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Herds by Stephen Goldin

PROLOG

The planet Zarti was peaceful at one time. The most advanced race was a species of gentle, long-necked herbivores who had no greater ambitions than full bellies. These Zarticku banded together in herds for protection from predators and eventually devised simple methods of communication to exchange basic ideas among themselves.

Without warning, the Offasü came. This space-faring race arrived *en masse* at Zarti, hundreds of millions of them—conceivably the entire Offasü population—in ships that were each several miles in diameter. They swarmed down like locusts upon this idyllic planet and irrevocably changed the course of life there.

First they formed zoos, gathering up specimens of each major species of animal they could find. These specimens were tested, probed and prodded in every conceivable manner for reasons too subtle to comprehend. The Zarticku passed the test, and were kept, while the others were returned to their natural environments.

There was a planet-wide round-up. All the Zarticku that could be captured were placed in special pens; the ones who couldn't be captured were killed outright. Then the tortures began. Many Zarticku were killed and dissected. Some others were not so lucky—they were cut open alive so that their systems could be observed in action. The screams of those poor creatures were

allowed to filter down into the penned herds, panicking other animals and causing still more deaths.

No Zarticku were allowed to breed normally. Specially selected sperm and ova were matched by artificial in-semination, while the Offasü calmly recorded the results of these breedings for three generations. When their computers had enough data, they began altering the DNA structure of the Zartic gametes. Genes they disliked were removed. New ones were substituted to see what effects they would have on the new generation. Some of these new genes also proved to be undesirable. They were eliminated in subsequent generations.

After twenty Zartic lifetimes, a generation was born that matched the Offasü ideal. When this generation had been raised to maturity all remaining members of preceding generations were put to death, leaving none but this new breed of Zarticku to inherit the world.

These new creatures were substantially different from their ancestors who had roamed free in the forests of Zarti. They were bigger, stronger and healthier. Their eyesight was keener. The tough, matted hair that had been on their backs had become thin armor plating. The little appendages at the shoulders that had originally served to steady tree branches while eating had been developed into full-grown arms, ending in six-fingered hands with two opposable thumbs that could grasp and manipulate objects. Their average lifespan had been doubled. And, most importantly, they were far smarter than their ancestors had been. Their intelligence level had been quadrupled at the very least.

They also possessed a legacy from their predecessors. Stories of the Offasü tortures had been passed down over the years by word of mouth, with each generation adding its new tales of horror. Stories grew in the retelling, and the mythos of Offasü cruelty increased.

Now that they had apparently gotten what they wanted, the Offasü proceeded to use—and abuse—their subjects. The Zarticku became slaves to the older race, used in the most menial and routine of tasks. They were chained to watch

machines that required no supervision, forced to take part in rituals that served no purpose, made to disassemble machines only so that other Zarticku could put them together again. They could be hunted and killed for sport by the Offasü. Sometimes they were pitted in arenas against wild animals or even others of their own species. Although copulation was permitted, the choice of mates was made by the Offasü, and followed no pattern that was discernible to the Zarticku.

The period of slavery lasted for about a century. During this time, the face of the planet changed. Every square inch of arable land was turned to good use by the brutally efficient Offasü. Cities arose, planned and engineered to perfection. Systems of transportation and communication were universal.

Then one day the Offasü left. It was an orderly and well-planned exodus, without a word spoken to the startled Zarticku. One moment the Offasü had been running the world in their usual brisk fashion, the next they calmly walked into their enormous spaceships—which had sat dormant since the day of their landing—and took off into space. They left behind them all their works, their cities, their farms, their machines. Also abandoned was a race of very stunned, very perplexed former slaves.

The Zarticku could not at first believe that their masters had really departed. They huddled in fear that this might be some new and devious torture. But weeks passed, and there was no sign anywhere of the Offasü. Meanwhile, there were crops and machines that required tending. Almost by reflex, they went back to their accustomed tasks.

Several more centuries passed and the Zarticku turned their specially-bred intelligence to their own use. They examined the machines that the Offasü had left behind and discovered the principles of science; from there, they improved and adapted the machines to their own purposes. They developed a culture of their own. They used their intellect to build philosophies and abstract thought. They devised their own recreations and enjoyments. They began to live the comfortable life of an intelligent species that has mastered its own planet.

But beneath the veneer of success was always fear— the fear of the Offasü. Centuries of cruel oppression had left their mark on the Zartic psyche. What if the Offasü should someday return? They would not take kindly to this usurpation of their equipment by upstart slaves. They would devise new and more horrible tortures and the Zarticku, as always, would suffer.

It was this atmosphere of fear and curiosity that nurtured the boldest step the Zartic race had ever taken—| the Space Exploration Project.

CHAPTER I

A two-lane stretch of California 1 ran along the coastline. To the west, sometimes only a couple of hundred feet from the road, was the Pacific Ocean, quietly lapping its waves over the sand and stone of San Marcos State Beach. To the east, a cliff of white, naked rock sprang upwards to a height of over two hundred feet. Beyond the cliff lay a string of mountains. They weren't very tall, the highest barely a thousand feet above sea level, but they were sufficient for the local residents. The mountains were covered with sparse forests of cypress trees and tangled underbrush, with a few other types of vegetation daring to make their presence known at scattered intervals.

At the top of the cliff, overlooking the highway and the ocean, was a small wooden cabin. It stood in the center of a cleared area, a simple understatement of human presence in the midst of nature. A car was parked beside the cabin on the gravel that had been spread around the structure's perimeter. The gravel extended for about ten yards, then gave way to loose dry dirt atop hard rock until it entered the trees another six yards further on.

There was a narrow dirt road that led up from the highway to the cabin. It did not come straight up, but wound snake-like among the trees until it reached the clearing. A pair of headlights could currently be seen weaving along that road, alternately vanishing and reappearing as the car rounded various curves or passed behind groups of cypress trees.

Stella Stoneham stood in the darkness, watching those •

headlights approach. Her internal organs were trying valiantly to tie themselves into knots as the lights came nearer. She took a final long drag on her cigarette and ground it out nervously beneath her foot in the gravel. If there were any person she didn't want to see right now it was her husband, but it looked as though the choice was not hers to make. She frowned and looked up into the sky. The night was fairly clear, with only a few small patches of cloud obscuring the stars. She looked back down at the headlights. He would be here in a minute. Sighing, she went back inside the cabin.

The interior normally cheered her with its brightness and warmth, but tonight there was an ironic quality about it that only deepened her depression. The room was large and uncrowded, giving the illusion of space and freedom that Stella had wanted. There was a long brown sofa along one wall, with a small reading table and lamp beside it. In the next corner, going clockwise, there was a sink and a small stove; a supply cupboard hung on the wall near them, elaborately carved out of hardwood, with scrollwork and little red gnomes in the corner holding it up. Also on the wall was a rack of assorted kitchen utensils, still shiny from lack of use. Continuing around the room there was a small white dinette set standing neatly in the third corner. The door to the back bedroom and bathroom stood half ajar, with light from the main room penetrating only slightly into the darkness beyond the threshold. Finally there was a writing desk with a typewriter and telephone and an old folding chair beside it in the corner nearest the door. The center of the room was bare except for a frayed brown carpet that covered the wooden floor. The place was not much to cling to,

Stella knew, but if a fight were going to take place at all—as it now appeared it would—it would be better to handle it on her own territory.

She sat down on the sofa and stood up again immediately. She paced the length of the room, wondering what she would do with her hands while she was talking or listening. Men at least were lucky enough to have pockets. Outside she could hear the

car crunch its way up the gravel to the very door of the cabin and stop. A car door opened and slammed shut. A man's footsteps clomped up the three front stairs. The door flew open and her husband walked in.

* * *

This was to be the eleventh solar system he had personally explored, which meant that, to Garnna iff-Almanic, the task of finding and examining planets had gotten as routine as a job that exotic could become. The Zartic had trained for years before even being allowed on the Project. There was, first of all, the rigorous mental training that would allow the combination of machines and drugs to project his mind away from his body and far out into the depths of space. But an Explorer had to have more training than just that. He would have to chart his course in the void, both hi attempting to locate a new planet and in finding his way home again afterwards; that required an extensive knowledge of celestial navigation. He had to classify in an instant the general type of planet he was Investigating, which called for up-to-the-minute expertise in the growing science of planetology. He would be called on to make a report on the life forms, if any, that the planet held; that necessitated a knowledge of biology. And, in the event that the planet harbored intelligent life, he had to be able to describe the level of their civilization from little more than a glance—and that required that he be made as free of personal prejudices and fears as possible, for alien societies had different ways of doing things that could send a normal Zartic into hysterical fits.

But most of all, he had had to overcome the instinctive Zartic fear of the Offasü, and that required the hardest training of the lot.

His mind hovered above this new solar system, inspecting it for possibilities. It was the farthest Exploration made to date, well over a hundred parsecs from Zarti. The star was average, a yellow dwarf—the type frequently associated with having planetary systems. But as to whether this system had planets... Garnna made a mental grimace. This was always the part he hated most.

He began to disperse himself through the space immediately surrounding the star. His mental fibers spread like a net, becoming thinner and thinner as he pushed his fragments of mind outward in all three dimensions in his quest for planets.

There! He touched one almost immediately, and discarded it just as quickly. It was nothing but an airless ball of rock, and not even within the star's zone of habitability for protoplasmic life. Although it was faintly conceivable that some sort of life might exist there, it did not bother him. He continued to spread his net outward.

Another planet. He was glad to find a second, because the three points that he now had—sun and two planets—would determine for him the ecliptic plane of the system. It had long since been discovered that planetary systems formed generally within a single plane, with only minor individual deviations from it. Now that he knew its orientation, he could stop his three-dimensional expansion and concentrate, instead, on exploring all the area within the ecliptic plane.

The second planet was also a disappointment. It was within the zone of habitability, but that was the only thing that could be said in its favor. The atmosphere was covered with clouds and filled with carbon dioxide, while the surface was so incredibly hot that oceans of aluminum and rivers of tin were commonplace. No protoplasmic life could exist here, either. Garnna continued on in his Exploration.

The next thing he encountered was a bit of a surprise—a double planet. Two large, planet-sized objects circled the star in a common orbit. Upon closer inspection, one of the planets appeared far more massive than the other; Garnna began to think of that one as the primary and the other as a satellite.

He tried to focus as much attention as he could on this system while still maintaining the net he had spread through space. The satellite was another airless gray ball, smaller even than the first planet outward, and appeared quite lifeless, but the primary looked promising. From space it had a mottled blue and white appearance. The white was clouds and the blue, apparently, was liquid water. Large quantities of liquid water. That boded well

for the existence of protoplasmic life there. He checked the atmosphere and was even more pleasantly surprised. There were large quantities of oxygen freely available for breathing. He made himself a mental note to investigate it more closely if nothing even better should turn up, and continued expanding outwards in his search for planets.

The next one he discovered was small and red. What little atmosphere there was seemed to consist mainly of carbon dioxide, with almost no detectable free oxygen. The surface temperature was acceptable to protoplasmic life, but there seemed to be little, if any, water available —a very dismal sign. Though this place had possibilities, the primary of the double planet had more. Garnna continued his expansion.

The net was becoming very thin, now, as the Zartic stretched himself farther and farther. Images were becoming blurry and his mind seemed to hold only a tenuous grip on its own identity. He encountered some tiny rocks floating in space, but declined to even consider them. The next world out was a gas giant. It was very difficult to make it out because his mentality was stretched so thin at this point, but that was not necessary. The search for planets was over in this system, he knew, for he had passed outside the zone of habitability once more. A gas giant like this could not exist within that zone, according to theory. There might be other planets beyond the orbit of this one, but they wouldn't matter, either. The Offasü would not be interested in them, and therefore Garnna wasn't interested in them.

He returned his attention to the double planet system.

He felt enormous relief as he reeled in all the far-flung parts of his mind that had expanded through space. It was always a good feeling when the initial planetary survey was over, a feeling of bringing disparate elements together to form a cohesive whole once more. A feeling akin to making a Herd out of individuals, only on a smaller, more personal scale.

It was bad enough to be a lone Zartic out in space, cut off from the entire Herd not to mention the safety and security of his own iff-group. The job was necessary, of course, for the good of the Herd, but necessity did not make it any the more pleasant.

And when an individual Zartic had to extend parts of himself until there was almost nothing left, that was almost unbearable. That was why Garnna hated that part of the mission the worst. But it was over, now, and he could concentrate on the real business of Exploration.

* * *

Wesley Stoneham was a big man, well over six feet, with broad, well-muscled shoulders and the face of a middle-aged hero. He still had all his hair, a thick black mane of it, cut so that it would even muss stylishly. The forehead beneath the hair was comparatively narrow and sported large, bushy eyebrows. His eyes were steel gray and determined, his nose prominent and straight. In his hand, he carried a medium-sized suitcase.

"I got your note," was all he said as he took a folded piece of paper from his pocket and flipped it to the ground at his wife's feet.

Stella exhaled softly. She recognized *that* tone all too well, and knew that this was going to be a long and bitter evening. "Why the suitcase?" she asked.

"As long as I was driving up here, I thought I might as well stay the night." His voice was even and smooth, but there was an edge of command to it as he set the suitcase down on the floor.

"Don't you even bother asking your hostess' permission before moving in?"

"Why should I? This is my cabin, built with my ' money." The emphasis on the "my" in both cases was slight but unmistakable.

She turned away from him. Even with her back to him, though, she could still feel his gaze piercing her soul. "Why not finish the thought, Wes? 'My cabin, my money, my wife,' isn't that it?"

"You *are* my wife, you know."

"Not any more." Already she could feel the inside corners of

her eyes starting to warm up, and she tried to check her emotions. Crying now would do no good, and might defeat her purpose. Besides, she had learned from painful experience that Wesley Stoneham was not affected by tears.

"You are until the law says otherwise." He strode across the room to her in two large steps, grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around. "And you *are* going to look at me when you talk to me."

Stella tried to shake herself out of his grip, but his fingers just tightened all the more into her skin, one of them (did he do it intentionally?) hitting a nerve so that a streak of pain raced across her shoulders. She stopped twisting and eventually he took his arms away again.

"That's a little better," he said. "The least a man can expect is a little civility from his own wife."

"I'm sorry," she said sweetly. There was a slight crack in her voice as she tried to force some gaiety into it. "I should go over to the stove and bake my big, strong mansy-wansy a welcome home cake."

"Save the sarcasm for someone who likes that shit, Stella," Stoneham growled. "I want to know why you want a divorce."

"Why, my most precious one, it's..." she began in the same saccharine tones. Stoneham gave her a hard slap against the cheek. "I told you to can that," he said.

"I think my reasons should be more than apparent," Stella said bitterly. There was a flush creeping slowly into the cheek where she'd been hit. She raised her hand to the spot, more out of self-consciousness than pain.

Stoneham's nostrils flared, and his stare was svipercold. Stella averted her eyes, but stubbornly stood her ground. There was ice on her husband's words as he asked, "Have you been having an affair with that overaged hippie?"

It took a moment for her to realize who he meant. About a

mile from the cabin, in Totido Canyon, a group of young people had moved into an abandoned summer camp and formed what they proudly called the "Totido Commune." Because of their unconventional behavior and dress, they were thought of by the surrounding residents as hippies and condemned accordingly. Their leader was an older man, at least in his late thirties, and he seemed to keep his group in order just this side of the law.

"Are you talking about Carl Polaski?" Stella asked incredulously.

"I don't mean Santa Claus."

Despite her nervousness, Stella laughed. "That's preposterous. And besides, he's not a hippie; he's a psychology professor doing research on the drop-out phenomenon."

"People tell me he's been hanging around this cabin a lot, Stell. I don't like that."

"There's nothing immoral about it. He runs some errands for me and does a few odd jobs. I pay him back by letting him use the cabin for writing. He types over here, because he can't get enough privacy to say what he really thinks at the commune. Sometimes we've talked. He's a very interesting man, Wes. But no, I haven't had any affairs with him, nor am I likely to."

"Then what's eating you? Why do you want a divorce?" He went to the sofa and sat down, never taking his eyes from her for an instant.

Stella paced back and forth in front of him a few times. She folded and unfolded her hands, and finally let them hang at her sides. "I want to be able to have some self-respect," she said at last.

"You have that now. You can hold your head up to anyone in the country."

"That's not what I meant. I'd like, just once, to be able to sign my name 'Stella Stoneham' instead of 'Mrs. Wesley Stoneham.' Maybe give a party for the people *I* like, instead of your political

cronies. Wes, I want to feel like I'm an equal partner in this marriage, not just another tasteful accessory to your home."

"I don't understand you. I've given you everything any woman could possibly want..."

"Except identity. As far as you're concerned, I'm not a human being, just a wife. I decorate your arm at hundred-dollar-a-plate dinners and make charming noises at the wives of other would-be politicians. I make a corporate lawyer socially respectable enough to think of running for office. And, when you're not using me, you forget about me, send me away to the little cabin by the sea or leave me to walk by myself around the fifteen rooms of the mansion, slowly rotting away. I can't live this way, Wes. I want out."

"What about a trial separation, maybe a month or so..."

"I said 'out,' O-U-T. A separation wouldn't do any good. The fault, dear husband, is not in our stars but in ourselves. I know you too well, and I know you'll never change into something that is acceptable to me. And I'll never be satisfied with being an ornament. So a separation would do us no good at all. I want a divorce."

Stoneham crossed his legs. "Have you told anyone about this yet?"

"No." She shook her head. "No, I was planning to see Larry tomorrow, but I felt you should be told first."

"Good," Stoneham said in a barely audible whisper.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Stella asked sharply. Her hands were fidgeting, which was her cue to fumble through her purse on the writing desk for her pack of cigarettes. She needed one badly at this point.

