield—they had been totally ignorant of the fact. So had the others. Had she concealed the trait because of a certain stigma attached to it? Could there be still other hidden telepaths?

Uli felt his anxiety soar. Did telepaths possess perhaps even greater powers? Nothing in the minds of his hosts indicated such a possibility, yet his hosts had known very little of Keim and even less of the girl. What might he find in the heart of the galaxy? He had to know. Suddenly he felt it was imperative that he enter the male telepath's mind. As it was, he was getting nowhere. Thought of Keim was so discomfiting that he forced the telepath from his mind.

Fortunately his control of the ship soon would be absolute—the dozen birds he'd had Yozell hide in the ship assured that. Tonight, while most of the humans slept, he'd have a host place them in the quarters of the humans he needed most; then he could dispose of the others.

He considered the crew and science staff. He'd need the chief engineer, the astrogator, perhaps the psychmedic. And

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Henry Fong, the historian. It would be interesting to have the historian record the epitaph for his race.

The thought amused him.

NINE

KEIM SWITCHED off the interphone and said jubilantly, "Janik will be right down."

"Are you certain he's all right?" Lara sounded dubious.

"Positive. His background thought pattern was perfectly normal. So was his voice." He felt some of the tension drain from his body. If anyone would believe him, that person would be Ross Janik, the astrologer. Janik was a clear thinker, cool, experienced. As Third Officer, he was in a position to warn the others, organize resistance. If they acted quickly enough they might be able to . . . what? He wasn't certain, but it was a beginning.

"Should I remain here?"

He nodded. "Coming from me alone, the story might sound wild."

"Incredible is the word."

"Keep your mind open, keep probing," he urged.

"It's a jumble."

"Pick a specific person, concentrate on him."

"I have. It's still a jumble."

"Who?"

"Peter Diamond."

"How well do you know him?"

"We exchange ideas occasionally."

"It usually works better with someone you know quite well, perhaps because of the rapport. Why not try Sam Gossett?"

"I couldn't." She flushed. "That would be too much of an invasion of privacy."

He grinned. "Is it worse to tap Sam's mind than it is to tap Diamond's?"

"He's a close friend," she protested.

"We have no friends, not now. You have to get over that. The best we can hope for are allies."

"Because we're telepaths?" she rebuked.

"Because of the alien," he corrected. "We don't know

who he has infected. But we have to know, and damn quick. To be certain, we have to probe every mind on the ship, friends not excluded. Telepathy is our only weapon."

He returned his attention to the ship around him. With the muted thunder in his mind reduced to an occasional crackling, he sensed the flow of life on all sides. And out of the flow, like faint voices hissing in his brain, came the thoughts of specific individuals. When he concentrated on such an individual, the thought usually came through with startling clarity and completeness, but not always. Some minds were more masked than others, but that too varied. The best he could do was probe and hope.

Abruptly a flickering image danced in his mind—the image of a slender, narrow-faced man whose arched brows gave him a satanic expression. Ross Janik! The astrogator was descending the stairwell from the astrogation bridge. Almost as quickly the image faded, leaving disconnected fragments of thought.

Keim wasn't surprised at the phenomenon. He'd experienced clairvoyant episodes before—swift, shimmery visions that he'd seldom been able to retain for more than a few seconds. With the passage of years, they had occurred more frequently. Because clairvoyance had never been proved satisfactorily, he'd once believed that he'd conjured up the imagery to fit the situation he was sensing telepathically; but no longer. He'd tested the phenomenon too often for that. Now he accepted the phenomenon as another facet of his mind that he didn't fully understand.

He felt a sudden uneasiness. Janik's thoughts were intense, filled with emotion, disorganized. That wasn't like him. Keim focused his attention on the astrogator while trying to shut out the distractions that assailed his mind from all sides. Janik's worry had to do with Captain Woon and the T-man. *The T-man!* Other people had names but he was the T-man! There, he had it! Janik was highly concerned over the captain's decision to abandon the planet—to set a course for Frohm, a minor system that lay on the periphery of the Empire. *Why Frohm?* Its single, habitable planet was scarcely more than a frontier world. Janik had coupled Woon's decision with Keim's call on the interphone warning him not to mention the message to anyone and to come to Keim's quarters as quickly as possible. *The T-man knew why the captain had ordered Krado 1 abandoned! There was some terrible danger!* Janik's mind fairly roiled with apprehension. *The T-man knew!*

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Keim felt the growing tension; his uneasiness rose to a shriek inside him. Small alarm bells clanged from somewhere deep in his subconscious. A flickering vision lasting but a fraction of a second showed the astrogator hurrying toward him. Abruptly, Keim rose and went to the door.

Lara asked quickly, "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. Senses focused on the passageway, he detected nothing. Still the alarm bells clanged unabated. The shimmery image of the astrogator danced in his mind again; Janik had reached the lower level.

Keim inched the door open to peer through the crack. The corridor was deserted. In instant later, the astrogator appeared at the far end and hurried toward him. Keim waited, puzzled by the strident danger signals that clamored in his mind.

Suddenly Ivor Bascomb stepped from another doorway. His hand whipped up, holding a small cylinder. Keim shouted a warning as he leaped from the room, a hand grasping for his laser. Janik halted, staring spellbound at the botanist before turning to flee. Bascomb fired, catching the astrogator squarely between the shoulder blades. Janik staggered and collapsed.

Bascomb swung toward the telepath just as Keim triggered his own weapon; the lethal beam caught the botanist in the chest. Keim glimpsed Bascomb's face as the man fell; it was blank, wooden, the eyes dull.

Keim stepped swiftly back into his own quarters and locked the door. "Janik's dead . . . murdered! Bascomb," he added.

"Oh!" Lara's cry verged on hysteria. Keim moved past her to the sleeping cubicle, hoisted Yozell's body over his shoulder and returned to the door. Finding the corridor still empty, he stepped outside and hastily deposited his burden alongside the dead botanist. Returning, he locked the door behind him. Lara's eyes questioned him.

"We couldn't leave Yozell's body here forever," he explained. He rubbed his jaw, trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together.

"How did Bascomb know?" she whispered.

"Perhaps someone on the bridge read Janik's mind, alerted Bascomb telepathically," he conjectured. The message behind Janik's death was stark; anyone who opposed the alien had to die!

"I know, but why was Bascomb there?" She appeared to

have regained her composure. "He was waiting for one of us, wasn't he?"

"One or both," he acknowledged.

"Kimbrough?"

"Somewhere around."

"What should we do?"

"We'd better try to contact Gossett, Duvall, Rayfield—all the senior scientists we can. We haven't much time." The moment he picked up the interphone he knew he was too late; the instrument returned only a dead silence.

"They've cut the circuit?" Lara's voice was strangely calm. He nodded, his mind already grappling with the next move. What might happen if he left the room? Was another Bascomb waiting to kill him? Perhaps not, if the alien believed that his death would result in Lara's immediate destruction of the ship. If he followed that assumption, the alien wasn't likely to kill either of them while the other remained free to act; ergo, the alien's only safe course lay in killing them simultaneously.

Following his reasoning, Lara exclaimed, "You still can't risk leaving here."

"Sooner or later I'll have to."

"There must be another way," she protested. Her head jerked up as a high-pitched scream echoed in the corridor. Startled, Keim looked at her. "Robin Martel," she murmured.

Keim concentrated, trying to probe the meteorologist's mind. *Confusion, fear, shock, horror*—although no image came, he knew she was gazing at the three laser-burned bodies. He heard other shouts, the pounding of feet.

"Get Harlan Duvall," a piercing voice commanded. Keim smiled soberly. The psychmedic was good, but not that good. For Yozell and Janik and Bascomb, time had run out. The shouts and confusion increased. Keim gestured for silence as someone began rapping at doors along the corridor.

"Wouldn't this be a good time to warn someone?" Lara whispered.

"We don't know who's rapping." He smiled grimly, at the same time trying to fix the identity of those outside. Peter Diamond, Karl Borchert, the astrophilosopher Arden, others who remained anonymous in the confusion. The rapping reached his door. He saw the look of inquiry on Lara's face. "*Sam Gossett*," he said telepathically.

"Sam. . . ." Her eyes held an anxious look but he shook

his head. He knew Sam Gossett, the elderly chemist, was her closest friend; but they couldn't take the chance. Gossett had to remain suspect for the time being. The footsteps retreated to the next door, and the next.

Keim kept his attention riveted on the corridor, certain that the alien, through the eyes of a host, would be watching the scene. But he couldn't contact such a mind; his experience with Yozell, Bascomb and Kimbrough had proved that. Yet he had discerned a sense of *presence* before Yozell reached his door—had felt a clamor of alarm as Janik had hurried to his death. But the inability to read such a mind wasn't entirely negative; any mind that he could read meant that person was safe. On that basis Robin Martel, Sam Gossett, and Harlan Duvall had not yet fallen prey to the alien. Neither had Arden, Peter Diamond, Karl Borchner.

Out of the welter of confused thoughts, he managed to pinpoint Hester Kane and Burl Ashford, adding them to the safe list. Ashford's mind was a maelstrom of terror. So were the minds of several crewmen who had been summoned to remove the bodies. After a while, the confusion waned and the silence returned.

Keim was probing the ship when he felt the first sensation of vertigo. He looked up quickly, caught Lara's eyes. Neither spoke. Moments later the vertigo passed.

The *Alpha Tauri* was in *unspace*.

Did the alien ever sleep?

Keim pondered the question, thinking it odd that he was locked in a life-and-death struggle with an adversary that still was but a shadowy mind. But a mind that could wreck a planet! Kimbrough had termed the alien invisible, immortal; but he couldn't believe that. He kicked the questions around. Man pretty well lived by his biological clock, but did the alien? And if he slept, what vigilance did he maintain?

Was sleep a requisite to life? It seemed so. The birds had been diurnal, but the alien hadn't needed to guard the night before the advent of the *Alpha Tauri*. And now the alien had human watchmen. Yet they had to sleep, if only fitfully, just as Lara now slept from sheer fatigue. Although it was too much to hope that they'd all sleep at once, he could hope for less vigilance during the night hours. Waiting was the most difficult part.

He probed the ship. Jobe Kyler, Hester Kane, Alex Ja-

son, Peter Diamond—one by one he isolated their minds, satisfied they were still free of the alien's control. But he was surprised and perturbed at his failure to sense the minds of Wayne Coulter, the chief engineer, and Paul Rayfield, the physicist. Dismayed, he realized how quickly the alien was taking command of the ship.

On every side he sensed the terror brought by the triple murders. He found the reaction understandable, for murder was a specter from man's past; only rarely did it occur. But three murders aboard a single ship! That was a shocker. The speculation ran high, much of it centered on the captain's sudden decision to abandon Krado 1. The action generally was interpreted in terms of some grave danger or other. One rumor claimed an invidious disease that deranged men's minds, else why the senseless killings? Another that the three men had been slain to prevent the spread of their contamination.

As the hours sped past, the turmoil began to subside, replaced by the disjointed thoughts of dreamers. Fear, worry and stark terror paraded as men slept. Keim made a last attempt to pinpoint key personnel still free of the alien. From the welter of dreams he isolated the mind of Sam Gossett, the chemist, surprised at its relative equanimity. Harlan Duvall was another who slept calmly. Karl Borchert, Hester Kane and Robin Martel were caught in hideous nightmares. And on the bridge Lloyd Kramer, the Second Astrogator, was wondering why the captain hadn't budged from his small underway stateroom since lift-off.

Keim felt satisfied. While the list of those still free of the alien's control was small, it would provide a nucleus for action. He stirred restlessly. With the interphones dead, he had no recourse but to attempt to make the first contacts personally; after that, the others could spread the word. He called Lara telepathically.

She awoke instantly. "*What is it?*"

"*Time to contact Sam Gossett, the others,*" he explained. "*If anything happens. . .*"

"*I'll destroy the ship,*" she promised. Her thoughts were calm, unafraid. Any fears she might have had were pushed far down into her subconscious. He heard her rustling around before she came from the other room.

"Don't jump the gun," he cautioned wryly.

"How will I know?"

"If you can't reach me, if my mind goes blank." He could all but feel her shudder.

"Be careful," she whispered.

"Keep in contact." He probed the corridor, found no sense of *presence*, nothing. Opening the door, he stepped outside. The main lights in the passageways and stairwells, extinguished during the sleep cycle, left only the dim glow of the night lamps. He stood for a moment to adapt his eyes to the gloom.

He'd taken but a few steps when the danger signals screamed in his brain. Pressing his body against the bulkhead, he glanced quickly in both directions, but saw no one. Still the sensation of imminent peril persisted. His hands grew clammy.

"Lara?" He called silently, listened with his mind.

"What is it?" she replied quickly.

"Sense something?"

"A jumble." The answer came hesitantly. "Danger?"

"I'm not certain." He tried to pinpoint the source of his alarm, failed, yet the prickling sense of peril increased. The clamor in his brain rose to a shriek. The danger close, close. The laser held waist-high, he moved slowly along the corridor. Movement in a doorway brought him to a halt. Shrinking against the bulkhead, he saw a figure emerge from the quarters of Harlan Duvall, the psychmedic.

The warning signals screamed anew. His first impression that it might be Duvall was quickly dismissed; the figure was too tall, too stoop-shouldered. In the dim glow of the night lamps, he had the impression of a far older man. The mental probe he directed toward the other elicited no response. A host! He caught his breath.

At the far end of the corridor the figure turned and started up a stairwell. Only then did he recognize it as that of Myron Kimbrough, the chief scientist. What had Kimbrough been doing in Duvall's quarters? Alarmed, Keim concentrated on the psychmedic.

The contact came with a mental blast. He recoiled at the wild, horrible, nightmarish thoughts that struck him. He had the tangled impression of fleeting galaxies, of time without end, of cold and deadly cogitation emanating from a small, egg-shaped body hidden in the confines of a scarcely larger black chamber. The alien! Clairvoyance, or had he conjured it?

"No! No!" Hoarse screams from Duvall's quarters shattered the stillness. Keim raced toward his door. A glance told him that the lock had been destroyed. Bursting inside, he saw a faint light seeping out from the bedroom.

Three bounds took him through the doorway. The light of a bedside lamp revealed Duvall, his face horribly contorted, sitting half-erect with eyes turned toward the shadowy corner of the room. Keim jerked his head in that direction, saw two small faintly-glowing coals—a small form atop a desk. Whipping up his weapon, he loosed a beam that reduced the desk to molten metal and sliced through the bulkhead beyond. The smell of burned feathers filled the air.