But it wasn't until she got a cigarette between her lips that she realized she was out of matches. "Got a light?"

"Sure." Stoneham fished around in his coat pocket and pulled

out a book of matches. "Keep them," he said as he flipped them to his wife.

Stella caught them and examined them with interest. The outside of the book was smooth silver, with red and blue stars around the border. In the center were words that proclaimed:

WESLEY STONEHAM

SUPERVISOR

SAN MARCOS COUNTY

Inside, the paper matches alternated red, white and blue.

She looked quizzically up at her husband, who was grinning at her. "Like them?" he asked. "I just got them back from the printer's this afternoon."

"Isn't it a bit premature?" she asked sarcastically.

"Only by a couple of days. Old man Chottman is resigning from the Board because of ill health at the end of the week, and they're letting him name the man he wants as his successor to fill out his term. It won't be official, of course, until the Governor appoints the man, but I have it from very reliable sources that my name is the one being mentioned. If Chottman says he wants me to fill his term, the Governor will listen. Chottman is seventy-three and has a lot of favors to call in."

An idea began glimmering in Stella's brain. "So this is why you don't want a divorce, isn't it?"

"Stell, you know as well as I do what a puritan, that „ Chottman is," Stoneham said. "The old guy is still firmly opposed to sin of any kind, and he thinks of divorce as a sin. God only knows why, but he does." He rose from the couch and went to his wife again, holding her shoulders tenderly this time. "That's why I'm asking you to wait. It would only be a week or two..."

Stella pulled away, a knowing, triumphant smile on her face. "So that's it. Now we know why the big, strong Wesley Stoneham

comes crawling. You won't leave me even a vestige of self-respect, will you? You won't even let me think that you came because you thought there was something in our marriage worth saving. No, you come right out with it. It's a favor you want." She struck a match furiously and began to puff on her cigarette like a steam locomotive climbing a hill. She tossed the used match into the ashtray, and the matchbook down beside it. "Well, I'm sick of your politics, Wesley. I'm tired of doing things so that it will make you look better or more concerned for the citizenry of San Marcos. The only person you ever consider is yourself. I suppose you'd even grant me the divorce uncontested if I were to wait, wouldn't you?"

"If that's what you want."

"Sure. The Great Compromiser. Make any deal, as long as it gets you what you want. Well, I've got a little surprise for you, Mister Supervisor. I do not make deals. I don't give a God damn whether you make it in politics or not. I intend to walk into our lawyer's office tomorrow and start the papers fluttering."

"Stella..."

"Maybe I'll even have a little talk with the press about all the milk of human kindness that flows in your veins, husband dear."

"I'm warning you, Stella..."

"That would be a big tragedy, wouldn't it, Wes, if you had to actually get elected..."

"STOP IT, STELLA!"

"... by the voters to get into office instead of being appointed all nice and neat by your buddies..."

"STELLA!"

His hands were up to her throat as he screamed her name. He wanted her to stop, but she wouldn't. Her lips kept moving and moving, and the words were lost in a silencing mist that enveloped the cabin. Normal colorations vanished as the room

took on a blood-red hue. He shook her and closed his huge hands tightly around her neck.

The cigarette dropped from her surprised fingers at the unexpected attack, spilling some of its ashes on the floor. Stella raised her hands against her husband's chest and tried to push him away. For a moment she succeeded, but he kept coming, fighting off her flailing arms to grip her with all the strength at his disposal.

There was a numbness in his fingers as they closed around her throat. He did not feel the soft warmth of her skin yielding under his pressure, the pulsing of the arteries in her neck or the instinctive tightening of her tendons. All he felt was his own muscles, squeezing, squeezing, squeezing.

Gradually, her struggling subsided. Her facial coloring seemed funny, even through the red haze that clouded his vision. Her bulging eyes looked ready to leap from their sockets, opened wide and staring at him, staring, staring...

He let go. She fell to the ground, but slowly. Slow-motion slow, dream slow. Still there was no sound as she hit the floor. She crumpled, limp as a rag doll tossed aside for fancier toys. Except for that face, that purple, bloated face. Its tongue stuck out like a grotesquerie, the eyes glazed with horror. A tiny trickle of blood leaked from her nose, down her purpled lips and onto the faded brown carpet. A finger on her left hand twitched spasmodically two or three times, then became still.

* * *

The blue-white world was below him, awaiting the touch of his mind. Garnna dipped into the atmosphere and was overwhelmed by the abundance of life. There were creatures in the air, creatures on the land, creatures in the water. The first test, of course, was the search for any Offasü that might be around, but it took only a quick scan to reveal that none were there. The Offasü had not been found on any of the planets yet explored by the Zarticku, but the search had to go on. The Zartic race could not feel truly safe until they discovered what had happened to their former masters.

The primary purpose of the Exploration had now been accomplished. There remained the secondary purpose: to determine what kind of life did inhabit this planet, whether it was intelligent, and whether it might conceivably pose any threat to Zarti.

Garnna established another net, a smaller one this time. He encompassed the entire planet with his mind, probing for signs of intelligence. His search was instantly successful. Lights gleamed in bright patterns on the night side, indicating cities of large size. A profusion of radio waves, artificially modulated, were bouncing all over the atmosphere. He followed them to their sources and found large towers and buildings. And he found the creatures themselves who were responsible for the radio waves and the buildings and the lights. They walked erect on two legs and their bodies were soft, without the armor plating of a Zartic. They were short, perhaps only half as tall as Zarticku, and their fur seemed to be mostly concentrated on their heads. He observed their eating habits and realized with distaste that they were omni-vores. To a herbivorous race like the Zarticku, such creatures seemed to have cruel and malicious natures, posing potential threats to a gentler species. But at least they were better than the vicious carnivores. Garnna had seen a couple of carnivore societies, where killing and destruction were everyday occurrences, and the mere thought of them sent imaginary shudders through his mind. He found himself wishing that all life in the universe were herbivorous, then checked himself. He was not supposed to allow his personal prejudices to interfere with the performance of his duties. His task now was to observe these creatures in the short time he had left to him and make a report that would be filed for future study.

He did see one hopeful note about these creatures, namely that they seemed to have the herd instinct rather than acting solely as individuals. They congregated in large cities and seemed to do most things in crowds. They did have the potential for being alone, but they didn't utilize it much.

He gathered his mind together once again and prepared to make detailed observations. He zoomed down to the surface of the world to watch. The creatures were obviously diurnal or they

wouldn't have needed lights for their cities, so at first he picked a spot on the daylight hemisphere to observe. He had no worries at all about being spotted by the natives; the Zartic method of space exploration took care of that.

Basically, this method called for a complete separation of body and mind. Drugs were taken to aid the dissociation, while the Explorer rested comfortably in a machine. When the separation occurred, the machine took over the mechanical aspects of the body function— heartbeat, respiration, nourishment and so on. The mind, meanwhile, was free to roam at will wherever it chose. Few limits had thus far been found for a freed mind. The speed at which it could "travel"—if, indeed, it could be said to go anywhere—was so fast as to be unmeasurable; theoretically, it might even be infinite. A freed mind could narrow its concentration down to a single subatomic particle, or expand to cover vast areas of space. It could detect electromagnetic radiation at any portion of the spectrum. And best of all from the standpoint of the cautious Zarticku, it could not be detected by any of the physical senses. It was a phantom that could not be seen, heard, smelled, tasted or touched. All of which made it the ideal vehicle with which to explore the universe beyond Zarti's atmosphere.

Garnna stopped at a place where the land was regularly laid out for the growing of crops. Farming varied but little throughout the societies he had investigated so far, probably because form followed function and the function was manifestly the same. These creatures were plowing with crude implements drawn by subservient, two-horned herbivore. This primitive state of agriculture did not seem consistent with a civilization that could also produce so many radio waves. In order to resolve the apparent paradox, Garnna reached out with his mind and touched the mind of one of the natives.

This was another advantage of the freed mind. It seemed to have the ability to "listen in" on the thoughts of other minds. It was telepathy, but in a very restricted sense for it worked only one way. Garnna would be able to hear the thoughts of others, but he himself would be undetectable.

The phenomenon was not nearly as helpful as it might first appear, however. Intelligent individuals think partly in words of their own language, partly in abstract concepts and partly in visual images. The thoughts go by very quickly and then are gone forever. Different species had different patterns of thought based primarily on differences in their sensory inputs. And within a race each individual had his own private code of symbolism.

Mindreading, therefore, tended to be a painstaking and very frustrating business. Garnna would have to sift through mountains of meaningless impressions that were bombarding him at an unbelievable rate to arrive at even the kernel of an idea. With luck, he would read some generalized emotions and learn a few of the basic concepts that existed within the mind he contracted. But he was experienced at this procedure and not afraid of hard work if it were for the good of the Herd, so he dived right in.

After a good deal of probing and even more guesswork, Garnna was able to piece together a small picture of this world. There was only one intelligent race here, but it had fragmented into many individual cultures. Several constant patterns emerged in nearly all the cultures, though. The iff-groups here seemed generally to consist of only a few adults, usually related or mated, plus their offspring. The purpose of the iff-group was much more oriented towards the raising of the young than it was toward the providing of security for the individual. There seemed to be some individuals who survived entirely without iff-groups. The Herd was more an abstract concept here than an everyday reality as it was on Zarti.

He learned, also, that some of the cultures on the planet were richer than others. The richest could be currently found on the nighttime side of the planet. In that particular culture, many of the things done by hand here were done by machine, and there was supposed to be plenty of food for all. The thought that one portion of the Herd could be overfed while another portion went hungry seemed callous to the Zartic. He reminded himself once more to stifle his emotions. He was here only to observe, and he had best concentrate on that.

He decided to investigate that ultra-rich culture. In evaluating these creatures as a potential threat to the Herd, his superiors would only be interested in their highest capabilities. It wouldn't matter at all what the poorer cultures did if the richer ones possessed a method of physical interstellar travel coupled with a warlike nature.

At the speed of thought, Garnna zipped across an enormous expanse of ocean and arrived in the darkened hemisphere. He immediately found several large coastal cities blazing their lights at him. These creatures might be diurnal, but they certainly didn't let the darkness affect their lives to any great extent. There were parts of the cities that were lit up as bright as daytime. There was one place in one of the cities where throngs of the creatures gathered in seats to view the action that was taking place between a smaller number of the creatures down on a specially laid-out field. The pattern was similar to what had been seen on numerous other worlds, particularly where omnivores and carnivores were dominant—institutionalized competition. Instead of dividing what there was evenly for the good of the Herd, as would have been done on Zarti, these creatures felt compelled to compete, with the winners getting all and the losers nothing. Try as he would, Garnna could not fully comprehend what such competition would mean to these creatures.

He moved on. He observed the buildings of the natives and found them in many ways structurally superior to those on Zarti. The machines for transportation were also advanced, being both efficient and capable of traveling at great speeds. But he noticed, too, that they burned chemical fuels in order to propel themselves. That, for the moment, removed these beings from the threat list. They obviously would not use chemical fuels if they had discovered an efficient means of utilizing nuclear energy, and no race could hope to build a workable interstellar drive utilizing chemical fuels alone. These creatures might know of the existence of nuclear power—in fact, to judge from their very ample technology, Garnna would have been surprised if they didn't—but it was too large a jump from there to an interstellar drive; the Zarticku would not need to worry about this race posing a threat in the near future. Even the Zarticku hadn't perfected an interstellar drive yet—but of course, there had been

extenuating circumstances.

He spent most of his time gathering the material he thought he would need for his report. As always, there was an overabundance of data, and he had to carefully eliminate some very interesting details to make room for trends which would help him build in his own mind a cohesive picture of this civilization. Again, the whole took precedence over its parts.

He finished his investigation and realized he still had a little time to spare before he was required to return to his body. He might as well use it. He had a small hobby, a harmless one. Zarti, too, had seacoasts, and Garnna had been born near one of them. He had spent his youth near the sea and had never tired of watching waves come in and break against the shore. So, whenever he found himself with spare time on an alien wor'd, he tried to fantasize back to his childhood at the edge of the ocean. It helped to make the alien seem familiar and caused no harm to anyone. So he glided gently along the seacoast of the enormous ocean on this strange world, watching and listening to the black, almost invisible water crnsrrng along the darkened sands of this planet, a hundred parsecs from the place of his birth.

Something attracted his attention. Up on top of the cliffs that were overlooking the beach at this point, a light was shining. This must be an example of the solitary individual of the society, set out here far from the nearest large grouping of others of its race. Garnna floated upwards.

The light came from a small building, poorly made in comparison with the buildings of the city but no doubt comfortable for a single creature to dwell in. There were two vehicles parked outside, both empty. Since the vehicles were not automatic, it implied that there must be at least two of the aliens inside.

Being a pure mentality Garnna went through the walls of the cabin as though they didn't exist. Inside were two of the creatures, talking to one another. The incident did not seem very interesting. Garnna made a brief note of the furnishings of the room and was about to leave when one of the creatures suddenly attacked the other one. It grabbed at the neck of its companion

and began strangling it. Without even extending himself, Garnna could feel the rage that was emanating from the attacking creature. He froze. Normally the instincts of his species would have caused him to flee the vicinity at top speed—in this case, the speed of thought. But Garnna had undergone extensive training in order to conquer his instincts. He had been trained to be first, last and always an observer. He observed.

* * *

Reality returned slowly to Stoneham. It started with sound, a rapid *ka-thud, ka-thud, ka-thud* that he recognized belatedly as his own heart. He had never heard it so loud before. It seemed to drown out the universe with its thumping. Stoneham put his hands to his ears to hold out the noise, but it only made the situation worse. A ringing started, too—a high-pitched tingling like a soprano alarm clock going off inside his brain.

Then came smell. There seemed to be a queer odor in the air, a sickly, bathroomy odor. Stains were growing at the front and back of Stella's dress.

Taste. There was blood in his mouth, salty and tepid and Stoneham realized he had bitten down on his own lips.

Touch. The tips of his fingers were tingling, there was a trembling in his wrists, his biceps relaxed after having been superhumanly taut.

Sight. Color returned to the normal world, and speed became as usual. But there was nothing to watch that moved. Just the body of his wife lying lifeless in the middle of the floor.

Stoneham stood there, for how many minutes he didn't know. His eyes roamed the room, seeking out the commonplace things it held, avoiding the body at his feet. But not for very long. There was a certain gruesome fascination about Stella's body that compelled his gaze, drawing it back from wherever in the room it had wandered.

He began to think again. He knelt belatedly at his wife's side and felt for a pulse that he knew would not be there. Her hand

already felt slightly cold to his touch (or was that only his imagination?), and all pretense of life had gone. He quickly drew back his hand and stood up once more.

Walking over to the sofa, he sat down and stared for long minutes at the opposite wall. Headlines shrieked at him: **PROMINENT LOCAL' LAWYER HELD IN WIFE'S DEATH.** The years of carefully planning his political career, of doing favors for people so that they, in turn, might someday do favors for him, of going to endless boring parties and dinners... all this he saw sinking beneath the surface in a great vortex of calamity. And he saw long, empty years stretching ahead of him, gray walls and steel bars.

"No!" he cried. He looked down accusingly at the lifeless body of his wife. "No, you'd like that, wouldn't you? But I'm not going to let it happen, not to me. I've got too many important things I want to do before I go." A surprising calm settled over his mind and he saw clearly what had to be done. He crushed out the still-smoldering cigarette his wife had dropped. Then he • walked to the utensil rack and took a carving knife from the wall, holding Ms pocket handkerchief around the handle so that he wouldn't leave any fingerprints. He went outside and cut off a large section of clothesline. Back inside the cabin, he tied his wife's hands behind her and bent her body backward so that he could tie her feet to her neck.

Taking up the knife again, he proceeded to make a neat slash across Stella's throat. Blood oozed out rather than spurting because it was no longer being pumped by the heart. He hacked roughly at her breasts and made an obscene gouge through her dress at her crotch. For good measure he slashed ruthlessly at her abdomen, face and arms. He cut her eyes out of their sockets and tried to cut off her nose, too, but it was too tough for his knife.

Next, he dipped the knife in her blood and wrote "Death to Pigs" on one wall. As a final gesture, he severed the telephone line with a decisive slash. Then he placed the knife down on the floor beside her body, at the same time picking up the note she had written him about her divorce intentions. He put the note in

his pants pocket.

He stood up and looked himself over. His hands and clothes were liberally smeared with blood. That would never do. He would have to get rid of it somehow.

He scrubbed his hands well in the sink until he'd removed all traces of the blood. He looked around the room and spotted something that caught his breath: his personally printed matchbook sitting on the table by the ashtray. He strode over to it, thinking that it would be very foolish to leave a clue like that lying around for the police to find. He slipped the matchbook neatly into his pocket.

Then he went to his suitcase and took out a fresh suit of clothes. He quickly changed into them, thinking as he did so that he could bury his old clothes someplace a mile away so that they'd never be found. Then he could come back here and pretend to have discovered the body as it was. Since the phone wires were cut, he would have to drive somewhere else to call the police. The nearest neighbor with a phone, he recalled, was about two miles away.

Stoneham turned and surveyed his handiwork. Blood was smeared all over the floor and on some of the furniture, the body was dismembered in particularly gruesome fashion, the radical message was inscribed on the wall in plain view. It was a scene out of a surrealistic nightmare. No sensible killer would have performed a butchery like that. Blame would instantly fall on that hippie commune, maybe on Polaski himself. It would serve two purposes: cover up his guilt and rid San Marcos once and for all of those damned hippies.

There was a shovel in a small toolbox outside the cabin. Stoneham took it and walked off into the woods to bury his clothes. Since there had been no rain for months, the ground was dry and hard-packed; he left no footprints as he walked.

* * *

It did not take long for the bigger creature to kill the smaller. But after it was done, the killer seemed immobilized by its own

actions. Gingerly, Garnna reached out a mental feeler and touched the killer's mind. The thoughts were a jumble of confusion. There were still swirling traces of anger, but they seemed to be fading slowly. Other feelings were increasing. Guilt, sorrow, fear of punishment; these were all things that Garnna knew as well. He pushed a little deeper into the mind and learned that the dead creature had been of the same iff-group as the survivor; in fact, it had been its mate. Garnna's horror at this was so strong that he raced out of the mind and curled himself up into a mental ball. Intellectually he could accept the idea of killing, possibly even of one's mate. But emotionally the shock of the direct experience set his mind quivering.

He existed there for minutes, waiting for the shock and disgust to pass. Finally, his training reasserted itself and he started observing his surroundings once more. The big creature was now hacking at the carcass of the little one with a knife. Was this some sort of ghastly custom? If so, these omnivores might have to be reeval-uated with regard to their threat potential. Even the carnivores Garnna had observed had not behaved this obscenely.

It took all the self-control he had to enable him to make contact with the alien's brain once more. What he saw confused and disturbed him. For the first time, he witnessed directly an individual planning to perform an action that would run counter to the good of its Herd. There was guilt and shame in the mind, which led Garnna to believe that this killing was far from a customary practice. The herd instinct was still functioning, though quite suppressed. And overriding everything was the fear of punishment. The creature knew that what it had done was wrong, and its present horrible course of action was an attempt to evade—by what means, Garnna could not say—the punishment that would otherwise naturally come.

This was a unique situation. Never before, to Garnna's knowledge, had an Explorer ever become involved in an individual situation to this extent. It was always the big picture that mattered. But perhaps some insights could be gained by watching this situation develop. Even as he thought this, he "heard" a bell go off in his mind. This was the first warning that

his time for Exploration was almost up. There would be one more in six minutes and then he would have to go back home. But he resolved to stay and watch the drama play out as much as possible before that happened.

He probed a little deeper into the alien's mind and witnessed the deceit within. The creature was going to attempt to avoid its just punishment by blaming the crime on some other innocent being. If the original crime had been hideous to Garnna, this compounding of it was unspeakable. It was one thing to let a moment of passion cause one to violate the rules of the Herd, but it was quite another to consciously and deliberately mislead others so that a different individual would be harmed. The creature was not only placing its welfare above that of the Herd, but above that of other individuals as well.

Garnna could no longer remain neutral and unconcerned. This creature *must* be a deviant. Even allowing for differences in customs, no viable society could last long if these standards were the norm. It would fall apart under mutual hatred and distrust.

The creature had left the cabin now, and was walking slowly into the trees. Garnna followed it. The creature was carrying the clothes it had worn inside the room, as well as a tool it had taken from the cabin. When the creature had gone a mile from the building, it put down the clothes and started using the tool to dig a hole. When the hole was deep enough, the alien buried the old clothes in it and filled it up again, brushing the dirt around carefully so that the ground looked undisturbed.

Garnna caught flashes from the creature's mind. There was satisfaction at having done something successfully. There was an easing of fear now, since steps had been taken to avoid the punishment. And there was the feeling of triumph, of having somehow defeated or outwitted the Herd. The latter gave Garnna a mental shudder. What kind of creature was this, that could actually revel in causing harm to the rest of its Herd? This was wrong by any standards, it had to be. Something would have to be done to see that this deviant was discovered despite its deception. But...

The second alarm sounded within his mind. *No!* he thought. *I*

don't want to go back. I must stay and do something about this situation.

But there was no choice. It was not known how long a mind could remain outside its body without dire consequences to one or the other. If he were to stay away too long his body might die, and it was problematical whether his mind could outlive it. It would accomplish no good at all if his mind were to be destroyed through carelessness.

Reluctantly, then, Garnna iff-Almanic's mind pulled itself away from the scene of the tragedy on the blue-white third planet of the yellow star and raced back to its body more than a hundred parsecs away.

* * *

As he walked back to the cabin Stoneham felt a certain satisfaction at having coped successfully with a bad situation. Even if the police didn't blame the hippies, there was no real evidence left with which to blame him, he thought. No motives, no evidence, no witnesses.

About a mile away, a girl named Deborah Bauer woke up from a nightmare, screaming.

CHAPTER II

This was not going to be a good day, John Maschen decided as he drove up the coast to his office in the town of San Marcos. To his right, the sky was beginning to turn from dark to light blue as the sun had just begun to make its uphill climb over the horizon; but it was still hidden from Maschen's view by the sea cliffs that reared up on the eastern side of the road. In the west, the stars had vanished into the fading blue velvet that was all that remained of the night.

No day that starts with having to go to work at five-thirty in the morning can be any good, Maschen continued. Most particularly when there's a murder connected with it.

He drove up to his office building feeling particularly scruffy. Deputy Whitmore had called and told him it was urgent, and Maschen hadn't even taken the time to shave. He hadn't wanted to disturb his still-sleeping wife, and, in the darkness, had taken the wrong uniform, the one he'd worn yesterday. It smelled as though he'd played a full game of basketball in it. He'd taken about fifteen seconds to run a brush through his partially balding hair, but that had been his only concession to neatness.

No day that starts out like this, he reiterated, can be anything but messed up.

His watch read five forty-eight as he walked through the door to the Sheriff's Station. "All right, Tom, what's the story?"

Deputy Whitmore looked up as his boss came in. He was a boyish-looking fellow, on the force for only half a year so far, and his lack of seniority made him a natural for the post of night dispatcher. His long blond hair was neat, his uniform pressed and spotless. Maschen felt a temporary surge of hatred for anyone who could look that immaculate at this hour, even though he knew the feeling was unreasonable. It was part of Whitmore's job to look efficient this early, and Maschen would have had to bawl him out if he'd looked any different.

"There was a murder in a private cabin along the coast halfway between here and Bellington," Whitmore said. "The victim was Mrs. Wesley Stoneham."

Maschen's eyes widened. True to his expectations, the day had already become immeasurably worse. And it wasn't even six o'clock yet. He sighed. "Who's handling it?"

"Acker made the initial report. He's staying at the scene, gathering what information he can. Mostly, he's making sure that nothing gets disturbed until you get a look at it."

Maschen nodded. "He's a good man. Do you have a copy of his report?"

"In a minute, sir. He radioed it in, and I've had to type it up myself. I've just got a couple more sentences to do."

"Fine. I'm going to get myself a cup of coffee. I want that report on my desk when I get back."

There was always a pot of coffee brewing in the office, but it was invariably terrible and Maschen never drank it. Instead, he walked across the street to the all-night diner and went inside. Joe, the counterman, looked up at him from behind legs propped up against one of the tables. He put down the newspaper he was reading. "Rather early for you, isn't it, Sheriff?"

Maschen ignored the friendliness that masked polite inquiry. "Coffee, Joe, and I want it black." He pulled fifteen cents from his pocket and banged it down on the counter top. The counterman took his cue from the sheriff's attitude and proceeded to pour a cup of coffee in silence.

Maschen drank his coffee in large gulps. In between gulps, he would spend long periods staring intently at the wall opposite him. He seemed to recall having met Mrs. Stoneham—he couldn't remember her first name—once or twice at some parties or dinners. He remembered thinking of her at the time as one of the few women who had turned their approaching middle age into an asset rather than a liability by cultivating a certain mature grace about her. She had seemed like a nice person, and he was sorry that she was dead.

But he was even sorer that she happened to be the wife of Wesley Stoneham. *That* would cause complications beyond number. Stoneham was a man who had discovered his own importance and was waiting for the world to catch up with him. Not only was he rich, he made his money count in terms of influence. He knew all the right people, and most of them owed him favors of one sort or another. The rumor was spreading that he was even being considered for the seat on the Board that Chottman would be resigning in a few days. If Stoneham liked you, doors opened as if by magic; if he should frown, they would slam shut in your face.

Maschen had been in police work for thirty-seven years, and sheriff for the last eleven. He would be running for reelection next year. Perhaps it would be wise to stay on the good side of Stoneham, whichever side that was. He didn't know any of the

details of the case yet, but already he had a feeling in the pit of his ulcer that it was going to be a nasty one. He muttered something under his breath about the policeman's lot.

"Beg pardon, Sheriff?" Joe asked.

"Nothing," Maschen growled. He finished his coffee in one gulp, slammed the cup down on the counter and stalked out of the diner.

Back in his office, the report was waiting on his desk just as he had requested. There wasn't much in it. A call had come in at three-oh-seven a.m., reporting a murder. The caller was Mr. Wesley Stoneham, calling from the residence of Mr. Abraham Whyte. Stoneham said that his wife had been murdered by party or parties unknown while she had been staying alone at their seaside cabin. Stoneham had arrived on the scene at about two-thirty and discovered her body but, because the phone lines at the cabin had been cut, he had had to call from his neighbor's. A car was dispatched to investigate.

Mr. Stoneham met the investigating officer at the door to the cabin. Inside, the deputy found the body, tentatively identified as Stoneham's wife, bound hands and feet, her throat slashed, her eyes removed, and chest and arms brutally hacked. There was a possibility of sexual assault, as the pubic region had been cut open. Facial discolorations and marks on her throat indicated strangulation, but there were no other signs of a struggle of any sort about the cabin. Beside the body lay a kitchen knife that had apparently been used to do the hacking— it was from the utensils set that was hanging on the wall. The carpet was stained with blood, presumably the victim's, and a message had been written in blood on the wall: "Death to Pigs." A stamped out cigarette that had been only partially smoked was on the floor, and a used paper match was in one of the ashtrays. The bedroom appeared untouched.

Maschen put down the report, closed his eyes and rubbed the backs of his knuckles against his eyelids. It couldn't be just a simple rape-murder, could it? This one had all the makings of a psychotic vendetta, the type that attracted wide publicity. He reread the description of the body and shuddered. He had seen a

lot of gory sights in his thirty-seven years of police work, but never one that sounded as gory as this. He did not think he was going to like this case at all. He half dreaded having to go out to the spot and viewing the corpse for himself. But he knew he'd have to. In a case like this, with tons of publicity—and with Stoneham looking over his shoulder—he'd have to handle the investigation personally. San Marcos County was not big enough to be able to afford—or require—a full-time homicide squad.

He punched at the intercom button. "Tom?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Get me Acker on the radio." He took a deep breath and got up from his chair. He had to stifle a yawn as he went through the door and down the stairs to the front desk.

"I've got him, sir," the young deputy said as he handed the radio microphone to the sheriff.

"Thanks." He took the mike and pressed the transmitting button. "Come in."

"This is Acker reporting, sir. I'm still at the Stoneham cabin. Mr. Stoneham has gone back to his home in San Marcos to try and get some sleep. I got his address... "

"Never mind that, Harry. I've got it somewhere in my files. Are there any new developments since you made your first report?"

"I checked the grounds around the cabin for possible footprints, but I think we're out of luck there, sir. It hasn't rained for months, you know, and the ground here , is awfully hard and dry. A lot of it is just rock covered by a thin layer of loose dirt and gravel. I wasn't able to find anything."

"How about cars? Were there any tire tracks?"

"Mrs. Stoneham's car is parked beside the cabin. There are two sets of tracks from Stoneham's car and one from my own. But the killer wouldn't have had to come by car. There are a

number of places within easy walking distance of here."

"A person would have to know their way fairly well, though, wouldn't you think, if they weren't to get lost in the dark?"

"Probably, sir."

"Harry, just off the record, how does this thing look to you?"

The voice at the other end paused for a moment. "Well, to tell you the truth, sir, this is the most sickening thing I've ever seen. I damn near threw up when I saw what had been done to that poor woman's body. There couldn't possibly have been any reason why the killer did what he did. I would guess that we're dealing with a lunatic, a dangerous one."

"All right, Harry," Maschen soothed. "You wait there. I'm going to round up Simpson and then we'll be out to relieve you. Out." He clicked off the radio and handed the mike back to Whitmore.

Simpson was the deputy best trained in the scientific aspects of criminology. Whenever a case of more than ordinary complexity occurred, the department tended to rely on him more than any of the other members. Normally, Simpson wouldn't have come on duty until ten o'clock, but Maschen gave him a special call, informed him of the urgency of the situation, and told him that he would pick him up. He took the deputy's fingerprint kit and a camera out to his car, then drove to Simpson's place.

The deputy was waiting on the porch of his somewhat weatherbeaten house. Together, he and the sheriff drove off to the Stoneham cabin. Very little was said during the drive; Simpson was a thin, very quiet man who generally kept his brilliance within him, while the sheriff had more than enough to think about in considering the different aspects of the crime.

When they arrived, Maschen dismissed Acker and told him to go home and try to get some sleep. Simpson went quietly about his business, first photographing the room and the body from all angles, then collecting small bits of things, anything that was

loose, in little plastic bags, and finally dusting the room for fingerprints. Maschen called for an ambulance, then just sat back and watched his deputy work. He felt very helpless, somehow' Simpson was the one who was best trained for this job, and there was little the sheriff could add to his deputy's prowess. *Maybe*, Maschen thought bitterly, *after all this time I find I'm really destined to be a bureaucrat and not a policeman at all*. And wouldn't that be a sad commentary on his life, he wondered.

Simpson finished his job almost simultaneously with the arrival of the ambulance. When Mrs. Stoneham's body had been taken away to the morgue, Maschen locked up the cabin and he and Simpson headed back into town. It was now nearly eight-thirty, and Maschen's stomach was beginning to remind him that all he had had for breakfast so far was a cup of coffee.

"What do you think about the murder?" he asked the stony Simpson.

"It's unusual."

"Well, yes, that much is obvious. No normal person... let me correct that, no normal *killer* would chop a body up like that."

"That's not what I meant. The murder was done backwards."

"How do you mean?"

"The killer killed the woman first, *then* tied her up."

Maschen took his eyes off the road for a moment to eye his deputy. "How do you know that?"

"There was no cut-off of the circulation when the hands were tied, and those ropes were awfully tight. Therefore, the heart had stopped pumping blood before they were tied. Also, she was killed before those cuts were made on her body, or else a lot more blood would have spurted out."

"In other words, this is not the traditional sadist who would tie a girl up, torture her and then kill her. You're saying that this

man killed her first, *then* tied her up and dismembered her?"

"Yes."

"But that doesn't make any sense at all."

"That's why I said it's unusual."

They drove the rest of the way in silence, each man contemplating in his own way the unusual circumstances of the case.

When they arrived back at the station, Simpson proceeded straight to the small laboratory to analyze his findings. Maschen had started up the stairs to his own office when Carroll, his secretary, came down to meet him halfway. "Careful," she whispered. "There's a whole gang of reporters waiting to ambush you up there."

How quickly the vultures gather, Maschen mused. *I wonder whether anyone tipped them off, or whether they can just smell the death and sensationalism and come running to it.* He hadn't really expected them this soon, and he had nothing prepared to say. His stomach was making him all too acutely aware that he hadn't eaten anything solid in about fourteen hours. He wondered if • there was still time to duck out the back way for a quick breakfast before they spotted him.

There wasn't. Some unknown face appeared at the head of the stairs. "Here's the sheriff now," the man said. Maschen sighed and continued up the steps behind Carroll. He'd known it wasn't going to be a good day.

Even he was surprised, though, when he reached the top and g'anced around. He had expected maybe a handful of reporters from a couple of county newspapers. But here the room was jammed with people, and the only one he recognized was Dave Grailly of the San Marcos *Clarion*. Everyone else was unfamiliar. And not only were there people, there were machines as well. Television cameras, microphones and other broadcasting equipment lay carefully scattered about, with call letters on them from the three major networks as well as local stations from the

Los Angeles and San Francisco areas. He was overwhelmed with the thought that this case was attracting much greater publicity than even he had anticipated.

Th^ instant he appeared, a loud yammering began as twenty different people started asking him twenty different questions at the same time. Dazed, Maschen could only stand there for a moment under the barrage of questioning, but finally he regained his composure. He walked up to the area where they had set up the microphones and announced, "Gentlemen, if you will all be patient, I plan to issue a statement in a few minutes Carroll, get your steno pad and come into my office. w»ll vou?"

He went into his office and shut the door, leaning his back against it. He closed his eyes, trying to regulate his breathing and perhaps calm his nerves. Events were piling one on top of the other too fast for his comfort. He was just a small-county sheriff, used to a relaxed pace and easy atmosphere. Suddenly, the world seemed to be going out of control, upsetting the humdrum normality to which he was accustomed. Again, the thought crossed his mind that maybe he shouldn't be a policeman. There must be hundreds of other jobs in the world that were better paid and less taxing.

There was a knock on the door behind "him. He moved away and opened it and Carroll came in, pad in hand. Maschen suddenly realized that he h?dn't the faintest idea of what to say. Each word would be critically important because he was speaking, not just to Dave Grailly of the *Clarion*, but to the wire services and the TV networks, which meant potentially every person in the United States. His mouth went suddenly dry with stage fright.

He decided, finally, to stick to just the facts as he knew them. Let the newspapers draw their own conclusions; they would, anyway. He paced around the room as he dictated to his secretary, stopping frequently to have her read back what he'd said and correct some phrasing that sounded awkward. When he was finished, he had her read it aloud to him twice, just to make sure of its accuracy. Then he let her go out to type it up.

While she was doing that, he sat down behind his desk and

willed his hands to stop shaking. The thought that he was unfit for his job would not leave his mind. He'd been a fine cop thirty years ago, but things had been a lot simpler then. Had time passed him by permanently, leaving him in this backwater with only a pretense left to him? Was the only reason he'd been able to succeed as a sheriff because there really wasn't anything challenging to do in this small coastal county? And, now that the present seemed to be catching up with him at last, would he be able to face it as he should?