Duvall slumped back on the bed, his breath a harsh rasp in his throat. His husky frame jerked convulsively. Beads of sweat, reflecting the lamplight, covered his brow. A flash of insight told Keim how the alien acquired his hosts. Holding the laser on the psychmedic, he tried to discern whether or not the alien had entered his mind. A swift probe revealed Duvall's ebbing panic; the thoughts that swirled up from his subconscious, although alive with horror, were reassuring. Keim thanked God that he had been on time.

"Harlan, wake up!" He shook Duvall's shoulder. The psychmedic jerked his head in protest. Suddenly his eyes opened, flared with apprehension before he recognized the telepath.

"Lord, what a nightmare." He pushed himself to a sitting position and wiped his brow. His hand trembled in the lamplight.

"That was no nightmare," said Keim. He retreated to the outer room, braced a chair against the door to give him warning should anyone try to enter, and returned. Duvall's face was puzzled.

"No nightmare?" he asked.

"Not the normal variety." Tersely Keim told him of the alien with terrible mental powers, how he was using the birds to take over the minds of the science staff and crew, how Yozell and Janik and Bascomb had died. He related his failure to sense the minds of Coulter, Rayfield, Jonley, Henry Fong and several others. "We have to assume that they're under alien control," he added.

"My God!" Duvall was aghast. "What can we do?"

"Warn everyone. Search the ship and destroy him or it, whatever it is. We haven't much time."

"If it takes one bird per host . . . ?" Duvall gazed at him.

"Then there can't be too many hosts, unless there's a lot of birds we don't know about. God alone knows how many Yozell or others might have sneaked aboard," he added.

Duvall mopped his forehead. "How about Woon, Kimbrough, the others? Can they be saved?"

"I don't know." Keim spoke irritably, realizing that the same question had laid deeply within his own mind. When the alien possessed a victim, did it possess him for all time, or could it enter and withdraw at will? Or did it kill its hosts upon withdrawal, as it had Weber? Yet what of Duvall? Equally interesting was how he'd managed to glimpse Duvall's thoughts at a time when the alien most certainly was in the psychmedic's mind, yet had found only blankness in the minds of Yozell and others. Perhaps he'd entered Duvall's mind before the alien had established full control, then had forced the alien to withdraw by killing the bird. In that event, for a few brief seconds, they had both been privy to Duvall's thoughts. *Fleeting galaxies, endless time.* . . . Had he tapped the alien's memories in that part of Duvall's mind not yet under full control? It seemed certain. The knowledge staggered him. Good God, Kimbrough had been right, the alien must be practically immortal, from the edge of the universe! He shivered.

Duvall agreed with Keim's reasoning.

"I awoke suddenly," he explained. "I seem to remember a soft clucking sound, realized it was coming from near the desk. I turned on the light, then saw the bird in the shadows—saw the glow of its eyes, as I recall. My first reaction was wonder at how it had gotten there; then I felt its mind entering me. It was cold, sharp, alien. That's when I screamed." Duvall peered at him. "You know how a frightful nightmare comes? It came like that. Subconsciously, I suppose, I realized what was happening and tried to fight it. I had the impression that my mind was a duality, each part battling the other. Suddenly entire galaxies were sweeping past me. I had the mental imagery of a purple star, of a small egg-shaped body. . . ."

"Hiding in a small chamber?" interrupted Keim. He felt tense, edgy.

"You know?"

"Your thoughts struck me like a wave," he acknowledged. "I'm certain you were sharing the alien's mind. It fortifies the belief that when it enters a host, both share both minds, at least until the host's mind is completely subjugated."

"What kind of a monster is it, Roger?"

"Kimbrough got me to thinking of it. as a *he*." Keim smiled faintly. "If it's shaped anything like our mental im-

pressions, it must not be mobile. Perhaps it requires a host to move it from place to place." He spoke slowly, analytically, drawing a portrait of the alien in his mind.

"Inconceivable," exclaimed Duvall.

"We have to accept the inconceivable, Harlan, get used to it."

"God, what it must do to the mind!"

"If we can control its hosts, we can keep it helpless," Keim reflected. "Given time, we can find it, destroy it."

"And its hosts?"

"We have to stop them at any cost."

"Kill them?"

"If necessary."

"That's murder," protested Duvall.

"Is it? We have an Empire at stake, Harlan, the whole of humanity. We used to talk about the unguessables, the life that might exist in the far reaches of space; and now we know. Our concern isn't with the few lives aboard this ship; it's with the billions and billions and billions of our kind. I'm convinced of that. We have to consider the hosts as they are, not as they were. For all practical purposes, they are aliens."

Duvall said softly, "They were once men, Roger." *Once men!* The term jarred Keim. It also was Duvall's subconscious admission that he no longer considered the alien's hosts as human. Robots created from flesh. Could they be redeemed? But Duvall was right; they couldn't kill them except as a last recourse.

"We might use the dart guns," said Duvall. Keim felt a surge of hope. Designed to subdue even the largest and most unruly of animals, the dart guns employed knockout charges that worked within seconds.

"You can't let them see you," he warned. "But first things first. We're in *unspace*, en route to the Empire."

"Take the bridge, is that what you're thinking?" The gleam of hope that flickered in Duvall's eyes almost as quickly died. "I imagine the alien has tight control of that."

"A chance we'll have to take," answered Keim.

"And if it has?"

"It's either dartguns, lasers, or a confrontation."

"With the alien?" Duvall's face showed shock. Keim nodded. Although he'd spoken almost without thinking, he realized the idea had lain deep within his mind. Neither was it entirely without merit. Remembering Duvall's ordeal, the prospect of such a confrontation made him shiver. But

if he could contact the alien while remaining outside his visual field, as he had through Kimbrough, he might still salvage ship and crew. He held powerful weapons, the life and death of the ship and every living thing aboard it not being the least of them. Did the alien realize that? If not, it was another reason for such a confrontation. He could offer the alien a choice of safe passage back to Krado 1, or death. He broached the idea.

"I wouldn't risk it." The psychmedic shook his head. "What's to prevent him from taking over your mind, converting you into a robot?"

"If he knew that such an action would result in the instant destruction of the ship?"

"Risky, Roger, I've had a taste of him."

"A chance I'll have to take." He'd scarcely spoken before he heard his name screamed in his mind. Instantly he realized its source. "*Lara?*" he replied urgently.

"*My door! Someone's trying. . . .*"

"*Coming!*" He raced from the room, leaving the startled psychmedic behind. Speeding through the corridor, he jerked the laser from his pocket.

"*He's burning it down!*" The silent shriek in his mind was filled with terror.

"*The inner room . . . use your laser,*" he shouted telepathically, conscious of the speeding seconds. While still a dozen paces from his quarters, he saw the door had been burned open. Scarcely slackening speed, he burst into the room. A slight figure whirled to meet him. He only had time to glimpse Henry Fong's slender face before he struck him, driving his body against the wall. The historian fell to his knees, tried to scramble up. Keim kicked the laser from his grasp and brought down the edge of his hand in a brutal chopping blow that caught Fong at the base of the neck. The historian collapsed with a groan.

"You all right?" shouted Keim.

"I'm . . . all right." Lara opened the inner door, her face pale and distraught. Her hand, clasping a laser, was trembling violently. Keim's immediate reaction was shock that the alien had tried to kill her. Didn't he believe that the death of one would cause the other to destroy the ship? If not, then he'd dispatch others to finish what the historian had failed to accomplish.

"Let's get out of here." He caught her hand and pulled her out into the corridor.

"Where to?" she asked breathlessly. The question stopped him only momentarily.

"Yozell's quarters will be empty." Holding the laser waist-high, he gestured and started toward an intersecting passageway that led to the biologist's rooms. He wondered why he hadn't killed Fong. Certainly, when the man recovered, he'd be as dangerous as before. It struck him that the strongly ingrained ethos against murder, present in the normal mind, could only be broken by conscious effort, and then only in the direst need for survival. He reflected grimly that he had a lot to learn.

They'd almost reached the biologist's quarters when he remembered the birds. Slackening his pace, he probed ahead with his mind. There was no indication of thought, of *presence* of danger. He tried the door, found it unlocked, slowly pushed it open.

"Wait," he commanded. Stepping inside, he hurriedly scanned the room; it was empty. So were the sleeping quarters. There was no sign of the birds, no sign that anyone had been in the rooms since Yozell's departure. He gestured her inside and locked the door.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"Keep to telepathy," he instructed.

She forced a smile. *"It gives me a creepy feeling."*

He laughed silently. *"It has a high survival value."*

"For the alien, too," she reminded.

"Not unless he sees us. He needs his eyes." He told her about Duvall, and of their deductions regarding the alien. *"I reached him just in time,"* he finished.

"Sam?" she asked worriedly.

"He was all right earlier." He looked at her. *"Things are happening fast."* He sent out a mental probe, aware that the usual mosaic of thought that filled the ship was all but gone. The silence was unnerving. He let his mind range. Sporadic words and sentences came; mental images flared and died.

Two men deep down in the engine room were hiding among the giant energy converters, their thoughts a flood of terror. They were waiting for a murderer! Dreading the moment one might come, they scarcely dared move. . . .

The scene flamed in his mind, faded, disappeared. He shifted his probe. The big watdroom used by the science staff and ship's officers was deserted, as were the galley and recreation hall. Large parts of the ship returned only the stillness of a void. What had happened? Perhaps while

he was winning the small battles the alien was winning the big ones. The possibility was frightening. He probed above, below, to all sides.

Several men were hiding in the cavernous storerooms deep down in the hull. One, holding a laser, kept it trained on the hatch. Desperation, fear, despair— The emotions struck Keim's consciousness like the battering of the tides.

He probed the navigation bridge. Silence! Where was Lloyd Kramer? He had been there only a short while before; now there was no sign of life. He tried both the captain's quarters and his small stateroom adjacent to the bridge but with no better results. Neither had he expected any; Woon's mind would be blank. Like Kimbrough, like the others, he would be awaiting only that moment when the alien had need of him.

"Sense anything?" Lara's worried question broke his concentration.

He stemmed his impatience. "*Nothing that matters. You?*"

"*It's all so silent.*" She shivered.

"*Keep trying.*" Again he concentrated. Mentally quartering the ship, he explored the areas allocated to the science staff—the passageways, living quarters, work spaces, library, laboratories. Suddenly he stiffened.

"*What is it?*" she asked quickly.

"*Harlan Duvall.*" He closed his mind to her, attempting to recapture the contact. Again it came, this time as a shimmery image. He caught the shadowy outlines of a second figure, one without features. Then the hair was painted in, the eyes, the slender nose, the full lips. Robin Martell. It was like watching a magic artist at work.

They were in the infirmary. Robin, faced toward the door, was holding a laser. Her face was a tight mask of anxiety, fear. She constantly nibbled at her lower lip. Duvall was loading the dart guns. He worked quickly, calmly.

The stark clarity of the scene awed Keim. It struck him that perhaps the evolutionary process had given the telepath clairvoyance as a survival weapon—one that could be triggered only under the greatest stress. Certainly it had never been so crystal clear. Beakers, syringes, scalpels—everything stood out in minute detail: Duvall's swarthy skin, the sweat glistening on his jaw. He watched the psych-medic drop the loaded dart guns in his pocket. Taking out a laser, he moved past Robin to open the door and peered out into the corridor. A bird flew out of the shadowy darkness; its wings rose and fell with the familiar slow-mo-

tion grace of a gull. Duvall leaped backward and slammed the door.

Birds patrolling the ship! Keim watched hypnotically until it reached the end of the corridor and vanished from view. Only then did it strike him that the clairvoyance had persisted after he'd broken contact with Duvall. What did that signify? He didn't know, no more than he knew the basis of his telepathy.

He saw the door open and the psychmedic peer out, scrutinizing the passageway carefully before stepping into full view. He held his laser low. The meteorologist came out behind him, her face taut with fright.

"Is it gone?" Her whisper echoed in Keim's mind. Duvall jerked his head in gesture for her to follow as he crept toward the stairwell leading toward the crew quarters.

"I heard voices," Lara murmured.

"Duvall and Robin," he explained.

"Oh, she's safe. I'm glad."

"No one's safe," he countered. "We can't let down our guards for a second." He told her about the bird.

Her eyes took on a strange look. "You saw it?"

"Sensed it, at least."

"Clairvoyance," she whispered.

"Something like that. I'm not certain."

"The idea frightens me."

"Why should it? Is it any more magical than telepathy?"

"I was thinking about how you saw the temple collapse before it actually fell."

"I'm not certain that the imagery didn't arise in retrospect," he countered.

"But there's the possibility. Telepathy's bad enough." She gave a nervous laugh.

"We'll debate the merits of it later," he said. "Right now we have to organize some resistance."

"How many are left?"

"I'm not certain."

"How many has the. . . ." She faltered again.

"Alien taken over?" he supplied. "Woon, Kimbrough, Coulter, Paul Rayfield and, oh yes, Lloyd Kramer; but I have no doubt that there are others."

"Sam?" she asked worriedly.

"Safe in his slumbers at last count." Don't let it happen to Sam he thought. Death would be far preferable. The reflection brought an anguish. What of Hester Kane, Dave Shepherd, Peter Diamond? What of Arden, the gentle

astrophilosopher? The loss of any would be a severe blow. Alton Yozell, Ivor Bascomb, Ross Janik—they had all been good men. Now they were silent. How many more would follow? And could Kimbrough be saved? Woon? Paul Rayfield? Or had their time run out? Shaking aside the morbid accounting, he sent swift probes throughout the ship.

It rang with the silence of death.

TEN

"Roger!" The call cut through Keim's mind with frantic urgency. Instantly he realized it had come from Duvall. Lara had sensed it too; she was holding her head cocked in a listening attitude. As the call was repeated, he tried to localize the source. The psychmedic's image danced fuzzily in his mind. Waxing and waning, it finally grew steadier. Duvall's thoughts were a jumble of horror—horror and rage; the intensity of his feelings was a blast in the telepath's mind.

As if a camera suddenly had moved back for a long shot, Keim envisioned two figures at the end of a long, shadowy corridor—Duvall and Robin Martel—there was no mistaking them. He murmured the information to Lara while trying to retain the clairvoyant image. She nodded jerkily.

The movements of the two figures were quick, spasmodic. The psychmedic paused at each door, called out in a husky whisper, opened the door and entered, returning almost immediately. Each time the horror in his mind flared anew.

Why were all the doors unlocked? The question stabbed at Keim's mind. Something was wrong, wrong. He felt an overwhelming sense of dread coupled with anxiety. Suppose Duvall entered the room of a host?