Carroll came in with a typed copy and a carbon for his approval before she made duplicates. Maschen fussed over it, taking an inordinate amount of time to read the entire document. When he could postpone the inevitable no longer, he initialed it and gave her back the carbon to make copies. Clearing his throat several times, he emerged from his office.

He was greeted by the popping of flashbulbs, which blinded him temporarily as he tried to reach the microphones. He groped his way along until he found them. "I have an official statement to make at this time," he said. He looked at the paper in his hands and could hardly see the words because of all the blue dots that seemed fixed in front of his eyes. Hesitatingly, he made his way through the speech. He described the circumstances of the body's discovery and the rather grisly state of the body itself. He mentioned the phrase written on the wall, but did *not* mention Simpson's hypothesis about the murderer's timetable. He concluded by saying, "Copies of this statement will be made available to anyone who wants one."

"Do you have any suspects yet?" one reporter shot at him.

"Why, uh, no, it's too soon to know, we're still assimilating the data."

"In view of the fact that your office is so small, do you plan to ask for state or federal help in solving this case?" That question from a different part of the room.

Maschen suddenly felt the pressure on him. The TV cameras were staring at him with one large, unblinking eye apiece. He was acutely aware that he was wearing a dirty, unpressed

uniform and that he hadn't shaved that morning. Was that the type of image that was going to go out across the country? A slovenly, unkempt hick who can't handle his own county when something really bad happens? "So far," he said deliberately, "the indications are that the solution to this crime is well within the capabilities of my office. I do not plan to ask for outside help at this time, no."

"Do you think it's possible that the murder could have been politically motivated?"

"I really couldn't say..."

"Considering the importance of the case and the un-usualness of its nature, who is going to be put in charge?"

When the question was phrased that way, there was only one answer he could give. "I am making myself personally responsible for the investigation."

"Will you be putting out an all points bulletin?"

"When I have some faint idea of the type of person we're looking for, yes. If we haven't caught him by that time, of course."

"What kind of person do you think could have committed such a terrible crime?"

At that moment, Maschen saw Howard Willsey, the District Attorney, enter the room towards the back, and his mind wandered from the question for a moment. "Why, urn, uh, he appears to me to have been, uh, somewhat disturbed. If, uh, you gentlemen will excuse me now, I believe the District Attorney wishes to have a talk with me."

There was some mumbling of routine thank-you's as the reporters began grabbing for copies of the statement and the cameramen started dismounting their equipment. The DA politely pushed his way through the crowd of newsmen to get to the sheriff's side. Howard Willsey was a tall man, thin and insubstantial with a bleak, hawklike nose and watery eyes that

always appeared on the verge of tears. He was a prosecutor largely because he had been unable to succeed in private practice.

"Let's go into your office," he said when he reached the sheriff.

Back in the comparative calm of his office, Maschen felt much more at ease. It was as though the wildcat that had leapt on his back had suddenly turned out to be a stuffed toy, after all. The removal of pressure was a positive blessing. Willsey, on the other hand, was nervous. He had a cigarette in his mouth before Maschen could even offer him a chair. "Well, Howard," the sheriff said with forced cheerfulness, "need I ask what's brought you around here so early in the morning?"

Willsey either missed the question or ignored it. "I don't like the idea of all those reporters," he said. "I wish you hadn't talked to them. It's so hard, nowadays, to know the right things to say. One wrong word and the Supreme Court will reverse the entire decision."

"I think you may be exaggerating a little."

"Don't be too sure. And in any case, the more you say, the more you prejudice prospective jurors."

"Maybe. But even so, what else could I have done?"

"You could have refused to comment at all. Just said, 'We're working on it and we'll let you fellows know when we're done.' Kept quiet until everything was socked away."

The idea had never occurred to Maschen. He'd reacted spontaneously to having a microphone shoved in front of his mouth: he talked. The whole ordeal could have been easily avoided with the words "no comment", only he didn't think of them. He wondered how many people would have under similar circumstances. That was one big thing that TV and the press had going for them— people who otherwise wouldn't utter a word felt it was their responsibility to others to help the spread of news.

He shrugged. "Well, it's too late to do anything about it now."

Let's hope I didn't wreck our cause too badly. Now, what did you want to talk about?"

"I got a call a few minutes ago from Wesley Stone-ham." The way he said those words, it sounded to Maschen as though the call had come via a burning bush. The district attorney was a man who knew his limitations in life and realized that, without this public job, he was a failure. Consequently, retaining his job was of uppermost consideration in his mind at all times—especially when he received calls from a man whose power in the county was rising so rapidly.

"What did he have to say for himself?" Maschen asked.

"He wanted to know if any arrests had been made in his wife's murder yet."

"Good God. I just found out about it myself a couple of hours ago, and nobody has been considerate enough to walk in here and confess to it. What does he expect of us, anyhow?"

"Take it easy, John. We're all under a lot of stress. Imagine how he feels—he arrives at the cabin late at night and finds... well, literally, a bloody mess. His wife hacked to pieces. Naturally, he's going to be a little distraught and unreasonable."

"Did he have any suggestions as to who he thought did it?" Maschen realized that that was the type of question he should more properly be asking Stoneham, but the DA seemed to be acting as a Stoneham-surrogate anyway.

"Yes, as a matter of fact he did. He mentioned those hippies who have been living out in Totido Canyon. You know, that commune group."

Maschen did indeed know about "that commune group". His office received an average of a dozen calls a week about them, and had ever since they moved into an otherwise deserted area three months ago. San Marcos was a very conservative community, consisting of a lot of older, retired couples who had little or no tolerance for the markedly different life style affected by the young members of the Totido commune. Whenever

anything turned up missing, suspicion was always laid first on the commune members.

A man named Carl Polaski was in charge of the group. Maschen knew him only vaguely, but he seemed to be an intelligent and reasonable man. A bit old to be carrying on in this manner, in the sheriff's opinion, but on the other hand he lent maturity to the youths of the commune. He kept them in line. To date, none of the charges brought against any of the hippy members had ever been substantiated. Maschen had developed a grudging respect for Polaski. even if the man's chosen life style was counter to the sheriff's own.

"What makes him think they had anything to do with it?"

"Do you think normal people would have chopped up the body that way? These hippies live only a mile away from the Stoneham cabin. One or a group of them could have gotten together and gone over there..."

"Is this your theory, or Stoneham's?"

"What does it matter?" Willsey asked, his tone becoming very defensive. "The point is, these people are weird. They think the standards of the normal world don't apply to them. Who knows what they're capable of? We've been trying to get rid of them ever since they moved in; nothing but troublemakers, that crowd."

"Howard, you know as well as I do that nothing's ever been proved against them..."

"That doesn't make them innocent, does it? Where there's smoke, I smell arson."

Maschen cocked his head sideways and narrowed his eyes as he looked the DA over. "Stoneham really stepped on you, didn't he?"

Willsey bristled. "What if he did? You may forget it sometimes, John, but we're little fishes in this pool. Stoneham is a big fish. You and I both have to run for our offices again next

year, remember? And Stoneham's help will be more than welcome in my campaign, I assure you."

The sheriff sighed. "All right, for your sake I'll go and have a talk with Polaski..."

"Not just a talk." Willsey pulled some papers out of his coat pocket. "I've taken the trouble to get a warrant sworn out for his arrest." He flung the papers on the desk.

The sheriff just looked at them, stunned. "Did you ever stop to consider the possibility that you might be wrong?"

Willsey shrugged. "In that case, we let him go and apologize. But if we're going to maintain the public's trust, we *have* to act fast on something this big."

"Howard, I know it might sound selfish, but I could be sued for false arrest."

"Believe me, it's not going to come to that. Besides, I'm the one directing you to make the arrest, and I think there's sufficient evidence."

"What evidence?"

"That writing on the wall—'Death to Pigs'. That's a hippy slogan, isn't it?"

"I suppose so."

Willsey stood up to leave. "Now trust me, John. You just go out there and arrest that Polaski, and I promise you that everything will work out fine."

For nearly five minutes after Willsey left, Maschen remained seated, wondering how much worse the day was going to get before it ended. He stared for a long time at the arrest warrant before he finally arose and picked it up off the desk.

CHAPTER III

Back through empty space his mind raced toward a rendezvous with his body. The speed of light was a laughable limitation, easily surpassed and outdistanced. The fabric of space warped and twisted around him, trying hard to conserve its own rules while he heedlessly broke every one. He traveled at the speed of thought, if indeed any speed could be assigned to it. Pinpoints of stars blurred into streaks and smudges against a gray background. Back, back to Zarti. Yellow star, fourth planet, second continent, Thirteenth City, three-story building at the southeast edge, second floor, western corridor, third room.

UNION.

The return of physical sensation was slow, as it always was. First the extremities, a tingling in hooves and hands. Then the feeling crept inward along the arteries and nerves towards the body and upward through the long neck to the head. At first a warmth spread through his being at the reunion, but then he felt a sharp pain as the machine that had been artificially maintaining his bodily functions shut itself off. It was the birth trauma all over again, greatly magnified by the size and complexity of his adult body. He gasped and shuddered, and those two involuntary actions were sufficient to start his auto-nomic nervous system working for itself once more. The weight of his body returned to him, along with the rest of the physical reality of his surroundings.

Garnna slowly raised a hand and pushed up the lid to the coffin-like Exploration box in which his body reposed. Light streamed in on him, and he had to shut his eyes tightly for a moment to keep out the glare. Then he opened them a crack to let his pupils adjust to the brilliance. He pushed the lid all the way up and tried to move the rest of his body.

It was not easy. The box had been designed to keep him alive while his mind was Exploring, and the dictates of efficiency precluded most attempts at providing some comfort for the inhabitant as well. The walls pressed tightly against him and the wires that were attached to different portions of his body kept getting in the way.

A head peeked over the side of the machine, outlined in black

against the light background and making it impossible to discern the facial features. A hand reached over and gripped his, providing a strong and helpful leverage point from which to elevate himself.

Garnna rose uncertainly and lifted himself out of the Exploration box. Around him were nine other Zarticku, all watching him anxiously. His eyes had still not completely adjusted to the light, but he did not need his sight to know who these others were. Standard procedure for waking an Explorer upon his return called for all the other members of his iff-group to be present. They helped provide stability during the first confusing moments of reunion with the body. Psychological tests had shown that it was much more beneficial to be surrounded by one's iff-group at such a critical moment than by strangers.

One of the figures moved forward towards him. His sight was just getting back to normal, and he recognized this person as his mate, Aliyenna. Garnna let his eyes wander over the red-brown armor plating on her back, her delicate legs and her long supple neck. It was quite pleasant to have someone like this to come back to. She was one of the most agreeable mates he'd ever had, and he hoped that they would be together for a long time.

"Welcome home," Aliyenna said softly. Her hands caressed the fur along the back ridge of his neck. "I get so worried every time you go on one of these Explorations, and I'm so happy every time you return safely."

With arms that were stiff from having been cramped in the Exploration box for so many hours, Garnna reached out to return his mate's caress. Then he stopped. A mental image flashed through his brain, a remembrance of the feeling of rage that had possessed the alien killer on the planet he had just visited. He imagined himself performing such an act, or reaching out and grabbing Aliyenna's neck and choking the life out of her until she slumped to the ground. Then he saw himself taking a knife and hacking away at her body...

"What's the matter?" Aliyenna cried. Other members of the iff-group were moving toward him to give him support. "Are you hurt?"

Garnna realized that his body had been swaying dizzily. He made a conscious effort to steady his feet. "It's nothing," he said, shaking his head. "I'll be all right. It's just an after-effect of something I saw on my Exploration."

"How horrible," said Malbuk, one of his iff-sisters, "to have to spy on weird creatures and watch them do disgusting things."

"Is it something you'd like to talk about?" asked Yari, the senior ifi-brother.

"Later. I have to make a preliminary report, first." He looked around and saw the worried concern that was stiK on the faces of his iff-group. "I'll be all right," he reiterated. And to himself he thought, *How wonderful to have so many others to care for me, just as I care for them. No wonder that omnivorous race can act so depraved... they don't have the emotional security that the iff-group offers.*

He chided himself once again for letting personal prejudices rise to the surface of his thoughts. He was supposed to view alien races objectively, without imposing his own values on the observations. He was only glad the Coordinators on the Project could not read his mind at such times, or they might consider him less than ideal for the job. Garnna enjoyed Exploring very much, and he would not care to be retrained.

As though the thought had produced reality, his Coordinator appeared at that very moment. Rettin iff-Laziel was quite short for a Zartic, standing but six feet high at the shoulders with a neck barely four feet long. His large black eyes had a steely glint in them, indicating a practical, no-nonsense soul within. It was this pragmatic quality that made him an ideal Coordinator.

"Welcome back, Garnna iff-Almanic," he said perfunctorily. "I trust you had a pleasant and profitable Exploration."

"I'll leave it up to you as to whether it was profitable," Garnna replied. "But as for me, it was far from pleasant."

Rettin frowned at this indication of an irregularity in the mission. "Come to my office," he said brusquely. "You can make

a preliminary report there. The rest of your iff-group is no longer needed. They may return home."

Garnna said good-bye to his iff-group and told them he would be home shortly. Then he turned and followed the Coordinator down the hall to the latter's office. Rettin walked at a crisp pace and Garnna, only recently emerged from the Exploration box, was hard put to keep up with him.

The Coordinator's office was no bigger than average— rank did not have its privileges on Zarti. It consisted entirely of four walls and a desk. One of the walls held a chalkboard, but the rest were bare—the Coordinator did not require art or beauty to help him work efficiently. There were no chairs in the office for the simple reason that Zarticku never sat. They weren't built for it.

Rettin took a pad of paper from his desk and held a pen over it in readiness. "You mentioned unpleasantness," he said. "Does that mean that you found some trace of the Offasü?"

"No, I did not."

The Coordinator's grip on the pen eased slightly, but that was the only visible indication of his relief. Coming from him, even that was an enormous sign, for Coordinators were supposed to be unemotional in the extreme. It only showed what the mere concept of the Offasü could do to even the most controlled of Zarticku.

Rwtin dutifully recorded Garnna's answer, then looked up at the Explorer again. "I take it, though, that you did find an inhabited planet, judging from the fact that your Exploration lasted to the maximum allowed time limit."

"I did indeed," Garnna replied, and proceeded to give a short physical description of the solar system he had encountered. Then he described the bipedal omnivores that had inhabited the third planet and the level their culture had attained.

"So far," Rettin said, "this is all standard. I would have expected a seasoned Explorer like you to have become used to these things and not find them particularly unpleasant."

Garnna took a deep breath and tried to settle his jittery stomachs. "These things I've told you so far are only preludes to the big one. I had concluded the bulk of my investigations and had some time to spare, so I was cruising along the seashore of one continent. In doing so, I happened to witness a horrifying event. I saw..." He had to gulp before he could continue. "I saw one of these creatures killing its mate."

Rettin stared at him silently for a moment, then said, "Explorers are not encouraged to investigate the phenomena of individuals."

"I know that. As I said, I happened upon this quite by chance."

"Describe the incident," Rettin said tersely.

With a great deal of hesitation and uncertainty, Garnna told the Coordinator about the strangulation, about the dismemberment of the body and the burying of clothes in the woods. He explained the anger that had radiated from the killer's mind, fear of punishment and the evolution of some plan not only to evade that punishment but to shift it over to some innocent member of the Herd. He described the unmistakable feeling of triumph the creature had broadcast at the thought of actually being able to outwit its Herd. By the time he finished, his mouth was so dry that the lips were sticking together.

A silence fell over the room as the Coordinator pondered Garnna's story for awhile. Finally he said, "You're right. That was a very distressing situation for you to walk into, as it were. I think you should make a report on the incident and distribute it to all the other Explorers. It will serve as a good object lesson to keep people from violating that 'no individual' rule in the future. Was there anything else you wished to discuss?"

"I'd like to know what we're going to do about the incident."

"As I just said, you will write a report..."

"I don't mean here. I mean back on that planet." Rettin squinted to indicate puzzlement. "I don't understand

you. Why should you want to do anything back on that planet?"

Garnna had thought that his motives would be self-evident, but perhaps he hadn't described his feelings well enough. He sputtered profusely as he tried to explain to the Coordinator what he thought was obvious. "Well, that killer must be a pervert of some kind. No society could survive if it allowed individuals to flaunt the good of the Herd that way. The killer should be caught and punished for its actions."

"Granted. But what business is that of ours?"

"Why... why I saw everything that happened. This creature is trying to fool its fellows. Maybe it'll succeed. I should try to communicate with someone on that planet, to make sure that its scheme doesn't work and that the killer is punished..."

Rettin gave a loud snort that cut off the Explorer in mid-thought. "You're talking nonsense," he proclaimed flatly. "You've been on eleven full Explorations, as well as having undergone extensive training in the theory of mind projection. You know it's impossible to communicate with the beings on this other world."

"But that's only theory. No one's ever *tried* to..."

"No, of course they haven't. Nor should they. What happens to aliens is none of our affair."

"But we must have some responsibility to see that justice is done."

"Don't ever forget, our primary responsibility is to the Herd. All else is secondary. And in this case, the Project Council decided from the very beginning that keeping ourselves secret from the races we are observing is in the best interest of the Herd. If they don't know we exist, they can't become jealous of our abilities or greedy for our world and possessions. That was one of the reasons why mind projection was selected over other means of Exploration. You yourself have agreed to the principle of secrecy on numerous occasions."

"Yes, but every general rule must have exceptions."

"That's possibly true," Rettin nodded. "But I can't bring myself to believe that this is one of them. Even this argument is futile, since we couldn't communicate with these beings even if we wanted to."

"But..." Garnna started to protest. The Coordinator walked over to him and put a hand on his back, gently escorting him to the door.

"Don't concern yourself too much with the affairs of these aliens," he said. "You said yourself that their civilization had advanced to a highly technical level. If they can attain that, then they must have some system for detecting and punishing wrongdoers. They couldn't have lasted this long if they hadn't. Why not trust them to rule their own affairs? Surely their entire civilization will not fall because of this one act, however tragic it may be.

"Now you have experienced a very horrifying situation. You are no doubt in a state of shock. Go home and relax in the security of your ifl-group. Let them ease the anguish you feel in your mind. Eat, drink, copulate. I'm sure that by tomorrow morning you'll see things in the proper perspective again." He gave the Explorer a gentle shove out into the corridor and returned to the business on his desk.

Garnna stood alone in the hallway for several minutes, biting his lip. Then finally he turned and went out the door to go home.

CHAPTER IV

He was awakened by the sound of heavy panting alongside his ear. He knew who was making the sound even without opening his eyes. It was the old Irish setter that belonged to Phil Lizzuco, one of **the** boys at the commune. Before coming to the commune, Phi! had called the dog Big Red, but that **name** had seemed terribly middle-class to the other residents and so, over Phil's strained objections, they had had a rechristening party and given the dog an equivalent name that was more in keeping

with the commune's spirit—Chairman Mao. The dog didn't mind; he'd answer to anything, as long as there was food to be called to.

Force of habit made Carl Polaski look at his left wrist. Then he gave himself a mental kick. Even after three months at the commune, he still could not get used to the fact that timepieces were not used here. He missed his watch very much. *All part of the grand sacrifices in getting back to Nature*, he thought sarcastically. He tried to roll over on the cot and ignore the dog's breathing, but it was no use. He was one of those people who, when they are awake, are awake completely, with no possibility of falling back to sleep. He stretched with his bare feet dangling over the edge of the short cot, then rolled out of bed and stood up to get dressed.

As he changed into a fresh pair of undershorts, he sneaked a peek out the window of his cabin. The sun was well up above the horizon, nearly to the top of the big cypress tree. That meant it was probably between eight and nine o'clock. Everyone else in the camp would be up and busy by this time but, by virtue of being the commune's senior citizen—and also, in the words of one member, a cool head—he was allowed to sleep later than the rest. It was a privilege he felt slightly guilty about, but only slightly. He'd woken up several times with the rest of the camp at sun-up, and as far as he was concerned there was no conflict between living a natural life and sleeping until a decent hour of the morning.

He slipped some dirty dungarees over his shorts and stuck his feet into a battered pair of sandals. He ran a comb quickly through his hair and admired his beard in the cracked mirror on the wall. His cabin—the administration building when the commune had been a camp— was the only one with a private bathroom, and after he'd used it he felt ready to face the world once more. He opened the cabin door, walked down the two steps to the ground and moved towards the cabin that served as the communal kitchen and dining room.

He thought at first that he had the place all to himself, but then he heard the sound of running water and the tinkle of

dishes. Moving towards the back of the room, he saw Deborah Bauer washing the breakfast plates. Polaski scowled. He wondered whether she had purposely volunteered for the wash-up duty so that she could be alone with him when he came in. That would be just like her.

"Good morning, Carl," she said cheerfully when she saw him. "We'd almost given up on you for breakfast this morning."

" 'Morning, Debby," he acknowledged, returning her smile. "I hope I'm still entitled to eat. I know it's a crime to sleep late around here."

"Almost as bad as sleeping alone," the girl sighed.

"It's by your own choice," Polaski pointed out. "You could have almost any man in the camp."

That was no exaggeration, even though Debby was far from what the normal person would call attractive. She tended to the plumpish side, fifteen pounds overweight, and it showed badly on her short body. Her face was rounded, with black, stringy hair that came down past her shoulders. Her face consisted of brown, bovine eyes, a glop of a nose in the center, and an overly-large mouth with too-full lips. But the members of the commune looked past the obvious. Debby was friendly, outgoing, easy to talk to. She was always eager to share whatever work had to be done, no matter how dirty, and she was the quickest person to laugh at a joke, even if she'd heard it before. She was universally admired and was the best friend of nearly everyone at the commune.

"True," she said, acknowledging Polaski's implied compliment matter-of-factly. "But I don't want almost any man in the camp. I want you."

Polaski sighed. That was the trouble. Debby had developed a father-fixation on him. She was still emotionally immature, and followed him around like a puppy. Being nearly twice her age, Polaski felt that any relationship the two of them might have would be sloppy and emotionally damaging to her.

"You're a nice girl, Debby," he said slowly. "And I like you too much to do that sort of thing to you."

"That sounds Victorian!" she exclaimed, misunderstanding him. "I'm hardly a virgin, you know. 'That sort of thing' has been done to me lots of times."

Polaski picked up a just-washed plate and turned to the food table. "That's not what I meant at all, and you know it. I happen to be a married man..."

"Separated," Debby corrected him.

"... and a good deal older than you are. Professionally speaking, I think our having an affair would be emotionally damaging for you."

"Sure, pull rank on me. That'll teach me to argue with a psychologist." There was no bitterness in Debby's voice. They had been over the same ground before, with the same results. She pouted slightly to show her disappointment, but otherwise took his decision with good spirits. She would accept the stalemate for now, and try to improve her lot at some later time.

Polaski looked over the food selection and grimaced. The "natural life" that the communities lived included a very basic diet—fruits, vegetables, nuts, berries, grains, eggs, cheeses and the ever-present goat's milk. The psychologist had had frequent delicious daydreams about strangling one of the commune's chickens to get some solid protein; but, having agreed to live as an ordinary member of the group, he had quashed them. Now, with a faint sigh, he scraped the bottom of the oatmeal pot and ladled the half-cold cereal onto his plate.

Debby watched his discomfort with mild amusement. "I woke up with a nightmare last night," she said conversationally.

"Oh?" Polaski paused for a minute in his eating. "What was it about?"

"I'm not sure. It didn't seem to be anything specific. Fear, anger, a choking sensation. I was screaming when I woke up;

Rachel had to calm me down."

"Probably something you ate," Polaski said, and went back to his own food.

"I don't know, it didn't feel like it. And then I woke up this morning with one of my Feelings."

"Good or bad?"

"Bad, definitely bad. The vibrations are all out of synch. Something rotten is going to happen today, I know it."

The psychologist paused again. That Debby had some sort of psychic powers he didn't doubt. It was her ability to find missing articles and "feel" events before they happened that had led the other members of the commune to nickname her "The Little Witch". Perhaps this was a partial explanation of how she could be so totally simpatico with her friends. Polaski had seen her use her talents too often over the past three months not to believe that they existed.

Parapsychology was not his speciality. He preferred working in the area of social psychology, the individual's reactions to the social milieu. But he had read some papers on the subject, and some of his colleagues had been studying Extra Sensory Perception and bouncing their theories off him, so that he had more than a casual grounding in the field. He even had a deck of Rhine cards tucked away somewhere in his luggage. He kept making mental notes to dig them out one day and try to test Debby's powers under scientific conditions, but there never seemed to be enough time to get everything done, and testing Debby's psychic powers always seemed to get shoved into the corner of meant-to-do items.

"Any details to this feeling?" Polaski asked.

Debby shook her head. "Just barely. It seems to spread over the whole commune, but somehow it centers on you. You are right in the middle of what's going to happen."

Polaski raised an eyebrow. "Interesting. Too bad we don't

know more about it."

"I could find out," Debby volunteered.

"How?"

"All I'd need is a little pot. It heightens my perception..."

Polaski shook his head. He was in an unusual position. As an observer of the activities at the commune, scientific procedure demanded that he play as small a role in those activities as possible, so that the Heisen-berg uncertainty factor would be kept to a minimum. On the other hand, being the most educated—and by far the most mature—person at the camp, the responsibilities of leadership had naturally gravitated to him. He disdained the outward forms of ruling, and tried to shun interpersonal politics of all sorts. Theoretically, all decisions involving the commune were made by the group as a whole. But on a practical level, the other members always looked to him for advice and, reluctantly, he gave it. His suggestions ended up as policy and his statements became law. It made him wince sometimes—he was supposed to be gathering data, not creating it.

One of the earliest problems to arise at the commune was the question of drugs. Polaski had advised strongly against the use of any illegal substances at the commune. The ban was not because of prudishness or personal prejudice on his part; he felt that all the evidence on marijuana, for example, was not yet in, and he refused to either condemn or praise something on insufficient data. His reason for suggesting the ban was eminently practical. San Marcos County was small, consisting largely of small land owners and elderly retired people, all with a conservative outlook. They were already very unhappy about having this radical-looking group of young people move in and set up an exercise in what to them was sinful free love (and what the communities regarded as primal existence). One whiff of burning grass, and the entire commune would be busted for good. It was self-preservation—and a desire not to become known as another Timothy Leary—that made Polaski keep the commune rigidly on the right side of the law.

"But it would be for the good of the commune," Debby protested his denial. "I'd be able to find out more about what this bad thing is and we might be able to prevent it. I'd only need one joint..."

Polaski continued to shake his head. Debby was weak-willed, and frequently used grass to escape her emotional problems. Polaski wanted to keep her as far away from her crutch as possible, in the hopes that she would outgrow it. "If you have the right to do something," he said, "then everyone else has that right, too. You know the rule: no special privileges. Even if it is for the benefit of the group as a whole, what's to stop someone tomorrow from saying that they have 'feelings' and need some pot to sort them out correctly? I think we'll all be better off if you keep off the grass. Let's try fighting kismet blind, like everyone else does." He finished what was left on his plate and placed the dish neatly atop the stack that had yet to be washed. "Right now, I have work to do... and I suspect that you do, too. I'll see you a little later, if catastrophe doesn't take me first."

"Okay," Debby said ruefully. "But take extra care of yourself."

Today, like every third day, was Notebook Day. Polaski would spend most of his time back in his cabin making longhand records in his notebook of the events of the past three days as well as the emotional reactions of the commune members to those events and their interreactions among themselves. After three months, Polaski could make out unmistakable lines of division throughout the colony. Loosely speaking, the membership had divided itself into two camps, which he privately termed the active and the passive, those who wanted to make bold new social experiments and those who just wanted to live as quietly and effortlessly as possible. Not only was Polaski engrossed in observing the goings on, but he also tried to predict who would join which camp and how each would react to a given issue. There was no vehemence yet between the two groups, but Polaski suspected that it would build and that eventually—sometime in the next several months—the commune would fall apart under dissension and mutual animosity. But from that break-up, if it did occur, he hoped to glean some small kernel of knowledge that might help mankind at some future

date.

He grabbed a hunk of cheese and a handful of nuts from the bowl on his way out of the dining room, then returned to his own cabin. The interior of his quarters was simple—one large room for working and a smaller one for sleeping, plus a private bathroom. His bedroom had a cot, a bureau and a closet, while the furniture in the outer room consisted of a long wooden worktable and several chairs. The walls were adorned with artful posters and a Playboy calendar.

Taking his notebook down from the high shelf on which he kept it, he set doggedly to work. He wrote a short burst, then took time to consolidate his thoughts before writing again. It was difficult to remember the details of three days of activity, but the only alternative would be to carry the notebook around with him all the time, which would probably have tended to make the other commune members even more self-conscious. They already knew he was here to study their behavior; it would be impolitic—not to mention bad procedure—to remind them of the fact.

Several hours went gliding silently by as he wrote. The next thing he knew of the outer world was when Joanne Kefauver came running up and banging at his cabin door. "Carl, you'd better come out here, quick. There's a sheriff's car pulling up the road."

He looked up, startled. His mind took a moment before it could recover from its broken train of thought. "Huh? Oh. I wonder who's missing some socks this time." He was referring to an incident that had happened three weeks back, when one county resident had complained to the police that a pair of socks had been stolen from her wash, and she was sure that one of the hippies had done it. A brief investigation had shown that her cat had dragged the socks down from the clothesline and behind the house, then abandoned them in the grass. The socks were an in-joke at the commune now. But Joanne didn't smile as Polaski got up from his writing, stretched and walked casually past her and out the door.

He arrived at the center of the camp at almost the same

instant that the car came to a halt in the dirt. Polaski was surprised to see Sheriff Maschen himself get out of the car. *Something big must be happening, he thought, If the sheriff himself is coming all the way out here to see us. I wonder what he thinks we've done now.*

"Good morning, sheriff," he greeted Maschen. "It's a pleasant surprise seeing you around here."

Maschen grumbled something. On closer inspection, Polaski noticed that the sheriff was looking a shade unkempt. He hadn't shaved that morning, and his uniform was grubby. Polaski was even more puzzled.

"This is the first time you've ever been up here, isn't it?" he asked politely. "Would you like me to show you the sights?"

Maschen looked around. His appearance had elicited two types of response from the younger people. Some of them had pretended not to notice his presence at all, continuing on with their chores as though nothing whatsoever were taking place. The rest of the community had stopped what they were doing and were staring at the sheriff with unabashed curiosity. "Uh, no, not right now, thank you," he answered. Then, lowering his voice, he continued, "Is there any place we can talk in private?"

"Theoretically, there is no privacy in this place," Polaski said, being careful to maintain his smile. "We have no secrets from one another. However, the chances of our conversation being overheard would be considerably diminished in my cabin."

"Then let's go there," the sheriff said.

They walked to the cabin in silence, with more than a dozen pairs of eyes following them every step of the way. Inside, Polaski closed the door and motioned for the sheriff to sit in one of the chairs beside the table. Maschen settled his squat frame into it as Polaski sat down opposite him.

"Interesting place you've got here," Maschen said after a moment.

"You're a man who considers his adjectives carefully," Polaski replied.

Maschen leaned forward and looked the psychologist straight in the eye. "I'll make a deal with you. I'll stop playing the hard-boiled cop if you'll stop playing the smart-ass intellectual."

Polaski's smile was genuine this time. "*Touche*, sheriff. What can I do for you?"

Maschen relaxed and settled back into the chair. "Well, for one thing, you can tell me what went on here last night."

"You mean aside from the orgies?" The sheriff shot him a reproving glance. "Sorry," Polaski went on. "Intellectual snottiness is an easy facade to fall behind, and a difficult one to abandon. Nothing much out of the ordinary happened. Why, did someone complain that we were too noisy?"

"What exactly do you mean by ordinary?" Maschen asked, avoiding the question.

The psychologist spread his arms apart. "Oh, nothing exciting. Mostly a couple of groups got together and talked. We had a small campfire. One fellow had a guitar and some people were singing folk songs. Then we all went to bed."

"About what time was that?"

"Oh, between nine and ten, I'd imagine. We don't have any clocks here, which makes it a little difficult to be precise."

"So you'd say that, from midnight on until this morning, everybody was asleep, including you?"

Polaski's eyes narrowed. The sheriff was uneasy about something, and he was leading up to it in a roundabout fashion. "Yes, I think that's an accurate statement."

"You wouldn't, uh, have anyone who could vouch for your whereabouts, would you?"

Polaski bristled. He did not like the sneaky half-innuendo buried within the sheriff's comment. "No, I sleep alone. And because everyone else was asleep, they can't swear that I was. Just as I can't swear that they were, because *I* was asleep. What's all this leading to?"

Maschen exhaled loudly and shifted his weight around in the chair. "Do you know Stella Stoneham?"

"Yes, she lets me use her cabin for typing up my reports. In return, I clean it up and do odd jobs there.

Why? Is there something wrong with that?"

"Stella Stoneham died last night." Polaski was shocked into silence. He opened his mouth twice to speak, but only stuttering syllables came out. Finally he shook his head and looked down at the ground. "I'm sorry to hear that. She was a very nice person. How did it happen?"

"She was murdered."

Polaski's head jerked upward sharply and he looked the sheriff straight in the eyes. "And that's why you're here? Because you think I did it?"

"Take it easy," Maschen said. "Nobody's accusing you of anything yet. I have to check out all aspects of the case, and you're one of them. You've been seen up around the cabin a number of times, and this camp is only about a mile away. I have to investigate the connection. You understand, don't you?"

Oh sure, Polaski thought. The little minds around this neighborhood think they can leap front A to Z without bothering with the letters in between. If I was up at her cabin a lot, it must mean that I was having an affair with her, which then makes me the most likely suspect in her murder. It's only logical. But he kept those thoughts to himself, and framed a reply that was more diplomatic. "I suppose I do. You're just trying to do your job efficiently."

Maschen relaxed visibly. "I'm glad you see it that way. It'll

make it easier for both of us."

"Tell me, how... how was it done?"

"She was strangled," the sheriff said simply. Polaski grimaced. "Not a very pleasant way to go, is it?"

"No. But then, so few of them are. I was wondering whether you might be able to come into town with me for awhile."

"What for?"

"I'd like to ask you a few questions..."

"Can't you ask them here just as easily?"

Maschen fidgeted again. It appeared to Polaski as though the sheriff were wrestling with some problem and trying to keep from surrendering to it. "We, ah, need an official statement, a disposition. It has to be properly witnessed. Also, we'd like to get a set of your fingerprints, just for the record."

Polaski hesitated for a moment, then decided there was no point to being stubborn. "All right. Would you mind if I bring my notebook along? I was right in the middle of jotting down some notes for my project when you interrupted me."

"Not at all," the sheriff said.

The psychologist stood up. "I suppose I should put a shirt on, too, if I'm going into town. Wouldn't want the folks around here to think I'm a degenerate." He went into the bedroom and grabbed a clean but wrinkled shirt from a pile of clothing in one corner. After putting it on, he slipped his notebook and pen into the breast pocket. "Let's go," he said.

As the two men left the cabin, they confronted the membership of the commune. The young people had gathered silently in a semicircle facing the cabin and were now staring with mixed expressions at the sheriff and the psychologist. In particular, Polaski sought Debby's face. It held a look of very fearful concern.