The camera in his mind moved up again, focused on the psychmedic's face. Duvall's jaws were clamped in a tight knot, his eyes were sick with disbelief. Sweat beaded his brow. Keim felt a horrible premonition. The camera moved to the blonde meteorologist wetting her lips. Her terror-stricken eyes darted from side to side; one hand gripped a dart gun.

What had happened? Keim tried to decipher the answer

from the tumult in their minds, failed. He sensed Lara's questions. "They're moving toward the wardroom," he explained.

"Have they found anyone?"

"I don't know. They're highly perturbed. I'd better get them, bring them here."

She jerked her head in nervous agreement. "Be careful."

He pulled the door slightly ajar and peered out into the corridor. Neither his eyes nor his telepathic sense detected any immediate danger. The alarm signal in his brain was still. Nevertheless, he took the time to send his probes ranging throughout the ship.

Two crewmen had taken refuge in the galley; another crouched in a forward hold; a third man had joined the two hiding among the energy converters—flitting figures in the bowels of the ship.

Some of the information came as imagery, some as words—all were accompanied by waves of terror, horror, desperation, resignation. My God, what was happening? Keim forced himself to remain calm. Why were Duvall and Robin still alone?

Aware that Lara was watching him, he moved out into the corridor and closed the door behind him. He ran to an corridor, he glimpsed two figures retreating in the opposite-intersecting passageways, reached a stairwell and started down. His heart was thumping a wild beat. In the lower corridor, he glimpsed two figures retreating in the opposite direction.

"Harlan," he hissed. The psychmedic spun around, jerking up the laser before he recognized the telepath. Robin threw a hand to her mouth to stifle a scream. Duvall gestured and hurried toward him.

"Watch out for the birds," he rasped.

"I saw them." Jerking his head for them to follow, he spun around and raced back toward Yozell's quarters. When they were inside, he closed and locked the door.

Duvall's eyes lighted at sight of Lara. "Thank God you're alive."

Keim whirled toward him. "What did you find?"

"Dead . . . all dead." Duvall's eyes mirrored his horror.

"Everyone?"

"Hester Kane, Carol Rusnak, Dave Shepherd, Peter Diamond, Karl Borchert"—he tolled off the names, his face twisted with anger. "Someone entered their rooms, used a laser on them. Thank God Robin escaped."

"You said everyone?" Keim's eyes glittered.
 "A figure of speech. I don't know how many."
 "Sam Gossett?"

"Dead."

"Oh!" Lara's mouth moved convulsively.

"Guy Starbuck?"

"Dead."

"Arden?"

"Dead. We started down toward the crew quarters hoping for help. Someone heard us coming, shouted they'd kill us if we came any closer. They're crazy down there."

"Can you blame them?" Keim brooded. "But we still have to reach them, get organized."

The psychmedic rustled in his pocket and brought out two dart guns and several additional lasers. "Thought we might need them," he explained.

Keim pocketed one of the dart guns and said, "We have to contact the alien."

"You said that before," Duvall answered tersely. "It's dangerous."

"Not if I keep out of its visual field. Besides, do we have a choice?"

"We're not dealing with a human," Duvall remonstrated, "we're dealing with a monster. What makes you believe it would listen?"

"Wouldn't you listen if someone offered you the choice between life and death?"

"But I'm human." Duvall's eyes pleaded with Lara. "What about it? You're the Alien Culture specialist."

"Not this trip." She laughed nervously.

"You must have some ideas," he insisted.

"I'd have to know something about its history, its values, its culture. What form of life is it? What are its objectives?"

"Conquest of the galaxy," Keim interposed.

She shook her head impatiently. "What does that tell us? Practically nothing except that it must consider it has the means to accomplish conquest. And that could well be, from what we've seen. We know that it possesses almost unimaginable mental powers, but that still doesn't tell us much. We're looking at a skeleton, bones without substance. Usually we have to study a culture for a considerable time before passing even a tentative judgment. In this case we don't even know what it is that you're asking me to judge." She looked at Keim. "But if the decision to contact it were mine, I'd be horribly afraid."

ALTON'S UNGUESSABLE

"You believe I'm not?" A smile touched his lips. "But is there an alternative?"

"If we could take over the astrogation bridge . . ." suggested Duval.

"I doubt that we could hold it."

"There must be a way," exclaimed Robin.

Keim glanced at her. "Can you suggest one?"

"The lifeboats?"

"Abandon the ship and let the alien reach the Empire?"

"I didn't mean that," she protested. "If we could destroy the ship, escape."

"Not while we're in *unspace*." Keim shook his head. "We'd have to gain control of the bridge, drop back into normal space, locate a sun with a planet on which we could survive. All that takes more time than we have." He shifted his gaze to Lara. "But you're right, we have to know more about the alien. That's the best reason yet for making the contact."

Duvall's eyes showed defeat. "How do you propose to do it?"

"Through one of the people he controls." He snapped his fingers. "Henry Fong!"

"Fong?"

"If he hasn't regained consciousness." He saw the question in the psychmedic's eyes and explained what had happened. "Perhaps he's still knocked out," he ended.

"I'll check him," Duvall volunteered.

"It's safer for me." Keim sent swift probes outward. He could detect no sign of life either in the adjacent corridors or Lara's quarters, yet knew it proved nothing. Regardless of where Fong might be, his mind would be blank. Finally he went to the door, peered out, turned.

"If I don't come back. . . ." His eyes held the psychmedic's.

"Don't worry." Duvall feigned cheerfulness. "I've always wanted to command a ship."

Keim nodded, satisfied, and slipped out into the corridor. Where was Woon, Kimbrough, the others? Where were the birds? His scalp tingled with anticipation as he hurried toward Lara's quarters.

He found the historian precisely as he had left him—slumped on the floor unconscious, his breath a harsh rasp in his throat. Keim felt a touch of pity for him. Henry Fong had been intelligent, resolute, an articulate spokesman for the past. He also had been a pleasant companion. Now he was . . . what? Looking down into the historian's

slender face, he knew that although Fong still lived, he had used up his time. Now he was just a body, a dangerous one. He wondered if the alien was there now, lurking behind the closed eyes.

Fabric from a decorative pillow provided a quick blindfold, then Keim slung the body over his shoulders and hurried back through the deserted corridors.

Danger! Abruptly the clangor rose in his mind. Halting, he whirled, saw nothing. Quick probes of the nearby rooms and side corridors returned negative results. The alarm signal rose to a shriek. Waiting, his body jerked and twitched under the tension.

The danger was behind him! Twisting around, he saw the bird. Almost at ceiling level, it floated toward him through the shadowy light. He fancied he could see its small beady eyes. An icy finger stabbed at his brain. A coldness touched his mind.

A dark planet under a purple sun. Vast crumbling buildings. Nine small shadows fleeing through the huge canyons of the sky. Tlo, Glomar, Xexl dying. Cities, towns, villages uprooted, streaming like vertical rivers into the air, vanishing. . . .

"No!" The cry strangled in his throat, Keim tugged up the laser, fired wildly, staggered against the bulkhead with his load. The smell of burned feathers reached his nostrils. Dazed, he stumbled up the stairwell with his burden. Gradually his thoughts cleared, became coherent.

With Duvall's help, he tied the historian to a chair, made the blindfold more secure. Finished, he stepped back. "Can you awaken him?"

The psychmedic's hands explored the base of Fong's neck, where the telepath's chopping blow had struck. Satisfied that nothing was broken, he took Fong's pulse, listened to his heartbeat, started to lift an eyelid, but desisted. Searching the cabinets in Yozell's laboratory, he returned with a small container. "This should do it."

He removed the cap and held the bottle under the historian's nose. The reaction was almost instantaneous. Fong's body twitched convulsively. His shoulders straightened, his hands jerked spasmodically, then suddenly were still.

"He's awake." Lara's warning touched Keim's mind. Gesturing the others to silence, he jerked a thumb toward the sleeping quarters. Duvall nodded, touched Robin's arm and began to withdraw.

Lara lingered a moment. "Be careful."

When the door closed behind her, he riveted his attention on the still figure. Behind the blindfold, he was certain, the dark eyes were watchful. A quick probe of the historian's mind revealed only the curious blankness that told how completely Fong had surrendered his identity. Even his subconscious was totally quiescent. The consciousness, then, was not the consciousness of Fong, but of the thing that lived within Fong.

Uli! Keim felt his tensions rise. Although Fong was blindfolded, the alien would be listening through the historian's ears, assessing the situation through Fong's tactual senses. Keim knew it was a dangerous moment.

"Uli?" He spoke the name softly. The figure on the chair grew even more still. Only the slight rise and fall of Fong's chest told of life. What was the alien thinking, planning? What weapons was it attempting to bring into play?

Keim felt the sweat on his forehead. Repeating the name, he watched for the slightest indication of response. Suddenly the bindings on Fong's ankles and wrists shredded; his hand leaped up, tore the blindfold from his eyes. Keim jumped to one side, cursing himself for having neglected the alien's psychokinetic powers.

Fong swiveled in his chair to keep the telepath in view. Keim groped for his laser, suddenly found himself unable to move. *"The dart gun,"* he screamed silently. Arms, legs, every part of him suddenly seemed detached from his will. He became aware of Henry Fong's eyes. Deep, dark pools that whispered of unknowable gulfs, they stared out from a slender, absolutely expressionless face. Only the eyes lived!

Icy fingers touched Keim's mind. He had the instant impression of awesome time, awesome space—galaxies so far apart that each burned like a dim star, yet he knew them for what they were. Suns were born, flamed, died; new suns were born. Time—endless time—telescoped so that the totality of the galaxy's existence was but the short, flickering life of a burning match.

Strange, dwarfish-appearing humans sped over the face of the planet in odd mechanical vehicles; cities flowered, were obliterated. Looking out through strange eyes—the eyes of a gull—he saw a starship hovering above a grassy meadow. The Alpha Tauri!

"Roger?" Lara's voice shrieked in his mind.

"Uli," he gasped.

"Shall I—?"

"Wait!" He managed to scream the plea from one small corner of his mind while he battled to stem the icy encroachment. Vision of a small, egg-shaped body flared in his consciousness, was blotted out. A sickening, vertiginous sensation gripped him. Where in God's name was Duvall? Cold needles stabbed at his brain.

"Uli?" The name exploded from his lips. "Withdraw or she'll destroy the ship!" Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed the inner door opening; Duvall popped into view, a dart gun in hand. Fong whirled around. Too late Keim realized that the alien shared his thoughts, had seen Duvall through his eyes. An invisible force slammed the psych-medical against a wall and he collapsed in an inert heap.

"Destroy the ship," Keim shouted.

"No, wait!" The icy fingers in his brain instantly ceased probing. Dimly he realized that the cry had come from Henry Fong's lips—from the alien who inhabited Fong's body. Simultaneously, the binding force that had gripped him ceased. He threw himself behind the historian.

"Lara, wait," he bellowed. Duvall pulled himself to his knees and scrambled back through the open door. Someone slammed it behind him.

Keim saw the historian start to swivel toward him and shouted, "Move and I'll have her destroy the ship!" Fong halted, then slowly turned until he faced away from the telepath. In the sudden silence, Keim realized that the harsh breathing that reached his ears came from his own lips.

"You wished to speak to me?" The words fell suddenly, mechanically, from Henry Fong's lips.

Startled, Keim groped for words. "You'll never reach the Empire," he grated.

"Ah, but I'm on my way."

"Until I decide to stop you."

"You're a fool, Roger Keim."

"Perhaps." Keim fought to control his anger. "We'll return you to Krado 1. It's either that or death."

"You have the power?" The words, flat and emotionless, nevertheless held a note of mockery.

"I can destroy the ship."

"And die?"

"Humans don't fear death that much."

"You forget, I've possessed the minds of humans."

"Some humans," he corrected.

"You still couldn't kill me, Roger Keim."

"If I destroyed the ship?"

"Not even then."

"I don't believe that," replied Keim; and yet he did believe it. The words had held too much certainty. He asked, "You're trying to tell me you can't be killed?"

"You are beginning to understand."

"No life can live in the vacuum of space," he gritted harshly.

"No?" The mocking impression came again. "I lived in the vacuum of space for far longer than the sun Krado has existed, Keim. Perhaps you glimpsed that in my mind. Destroy the ship and I shall go on as before. Only now, in this star-filled galaxy, can I find a suitable planet readily enough."

Keim knew the truth of the claim. It was the thing he had sensed—the knowledge of infinity, eternity, of life moving like small black shadows across the tremendous chasms between galaxies. My God, what kind of life had taken the body of Henry Fong? What had man come against? He struggled to pull his thoughts together. "Do you claim to be immortal?"

"As you conceive of time, yes."

"I don't believe it," he rasped.

"It makes scant difference what you believe, Roger Keim."

"If you don't fear death, why did you withdraw so quickly from my mind when I threatened to destroy the ship?"

"I prefer to reach my destination as soon as possible."

"You won't, I can promise that."

"No?" The single word held a guarded note that pinged at Keim's mind. Despite the alien's claim to immortality, he'd sensed a tinge of fear. The knowledge caused his heart to pound. What was the alien's weakness? What did he fear? *Unspace*? Perhaps he could live in space, but if the *Alpha Tauri* were destroyed in *unspace*, he was forever doomed. But that wasn't it; he could have Woon, or whoever he controlled on the bridge, bring the ship into normal space quickly enough. Or perhaps it was death itself that he feared. If so, the corollary was that he could be killed!

Keim drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. Perhaps that was the strength he had that the alien lacked—the willingness to die. The idea became a certainty in his mind. Death to a human was chilling enough; to an immortal it must be terrifying. Death could be his weapon.

"Why not?" the alien asked, this time more sharply.

"You'll know just before you die," Keim promised.

"You're a fool!" Henry Fong's lips snapped shut, his head swiveled on his neck, farther and farther. *Snap!* Keim heard the sickening sound, glimpsed the historian's bulging eyes in the instant before his head fell loosely to one side. He felt sick. Had he actually witnessed Fong's death, or had the historian died the instant the alien possessed his mind? If the latter, then Kimbrough, Woon, Coulter—all who had fallen prey to the alien—were the walking dead. *The once men!* The term swept back to chill him.

The alien feared death! He was certain of that. He forced himself to think rationally, carefully, logically—to review, point by point, everything he had learned about Uli. He had to gird his weapons, force the alien into a showdown. And soon. The road to the Empire through *unspace* was swift.

"Roger?" Lara called anxiously.