He stepped down to the ground with the sheriff behind him and walked through the crowd. "It's all right," he said cheerfully. "I just have to go into town for awhile to straighten up a few matters. I should be back in a couple of hours."

"I think this is the thing I mentioned to you," Debby said quietly.

Polaski forced a smile. "Well, if it is then you were worried about nothing. I'll be back in a little while." He got into the passenger side of the sheriff's car as Maschen got in to drive.

Polaski waved to his friends as the sheriff started the engine. The crowd parted to let the car go through. As it drove off down the dirt road, Polaski turned around and caught sight of Debby, a look of forlorn helplessness still evident on her face.

CHAPTER V

Garnna walked home from the Project headquarters rather than taking the public trams. Hooves were the only private mode of transportation on Zarti, and Garnna wanted to be alone with his thoughts. His mind was very confused. If it had been one Zartic killing another that he had seen, there would be no moral question; his responsibility for the welfare of the Herd would demand that he testify against the killer. But it was the fact that the event had taken place on another planet, between creatures of another race, that was confusing him. Zartic morality had always been simple before—the welfare of the Herd was always the first consideration, and policy guidelines were set by those most qualified to judge what was best in that particular area. But now that space exploration was possible, there were other races, other Herds, to consider. Did he have a responsibility to those Herds as well?

It was dark by the time he finally reached his iff-home, and he still had not arrived at any answers for his problem. He walked in the doorway and was immediately greeted by Nolisk, the youngest of his iff-sisters. "It's about time you got back," she said, relief evident on her face. "We were worried that you might have had an accident. We even called the Project, but they said

that you had left hours ago."

"I decided to walk home. I wanted to think."

"Sure. And while you're thinking, we're starving," Fare, Nolisk's mate, complained. "This is becoming an annoying habit with you."

Meals were the big events in the daily lives of the Zar-ticku. It was at these two occasions—breakfast and dinner—that the entire iff-group was assembled together for common purpose. After dinner they relaxed individually, then went into their own little cubicles to copulate or sleep; while during the day they worked at diverse jobs according to their aptitudes. The meals were crucial, the meals bound them together and made them, a solid social unit. No one could be excluded from a meal and no one could eat until all were present. Garnna's entire iff-group had had to wait until either he returned safely or they were informed that he was dead or injured—and if the latter, they would go to the hospital to have their meal with him there.

"I'm sorry I've held up our dinner again," Garnna apologized to the entire group. "I had more of an appetite for thought than for food, and I selfishly indulged it to the detriment of the group. I didn't realize I would be so late."

Yari, the senior iff-brother, waved off Garnna's apology. "You aren't that late. Fare was exaggerating, as usual, letting his belly take precedence over his brains. While he was right that you've been tardy lately because of your pensive nature, there was no harm done this time. Your apology is noted and accepted. Now let's eat."

Garnna walked quickly over to his position beside the trough, unwilling to cause any more of a delay than he already had. All the males took positions on one side of the trough, all the females on the other. Yari, the senior iff-brother, stood at the end nearest the wall, across from Dondors, his mate. At the other end of the trough were Fare and Nolisk as the two youngest in the group. In between were the other three couples, ranged according to age. Garnna was precisely in the middle, opposite Aliyenna, his own mate.

When they were all in position, Yari pushed a button and a small metal door at the kitchen end of the trough swung open. The food machine sent a stream of hot greenish liquid down the trough. In the soupy solution were floating large, succulent hunks of greenery. The smell that arose reminded Garnna that he did have an appetite for food, after all.

"I hope you all like this," said Yari. "It's my latest recipe." Yari was one of the prime chefs at the Food Institute, responsible for developing better and more nutritious meals for the Herd. He was a creative genius when it came to food, and his recipes were popular as well as nutritious. Most iff-groups in Thirteenth City had at least one of his recipes programmed into their home food machines.

Garnna unhooked his ladle from the side of the trough and dipped it into the liquid, managing to snare some of the floating vegetation as well. The broth had a grass base, but was delicately seasoned to hide the normally spicy taste one usually associated with common grass. The solids turned out to be pressed *baloh* leaves mixed with flour to form little dumplings. The combination was exquisite.

All up and down the trough came sounds of enthusiasm and praise for this delicious new dish. Yari beamed with modest pride. "It's great," Blouril called out between swallows.

"It wasn't easy making that grass broth and keeping the twigs and seeds out at the same time," Yari admitted.

"Magnificent," Racgotz said, echoing the general sentiment.

Now that the compliments had been bestowed on the chef, the general interest turned to Garnna. Always before, on returning from one of his Explorations, he had fascinated the iff-group with the descriptions of the strange and wonderful things he had seen while his mind was so many parsecs away. Usually he was effervescent and eager to talk about his adventures, but tonight he was subdued and quiet.

"Did you have a good Exploration this time out?" asked Nolisk when it finally seemed as though Garnna were not going to

volunteer anything at all.

"No," Garnna answered, munching introspectively on a dumpling. "No, I don't think so."

This unexpected, unhappy reply from their iff-brother prompted the rest of the group to instantly adopt a concerned attitude toward him, as their responsibility. "We'll understand if you don't want to talk about it," said Dondors, the senior iff-sister, kindly.

Garnna looked up and around at the faces that were watching him so intently. "No, no I believe I should. This is a pain that should be shared, and a problem whose solution can best be found among the iff-group." Slowly, Garnna began to describe his Exploration to his assembled peers. He had to hesitate often and pick his words carefully as he went, for the other members of the iff-group had not undergone the training that he had. They were still laden with instinctual prejudices and fears. Concepts that he could view dispassionately might disturb them deeply, so ideas that disturbed him might wreak untold havoc in their psyches.

He was particularly delicate when describing the killing. He talked around it, built up to it gradually, then described it in the gentlest possible terms. There was shock on their faces as he told of the killing itself. When he described the dismemberment, several of his iff-sibs dropped their ladles into the trough with revulsion. He concluded by mentioning the creature's scheme to avoid its punishment and was met by dead silence. After a long pause, the group's reaction was an explosion.

"How terrible!"

"Disgusting!"

"Dreadful!"

"Horrible!"

"Revolting!"

Malbuk put down her ladle. "With all due apologies to Yari, I'm afraid I can't eat any more of this delightful meal after hearing a story like that."

"No wonder you weren't feeling hungry tonight."

Toskit said to Garnna. "A sight like that could spoil anybody's appetite."

"I'm certainly glad *I* don't have to go Exploring," Nolisk stated. "I'd probably shrivel up and die if I met beasts who would do a thing like that."

"You can keep all these alien creatures of yours, Garnna," Toskit agreed. "Just let me live my life among safe, sane Zarticku and I'll be contented."

"What did your Coordinator say when you told him about all this?" Yari asked. Although Garnna's story had shocked him as much as any of the others, he was the oldest one present and had the greatest reserves of self-control.

"That's where my problem comes in. Rettin iff-Laziel told me that I should forget about the matter, not worry about it, try to pretend I'd never seen it."

"I'd say that was very wise advise," nodded Racgotz. "Yes, I know *I* shall work very hard at not thinking about it," added Malbuk.

"You mentioned that you had a problem," Aliyenna said softly, sensing some of her mate's anguish. "What is it?"

"It's... it's a question of responsibility. Here is a creature who is blatantly defying its entire Herd, putting its own welfare first. This is wrong."

"Very true," Dondors said, and everyone around the trough nodded agreement.

"And yet, the creature has worked out some plan whereby not only will it avoid punishment, but the blame will fall on some

other, totally innocent member of the Herd."

"What is your problem?" Aliyenna repeated. "I... I want to try to communicate with these beings and let them know their fellow has done, to ensure that its horrible plans are defeated."

There was a momentary stillness in the room. Then Malbuk said lightly, "Well, personally, I feel that whatever these hideous creatures do to one another is their own concern and none of mine."

"Exactly," Racgotz said. "What difference does it make to the Herd if one alien thing kills another alien thing? I can't see it as a matter of great importance."

"But that's the point," Garnna argued. "These aliens are not 'things', they are creatures who are probably every bit as intelligent as we are."

"Then why don't they act it?" Rocgotz challenged.

"Perhaps," interposed Blouril, trying to smooth matters over, "perhaps you are becoming alarmed over nothing. It may be that these creatures habitually behave this way, that this anti-Herd behavior that we consider so deviant is the norm in their world."

"Impossible," Garnna said, shaking his head. "These beings had built up a well-ordered culture. And no society can exist for long if every individual is attempting to flout the rules so flagrantly. The society would just fall apart."

"Have you considered the welfare of the Herd in this matter?" Yari asked quietly from the end of the trough.

"I've tried," Garnna admitted. "That's what I was thinking about all the way home as I walked. I couldn't come to any conclusions. My mind kept running in circles."

"Obviously. It is a question of ambivalence. Racgotz brought out a good point. It does not hurt the Herd if one of these aliens kills another. Putting aside the matter of their intelligence, they are so far away from us that their actions can have no possible

bearing on the Herd. Is that correct?"

When it was put so baldly, Garnna had no choice but to agree.

"Therefore," Yari continued, "the question of whether this errant individual is punished is likewise of no consequence to the Herd. Therefore, if these were the only considerations at stake, the matter would be wrapped in ambiguity. Since the punishment of this deviant can neither help nor hurt the Herd, your actions concerning it would be a matter of individual choice and not a question of responsibility at all. This ambiguity is no doubt why all your thoughts were going in circles.

"However, there are other factors to be considered. If you were to somehow communicate with these alien beings, they would learn of our existence. From the way you have described them, they seem very competitive. They might take a disliking to us. Or they might feel that we have something they want. We are all familiar with the behavior of carnivores and omnivores on Zarti—they take what they want by the power of their teeth and claws. I daresay, from this killer's behavior, that the omnivores on this other planet are exactly the same. If they learned of our existence, they might try to take our planet from us, even to the point of developing a physical interstellar drive to do it.

"Summing up my argument, then, it can do no harm to the Herd if we ignore the situation on this other world. On the other hand, there is the chance that it *could* harm the Herd if you were to interfere. From this, your course of action is obvious. Your responsibility for the welfare of the Herd absolutely forbids you from interfering in this alien situation." Yari finished his argument with a small flourish of one hand, as though he'd driven home some brilliant point. All the other iff-sibs at the table looked in awe of his ability to sort out the tangles of such an unprecedented situation and explain it so simply and lucidly.

Garnna, however, was more confused than he'd been before. It all sounded so dry, so clear, so logical when Yari explained it. But Yari had not been there on the planet. Yari had not witnessed the strangulation and dismemberment of that poor creature. Yari had not touched the mind of an alien killer and seen the rage and maliciousness that swelled within. If the senior

iff-brother had seen the cancer mind-to-mind, he might not be so glib with his therefores.

The Explorer tried to gather his mental resources to rebut his senior's arguments. But by the time he could even begin to frame a reply, Toskit had changed the subject by relating an incident that had happened to him that day at the machine shop. The dinner conversation shifted with obvious relief to more mundane matters. Yari's argument had settled Garnna's problem to the satisfaction of everyone but Garnna himself.

The small talk continued through the rest of the meal. Several times, Garnna tried to steer the subject back to the alien killing, but no one paid him any attention. It was as though the subject did not exist for them any more. He felt puzzled, confused, drawn apart from the rest. Alienated from his own iff-group. That thought was even more hideous than the killing. He could not allow himself to be cut away from these others, no matter what the cost.

But how could they be so blind? There was an important question at stake here. It was not some worm that had died, but an intelligent creature, as sentient as any Zartic. Why did they dismiss the affair so lightly and forget about it? It was almost as if they were afraid of something. And Rettin iff-Laziel had behaved the same way, flatly refusing to become involved in the tragedy. What were they all afraid of?

Dinner ended with the ritual pledging to the Herd and to the iff-group. The nearly empty trough was tipped upward so that the scanty remains of the meal were poured back into the food machine for recycling.

The hours after dinner were devoted to individual relaxation. Several of his iff-sibs chose to go to the small home gymnasium for physical exercise, but Garnna chose a more cerebral activity. He stood in the dining room for the three hours holding a recent text on planetary geology in front of his face, but he found it impossible to concentrate on the words. A tinkling bell announced the end of the relaxation period and the iff-group members moved to the sleeping area. This was a large circular room with five individual cubicles branching off around its

perimeter. Garnna's problem still burned unresolved in his mind.

As he entered the cubicle he shared with Aliyenna, he discovered that his mate had already arrived. "I'm in Cycle," Aliyenne stated. Garnna nodded absently, but made no other comment.

"You seem very troubled, Garnna," Aliyenna said as she began caressing the short, bristly hairs along the back of his neck. "It must have been terribly unsettling to have witnessed such a ghastly act."

Garnna realized that his jaw muscles had tightened, and he made an effort to relax them. Of all his iff-group, Aliyenna was the one who understood most what he was feeling. And that was as it should be. Not because she was his mate—there was little more than a physical relationship attached to that—but because she was the kind of person she was, with her individual aptitudes. The Tests had shown her to be kind, empathic, selfless and devoted... the perfect qualities for a Childraiser. And so Aliyenna worked all day in Thirteenth City's east-side Academy. All day she was one of the "mothers" for the more than three hundred young Zarticku who were raised in that Academy from birth to maturity. And the same qualities that made her ideal for tending children also made her empathic in her relationships with the adults around her.

"Everything is unsettling," Garnna answered bitterly. "Particularly the attitudes of the people around me. Can't they see that they're not discussing inanimate objects? They're talking about people like ourselves."

"They have worries of their own," Aliyenna soothed. "They don't have the training or the interest. Take Yari. His aptitudes make him a Chef, an excellent one. All day he struggles for perfection in his recipes, and if something isn't perfect he tosses it out and forgets about it. Should he be any different when he gets home? All the others, too, have more immediate problems that worry them every day. How can they bring themselves to worry about something that has happened to someone else so very far away? If it will not harm them, they would prefer not to bother with it. Only you can be concerned here, because only you

are trained to worry about other planets."

Is that the reason? Garnna wondered. Is that why I seem to be the only one disturbed by this event? Because only I have been trained to observe and take an interest in alien cultures? But even as he thought that, he knew it was wrong. Rettin, too, had had training that was bent towards understanding alien societies. Yet he had been as frightened of the concept of interference as Garnna's iff-group.

Aliyenna's hand had wandered down from his neck and was now caressing the plating along his back. This was not the time for thinking. Garnna tried to push the aimless thoughts out of his mind. He moved close beside his mate. His hands sought and found her short little fluff of a tail, fondled it momentarily. Aliyenna sighed, and a pleasant shudder ripped through her body. Instinctively, they ceased hand contact and moved back to back.

He imagined himself taking Aliyenna's neck between his hands and squeezing it until all the life went out of her. He could see her eyes bug out, her mouth open in surprise. Her face took on the same look as that dead alien. Her lifeless body slumped to the ground at his hooves, her beautiful, lithe neck purpled with the imprint of his fingers.

He himself would stand over the body coldly. Dispassionately, he would hack at it with a knife until Aliyenna was nearly unrecognizable. Then he would go outside the cubicle, dragging the bloody carcass with him unobserved, and place it in Toskit's quarters. "Tos-kit has killed Aliyenna!" he would shout. "He has killed his own ifl-sister. He must be ostracized at once!"

The image was too vivid, too nerve-shattering for him to stand. His outstretched forelegs no longer seemed capable of supporting him, and he fell forward to the ground. His digestive system was convulsing as both stomachs churned with their only partially digested dinner. Then they both gave up the effort and the double mess came hurtling quickly up his long throat and spurted out his mouth. The world spun silently around him as he lay on the floor, quietly vomiting.

After a while, his internal organs seemed to steady themselves again, and the vomiting stopped. The smell of the acrid stuff burned in his nostrils. He shivered as he lay there, too weak to rise. He became aware of Aliyenna bending her neck over him, a very worried look on her face.

"Are you ill, my mate?" she asked. Garnna groaned. Aliyenna bent closer to him and repeated her question.

"No," he answered finally around the sour taste on his tongue. "I... I think it's just due to everything that's happened to me today, all the horror, all the upsets. Even though you are in Cycle, I think you'd better leave me alone tonight. I apologize..."

Aliyenna cut him short. "I'll bring you a towel," she said, "to clean up this mess." And she raced out of the cubicle before he could say another word and was down the hall in a flash.

Left alone for a moment, Garnna had time to ponder. It was no good, his trying to go back to leading a normal Zartic life. His mind wouldn't let him. He had seen a horror on that far planet, and it had changed him. Whether the change would be permanent or not, he couldn't say, but the change was there now, and it was definite. It was a change not so much in theory as in application. He still agreed with the Herd philosophy— all his instincts as well as his training supported that. But. But, but, but. There was a difference in his mind that he couldn't pin down, and it was forcing him to view events from a new perspective. He was not at all sure he liked it. It had come between himself and his iff-group, normally the closest bond a Zartic could have. But, like it or not, the change was there and he would have to live with it.

Perhaps another Zartic, viewing the way his thoughts were going, would think him insane. Garnna couldn't be sure whether he was or not, and he dismissed the consideration from his mind.

Aliyenna came back with several towels, two for wiping up the mess her mate had made and another for wiping off the sweat that was covering his body. As she worked, she crooned to him in low, soothing tones. Garnna paid her no attention whatsoever.

He was busy planning his future course. Tomorrow morning he would go to Rettin and ask once again to be allowed to return to that alien planet and attempt to contact the beings about the killing. And if Rettin turned him down...

Garnna did not even consider that. He simply would refuse to take no for an answer.

CHAPTER VI

It was nearly eleven-thirty by the time Maschen and Polaski arrived in San Marcos, and the sheriff's stomach was complaining loudly that it wanted to be fed. Both men in the car pretended to ignore the rumblings. They had made the drive back from Totido Canyon with only a couple of words exchanged between them. *I guess we don't have much in common*, Maschen thought. *Then, too, this is an awkward circumstance for a conversation.*

When they arrived at the Sheriff's Station, Maschen led the way up the narrow stairs to his office on the second floor. "Anything happen back here, Carroll?" he asked his secretary.

"Nope," she said shaking her head. "I made all the reporters clear out—told them to wait downstairs if they wanted to, but I had work to do up here." She looked at Polaski for a moment. "Ah, it might be best if you and your visitor wait out here for a moment, sir. There's someone waiting for you in your office."

"Who?" Maschen blinked.

"Wesley Stoneham," Carroll said matter-of-factly.

Maschen's mouth formed a small "oh" and indecision overcame him momentarily. He hadn't particularly wanted to see Stoneham quite this early in the investigation. The man would be upset and possibly incoherent this soon after his wife's murder. And to boot, Wesley Stoneham was a totally unpredictable man. He could be polite as a diplomat, but he had a lightning temper when riled—and he had the power to back up any threats he made.

"Carroll's right, I think you'd better wait here."

Maschen told the psychologist. "Mr. Stoneham is liable to be distraught over the loss of his wife, and I should talk to him alone. I'll be with you in just a few minutes."

"Suit yourself," Polaski shrugged. He walked over to a bench against the wall, pulled out his notebook from the breast pocket of his shirt and began writing. Maschen braced himself mentally and turned towards his office.

"Oh, Carroll," he said with his hand on the knob, "would you go across the street and pick me up a couple of sandwiches from Joe's? It feels like I haven't eaten in days."

Maschen entered his office and found Stoneham waiting. The lawyer was wearing a black business suit and tie, looking thoroughly presentable. He was seated calmly in one of the comfortable chairs that were spread around the large office, reading a paper that he had taken from the sheriff's desk. His expression reeked of dignity-in-the-face-of-tragedy. He stood up as he saw Maschen come in. "Hello, John."

Maschen put on his sympathetic face as he shook Stoneham's hand. "It's a shame we have to see each other under circumstances like this. I was really shocked when I heard about it. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Stoneham managed a wan smile. "It's nice to hear you say that, but it's rather poor consolation."

The sheriff nodded. "I know how you must feel. If there's anything I can do..."

"Aside from catching Stella's murderer, I can't think of anything."

Maschen looked towards Stoneham's hand, which was still holding the papers he'd been scanning when the sheriff had walked in. "What are you reading?"

"Oh, just a report that was on your desk." Stoneham shrugged

and handed the papers to the sheriff. Maschen saw that it was Acker's report that Tom Whitmore had typed up earlier that morning. "I hope there wasn't anything secret in it," Stoneham continued.

"Not exactly," Maschen said, a trifle annoyed, "but it was a private document. I'm sure you wouldn't like me coming into your office and reading your contracts."

"I guess not. Sorry."

"But as long as you've read it, what do you think of it?"

"It's basically accurate. He's got all the facts, but he doesn't really convey the horror of it."

"I know. I was up there myself a couple of hours ago."

"What did you think?"

"Terrible." Maschen shook his head. "Obviously the work of a madman."

"Have you made any arrests yet?" Stoneham asked.

"That's something I wanted to talk to you about. Howard Willsey was in here this morning. I got the feeling from talking to him that you think you know who did it."

"Of course. That Polaski guy."

"What makes you think it's him?"

"Well, who else could it be? He's a member of that hippy cult, and 'Death to Pigs' is a hippy slogan, isn't it?"

"Perhaps. But anyone can write slogans, and Polaski isn't the only hippy in the world."

"He's been seen around the cabin several times."

"But not last night, as far as we know."

Stoneham looked exasperated. "What are you trying to do, John—defend him?"

"I'm just trying to look at this thing rationally." He put a hand on Stoneham's shoulder. "I know you're upset..."

"Upset? Of course I'm upset. My wife has just been brutally murdered and the police are doing nothing about it."

"Take it easy. Have a seat." He guided Stoneham over to one of the plush chairs and sat him down. Then he went behind his own desk and sat. "You'll have to realize, Wes, that these things take time, particularly when there are no witnesses and no one confesses. It'll do us no good to get so excited."

Stoneham appeared to be trying to control himself. "I suppose you're right."

"Of course I am. Now, can you think of any motive Polaski might have had for killing your wife?"

"Haven't you been reading the papers lately? Nobody needs motives any more; they just go out and kill for the sheer hell of it."

Maschen spread his hands. "Nevertheless, it would help convince a jury if we could find out why the murder was committed. Even madmen have reasons for what they do, even if they don't make sense to us."

"Well, Polaski was around the cabin a lot. Maybe Stella caught him trying to steal something. Or maybe he developed an infatuation for her and, when he found her alone, he raped and killed her."

Or perhaps they were having an affair, Maschen thought less kindly. And yet, none of those explanations seemed in keeping with the character of Carl Polaski, although the sheriff had to admit that he hardly knew the commune leader.

"Maybe they all got high on marijuana," Stoneham continued, "and decided to go on a killing spree like the Manson bunch. An

orgy of death."

The sheriff shook his head. "There is no evidence to suggest that a large number of people was involved. And rape seems to be unlikely, too—the bedroom was untouched and nothing in the outer room indicates..."

"All right, all right." Stoneham was getting testy again. "So I don't know why he did it. But he did it, I'd stake my life on that. Why don't you bring him in and ask him yourself?"

"I have brought him in, but I can't be as blatant as all that."

"Why not? You can ask him anything when he's under arrest."

"He isn't under arrest. I just brought him in to get a statement from him."

"Didn't Howard give you the warrant?" The pleasantness was gone from Stoneham's face.

"Yes, he gave it to me, but I chose not to use it just yet."

"Why the hell not? What kind of an operation do you run around here?"

Maschen's own temper was wearing thin. "Look, I don't tell you how to write up your contracts, don't you tell me how to handle police work. I had several reasons for not serving the warrant. Primary among them is that I'm not sure there's any case at all against Polaski. He seems like a calm, rational man to me, and that murder was not committed by a calm, rational man."

"So you're a psychiatrist too, eh?"

"Secondly," Maschen went on, ignoring the other's jibe, "if I were to arrest Polaski outright, he'd shut up like a clam. The man's no fool, he knows all about his civil rights. The only person he'd utter a word to would be his lawyer, and we'd never get any information out of him. By inviting him to come down here voluntarily, I've tried to make him less suspicious. I can't remove

all the suspicion—he'd have to be a low-grade moron for that—but by being cordial I can talk with him, get a statement from him, ask him some questions and maybe get a modicum of cooperation. If I then feel that the action is justified, I can still serve the warrant. But I will not arrest anyone on an idle whim."

The lawyer harrumphed loudly. "Sounds to me as though you're trying to think up excuses for not doing your duty."

Is the man that dense? Maschen marveled. Grief-stricken or not, he ought to be able to see that the sheriff was being as helpful as the law allowed. Even more so, perhaps, for he doubted that the warrant that was still in his shirt pocket had been obtained by precisely normal channels. Aloud he said, "I've been on the Sheriff's Department for thirty-seven years, and I've never failed to do my duty yet. My record speaks for itself."

"Perhaps that's the trouble—you've been around too long. Maybe what the Department needs is new blood, someone who isn't too stodgy to take chances." Maschen flushed as Stoneham's criticism echoed his own self-doubts of earlier that morning. Was Stoneham right? Had he grown so conservative in his job that he could no longer function as he should? Had the world really passed him by as completely as he feared? And was Stoneham's remark a threat to have him replaced at the next election, or even sooner, if results were not forthcoming? Stoneham had the power to do it, Maschen knew.

"Maybe so," the sheriff admitted, "but in the meantime I'm still in charge here, and I'll do things my own way until I'm relieved of my duties. And speaking of them, I'd like to get a statement from you about the murder."

"I already gave a statement to one of your deputies..."

"Well, now you can have the fun of giving it to me personally. I like to have as many of the facts first-hand as possible, stodgy old coot that I am."

Stoneham grumbled a bit, but repeated his story. He had arrived at his seacliff cabin at about two-thirty in the morning.

Inside, he had discovered the body of his wife, hacked up horribly, and that bloody message inscribed on the wall. He tried to phone the sheriff's office immediately, but discovered that the phone lines had been cut. So he had driven over to the house of the nearest neighbor, Abraham Whyte, and called from there at about three o'clock. Then he had gone back to the cabin to meet the sheriff's deputy at the door.

Maschen pretended to take notes, but actually he was barely paying attention to what Stoneham was saying. His mind was still pondering the very personal problem of his fitness for office. What if he were proven unfit and were not reelected next year? What could he do? He would be sixty only a couple of months before the election. A few years too young to retire, but what else was there for him? Law enforcement was the only career he knew. He had recruited into the Sheriff's Department when he was twenty-two, and had stayed with it continuously for thirty-seven years. He didn't know anything else. And no other police force was likely to hire a sixty-year-old rookie. The only other option was retirement. He had a couple of dollars stored away in the bank, and a sheriff's pension was better than some others. He and his wife would be able to live, though they'd hardly be wealthy.

But what would he do with the rest of his life?

He was aware that Stoneham had stopped talking and was looking at him. To fill the silence, Maschen asked quickly, "You didn't touch anything in the cabin?"

"I might have sat on the sofa for a moment to steady myself, I don't recall. It was quite a shock."

"Yes, I can well imagine. Why was your wife up at the cabin?"

"She was a very high-strung woman, quite prone to tension headaches and that sort of thing. Whenever the strain of living got to her, she'd go up to the cabin. I built it specially for her, you know. She always found it restful up there, and it was cheaper than therapy."

"Why did you arrive at the cabin so late at night?"

"I had some business to attend to up in 'Frisco. I didn't finish it until seven or so, and then I drove back down to our house here in San Marcos. When I got home, I found my wife's note saying that she was going up to spend the night at the cabin. I decided to join her, so I packed a suitcase and went. You know the rest."

"Do you still have your wife's note?"

Surprisingly, Stoneham seemed momentarily stunned, and he had to think carefully before he answered. "Why, uh, no, I threw it out."

Maybe I could be a bank guard or a night watchman, Maschen thought, then discarded the idea immediately. It would be too great a jump in prestige from Sheriff to guard and, if nothing else, he would have to maintain the dignity of the office. "Is there anyone who can substantiate your story?"

Stoneham exploded. "No! I don't need any substantiation. Why should I want to kill my wife? There's no evidence whatsoever to suggest that I did it."

"There's no real evidence against Polaski, either."

"You keep telling me about all the evidence you don't have," Stoneham ranted. "Why don't you go out and get some? Don't bother me with all these ridiculous questions—ask a man who can answer them: Polaski."

Maschen bit his lower lip. Stoneham, with his wild carrying on, was hindering the investigation by wasting the sheriff's time. Polaski had actually been far more cooperative. "All right, I will." He punched at the intercom button. "Carroll, will you ask Mr. Polaski to come in, please?"

"Do you mind if I stay and watch?" Stoneham asked.

"I don't think that would be advisable..."

The question was made academic, however, as Polaski entered the room. "Your secretary is still out getting your

sandwiches," the psychologist said, "but I'll come in anyway."

Maschen rose to make the introductions. "Mr. Stoneham, I'd like you to meet Mr. Polaski."

"*Doctor* Polaski," the psychologist corrected, holding out his hand. Stoneham looked up and down Polaski's tall, thin body with unshaven face and unkempt hair and just glowered, refusing to make any move of friendship. "Suit yourself," said Polaski after it became obvious that Stoneham was not going to shake his hand. "I probably would have gotten your germs, anyway."

"Glib son-of-a-bitch, aren't you?" Stoneham growled.

"Is he always this friendly?" Polaski asked the sheriff.

"His wife was killed this morning," Maschen said by way of explanation. "Won't you have a seat, doctor?"

"Thank you." Although there were three other empty chairs scattered about the office, Polaski deliberately sat down in the one next to Stoneham. The lawyer's face grew darker.

At that moment, the sheriff's secretary came in, carrying two sandwiches. "Here you are," she said. "One's roast beef, the other's turkey. You owe me a dollar sixty-eight."

"Thanks, Carroll. I'll settle with you later." The secretary nodded and left. "I hope you fellows won't mind my eating in front of you," Maschen apologized. "I haven't had anything to eat in almost twenty-four hours. Doctor Polaski, how well did you know Mrs. Stone-ham?"

"Not terribly well. I met her once while I was hiking through the hills and I stopped at her cabin for a drink of water. She thought I was rather old to be doing the hippie bit, and I explained that it was research for my psychology project. We talked a little about psychology and the world in general, and I explained some of my projects to her. I complained that sometimes I didn't get as much privacy as I would like at the commune for typing up my reports, and she volunteered to let

me use the cabin whenever I wanted for typing. I made her agree to let me do odd jobs around the cabin to pay for the privilege. That's about it. Usually when I went up to the cabin it was deserted, with a note from Mrs. Stoneham telling me what she'd like done. I would do it, then type for awhile and leave. I only saw her twice after our initial meeting. Both times we had short, intelligent conversations. That's the extent of it. I thought she was a very nice person, and I am sorry to hear that she's dead."

"Very touching," Stoneham muttered.

"If, as you say, the cabin was usually deserted when you got there, how did you get in?" the sheriff asked.

"She gave me a key," Polaski said.

Stoneham shot the sheriff a significant glance, which Maschen chose to ignore. "And you say that you were in bed asleep all last night?"

"That's right. I can't say for sure the exact time I turned in, but it couldn't have been later than eleven."

"Can anyone substantiate that?" Stoneham interrupted, a sneer on his face.

. "Well, just about everyone at the commune saw me go to my cabin at about that time. But they couldn't swear that I didn't leave it again during the night, if that's what you mean."

"That's exactly what I mean," Stoneham said.

"And where were you all last night?" Polaski asked suddenly.

The quickness of the question put Stoneham off balance. "Why, I..." Then he caught hold of himself, and his brusqueness returned. "Don't try to change the subject. That's totally irrelevant. I'm not on trial here."

"And I am?" Polaski's voice rose barely enough at the end to make it a question instead of a declaration.

"Yes, you murdering bastard!" And without warning, Stoneham sprang out of his chair and launched himself at Polaski. The startled psychologist could do nothing at first to defend himself. Stoneham's body crashed into him, knocking over the chair and sending them both to the floor. Stoneham's hands were around his throat pressing in on his windpipe.

Maschen moved quickly. He swallowed a mouthful of sandwich, moved around his desk and tried to put himself between the two combatants. Stoneham was a big, powerful man while the sheriff was short and squat, but Maschen was trained in fighting and knew how to use his weight to best effect. He was able to get his arms in at the right angle and apply leverage. Slowly, he managed to pry Stoneham away from Polaski and pulled him off to one side of the room a few feet away. "If you don't learn to control yourself a little better than this," he warned, "I'm going to book you for assault."

Stoneham glared at him. "You wouldn't dare."

Maschen felt the heat in that gaze, but he could be stubborn, too. "Try me."

A change came over the big man. He shrugged his shoulders and his face became tranquil. "I'm sorry, John. I didn't mean to do that. It's just that I couldn't bear to sit there and listen to all those lies from the guy who hacked my wife to pieces."

Polaski was rubbing at his throat, still lying on the floor. He looked up at the sheriff, puzzled. "Hacked to pieces? I thought you told me she was strangled."

"Both," Maschen said gruffly. "Now I want the two of you to sit down and behave yourselves, or I'll have you both locked up."

Polaski opened his mouth to protest that he hadn't done anything, then thought better of it. Instead, he picked himself up and went to a chair that was well across the room from Stoneham. "I wasn't aware that I was going to be put on trial down here," he said.

"You're not," Maschen said, returning to his desk and

renewing his attack on his sandwich.

"Stoneham's already judged and sentenced me," Polaski argued. "And he was quite willing to execute the sentence as well."

"Mr. Stoneham will behave himself from now on," Maschen promised. "I'll see to that."

"Why don't you like me?" Polaski asked, looking straight at Stoneham.

"Because you're a member of that weird hippie cult."

Polaski smiled. "What's so funny?" Stoneham demanded.

"Just an idle thought. I'm not very religious right now, but I was raised a Catholic. I was thinking that the Church hasn't been accused of being a 'weird hippie cult' in at least sixteen hundred years."

"You know good and well I mean that damn commune."

"I am a psychologist, Mr. Stoneham. I happen, at the moment, to be making a scientific study of this commune phenomenon that has taken hold in our country. In order to do this, I have to actually live at one and accept their life style. It is not my chosen way to live, but it is forced on me by the conditions of my work. When I have finished with my research, I will go back to my nice little house with its mortgage, its television, its stereo and all the other decadent comforts of Western Civilization. I admit to being a member of the commune, but that is only a temporary status."

"Humpf. Everyone knows you're the leader of that mob."

"They're all over twenty-one. When they ask me for advice I give it, but I refuse to take the responsibility if they decide to follow it."

"What sort of advice?"

"Oh, not to take drugs, not to steal things. That sort."

Maschen had decided to let the other two men do the talking for awhile, while he ate and made sure that the situation did not get out of hand again. Now he had finished one of his two sandwiches and he decided it was time to get back into the conversation. Polaski's remark had left Stoneham temporarily at a loss for words, giving the sheriff the perfect opportunity to speak again. "Are you finished with your little interrogation?" he jibed Stoneham.

The attorney turned his glower to Maschen. "All I can say, sheriff, is that there'd better be some action on this case soon."

There it was. Not an explicit threat. When you had the power of a Wesley Stoneham, you didn't need to make explicit threats. You simply let people know how you felt about matters. The wise ones would bend to your will, and the foolish would fall by the wayside.