"A moment, give me a moment," he answered impatiently. He needed time to think, to concentrate, to recall every aspect of his brief glimpse into the alien's mind. *Dark shadows fleeing through the huge canyons of the sky*—what was the significance? Were there more like the alien? Logic said yes, for what form of life could exist as the only one of its kind? Yet Yozell, Kimbrough and Bascomb had spoken as if the alien were unique, a single being. If so, what had happened to the others of its kind? *A dark planet under a purple sun; vast, crumbling buildings*—could Uli be the sole survivor of some cataclysmic disaster? More important, how could he kill a being he couldn't see? Couldn't see? *A small, egg-shaped body hidden in a dark chamber*—was that the shape of the most powerful brain in the universe? If so, Uli must be immobile, utterly dependent upon its hosts.

Keim pulled his thoughts together. Uli was aboard the ship, a small, egg-shaped body; that dispensed with the myth of invisibility. Immortal? How did one go about killing an immortal, especially an immortal who could live in space? *But Tlo, Glomar and Xexl had died!* How? They had been crossing the vast gulfs. . . .

He snapped his fingers; he had it! Death would be certain, even for a so-called immortal! Death to the alien! And death to the ship! He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Death to Lara and to Robin and to Harlan Duvall—to those nameless crewmen now huddled in fear in the

bowels of the ship. But life to the Empire! That was all that really mattered.

Death! He let the word run through his mind. Yet need they die? Suppose, at the last moment. . . . He let the hope grow, fade, grow again. Could he outsmart the alien? His mind spun with the possibility. If so, he might die, but not the others. Lara, Robin, Duvall, a handful of crewmen—they, at least, would return to the Empire.

But he had to let the alien inside his mind! He had to let him probe deeply, to uncover a plan that seemingly he was struggling to hide. And if he let the alien inside his mind? Gazing at the body of Henry Fong, a shudder ran through his muscular frame.

Movement in the corner of his eye brought up his head with a jerk. A metal desk at the far end of the room had lifted. He threw himself flat against the floor as it hurtled straight toward the spot where he had been standing. As it whipped past him, he heard a sickening thud.

"Roger," Lara screamed. Scrambling madly to his feet, he saw that the body of Henry Fong was gone. His eyes darted to the wreckage of the desk; behind it, smashed against the wall, was Henry Fong's bloody figure. He felt a quick revulsion, at the same instant aware of Lara's frightened face in the doorway.

He shouted a warning as the wreckage lifted, hurtled toward him, missed by scant inches to crash against the opposite wall. A heavy chair shot past him with terrifying speed. The mind power! It was the forest all over again—the alien's answer to his threat! Duvall, at Lara's side, stared hypnotically at the wreckage.

"Get out before the room explodes," bellowed Keim. He saw the chair hurtling back and dove to one side.

"My God, what is it?" cried Duvall.

"Psychokinesis," he shouted, "get out!" The words were still on his lips when the laboratory door was ripped from its hinges, sent whirling toward him. A long metal workbench the biologist had used to hold his specimens suddenly was torn from the wall. Suspended lengthwise in the air, it began to whirl madly, smashing everything it touched. "Down," he bellowed.

Lara dropped flat to the floor and began rolling toward the outer door. The workbench spun wildly above her. Duvall pulled Robin down, urging her to follow. When she hesitated, he shouted, "Quick, or you're dead!"

Panicky, she forced herself to roll under the spinning

bench. A chair struck Duvall, smashed him against the wall. He fell and came up bloody. Vanishing into the sleeping quarters, he reappeared with his medical kit. Drops of sweat and blood clung to his brow. He rolled toward the doorway, dragging the kit with him.

"The door won't open," screamed Lara. She had risen to her knees, was tugging at the knob. The metal bench spun wildly a few feet away. Duvall lifted his laser, sliced through the hinges. The door fell inward, was smashed by the bench. Sharp fragments flew through the air.

Keim dropped flat and rolled toward the others as they scrambled out into the corridor. A flying object struck his shoulder, hurling him to one side. Gritting to suppress the pain, he dove toward the open door. Duvall reached in, caught his arm and jerked him to safety.

"God, what's happening?" The psychmedic's voice was shaking.

"Later." Keim shook his head groggily. "We have to find new quarters, quick!"

"My rooms?" suggested Lara.

"No, Fong was there." He fought to bring order to his thoughts. They had to find a place not apt to be known to the alien's memories, or at least one that wouldn't be immediately suspected. The sound of the spinning bench smashing the furnishings in Yozell's quarters told him the alien was not yet aware of their escape.

Lara screamed. Keim jerked up his weapon, glimpsed a bird flying toward him. Ice touched his brain. Instinctively he sprayed the passageway with a deadly beam. The bird fell off to one side, a wing gone. Fluttering wildly, it dropped to the floor.

He fired again, conscious of what might happen if a beam sliced through an outer bulkhead. With the drop in barometric pressure, automatic safety doors would seal off the area from the rest of the ship; everyone within that area would die. He hadn't considered that. It made his threat to the alien hollow. Did the alien know that?

The question startled him, then he realized the alien did know; it was the kind of thing he would have gotten from Captain Woon's mind. Still, why hadn't the alien destroyed an outer bulkhead, killed them in just that way? He felt suddenly jittery. But there was knowledge in his own mind that he seldom tapped, that seldom rose into his awareness. Perhaps it was that way with the alien; the knowledge was there but he hadn't tapped it. Neither could the

alien be certain that he couldn't destroy the ship. A man with a laser—a man willing to die—could destroy the giant energy converters, the bridge, the sensitive equipment that meant life or death for the ship. Equipment that couldn't be sealed off!

The aft air-conditioning compartment! It struck him suddenly. One of the several such centers, it serviced the bridge, the energy converters, and other operational centers. If the outer bulkheads near it were destroyed, the ship would die. It was a double weapon; the alien couldn't afford to destroy it, and if Keim had to, he could.

"Better get moving," Duvall suggested nervously. Keim jerked his head, started along the corridor. Fixing the location of the air-conditioning unit in mind, he sent out swift probes, got only silence. He explained the situation tersely. Duvall nodded acquiescence. He dropped down two more ladders, then heard the soft purr of machinery. The sound was reassuring. He sent out another probe before opening the hatch, then stepped aside to let the others enter.

When he closed it behind him, the psychmedic asked heavily, "Now what in God's name was it, Roger?"

"The mind power, I told you." Robin's face blanched.

"Hearing it and seeing it are two different things," admitted Duvall. "What kind of a monster is it?"

"A small, egg-shaped creature that's near-immortal, telepathic, can make robots out of men, live in space, and which possesses the mind power; that's what we're up against."

Duvall's body sagged, his face heavy with resignation. "How can we fight that kind of power?"

Keim smiled, all at once cheerful. "Just before the housewarming, I got an idea," he explained. "If we're lucky, it'll work."

"If we're lucky!"

Keim looked at Lara. "We can only die once," he said.

ELEVEN

The telepaths had escaped!

Nestled in the small drawer where Yozell had placed him, Uli sought to stifle his fear. When, through Henry Fong's eyes, he'd first realized that the telepaths were in

the biologist's quarters, he'd been terror-stricken beyond belief. Had not the *Alpha Tauri* been in *unspace*, he would have destroyed it instantly. But the telepaths hadn't suspected his presence; he'd determined that quickly enough. For a while he'd felt certain that the telepaths and their companions had died in the violent destruction of the room, but the brief glimpse he'd caught of them through the eyes of the bird had told him otherwise. Worse, the male telepath was more determined than ever to kill him. Mere thought of it brought back his terror anew; his small body, almost totally brain, seethed with it. At first formless, the terror rapidly took shape—the shape of death! *To not be!* The single, blinding possibility engulfed him with fear and horror.

Uli struggled to bring his emotions under control. It wasn't that the telepath might destroy the ship; he would, if necessary, and if not prevented. Although it was less likely since he'd learned that Uli could survive in space. He'd gleaned that much during his brief moments in the telepath's mind. But the alarming thing, the source of much of his inner turmoil, lay in the telepath's supreme confidence that he could kill him. That was one thing; the other was the strength of the telepath's mind.

Uli contemplated it fearfully. Every mind he'd ever entered had resisted to one degree or another. In the case of lower life forms, such as birds and quadrupeds, resistance would crumble almost instantly. Neither was such resistance based on intelligence, but rather was an instinctive response to the invasion of the territoriality of the self. The response was common to all life forms however insignificant. It was only the bipeds that differed. Their response, while instinctual, also held elements of intellectual resistance, hence was more prolonged. (Ah, the bipeds of long ago—how he had smashed and obliterated every trace of their civilization!) Some had resisted quite fiercely, but their struggles had been as nothing when compared with the humans. And of the latter, none had resisted like the male telepath.

The thought perturbed him. Given time, of course, he could conquer him, possess him just as he had the others. Yet it wasn't the strength of the male telepath's mind that disquieted him so much as the quality. Beyond his unique power of telepathy (unique to Uli because it operated beyond the visual field), he had sensed still greater powers. Strangely enough, the telepath himself was unaware

of them. Aside from the recognition of clairvoyance, he had no comprehension whatever of his mind's full potential.

But what powers had he? He had seen the temple fall before it fell! He had looked into the future! What lay hidden in the telepath's mind? What latent powers lay there . . . waiting? One day the telepath would sense them—if he lived! But he wouldn't live!

Uli pushed the frightening thoughts from his mind. *He* was the master of death, not the telepath. Despite the self-assurance, he couldn't quite stem his apprehension. It came to him that it was caused by still another of the telepath's traits—his total lack of fear of personal death. He would never have believed it had he not looked into the telepath's mind. Such a lack of fear was completely incomprehensible. Fear of death was the stimulus to survival, the governor of decision, the ultimate parameter that determined the nature and scope of action. Without it, how could decision and action be predictable? That was the frightening thing—the knowledge that he couldn't predict what the telepath might attempt next.

Perhaps he should have Woon bring the ship from *un-space*, destroy it. While savoring the idea, he knew that he wouldn't except, perhaps, as a last recourse. Memory of the fates of his companions in the deeps of the universe cautioned against it; the perils were simply too many.

But neither would the telepath attempt to destroy the ship, he decided. More likely he would attempt to reach the bridge and commandeer the ship, return it to Krado 1 or some planet well outside the Third Empire, attempt to persuade Uli to abandon his plan under threat of death. That seemed the most logical course. But was the telepath logical? Logical, yes, but not predictable. There was a vast difference.

Uli held one certainty: the telepath had to die! Still, it would be interesting to acquire Keim's mind, plumb its innermost depths, assess its strengths and weaknesses, analyze its full potential. Perhaps he could acquire the human's ability to extend his telepathic range beyond the visual field. He could with his hosts, of course, but they were part of him—an extension of the self. Keim's ability went beyond that. But while the human exceeded him in that respect, it was a small achievement when compared with his own vast powers. Could the telepath shake a planet to its core? Never! Uli considered that the final measure of the telepath's true significance. Really quite

paltry. Judging by the human minds he now possessed, the entire matter scarcely was worth his consideration. Yet Yozell, Kimbrough, Bascomb, and Henry Fong had failed in the attempt to trick Keim and kill him. Somehow the telepath had detected the falseness of identity, had acted too swiftly for them.

That was it, Uli decided; Keim had acted out of pre-knowledge. He had to make his human hosts more human, less host—pay more attention to movement, expression, voice, to what the telepath thought of as “a blankness of mind.” With such a host he could rid himself of the telepath both easily and safely. It was imperative that he do so. He had to kill Roger Keim. *Now, now, now. . . .*

The word became a scream in his brain.

Keim probed the ship.

The compartments around him and long corridors above were devoid of response. He could sense no one on the bridge, nor in the small cabin adjacent to it that Woon used when the ship was in deep space. He knew that meant nothing. Not when robots roamed the decks; not when the alien moved through the passageways on the silent wings of gulls.

He did sense life deep in the bowels of the ship. Two men—no, three now—were hiding among the giant energy converters. He tried to capture the clairvoyance he’d experienced earlier. The interior of the converter room flickered fuzzily in his consciousness, a place of shadowy impressions. He found it strange how the power waxed and waned, but he knew that somewhere in those shadows were three men; their fear screamed in his brain.

He shifted his probe slowly, scanning the ship compartment by compartment. Two men in a storeroom, another in the crew’s galley, still another in a foreward hold—their thoughts, heavy with fear, touched his mind. Occasionally brief images flared in his consciousness and died. How many of the crew still lived? But that conjecture was useless. Whatever had to be done, had to be done by the four remaining members of the science staff. By himself, he amended.

He looked at Lara, debating an earlier idea. It was risky, yet there seemed no other way. Finally he said, “I’m going to the bridge.”

She started to protest, but caught herself. Wincing from

the battering he'd taken in Yozell's quarters, the psych-medie struggled to his feet. "I'll go with you," he offered.

Keim shook his head, related his plan. "Wait here till you hear from me," he finished.

"How?" asked Duvall. "The interphones are out."

Keim glanced at Lara. "I'll manage."

"You can't go alone," she protested.

"It's more dangerous for two." He added telepathically, "*Keep in contact with me. That's essential.*"

"I'll still worry." She tried a smile that didn't quite come off. Neither could she hide the pain in her eyes.

Keim paused at the door, his eyes on the psychmedie. Duvall caught the unspoken message and said, "Don't worry about this end."

Keim's last look was at Lara. "*Take care of yourself.*"

"*Come back . . . safely.*"

"*Before you know it.*" Slipping out of the air-conditioning room, he closed the hatch behind him. He knew it wasn't courage that motivated him to go alone; it was simply that he had powers the others lacked. If he failed, they had the most difficult task of all.

He moved stealthily up a ladder, his mind probing above, below, to all sides. *Two shadowy figures in a supply room, another in an auxiliary power center*—he touched their minds briefly as he made his way toward the dim corridor that ran through the science quarters. A crewman here, a crewman there—perhaps more lived than he'd suspected. The hope was reassuring.

What was the alien doing? The nagging question brought a distraction that he fought to fend off. But what would the alien try next? Where would he strike? On the answers, perhaps, depended his life—the life of the Empire. But there were no answers. He was a blind man picking his way through an unknown maze, and somewhere in the maze was a predator. He had to banish such thoughts. His job was to reach the bridge. And then? He'd have to play it by ear. Could a human outsmart the alien? An intriguing question!

Danger! Like a sharp needle jabbed into his brain, the signal came. A tingling ran along his spine. An alarm clanged from somewhere deep in his subconscious. *Someone was near!* He halted, waited with laser ready, finger on the firing key. As the sense of *presence* grew stronger, his muscles tightened. An image flickered, faded, but not the sense of *presence*. Not a host! If it were, he would never

sense him so clearly. His hopes soared. He moved his head fitfully, trying to locate the other.

There, in an upper passageway! His mind focused on the area, he tried to see it clairvoyantly. A shimmery image danced in his brain, grew stronger. Gray hair, a round face with eyes that he knew were a mild blue. Burl Ashford! The recognition jarred him. He'd long since counted the geologist among the dead; now he was here, alone, creeping along the upper corridor. Keim probed more deeply. Ashford's mind, although bewildered and incoherent, held nothing of the alien. How had he escaped? Keim felt a quick surprise.

"Lara?" he called silently.

"Yes?" Her answer came instantly, nervously.

"I've located Burl Ashford?"

"Is he . . . one of them?"

"His mind is clear." He recognized the answer as an evasion and added, *"I don't believe so."*

"Be careful," she pleaded. He sensed her dilemma: the obligation to help the geologist and the fear that he might be another of the alien's hosts. But she was right; they could trust no one.

"I'll test him," he promised. He jerked his concentration back to the geologist. The image came again, moving up and up until Ashford's face filled the landscape of his mind. A sad face, puzzled, bewildered . . . the image danced and flickered, faded, came back more strongly than ever. Ashford's mind was a chaotic jumble. He reached a stairwell, moved down haltingly.

Keim watched him uneasily. The geologist's movements, rather than mechanical, were those of a man in shock. Perhaps, like Duvall, like himself, he had been touched by the alien, had escaped. Or perhaps he was reacting from the knowledge of the carnage. Either would be sufficient to account for his strange behavior. Acting on impulse, Keim hurried to intercept him.

"Burl?" He called the name sharply as the geologist came into view. Ashford's head jerked up. He turned disbelievingly. Although his hands were empty, Keim kept a tight grip on his laser.

"Roger!" Ashford took a faltering step forward. *"Is it really you?"*

"Flesh and blood," answered Keim. He moved toward the other warily.

"My God, Roger, what's happening?" Ashford's eyes

dropped to the laser, came up again. He hadn't seemed to notice it.

"We have an alien aboard," Keim told him. He watched closely for a reaction.

"Alien?" Ashford's body jerked spasmodically. "That's what I was afraid of. I warned Woon, I warned them all. You remember, Roger. I told them we had to get off the planet, get off before it was too late. I pleaded with Woon, but he wouldn't listen."

"Where is he?"

"Captain Woon? I don't know. I only know that everyone's dead. This is a death ship." His eyes rolled wildly. "You have to help me, Roger."

Keim felt a quick sympathy for him. Weaker than most, Ashford now was dangerously near a complete crack-up. "They're not all dead," he said.

"Others . . . are alive?" Hope flared in the ashen face.

"A few."

"For God's sake, where?"

Keim deliberated. Ashford held no taint of the alien that he could discern. He seemed more a man suffering from the horrors he had witnessed. If allowed to wander, he couldn't escape the alien for long. Either that, or he'd be murdered by the first panicky crewman he met. The stricken look on the geologist's face decided for him. "Go down to the aft air-conditioning compartment," he instructed.

"Aft air-conditioning?" Ashford looked puzzled.

"Lara's there, and others. You know where it is?"

"Below the staff quarters? Yes, I remember."

"Watch yourself, Burl."

"Aft air-conditioning compartment," Ashford intoned. He mumbled his thanks and stumbled toward the stairwell. Keim watched him uneasily until he vanished from view, then contacted Lara.

"Ashford's on his way," he advised. "*Keep a close watch on him.*"

"I know," she answered doubtfully.

"Were you reading us?"

"You," she corrected. "*His thoughts were too incoherent. Do you really believe he's safe?*"

"He's in shock, but I believe that's all. If Duvall can bring him out of it, he might be of help. I'd keep the laser handy," he added.

"We'll do what we can," she promised.

Keim diverted his attention to the empty corridor ahead. In the dim glow of the night lights, it held a gloomy air of long abandonment. He refrained from glancing into the quarters on either side, knowing what he would find. The knowledge that each was a tomb sparked his horror. Deliberately he sent his probes ranging. From isolated parts of the ship, panicky thoughts were borne in on waves of terror.

Where was the alien? The question nibbled persistently at his mind as he ascended to the next level, and to the next. Finally he halted at the foot of a stairwell that led past several small staterooms used by the captain and his chief officers when the ship was in deep space. Beyond was the chart room, the astrogation bridge, the command bridge.

A warning clanged in his mind.

He halted, his body taut with expectancy. Although he could detect no mental activity, he became aware of a sense of *presence*. The warning rose to a scream in his mind. The hair at the nape of his neck bristled. A host, but who? Not that it mattered. Neither was there any turning back.

He forced himself slowly up the stairs.

The back of a head came into view, narrow shoulders. He froze, recognizing the figure as that of Jonley, Chief of Maintenance. Attempting to probe him, he encountered only the same curious blankness he had known before. And yet, with the blankness, there was that same indefinable aura that he interpreted as a *presence*. In some strange way, it recalled the horror he'd encountered in Duvall's mind. It was that way now as he gazed at Jonley—the feel of something malevolent, something foreign to anything he'd ever known. Holding the laser steady, he reached into a pocket with the other hand and brought out a dart gun.

How many like Jonley were on the bridge? Two, three, a dozen? He moved stealthily up the stairs. Jonley turned, bringing his hatchet profile into view. Keim halted, lifted the dart gun, flipped the safety with his thumb. He felt taut with apprehension. As if suddenly sensing his presence, Jonley swung toward him. Keim triggered the weapon, felt it buck slightly as it discharged the dart.

Jonley looked blankly down at him. His hand came up, grasped the needle-tipped missile and yanked it from his chest; mechanically he threw it to one side. An instant later his legs began to buckle. Pitching face forward, he

tumbled down the stairs. One swift glance at his face told Keim that consciousness had fled. But the alien would know!

The laser gripped in one hand, the dart gun in the other, he moved quietly up the stairs. Feet thudded against the deck above him and another head came into view. He fired a second dart, saw it strike the other in the neck even before he recognized the figure as that of Paul Rayfield, the physicist.

Rayfield's hand jerked up with a laser as his eyes met the telepath's. Ice touched Keim's brain. Through sheer will power, he scrambled back behind Jonley's inert body, at the same time struggling to bring his own laser to bear. The paint sizzled as a beam cut through the bulkhead alongside him. Rayfield swung his weapon sideways with a disjointed, chopping motion; Jonley's body convulsed as a beam cut through it. Keim felt a searing pain along the side of his neck. Rayfield jerked erect, a groan escaping his lips. Collapsing, he slid forward on his face and lay still.

Desperately aware that time was running out, Keim leaped to his feet. Rayfield's body suddenly lifted, hurtled toward him. He threw himself frantically to one side. A staggering blow on the shoulder hurled him against the bulkhead; a split second later, he heard the physicist's body slam with a sickening thud against the deck below. Keim pulled himself erect, sprinted up the stairs and burst into the passageway that led to the bridge.

Kimbrough came racing from one of the small staterooms, his long legs pumping awkwardly. One hand grasped a bolt gun. He slid to a halt just as Keim's dart caught him in the chest. Staggering, he started to collapse, but suddenly was lifted into the air.

This time Keim was ready. As the chief scientist's body hurtled toward him, he threw himself flat to the deck. The body whistled past, thudded against a bulkhead. Keim glanced back, saw the bloody body lift, fly toward him with bullet speed. He threw himself violently from its path. The body smashed through a window of the small chart-room and was lost to sight.

A laser beam hissed past Keim's shoulder.

Coulter, the chief engineer, charged toward him from another of the small staterooms. The ludicrous thought struck Keim; whatever the alien was, he certainly wasn't a tactician. He fired, missed, triggered the dart gun again

and discovered it was empty. He hurled the weapon violently. It caught Coulter in the face, staggered him backward. He fell in a crumpled heap.

Keim raced toward the bridge with the sick feeling that too many things were happening too fast. Weapons on the bridge! One slash of a misdirected beam and the explosive decompression would spell the end. Although the safety doors automatically would seal off the bridge, there were no maintenance crews to effect repairs. A starship without a usable command bridge!

Ahead, the thin form of Kramer, the Second Astrogator, whirled to meet him. Other feet thudded against the deck behind him. Instinctively he realized it was Coulter and cursed himself for not having killed him.

Miraculously, or so it seemed, a weapon appeared in the astrogator's hand. As he fired, Keim dived for his legs. The heavy *wump* of the discharge identified it as a bolt gun. A scream came from behind. The force of his body drove Kramer into the instrument console; he came down atop the telepath in a dead weight.

Keim seized his body to use as a shield. As he did, he glimpsed the laser slash across the astrogator's chest and knew he was dead. Struggling to his feet, he whirled toward the chief engineer.

Coulter was lying in a pool of blood. It took Keim an instant to realize that Coulter and Kramer had killed each other in the deadly cross-fire. His eyes swept up; the star shields were closed. A quick inspection revealed the only damage was to the console.

He glanced up at the telescreens. They showed only the vast emptiness of *unspace*—an ebon, starless night that still remained a mystery to man, even though he used it as a swift byway between stars. Whether a phenomenon of time or space, or both, no one really knew.

Keim could not even begin to guess the *Alpha Tauri's* location relative to the real universe; that secret, temporarily at least, had died with the Second Astrogator. Not that it actually mattered, he reflected. For his purpose, one place was as good as another.

His heart still pounding, he studied the control panel. Like most personnel who had spent considerable time on the bridge, he was generally familiar with its operation. He grasped a red handle, jerked it down. The ship seemed to reel around him as a wave of vertigo struck him, then

passed. He lifted his eyes to the telescreens. They danced with a thousand lights—the lights of stars.

The *Alpha Tauri* had emerged from *unspace*.

TWELVE

HARLAN DUVALL felt a surge of vertigo. The sensation told him that the *Alpha Tauri* had made the transit from *unspace*. Gazing at the others, he tried to suppress his tension. Lara wet her lips nervously.

"I'm frightened," Robin whispered. He nodded understandingly. Coming from *unspace* in the blind, as the *Alpha Tauri* surely had, was perilous at best. Although the possibility of colliding with a star was remote, at least on a statistical basis, there was a far greater possibility of emerging sufficiently close to one to be incinerated in its radiation field. It had happened.

When a moment passed with no discernible rise in temperature, he exhaled slowly. "Made it." He tried to sound laconic.

"Even a normal transition frightens me," Lara confided. He knew she spoke for Robin's benefit. A pounding at the door brought up his head with a jerk. He fumbled for his laser.

"No," Lara called sharply. Although she knew it must be Burl Ashford, she couldn't admit it without revealing her telepathy. Momentarily she struggled with the dilemma.

"It might be one of them," Robin whispered fearfully.

"Lara," a hoarse voice shouted, "Roger sent me here!"

"Burl Ashford," she exclaimed. Relieved, she went to the door and peered out before the others could protest. As her eyes met the geologist's she experienced a slight shock. Reluctantly, she retreated, Ashford following her into the room. His blue eyes were deep, long tunnels. She wanted to scream, found she couldn't.

"Burl!" Grimacing with pain, Duvall struggled up from his chair, careful to keep his hand on the dart gun. The geologist looked as if he had been dragged through the pits of hell.

"Dead, all dead," Ashford moaned. His sepulchral tone made Duvall shiver.

"How did you escape?" he demanded.

"Running, hiding. . . ."

"Where did you meet Roger?"

"He . . . found me." Ashford switched his gaze to the psychmedic. "He . . . sent me here." The words came out in a curiously halting manner. His lips twisting convulsively, he blinked and began to sway.

"You all right?" Duvall sprang forward, caught Ashford's arm as he collapsed. Sprawled on the deck, soft moans escaped his lips. Duvall rolled him over, felt his pulse. "Get the amoid," he snapped.

Robin pawed nervously through the medical kit to retrieve the nerve-tingling drug that had been used to revive Henry Fong. She located the container, passed it to him. Duvall held the bottle under the geologist's nose. Ashford's body twitched and jerked; a long strangled cry escaped his lips. His stubby hands clenched and unclenched. Finally his eyelids fluttered open and he looked bewildered into the psychmedic's face.

"Lord," he sobbed.

"What is it?" Duvall tried to suppress his alarm.

"The alien." Ashford struggled to a sitting position and looked wildly around. The fear surged into his eyes anew. Duvall had the fleeting impression of a trapped animal.

"You're safe here." He laid a restraining hand on the geologist's shoulder. "Tell us what you know about the alien."

"My mind," moaned Ashford.

"It's there now?" Duvall's hand dropped to the dart gun.

"No, no, it's gone. Oh God!" His body shook uncontrollably.

"Get hold of yourself," snapped Duvall. "We have to know."

"Lord, the memories. . . ."

"What happened?" Duvall fought to subdue his growing tension.

"Dead, dead," Ashford sobbed piteously. "Shepherd, Diamond, Carol Rusnak, Hester Kane—all dead, murdered." Robin stepped back her eyes wide with fright.

"How do you know?" demanded Duvall. Ashford averted his gaze. Haunted and miserable, he began to weep. Duvall stared at him with a terrible comprehension.

"My God, you. . . ."

"No, no," the geologist called wildly. He looked beseechingly at the psychmedic.

"Who then? Speak up, man!" Duvall shook the geologist's shoulder violently.

"The thing . . . the thing in my mind," moaned Ashford. He lifted his eyes imploringly. "I couldn't help myself, control myself. It was like my mind was cut off from my body. I could see, know, but there was nothing I could do. Nothing at all. My God, Harlan, my body was a machine. I was walking, walking and holding the laser. The thing in my mind made me. . . ." He broke off with a strangled sob.

"You killed them?" Duvall's voice shook with horror and disbelief. Dropping the dart gun, he fumbled for his laser.

"Not me, it was the thing in my mind. Can't you understand?" Ashford pleaded. "I was . . . cut off from myself. It was as if I were looking at myself from somewhere deep inside, but I had no control. God, it was horrible. It was the same with Kimbrough and Woon and Coulter and Jonley."

"They were all killing?" Duvall was aghast.

Ashford jerked his head in a nod. "I was sharing their minds. Bascomb killed Ross Janik. Only it wasn't Ross Janik; it was the thing in his mind. It looks like a large egg. Uli, that's its name. I remember, I was in its mind, too."

"What is it? For God's sake, talk, Burl!"

"I was in its mind," babbled Ashford. His lips twisted in self-pity.

Duvall shook him savagely. "What is it?" he demanded.

"It came . . . it came from the edge of the universe. There was a purple sun dying; the stars were dying." The geologist peered at him, his eyes filled with both wonder and terror. "It came from billions . . . billions of years ago. There were nine of them, nine—driven by thought, feeding on radiation. My God, I saw galaxies die!" The fright swept back into his face.

"Talk sense, Burl!"

"But I am." Ashford twitched violently. "The others died, but it lived. It came to take over the galaxy."

Duvall asked intently, "Where is it now? Try to remember."

"It's, it's. . . ." Ashford flinched, the horror leaping into his eyes. "My God, we've got to get out of here, get to the lifeboats. It's our only chance." Struggling to his feet, he lurched toward the door.

Duvall grabbed him savagely. "It's what?" he shouted.

"Laral! That's what I had to do, find Laral!"

ALTON'S UNGUESSABLE

"Lara?" The psychmedic recoiled.

"It sent me here to find her!" Ashford's eyes blazed with the fright of memory. "It left me, went to her. It's there now, in her mind!"

Robin shrieked.

"We've got to escape." Ashford twisted from the psychmedic's grip and bolted toward the door. For the first time Duvall saw that it was open.

"Lara?" He looked wildly around, saw only Robin.

"She's gone," Robin quavered.

"Lara?" he shouted. His cry echoed through the passage ways, died, left only the silence.

Lara was gone.

Keim peered through the directional telescreens.

Suns, like fireflies, sparked the night. Some burned in solitude, others in clusters. Out and out and out they receded into that never-ending space where live the whitish shadows of galaxies. Galaxies without end. The sight made him giddy.

He hadn't the remotest idea in what part of space the *Alpha Tauri* might be; nothing on the instrument panel gave him the slightest clue. Coming as abruptly as the ship had from *unspace*, without reference to the atomic clock that marked its passage through that other void, even a first-class astrogator would have his work cut out to position them correctly. Not that it mattered. All he needed was a sun, a sun with planets. The latter was imperative to his plan. He had to have a seeming escape route, even though in reality none would exist. Not for the alien. And he needed luck. Lots of luck.

He found his sun.

Greenish-white, all but lost in the splay of light from the stars around it, he would never have detected it were it not for the sensitive rad analyzers, which revealed it to be by far the closest. And it had planets, five of them. Despite the tremendous distance, the grav detectors had picked them up, separating their masses from that of the green-white sun itself. Each of the three outer planets possessed a single moon. Although quite an ordinary system, Keim believed it the loveliest he'd ever seen.

How close was the green-white sun? He wasn't certain, but if he were interpreting the readout data correctly it lay but the fractional part of a standard light-year away. In terms of real space, or in terms of time as real space

was measured, that still was an awesome distance; in terms of the equations of *unspace*, the moments of transfer, it was dangerously close. Given time, he might refine the figures more closely, but he couldn't wait. That inescapable knowledge plagued him. The alien knew where he was, what he was attempting—had known since that first instant Jonley had seen him on the stairwell. By telepathy, all its hosts had known; the quick but futile attempt to kill him proved that. And knowing, the alien undoubtedly was taking countermeasures at this very moment. Keim could but guess at their form.

Setting the course for the green-white sun was simple; he had merely to lock the guidance system to the grav detectors. It took but a moment to actuate the proper controls. Waiting for the course correction to take effect required far longer, for the change had to be agonizingly slow to keep the resulting g-forces within tolerable limits.

While waiting, he tried to contact Lara, but failed. He felt an immediate anxiety when probes directed toward the air-conditioning compartment returned only a confused medley of thought. Neither could he obtain more than a fragmentary image through clairvoyance. Worried, he returned his attention to the green-white sun. Finally, through a visual scope, it flared directly ahead.

Nervously, for he knew he was working in the blind, he moved the red handle up again; the stars blinked out. In the wave of vertigo that followed, the *Alpha Tauri* transferred to *unspace*. The blank telescreens mirrored only the awful emptiness of a sunless universe.

Almost immediately he jerked the red handle down, felt the giddiness—saw a gigantic green-white sun spring into view on the telescreens. Great coronal flames leaping outward from its disc stabbed vast distances into space.

Gripped by the horrible fear that he might have misjudged, he threw a quick glance at the instrument console. The grav meters and rad counters were going wild. In relation to its diameter, the sun's angular distance in the sky was slightly more than one and one-half degrees. Coupled with its spectral type and temperature, that gave him an uncomfortably slim margin of safety, but still a margin. But he had to work swiftly.

He threw the velocity controls into the maximum tolerable deceleration and polarized the telescreens to diminish their brightness. Even then, the harsh glare caused his eyes to ache. The spectrum analysis readout data revealed

the sun to be comparatively young, not more than a few billion standard years of age. Flaming, awesome, unstable, eye-searing—it was straight into that pit of hell that the *Alpha Tauri* was plunging. He jerked his gaze away.

The needles on the rad meters, after the first wild fluctuations, now were edging steadily upward and soon would reach the red line that marked the radiation hazard as critical. In the silence, he heard the cooling system groan as it sought to counter the rising internal temperatures. Still another instrument reported that the *Alpha Tauri* was inside the orbit of the innermost planet.

A glance along the outer corridor and approaches to the bridge revealed them to be clear. Blood dripped from the jagged edges of the chartroom window where Kimbrough's body had crashed through. The sight brought a quick revulsion. The bodies of Kramer and Coulter lay where they had fallen. Eyeing them, he wondered why the alien hadn't attempted to use them as missiles and concluded that it was from fear of destroying the ship's astrogation and computer equipment. What significance had that? He wasn't certain.

Where was the alien? More important, where were its hosts? Certainly the increased load on the cooling system had apprised him of what was happening. Whatever the alien was planning to do had to be done quickly. Time was running out.

Puzzled over what mode the attack might take, he selected a position in which it would be virtually impossible to catch him by surprise. Neither could the alien strike through the mind power unless he located him through the eyes of a host. Even then, his position near the vital equipment would make such an attack extremely hazardous.

Step by step, he reviewed the possible actions that might occur. The alien was certain to dispatch another host to the scene. Woon? Of the known hosts, Woon alone had abstained from the fray. But whoever the emissary, he would have to capture him while remaining outside his visual field, use him to contact the alien—tell the alien he was doomed to die in the furnace of the green-white sun. And carefully, just for an instant, he'd have to allow the alien to penetrate his mind, glimpse a possible escape route, then break the connection—trust to luck. But if he let the alien inside his mind, even for a fleeting moment, could he thrust him out again? He preferred not to think of that.

But where was the alien? Fidgeting, he felt the tension gather in his muscles, the sweat course down his body. In the script that he'd mentally written, everything depended on the alien's response. The alien would do this and this and this; it had all seemed so coldly logical. Now there was no alien, no response. Could aliens just fade away? At another time he might laugh; now he just wondered. This alien might do almost anything!

He fought to bring his reasoning under control. The brief maneuver through *unspace* had brought him far closer to the blazing sun than he'd anticipated. Too close? He thought not, for if the alien destroyed the ship, the sun's vast gravitational tides would pull him to a fiery death. Certainly the alien would know that. In a perverse way, it would force the alien into the role of protecting the ship. Keim had to smile at the irony of it. But time suddenly was racing. If the alien didn't dispatch a host soon, he'd have to make the contact. How? Of the hosts he'd known of, only Captain Woon yet lived. Or did he?

The question startled him. If the alien acquired his hosts through the eyes of other hosts, what power would he have if the hosts were all dead? The mind power, certainly—he'd demonstrated that. But without hosts he couldn't pinpoint it, use it against a mere individual; he could use it only randomly, as he had in Yozell's quarters. Blind, he could destroy forests, level hills, wreck planets; but he couldn't use the power selectively in the absence of visual guidance. But if that were true, how had he acquired his first host? He couldn't even guess.

As the minutes passed, Keim felt his desperation building. He had to locate Woon, use him to contact the alien. That Woon was alive, he was certain; the alien would need him to guide the *Alpha Tauri* to a safe destination. Could Woon be in his small cabin off the bridge? Keim reached for the dart gun, then remembered he'd emptied it—had hurled it at Coulter. The laser was worthless; he needed Woon alive.

Duvall? He felt a flicker of excitement. If Duvall could locate the captain, knock him out with a sleep dart, bring him to the bridge, revive him. . . . It could work! He could contact the psychmedic through Lara, *if he could reach her!* Glancing at the flaming image of the sun in the telescreens, he wondered if enough time remained for all that had to be done.

"Lara?" He called her telepathically. When no answer

was forthcoming, he tried again. He stemmed his panic, probed with his mind. Silence. What could have happened. *Burl Ashford!* The name rolled like thunder into his awareness. Yet Ashford had shown no sign of the taint. Or had the alien perfected his robots? The possibility chilled him. Perhaps he should forget the alien, try to locate the others, flee in the lifeboats. His present gamble seemed sheer futility. What was his function, his reason for being? To kill aliens, or to live? But such speculation was madness; he had to kill the alien. No compromise was possible. But to kill him, he had to find him. Or he could wait. Wait and die in the blazing green-white sun.

He glanced at the console. Although he couldn't see the dial faces, he knew the needles on the rad meters would be dangerously near the red lines. What if the cooling system broke down under the heat load? He shook his head. He couldn't afford to think like that. If he did, there were a thousand possibilities, each of which could spell total disaster. He'd have to meet each emergency as it came.

All at once he felt calm, coldly calm. If he were to stand any chance of saving the ship, saving Lara, he'd have to contact the alien—face him with only his mind as his major weapon. Although he couldn't hope to win by sheer intellect—that was patently impossible—there were other factors. Courage was one, the willingness to die another. If he died, it would mean little or nothing to his race. Death, therefore, was a personal loss. But what did death mean to that strange entity that called itself Uli? What was death to a near-immortal? Frightening, he hoped.

"Uli!" He shouted in the silence of his mind. "*This is Roger Keim on the bridge. You are going to die, Uli! Do you hear that?*" He listened, listened while the long seconds dragged out. But of course Uli couldn't hear him except through a host. Where was Woon? Someone had to find him.

"*Lara?*" He tried again to reach her, both telepathically and clairvoyantly. The strange screen in his brain remained blank. He switched his attention to Duvall. A jumble of thought, heavy with emotion, swirled through his consciousness. Duvall and Robin Martell Closing his eyes to the telescreens, his ears to the groaning of the cooling system, he tried to make sense of the mishmash.

Duvall panicky. Robin close to hysteria. Burl Ashford! Something about Ashford. Ashford and Lara! The fragments that reached him were so laden with emotion as to

be all but undecipherable. Good God; what about Lara? He felt cold and sweaty at the same time.

He called her again, fought to stem his fear at the silence. He probed the surrounding area with no better result. The corridor above rewarded him with a flood of thought. He got the shimmery mental image of three figures. Two held lasers or bolt guns, he couldn't tell which. Their minds were alive with fear.

Escape! They were trying to escape! Escape from what, the alien? From the ship! He knew without quite knowing how he knew. Perhaps they'd sensed the vertiginous transfer to normal space, had reasoned that the *Alpha Tauri* had emerged near a planetary system. He concentrated on one of the figures, trying to isolate his mental processes from the others. *They were trying to reach the lifeboats!* He felt his stomach muscles tighten. The image in his mind grew smaller and smaller and smaller until it vanished in a pinpoint of light.

He shifted his probe to locate the men who had been hiding in the cavernous storeroom. No sign of life. He could locate neither the man who had been hiding in the galley nor the one in the forward hold. Yet vague, random fragments of thought did reach him; mostly they came amid swirls of tension and terror.

How much longer could he wait? He became aware that he was bathed in sweat; it clung in beads to his brow, dripped and stung his eyes. His hand on the laser was wet. The harsh groaning of the cooling system indicated it was near the critical overload point.

He flicked a fast glance at a telescreen, appalled at the flaming green-white image that all but filled it. Worse, the rad needles were edging into the red. His margin of safety had all but reached the vanishing point. If the *Alpha Tauri's* radiation shields failed. . . .

A buzzer sounded.

He jerked his gaze to a blinking red light on the console. The numeral "four" flashed on a readout display. What was four? Casting a quick glance around to make certain no one was approaching, he dashed toward the panel. The legend beneath the readout instruments read **LIFEBOATS**.

Lifeboat Four! Someone had launched a lifeboat! He felt a quick dismay. It was possible, just possible, that a lifeboat might reach the innermost planet . . . if that planet were in the right part of its orbit! He hadn't ascertained

that. But it was not probable. And it was extremely improbable that such a close-in planet would be habitable.

Suppose other crewmen got the same idea? He felt suddenly jittery. The *Alpha Tauri* carried but four of the giant craft. Lose them all and his plan was shot.

He studied the communication panel and turned a switch. A green "on" light flashed. "Lifeboat Four, Lifeboat Four," he called. "This is Roger Keim on the bridge. Come in, Lifeboat Four." He waited, then repeated the call. The communicator emitted a burst of static.

"Roger!" The call broke hoarsely through the speaker. "Escape while you can! Warn the others! Duvall wouldn't listen. Roger, can you hear me?"

Burl Ashford! Keim felt a surge of incredulity. Then Burl hadn't fallen prey to the alien. He felt a wild hope for Lara. "Return to the ship," he shouted.

"No, no, no," Ashford gabbled wildly. "It's a death ship, Roger! There's an alien. My God, they're dead, all dead. . . ."

"Where's Lara?" he broke in.

"Lara. . . ." A long groan came over the communicator. Abruptly Ashford's voice was cut off; only the low humming in the speaker remained. Keim gazed impotently at the instrument. Ashford, for whatever reason, had broken the connection.

He switched on the exterior videos that were used during inflight rendezvous and docking. The lifeboat flared into view aft on the starboard side. Its course was slowly diverging from that of the *Alpha Tauri*. Did Ashford have the slightest idea where he was headed? Keim thought not. But one thing was certain: his destination was death.

He tried to contact Lara again, failed, and switched his concentration to Duvall. Snatches of conversation came through. As if clicking the switch of a telescreen, a mental image took form, shimmered crazily before settling down. He had the impression of two ghostly blobs in a long, dark corridor. The focus moved in, sharpened, and he recognized Robin Martel's frightened face. Duvall's countenance, haggard and worried, took form more slowly. But where was Lara?

For one sick moment he feared that Ashford might have forced her to accompany him, then violently rejected the possibility, more from his inability to harbor it than from any basis of logic. She had to be aboard! Reluctantly he tore his thoughts from her.

Where was the alien? He felt a frantic urgency at the

high whine of the cooling system. A swift glance showed the rad needles riding in the red. Did the alien know what was happening? If so, and if he could live in space, why hadn't he destroyed the ship? Or did he realize he'd be caught in the flaming sun's gravitational tides?

A buzzer sounded.

He jerked his gaze toward the console as the numeral "two" flashed on the readout panel. Two lifeboats gone, two left! He stifled his panic. The starboard video revealed the craft emerging from its docking well. He tried to contact it on the communicator without success, then desperately attempted to probe the small boat clairvoyantly. A ghostly image danced in his mind. He had the impression that it was of the three crewmen he'd contacted earlier.

The small boat swung slowly, pointing its bow at a right angle to the *Alpha Tauri's* flight path. In the immensity in which it rode, it was but a small mote. He wondered at the desperation—or was it sheer panic?—of those who manned it. Accelerating, the lifeboat grew smaller and smaller, finally lost in the eternal night.

He felt a quiet despair. The certainty of what the alien might attempt when he discovered that the ship was plunging directly toward the heart of the green-white sun, the plans he had committed to that certainty, seemingly had gone awry. Did lack of action mean that the alien was incapable of action? Were all the hosts dead? It didn't seem probable that the alien would leave himself that defenseless. Woon, he thought. Woon lived. But why was the alien waiting?

He debated the question uneasily. If the alien didn't make his presence known very shortly, but one course of action remained: do nothing, allow the *Alpha Tauri* to plunge to its death in the vast radiation field of the green-white sun. Before he died, he'd like to see Lara.

"Lara?" He screamed the name telepathically, tried to envision her clairvoyantly. "Lara? Lara? Lara?"

"Roger!" The name came faintly. "Roger, here."

Whirling, he saw her running toward him across the bridge.

THIRTEEN

"LARA!" Keim sprang to meet her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I. . . ." She stared past his shoulder at the tele-screen—at the flaming green-white sun that sent its coronal streamers raging against the ebon sky. Her eyes swept back, caught his. Icy fingers touched his brain. Startled, he whirled toward the passageway. It was deserted.

"Roger. . . ."

"The alien," he rasped.

"The ship! You have to. . . ."

"Quiet!" He listened intently and scanned the bridge; no movement, no visible danger, yet the iciness was still there. An alarm inside him shrilled of danger. The alien had come, but where was he? In what form?

He looked wildly around. Lara's eyes, blue and now strangely empty, were fixed squarely on him. Her face held a vacuous expression. Suddenly the iciness assaulted him with a force that was almost physical. Transfixed, he returned her stare while trying to reject what he knew to be true: *she was a host!* A flash of insight told him that Ashford had been the carrier.

The thought vanished as cold needles stabbed at his brain; fiery pain leaped out along his nerves. Tiny, unidentifiable memories jiggled into existence flicking elusively, dancing in and out of his consciousness. Visual memories that were his, yet not his. The alien was entering his mind!

He fought against it violently. The iciness flooded in, receded, flooded in again. Two beings! Two beings were battling for possession of his mind! No, he was battling against a second being. The alien! Visual memories flared anew. He saw. . . .

. . . *the planet of a purpling sun, awesome buildings that rose from a dying surface—within them row after row of strange, egg-shaped bodies, each immobile in a silver urn. . . .*

"No, no," he shouted, but the vision remained, mingling with his own memories, becoming part of him. Dimly, he was aware of Lara's eyes—large, blue, blank, unmoving

eyes—that looked at him, into him, through him. And the strange beings in the urns were part of him, and he of them.

Each commanded the lives of a thousand planets through the minds of hosts; each contemplated the death of a million sun systems as nuclear fires were banked, as the edge of the universe died; each was secure in the knowledge that a chosen few of their kind, propelled by the combined mind force of their race, were plunging through the abyssal deeps toward the galaxy-rich heart of the universe to begin anew the life that first had flowered in that dawn of the Prime Creation; each. . . .

Not his memories! Not his! He groped wildly, caught by the sense of something terrifying entering his mind, his body. Something alien! Instinctively he fought to reject it, thrust it out, but it clung tenaciously—clung and bored and spread. Visual memories danced in its wake, jelled, clarified and. . . .

Linked telepathically with his companions, whose minds in reality were one mind, a race mind, he was speeding through the gulfs of space. Tlo, Glomar, Xexl, Zimzi—nine in all—each on a diverging course. Periodically messages passed between them. He was. . . .

Only it wasn't he! It was the thing in his mind! Ulil He fought desperately, wildly, trying to thrust it out. Lara's face hung like a painting before his eyes. Icy needles stabbed. A thousand tentacles probed deeper and deeper and deeper and. . . .

Eternities died. Thoughts from far behind, faint whispers that came as he plunged through infinities at the velocity of light times ten thousand, whispers that grew weaker and weaker and weaker as the purpling sun grew darker, as towering buildings disintegrated into the dust of time. . . .

"Not my memories," he screamed. Why was he shouting against himself, denying his heritage? His heritage, his! He remembered. . . .

He sped on, one of nine, his mind recording the birth

and death of matter. Zimzi colliding with an errant wanderer in intergalactic space; Omegi dying in a vast nuclear storm; Yilill in the implosion of a collapsing star island. Death came again and again and again, and he was alone. Alone of his kind in the universe! If he should die! To not be—the fright screamed in his mind as he rushed through immeasurable time, immeasurable space. Ahead, a flat sliver of light in the endless darkness. Eternities passing. The sliver growing, taking form as a galaxy, discus-shaped with spiral arms, a billion suns. It was the one! Here the Qua race would be born anew. Here. . .

"Keim, save the ship!" The electrifying cry crackled in his brain, obliterated the memories, brought back his own fragmented consciousness of being. From so deep within him had the command come that he would have taken it for his own had it not been for the use of his name. *Something was in his mind!* He tried to pinpoint it, isolate it, sever it from his consciousness. He had the impression of a small, egg-shaped body huddled in a dark chamber. Dimly he knew what the chamber was, where it was.

"Keim!"

"No!" He screamed the word silently, defiantly, while he fought to retain control of the last of his reasoning processes. A fragment of his mind, hidden behind barriers, looked out at the alien, defied him. He tried to throw up more barriers, save that last spark.

"Save the ship or die," part of his mind screamed.

"You'll die with me," the voice from behind the barrier cried.

"You have no intention of dying, Keim!"

"No?" The remaining spark of rational being suddenly was wary.

"You forget, I'm in your mind. You intend to frighten me into attempting to escape by lifeboat, then putting the ship back into unspace."

Keim groaned with despair at the ease with which the alien had seen through his scheme. He had to keep his thoughts in that small part of his mind that he still controlled—that part that crouched behind the barrier. He had to build the barrier higher, stronger, shut out that other part—that part that screamed for him to do the alien's bidding. That's where Uli was hiding—in the corridors of his brain. *"I won't go into unspace,"* he gasped. *"We'll both die! Do you hear that, Uli? We'll both die!"*

A pain seized the calves of his legs; the muscles knotted, drove him to his knees. The briefest glimpse of Lara's frightened face showed it filled with a horrible awareness of what was happening. *She knew!* In passing from her mind to his, the alien had left her free!

He struggled to cap the thought, hide it. If she could escape, there was a chance—an almost microscopic one—that he could yet trick the alien. He could twist his plan. . . . But he couldn't think it. He couldn't, couldn't!

"Roger!" Lara's scream came like an echoe from far away.

"Tell Duvall . . . the lifeboats!" A stunning force gripped him, paralyzed his nerves. He had the faint awareness of Lara being lifted, hurled against a bulkhead. Slowly she pushed herself to her feet, swaying, her face filled with shock. He jerked his gaze from her to put her beyond the alien's visual field.

"*Save the ship!*" The command from one part of his brain thundered against the mental barricades of the other with a tidal power.

"*You'll die, Uli!*" He hurled the threat definantly, knowing that his last resources for resistance fast were slipping away. Instantly he felt the pain rush back, knot his stomach muscles—a bright, fiery pain that ripped him through and through. His arms were thrust backward, bent upward in an excruciating double hammerlock that made the preceding pain seem little more than a vague discomfort.

But he wasn't a host yet! Not a host! He clung desperately to that knowledge while he fought to regain control of his own awareness. He wouldn't succumb, not like the others! He'd die first, he'd. . . . As suddenly as it had come, the pain vanished.

"*You'd kill the girl?*" The sudden psychological shift caught Keim by surprise. Almost as quickly he realized that the alien had uncovered the deep feelings he held for her, was attempting to use them to serve his own ends. It also explained why the alien hadn't killed her outright as he had Henry Fong when he found no further use for him. *Don't think that!* He tried to mask the thought, but it was too late.

"*Exactly,*" the voice deep within his brain said. "*She'll die the same way.*"

"*Not if you can't see her!*"

"*I can force you to look at her, Keim!*"

"*Lara, run, run, run. . . .*" He screamed the command

telepathically as his body twisted violently around, his head jerked upward. He fought to keep his eyes closed but one lid flipped open, then the other. The briefest glimpse of Lara's slender figure disappearing down the stairwell told him she'd begun her flight before the warning call. "Too late," he croaked. The words bubbled from his lips.

"It makes no difference, Keim. If the ship dies, she dies."

Acquiesce, he thought, stall him, stall him. Give Duvall a chance. He tried to smother the thought by saying, "How can I? I can't move."

"Move," the alien part of his brain commanded.

Keim felt the iciness recede; but his muscles, locked in pain-searing cramps, remained immobilized. He tried to move an arm, a leg, groaned at the effort. But the pressure in his mind had lessened. *Would Duvall understand? Would he figure it out?* He tried to suppress the questions.

"Understand what?" the voice inside him commanded sharply.

"Lara!" He hurled the cry out. *"The lifeboat! Tell Duvall. . ."* His message was chopped short as his body was lifted, hurled violently toward the console. Halted in mid-air by an abrupt counterforce, he was left dangling above the deck before being dropped. His knees buckled and he sprawled flat, a wave of pain shooting through him. Another force turned him, brought him to a sitting position, snapped his head upward.

"Look at the controls!" The command was a thunderclap in his brain. A small part of his consciousness told him not to look. Again his brain was a house divided—one part battling for survival against the other. The battle raged in each grotto, each corridor. *He couldn't let the alien manipulate the controls by mind power! He had to keep his eyes away!*

"Look at the controls!" The thunderclap came again; his body was jerked upward, an abrupt movement that left him dangling in midair a few feet from the console.

Don't look! Don't look! He screamed the order to himself, tried to will himself to obey it. *Don't look!* He heard the harsh noises from the air-conditioners, sharp cracklings from the expanding heat shields. His eyelids fluttered open and he forced them shut. *Don't look!*

"Hurry," the alien cried. Keim sensed a panic behind the command and the absurd notion struck him that it made Uli seem almost human; at least he knew fear. Fear, that was it—he had to play on the alien's fear, buy time.

As his lids flipped open, he managed to roll his eyes away from the red handle that could send the *Alpha Tauri* into *unspace*. He tried to focus his gaze on controls that had nothing to do with *unspace*. As his eyes moved relentlessly back, he jerked his head to the side. The instrument panel swept into view; the rad needles were high in the rad. Concentrate on the rad needles. *He had to buy time for Duvall.*

"*You have no time.*" The voice in his brain held a taut, anxious note. "*The girl will die unless you save her.*"

"*She won't die!*" Keim felt suddenly exultant at the alien's failure to control him completely. Keep fighting, keep fighting.

"*Won't die?*" The question held a distinct wariness.

"*Look!*" Keim painstakingly wrenched his eyes toward the exterior videos. For what seemed an unending time, he saw only the smooth side of the hull and the lonely lights of stars beyond. "*Lara?*" he cried silently.

"*You're trying to trick me, Keim!*"

"*No, wait!*" He kept his gaze on the videos. "*Lara?*" he cried again.

"*Roger. . . .*" The name came as a faint whisper. A buzzer sounded.

"*What was that?*" the alien demanded.

"*Wait,*" Keim repeated. The door to one of the docking wells opened and a lifeboat slid out, a frail sliver in the sea of space. "*They're safe!*" screamed Keim. "*You'll die, Uli, and so will I, but they're safe!*"

"*It's too late for the lifeboats, Keim. I know that from your mind.*"

"*You do?*" He laughed mockingly.

"*I know your thoughts, Keim. The lifeboats are doomed.*"

"*You can't see into all of my mind, Uli. There's a small area you can't penetrate, where I am I. It can make the rest of my mind believe what I want you to believe.*"

"*You can't trick me, Keim!*"

"*But I have.*" He laughed wildly. "*I'm a T-man, Uli. You read only what I want you to read.*"

"*That's not true!*" The startlement and fear in the denial gave Keim a flickering hope.

"*Three lifeboats have gone, Uli. Would they launch in the face of certain death?*"

"*Put the ship into unspace!*" The command crackled in his brain; his head jerked around. His lids flipped open and he rolled his eyes wildly. Knifing pains slashed his

nerve trunks. *"You'll die, Keim!"* The threat held terror, panic.

"That's what I've been telling you." He forced a wolfish smile, at the same time managing to jerk his head to one side. The small victory fueled his hopes.

"Die, then," the alien screamed. Almost instantly an inner stillness came; the iciness receded and his mind gained a new clarity. The alien was gone! Gone without even waiting to take punitive action! Why hadn't the alien snapped his neck, killed him as he had Weber and Henry Fong?

Suddenly he lay back, still and tense, listening to the thudding of his heart. What was it he sensed? His mind! Despite its clarity there was something there! A blockage, as if an intangible barrier had been erected that he couldn't penetrate. It was like the scent left in the lair of a wild beast long after the animal had gone. But like the wild beast, had he gone?

He tried to rise, was horrified to discover that his cramped muscles refused to respond. Waves of pain and nausea accompanied every attempt to move. His muscles were locked, rigid. He felt them coiled in his arms, legs, in great cramped knots. He tried to relax in the hope the spasms would pass.

What lay behind the barrier? *"Die, then!"* The alien's last words rushed back. Had the alien left the fragment in his mind to keep his body locked? The sweat sprang to his face. He couldn't move, couldn't reach the red handle—could do nothing but watch helplessly as the *Alpha Tauri* plunged toward the heart of the flaming green-white sun.

No, wait, there was Lara! The alien hadn't known about her, had thought she was aboard the lifeboat with Duvall. *"Lara?"* He screamed the name desperately.

"Roger, I've been trying to contact you!" Her answer was filled with a fright that verged on hysteria.

"Where's Duvall?"

"In the lifeboat, but I saw Captain Woon!"

"Where?" His hopes soared.

"Coming down from the bridge. He must have been hiding in his cabin."

The bridge! Keim felt a jolt. Why hadn't the alien had Woon kill him. Because he might have destroyed the ship at the first sign of Woon's coming, he thought. And Woon was the last of the hosts; the alien couldn't risk losing him. *"Where's Woon now?"*

"I don't know. I ran as soon as I glimpsed him."

Woon! He forced his eyes closed, tried to fix the captain's image in his mind. He had the sense of trying to peer through a dense fog, one in which tiny shadows leaped and dodged, appearing and disappearing in the camera of his mind's eye. He had to catch the shadows, hold them, tear away the shroud in which they were immersed.

Tiny mental images flared, died, flared again. They came and vanished so quickly that he was uncertain whether or not they'd ever really existed. He had the impression that part of his mind—the fragment left by the alien to immobilize him?—was attempting to draw a veil over the images, blot them out.

He riveted his attention inwardly more fiercely than ever. *Movement in the fog! A running man! Woon!* His face frozen and vacuous, his legs pumping with an odd mechanical precision, he was dashing along the corridor that led to Yozell's quarters. *Where Uli was hiding!* He could all but picture the small egg-shaped body in the small compartment.

"Roger, what's happening. Are you all right?" Lara's words, impinging on his mind, broke the vision. At the same time, he became aware of their own predicament—the scant time they had left.

"Come to the bridge, hurry!" Battling to move, he sensed that the invisible bonds no longer held him, but that his muscles failed to respond because of the hideous cramps. His entire body seemed aflame. Had he ejected the fragment that was the alien, or had he controlled it? Or had the alien withdrawn?

That last hope burst like a bombshell inside him and, almost as quickly, died. He could still sense the spark of strangeness, even though it lay inert deep in his consciousness. But there was no time for that now; the harsh whine of the cooling system had grown too loud.

Slowly, torturously, he straightened. Pulling himself up from the deck, he swayed, and toppled toward the communication console. Crashing against it, he managed to grasp the edge, keep from falling. Groping, he located a switch and flipped it, forcing his gaze back to the exterior videos. "Duvall, come in," he croaked. "Duvall!"

"Herel" The psychmedic's reply was an anxious snap.

"Hurry, get back in the ship!"

"Has the alien . . . ?"

"Hurry," he shouted. He kept his eyes glued to the lifeboat. Its nose swung in a sluggish arc until it pointed to-

ward the docking well. As it slid inside, the exterior door closed behind it. Clinging to the edge of the console, Keim listened to the creak and groan of buckling plates, the whine of the cooling system. Although he couldn't see the red needles, he knew they rode high in the red.

Why hadn't the alien snapped his neck? He fought to keep his eyes on the videos. Caught with a fearful anxiety, he watched as if hypnotized. A minute passed, another, and another. He was beginning to despair when a buzzer sounded. A numeral flashed on the readout panel. An instant later a lifeboat slid from its docking well. Racing alongside the *Alpha Tauri*, it appeared incredibly small and fragile. Its movements sluggish and labored, it swung its bow outward from its flight path. Slowly it began to accelerate.

What if the alien lived? He felt a fear close to panic. If the lifeboat escaped the green-white sun's gravitational field, the alien could live indefinitely in space. The brief glimpse he had into Uli's mind convinced him of that. Feeding on the sparse radiation of stars, he could move past suns and planets—penetrate deeper and deeper into the galaxy—until he eventually reached the Empire. Despite the growing heat, Keim shivered uncontrollably.

But the alien couldn't escape! Regardless of the lifeboat's lateral headway, it was being dragged ever closer into the flaming sun. The alien was doomed! No power in the universe could prevent Uli's destruction now.

"Roger?" Duvall's voice boomed from the speaker.

"The alien's gone," Keim gasped. "He had Woon carry him to the lifeboat."

"Woon," echoed Duvall.

"He's as good as dead." Keim felt a quick dread. Billions and billions and billions of years, and now to die in a flaming sun. Ashford, Woon, the three nameless crewmen—all would die with him in the same horrible way.

He tried to rise, force his cramped muscles to give him the movement he needed to reach the red handle. Faint from the effort, he knew he'd never make it. Lara had better hurry. The thought scarcely had come when he felt himself hurled violently backward to the deck.

The *Alpha Tauri* lurched underfoot, a slow movement followed by a sharp quake that rolled through the ship. The console jerked and danced before his eyes. With extreme effort, he jerked his gaze around to fasten it on the red handle; it seemed shimmery and far away. Sickeningly it

came to him that the ship was breaking up under the combined stresses of heat and the sun's gravitational tides.

He held the shimmery red handle in his visual field. He had to push it up, push it up, push it up. The determination dinned in his mind as he tried to force himself up from the deck. The whine of the cooling system, the buckling of plates. . . . *He had to push it up!*

"Roger!" Lara's scream rang in his brain. *"The mind power!"*

The mind power! The alien was trying to destroy the ship! Somewhere, in the lifeboat, he was taking his last moment of vengeance! The realization panicked him. Steady! He had to reach the red handle, *push it up!*

Slowly, painfully, he pulled himself to his knees, his eyes clinging to their target. A wave of vertigo caught him, engulfed him in a dizzying stream of consciousness in which past and present and future merged as one.

He was gazing at the edge of the universe, at the blackened ember of what had been the purpling sun, at the gigantic frozen planet that circled it—two ghosts in the midnight of space. Towering buildings disintegrated into dust; silver urns less than dust; a race buried in time.

A dream that died.

Dimly he realized that the terrible quaking had ceased, that the great flaming green-white sun had vanished from the telescreens. His last thought, as consciousness fled, was that the *Alpha Tauri* was back in *unspace*.

FOURTEEN

THE TUGGING CAME, an insistent pulling at his arm that slowly penetrated his consciousness. He opened his eyes. His first awareness was of the hazy outlines of a man's face and shoulders bent over him; something was being done to his arm. Blinking to bring his eyes into focus, he realized the figure was Harlan Duvall.

"Roger?" Lara's voice, low and worried, brought his head around; she was looking anxiously down at him. Trying to smile, he struggled to sit erect. Duvall pushed him back down.

"Take it easy," he cautioned. "I'm giving you a triple injection of antiradiation serum."

"Sure." This time he did smile. It felt good to be alive. *And he had moved!* He held up a hand, regarding it wonderingly before he let it drop. The muscles ached, but that was all.

"Think you were dead?" asked Duvall.

"Close to it." He looked at Lara again—drinking in her dark eyes, her oval face, the wistful way in which she regarded him. They were safe! The flaming green-white sun was gone, the alien was gone. It all seemed like a garish nightmare. Remembering the terrific buffeting the ship had taken from the mind power, it was a miracle it had held together.

"We made it," he murmured wonderingly.

"Thanks to you." Duvall drew the needles from his arm and applied a drop of skin seal.

"To me?" Keim blinked at him.

Duvall nodded. "You got this baby back into *unspace* just in time. It was about to come apart at the seams."

"But I. . . ." He cut the answer short, caught by a sudden stillness. He hadn't pushed the red handle up; he remembered that quite clearly. He'd been struggling to move his cramped muscles when he'd felt the vertigo that signaled the transfer from normal space.

"*But you did, Roger.*" It took him a second to realize that the speaker was Lara, that the words had come telepathically. She continued, "*I was still running toward the bridge when we went into unspace.*"

"Impossible!" He eyed her quizzically. He'd been struggling to reach the console when the stars winked out, when the green-white sun vanished from the telescreens. He told her so.

"Nevertheless you did," she persisted.

"But how?" He gazed perplexedly at her.

"Your mind." The answer was soft, pensive, wondering.

"What about my mind?"

"It's different. I don't know what, but I can sense it. You've . . . you've experienced clairvoyance, perhaps precognition. This might be still another stage."

"Say it! Say it!" He knew the impossible thing she was thinking, yet scarcely dared contemplate it.

"The mind power, Roger." Her eyes held a touch of sorrow.

"That couldn't be!"

"How do you feel?" Duvall broke in. Unaware of the silent conversation that had been taking place, he eyed the telepath critically. Instead of answering immediately, Keim experimentally moved his arms and legs, pushed himself to a sitting position. Aside from a few aches and pains, he felt quite normal.

Normal? His body, yes, but what of his mind? Something *was* different! It was the strange *presence*, the thing he'd sensed before. Alien, yet not menacing; that was the difference. The part that the alien had left behind, he thought ruefully. Now, with the alien dead, perhaps it would be left with him forever.

"*Perhaps that's it,*" suggested Lara.

He caught her eyes. "*The mind power? Is that how I . . . ?*"

"*It's possible, Roger.*" Her expression told him she was certain it was so. Aware that Duvall was eyeing him oddly, he struggled to his feet.

"Feel fine," he exclaimed.

"Take it easy for a while," Duvall counseled. He packed his medical kit before glancing up. "There are only a few of the crew left, but enough to get us back to the Empire. Robin's a good hand at math. She's certain she can master the astrogation."

"The Empire." Keim gazed at the telescreens, at the black, empty, silent never-never space that science, for all its knowledge, couldn't quite explain. Somewhere—perhaps less than an atom in size and less than an inch away, if he were to believe one theory—blazed the great green-white sun in which the alien had died. So much for immortality.

Duvall withdrew, leaving him alone with Lara. A long silence ensued before she said, "Don't be afraid, Roger."

"Afraid?" He turned toward her.

"Of what's in your mind."

"You believe. . . ."

"That it was the mind power? Yes, it was the only way."

The mind power! He sensed a sudden stillness inside him. Again he had the swift impression of gazing at the red handle, of thinking that he had to push it up, up, up. And he had pushed it up! Was this a new stage, or had he accomplished it through the fragment of Uli left behind in his mind?

"What difference does it make?" she asked softly. "The alien tried to capture your mind and failed. Instead, you captured part of his."

"Impossible!"

"Either that, or you've tapped new resources. Beyond clairvoyance," she added.

He didn't answer. Instead he swung his gaze to the console. The needles of the rad meters rested motionlessly in the black. Fixing his mind on one, he concentrated. The needle leaped, fluttered wildly in the red before subsiding.

Lara gripped his hand convulsively. "Does it frighten you?"

He shook his head slowly, his eyes drawn back to the telescreens. What was the nature of man? Was evolution a constantly ascending function until the universe itself died? What of himself? Had the alien opened his mind to powers long latent, or had they been given to him? Lara, a telepath; himself something more. What might their children be? Was this a new dawn?

Gazing into the vast emptiness of *unspace*, he wondered what lay ahead.

Keim woke suddenly.

The ceiling above him clouded in darkness, the room around him still, he lay tense and alert, wondering what had brought him so abruptly from his deep sleep.

Why hadn't the alien killed him? The question leaped into his mind and he knew that subconsciously it had been troubling him. Yet why hadn't the alien killed him?

The alien! Suddenly, definitely, he knew that the alien still lived. Yet the alien was dead, had perished in the blazing inferno of the great green-white sun. There had been no escape. None? So why his perturbation?

He forced himself to think calmly, step by step, of those last harrowing moments when the alien had attempted to escape in the lifeboat—had attempted to destroy the *Alpha Tauri* by the mind power. *Destroy the Alpha Tauri?*

He conjured up a picture of huge trees being uprooted, tossed around like twigs in a high wind—of the entire forest and low hills on which it had stood being wiped from existence. My God, the alien could have destroyed the *Alpha Tauri* with ease! But he hadn't! Why not? *Because the alien was still aboard!* That explained why the alien hadn't killed him; he needed him to save the ship! It was the only answer.

In the darkness of his room, Keim knew he'd guessed right. And it made sense. The alien, after all, had penetrated the deepest corridors of his mind, had unraveled the

most submerged of plans. In turn, he had sent Captain Woon alone into the lifeboat to perish in the inferno of the sun. Then he had shaken the ship, had shaken it violently to give the impression of trying to destroy it. The alien had tried to panic him—had panicked him!—into a supreme effort to save the ship. Perhaps the alien had left the fragment of mind power with him to enable him to do it, or had sensed that he had the strength to accomplish it. The alien could have destroyed the ship, but hadn't. That was the clue!

A vein pulsed at the base of Keim's neck. His hands suddenly were wet, clammy. Still, unmoving, he forced himself to think. The ship was free of the alien's hosts . . . *the once men*. He winced again at the term. That meant the alien had no eyes, no ears—nothing but the tremendous power of its brain wrapped in whatever small shell it inhabited. And it was in Yozell's quarters!

He resurrected the brief glimpses he'd had into the alien's mind—the planet of the purpling sun, galaxies like fireflies, the small, egg-shaped body huddled in the small chamber. He relived the terrible moments during which the alien had attempted to kill them in the biologist's quarters. The hurled chairs, the bench, Henry Fong's battered body.

His mind's eye scanned the room, halted, fixed on a small specimen table with the single drawer beneath. Alone, of all the furniture in the room, it remained undamaged. It loomed there, clairvoyantly, untouched. Carefully, meticulously, he fitted the shape of the drawer into the geometry of the space in which the alien had been—was, he was certain—hiding.

He rose, padded to his desk, got the laser. Then, quietly, he went out into the corridor.

Uli suddenly sensed the danger; it assailed him with alarming intensity. With no eyes or ears to alert him, no host to serve him, the awareness had come through the sensing of vibrations—vibrations that he identified by their rhythmical nature as the movement of human feet. Feet coming toward him! Danger! Dánger! Danger! It screamed in every fiber of his being.

Instantly his single eye opened, staring into the blackness of the small chamber where Yozell had placed him. If anyone opened the drawer, he could immediately seize his mind, acquire him as a host. The knowledge lessened

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his tension. He concentrated on the vibrations; the feet were coming closer and closer.

What if it were the telepath? What if the telepath knew? He felt the fear surge through him in great terrifying waves. *He could destroy the ship, but then he'd be in unspace. He'd be locked there until the end of time, until the universe died.* He had to chance it.

He waited.

Suddenly his mind made contact with the small fragment he'd left behind. *Roger Keim, the T-man! And Keim knew! An eternity, an eternity in the utter blackness of starless space! Even as the thought smote him, Uli knew he had wasted the precious seconds that spelled existence.*

He was trying to muster the mind power to destroy the ship when the laser beam sliced through the drawer, through his body's hard shell. For the fractional part of a second he felt the tremendous heat, and the greatest terror of all: *to not be!*

Consciousness fled.