Maschen sighed quietly. He was being forced into a position he didn't like. He could see the push coming, and there was no way to avoid it. To disobey Stoneham's will would be to set in motion titanic forces far beyond the sheriff's ability to control. He did not like politics entering the realm of police work. He had fought against it for years, with moderate success. But, like it or not, the politics was here now, and he would have to cope with it.

He did not like the idea of retiring next year or even this.

"Dr. Polaski," he intoned so quietly that both of the men had to strain to hear him, "I am afraid I'm going to have to put you under arrest. The charge is suspicion of murder." He took the warrant from his shirt pocket. "Here. You may read it if you like. I'm sure it's in order."

"I'll take your word for it," Polaski said. His lips were stretched thin and tight across his teeth, his facial expression was unreadable.

"I am supposed to apprise you of your rights..." Maschen began.

"Let me see," Polaski interrupted. "I have the right to remain silent and anything I say may be used as evidence against me. I have the right to have an attorney present whenever I'm being questioned, and if I don't have one or can't afford one, a lawyer will be assigned to me. Is that about right?"

"I think you've got the gist of it."

"My lawyer's down in L.A. It's a long-distance call."

"You can make it at county expense." The sheriff glanced over at Stoneham, who was actually smiling. That was the first time today Maschen had seen him smile, and he didn't like it. It was a cold smile, a satisfied smile, not a happy smile.

I hope I'm doing the right thing, Maschen thought as he reached for the intercom. "Carroll, get one of the boys from downstairs to come on up here. We've got a suspect to book for murder."

CHAPTER VII

Garnna had had a rough night. First there had been his impotence and the accompanying sickness. Then, lying there in the darkness with Aliyenna's body pressed warmly up against his own, it had been impossible to relax. Sleep eluded him for several hours. When it finally did come, it held within it strange and disturbing dreams. Garnna was back on that planet, witnessing the killing ail over again. This time, though, it was in slow-motion, with all the details painfully exaggerated. He tried to move in and stop it, and each time he tried he bumped against an invisible solid wall. He looked around for some way to sidestep the wall, but there was none. As he watched, he saw the wall being built higher and higher by Yari and Rettin, with the rest of his iff-group lending their support to the construction. Then he was falling, falling into a large vat filled with all kinds of living creatures. There were Zarticku and those aliens he had seen that day, plus all the other types of creatures he had ever seen on his Explorations. There were even... even Offasü. All of them in there together, talking, screaming, trying to get out, even as a giant ladle began to dip into the vat and stir them all

around...

He awoke in a cold sweat. A little ray of natural light seeped into the room. It must be slightly after sunup, then. Even though he was still tired, he knew it would do no good to try to go back to sleep again— the rest of the iff-group would be waking up shortly, and then he would have to have breakfast with them. So instead he lay in the cubicle with Aliyenna's still-sleeping body pressed against him and thought some more about his problem and about the dream he had had. What did it mean? Or did it mean anything?

He was still thinking when the wake-up bell rang. Aliyenna, reacting instinctively, stretched, yawned and opened her eyes. She gave Garnna a pleasant nod and asked about his health. He replied slowly, saying that he hadn't had much sleep during the night but that his stomachs at least no longer felt queasy. They went through the ritual of combing each other's manes, went off together to the lavatory pool and then to the dining room.

Breakfast was a noisy buzz. Garnna stood quietly at his position along the trough and ate mechanically, not even noticing what it was he was eating. The other members of the iff-group talked easily among themselves, discussing the various projects they were each working on and what their schedule was for the day. Garnna did not join in the conversation. When someone asked, out of politeness, what he would be doing that day, he mumbled something automatically. His answer was accepted and he was not required to say anything else.

Of all the iff-brothers and iff-sisters at the trough, only Aliyenna took note of Garnna's disturbed preoccupation. She made no comment, but continued watching him intently throughout the meal.

Garnna's waking trance continued all the way in to the Project headquarters where he worked. He gave no thought at all to the tram that took him across the city to his job. All transport in Zartic cities was public and free, for the good of the Herd. All the streets were crisscrossed by the routes of the quiet and completely automatic electric trams. The trams were never crowded, because one would pass each stop every few minutes

and the waiting period was slight. The inefficiency was high, for the trams frequently ran empty, but it was for the good of the Herd that transportation be made readily available to all, and so it was.

When he arrived at the building, Garnna went immediately to the office of Rettin iff-Laziel. The short Coordinator looked up from his desk as Garnna entered. "Yes? What can I do for you, Garnna iff-Almanic?"

Garnna self-consciously shifted his weight from foot to foot to foot to foot. "I've had some further thoughts about the conversation we had yesterday after my return."

"Indeed?" The Coordinator's brisk efficiency was only making it more **difficult** for Garnna.

"I also discussed the problem with the rest of the iff-group."

"Very commendable. What was the decision?"

"They decided that I should forget about the matter of the alien killing."

"A wise decision," Rettin nodded, pleased that it had coincided with his own. "I trust that you will now get down to the business of writing a detailed report on your Exploration."

"I think they are wrong," Garnna stated, so quietly that his voice was barely audible.

"What did you say?"

"I said, I disagree with them," Garnna said a little louder.

"You're challenging the combined wisdom of your iff-group?" Rettin asked, startled. Such an act, while not unprecedented, was strikingly unusual and generally indicated a disturbed mentality.

"Not their wisdom, no," Garnna said hastily, hoping that the Coordinator would not get the wrong impression of him. "I just feel that they—and you—have made their decisions based on

incomplete evidence."

"I made my decision based on what you told me yesterday. Was there some significant detail you neglected to mention?"

Garnna's face took on a pained expression. "Well, it's... it's not a detail, exactly. I gave you all the facts, precisely as it happened. But you got the facts only, in a vicarious way. You didn't feel it. Your mind didn't touch the mind of this killer. You didn't see the hatred, the rage, the duplicity that boiled in there. I did. It was like a sickness, one that must be wiped out."

He paused, considering the words he had just spoken. "Yes, that's it. It's a sickness. That's the best way to describe it. And like any sickness, we must control it quickly, or it may get out of hand. Here on Zarti we're quick to control any diseases we find, even among the lower animals, because we know that a balance must be maintained within the ecology. This case is just a larger scale version of the same thing, only the disease is mental and it's occurring on another planet. But we must act to control it, all the same."

Rettin did not answer immediately. He stood staring at Garnna intently and thinking over what the Explorer had said. After a minute he spoke. "Let me take your argument to its logical conclusion. What you are, in effect, saying is that we should become the doctors to the entire Galaxy. That we should patrol the stars, administering cultural remedies to everyone we think has problems. It can't be done. For one thing, Zarti doesn't have the resources to handle something like that. We've strained ourselves to the very limits just to establish and maintain this Project, and only because it is so very vital to our own interests. Our capacity is severely limited."

Garnna tried to interrupt with a protest, but Rettin would not let him. "And even if we could, *should* we? Who are we to set ourselves up as the moral judges of the rest of the intelligent life forms of the Universe? We are a single race on a single planet. We number about seven hundred million, total population. Is it in our destiny to rule the lives of all those trillions of trillions of creatures that live on other worlds? It takes enough effort to run our own planet—we can't spare the time for others.

"You've been an Explorer for two years now.

You've been Trained, you know that morals differ from culture to culture. We have no right to impose our own moral solutions on races that have situations to which our own standards may not even apply."

"But they must apply here!" Garnna finally managed to protest. "No viable society could survive if it permitted such behavior as I witnessed. It would fall apart from disunity; as you said, I've been Trained. Elementary social dynamics tells me that."

"All right," Rettin said with an effortless shift of mental gears, "but maybe their culture is supposed to fall apart. Maybe it's a sick race, a cancer on the face of its planet. Your report indicates that there is already a sickness there. Maybe we should quarantine them before their mental disorder spreads. Maybe it would be best for the Universe if their culture *did* fall apart."

Garnna gasped. That particular notion had not occurred to him.

"And besides," Rettin pressed, seeing that he had a momentary advantage, "you may be making this whole fuss for nothing. This deviant individual might already have been caught and punished by its peers. I know you told me that it made plans to avoid that, but that doesn't mean they were successful. This whole big problem that you're so concerned about might be meaningless."

"In that case, I'd like to request permission to revisit that planet and observe the situation for myself, to see whether it's been satisfactorily resolved."

Rettin shook his head sadly. "You don't understand. We can't allow ourselves to become involved with an alien race. The risks are too great. Right now they are, in ignorance of us and we are safe. If they were to learn about us, they might become our enemies. Remember, it's in the nature of omnivores and carnivores to prey on herbivores like ourselves. For our own survival, we cannot allow that to happen."

Garnna stood his ground stubbornly. "I know that what I am trying to do is right. I could feel it the moment I touched minds with that killer."

Rettin's manner changed back into the efficient administrator. "Your job, Garnna iff-AImanic, is as an Explorer. You are to observe other worlds and report back on all you've learned, particularly if you've noticed any traces of the Offasü. That is your duty. You have been specially trained not to let your personal prejudices interfere with this duty. There was a reason for this, a double reason. Perhaps you thought it was only to keep your fear instincts of flight under control so that you could stay and watch what might seem to you to be horrible practices among the aliens. But it was also meant to keep you from becoming involved in alien problems that you are powerless to change.

"You appear to have violated these precepts and disobeyed your duty. You've allowed your personal feelings to color your observations, thereby decreasing your effectiveness as an Explorer. You have also allowed yourself to become involved in an individual situation, with the same result. Have you anything further to say to me?"

Garnna looked at him and his mouth moved several times, but no sounds came out. Finally, he said, "No, I guess not."

Rettin smiled, having triumphed again. "Good. Then I suggest that you return to your duties. Go to your office and prepare a detailed report on your last Exploration. I'll expect to see it finished within five days."

Garnna turned slowly to leave, stopped and turned his head back to look at Rettin. The Coordinator was no longer paying him the slightest bit of attention, having returned to other matters on his desk. With a faint sigh, Garnna left and walked slowly down the corridor to his own office.

The interior of Garnna's office was in direct contrast to the chilly efficiency of his Coordinator's. There was the ubiquitous chalkboard on one wall, but on the other three hung bright seascape paintings that norm-ally gave the room an atmosphere

of quiet restlessness. But today, everything appeared dull and bland. The top of the desk was neatly laid out and ready for work. The light was constant and brighter than usual, putting too much glare on the paintings. Garnna had always felt alive and secure in his office before, but now he felt cramped, restricted, chained in. His head was pounding, as though some giant fist had grabbed it and were squeezing all his brains out through his ears.

He moved slowly to the desk and took out a pen and a writing pad. He set them down in front of him and stared for perhaps half an hour at the empty sheet before him. Nothing came. His mind was a total blank.

Finally he could take no more of this self-inflicted torture. Picking up the pad, he flung it violently across the room. The pen followed a moment later. Garnna raced out the door, down the stairs and out of the building.

Outside, the air already smelled fresher. Garnna inhaled large lungfuls of it, savoring the vitality in every molecule. The few pedestrians who were out on the street ignored him as he capered in the sunshine for several minutes, delighting in the experience of his minor rebellion.

But his elation was short-lived. He had done nothing except escape his office for a few moments. The report would still have to be written when he went back in. Worse, he had done nothing toward solving what he was beginning to consider was his own personal problem. He had been unable to persuade Rettin to allow him to return to that planet. Maybe he wouldn't have to interfere in the alien situation. Maybe, as Rettin himself had suggested, the aliens had resolved the matter themselves. But he had to know. Why couldn't they let him just go back and look? What would be the harm in that?

He did not go back into the building. Instead, he wandered along the street aimlessly, letting his feet guide him in whatever path seemed most convenient. /

can't do my job efficiently if they insist on shackling me, he thought. I've been Trained to Explore, I have all the instincts for

it. Why don't they let me do my job the way I deem it best?

His eye chanced upon a sign and it held his attention. Three concentric circles, symbol of a Counselor. He stared at it for a moment unaware before the idea inveigled its way into his mind that what he needed most, at the moment, was spiritual guidance. He walked resolutely across the street to the small shop and entered.

The Zarticku did not have anything that could be called a formal religion. Their culture had been brought from a very primitive herd level to a sophisticated scientific one in the space of a few horror-filled generations. Their ancestors had lived too simple a life to have need of supernatural beings and, after the Offasü had left, the new Zarticku were of a high level of technical competence. They did not need to explain lightning bolts as spears of the gods when a few basic experiments showed them to be simply phenomena attributable to an ionized atmosphere. Their Universe became a rational one, in which all things had logical explanations. The supernatural was unknown on Zarti; gods, devils, imps and fairies were nonexistent. And if it's true that everyone needs a bogeyman why, they had the Offasü, a very real, very horrifying menace.

But even though the Zarticku belonged to the Herd, each Zartic was capable of thinking and acting as an individual. And for every individual, there is always the fear of death lurking at the back of his mind. An intelligent creature is aware., of the inevitability of death and knows that it will come to him one day. This knowledge conflicts with the individual's drive for self-preservation; all his natural instincts make him want to live forever. In order to maintain his sanity, the intelligent creature must find some way to reconcile these two forces.

Without a belief in the supernatural, the Zarticku had no conception of an afterlife. Death was final in the real world, and they saw nothing that would indicate the existence of some other plane of existence. They could not imagine any part of themselves surviving after death in some imaginary land, or even being reborn into some other creature back home on Zarti. Death was simply the end of the individual.

But if the individual died, the Herd lived on. It was a constant thing in a Universe of changes. Barring the end of the world, the Herd would continue to exist regardless of what happened to its members. It, the collective identity of all the people on Zarti, was immortal. The individual could sublimate his own drive for immortality into the Herd. And so, it was for the life of the Herd that the Zartieku lived. Each Zartic, by doing his utmost to ensure the welfare and survival of the Herd, was achieving his own immortality. He was part of the Herd and the Herd was immortal, therefore he was immortal. 'Thus the Zartic lived out his life, content to know that his efforts would keep the Herd alive.

The Counselors were the closest thing Zarti had to priests. They served in part as spiritual guides, in part as judges, and in part as lawmakers. It was they who decided what the ultimate welfare of the Herd was and what means should be used to achieve it. Occasionally, disputes would arise between groups or individuals as to how something was to be done, and the Counselors would be asked to adjudicate. And on the personal level. The Counselors could be consulted by any individual who was in need of advice or guidance, to help him reconcile his own personal desires with the needs of the Herd. For this reason, all Counselors maintained offices open for anyone who required assistance. The offices were identified by the sign of the three concentric circles, symbol of the Zartic beliefs. The outer circle signified the Herd, the greatest of all things and encompassing the rest. The middle circle represented the iff-group, enclosed within the Herd and yet an entity unto itself, holding inside it the third circle which stood for the individual. This was the smallest circle, but it was in the center, guarded securely by the iff-group and the Herd so that it was doubly safe.

Garnna entered the waiting room and found that there were three other people ahead of him. The waiting room had a series of numbered stalls. He stood in the fourth stall and waited. After awhile, someone left the Counselor's chamber and the person in the first stall was called in. The Zarticku waiting outside each moved up to the next highest number.

The line moved surprisingly quickly, and within an hour

Garnna found himself being summoned into the inner office. The Counselor was a female, standing behind an impressive dark wood desk. On the walls of the office were long rows of books covering nearly every imaginable topic. The room had the odor of wisdom about it, and the lighting was dim.

Garnna looked more carefully at the Counselor. She was old, but her exact age was indeterminate. There were patches missing from the bristly hair that adorned the back of her long neck, and the silvered mane at the base of her neck was scraggly and unkempt. She had a look of peace in her eyes and self-assurance in her stance. Garnna trusted her instantly, and knew he would abide by whatever decision she made.

"I am Norlak iff-Delicon," she said. Her voice was quiet, but the sound carried quite well in the atmosphere of the darkened room. There was a presence to the voice that made itself heard.

"I am Garnna iff-Almanic," he returned. "I have come to seek advice."

"A well-advised individual serves the Herd best." Her voice had a tingle to it that made even that platitude sound fresh when she said it.

Her calm gaze remained level, staring into his eyes as he struggled to find a way to begin. "My problem is involved and entails a tangle of ethics."

"They're the ones I enjoy best," she said. For a brief instant, she stepped out of the Counselor-role and Garn-na could see the living person within her. "They're the ones that deal with *people*, rather than things. People are so much more interesting." Then she slipped the mask back on and she was once again the impersonal Counselor. But the momentary glimpse of her as a person was strongly reassuring and put him instantly at ease.

Garnna was particularly worried about Rettin's suggestion that the alien society might deserve to be destroyed as a cancer. If that were so, then he ought not to interfere, and let their society disintegrate naturally. He needed a Counselor's advise, and so he tried to explain the situation in analogues that the

Counselor could easily understand.

"Let me give a hypothetical situation," he said. "Suppose a person found an iff-group that was, for one reason or another, badly put together and on the verge of a dissociation. What should he do?"

"Take the matter to a Counselor immediately so that the individuals could be rearranged into other iff-groups."

"No, suppose there are no Counselors around and the iff-group is on the verge of imminent break-up. If the individual doesn't act, the break-up will surely occur, although there is no certainty that the break-up will be avoided if he acts."

Norlak barely had to think to answer that one. "The individual should still try. A broken iff-group is a harm to the Herd."

"Even a badly formed iff-group that was not working properly together?"

"Even that. Such an iff-group, even without a Counselor around to help it, is better than no group at all. Without the group, there would be nothing but individuals, and the result would be chaos. The iff-group gives unity and direction. Without them, the individuals are random forces in a patterned society. They could have a deleterious effect on the Herd."

Garnna sighed. That was the answer he'd been hoping to hear, and it reassured him coming from a Counselor. "Now I have a slightly more difficult question to ask you. What is the Herd?"

Her sharp eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What makes you ask a thing like that?"

"I have my reasons. Please, the answer is important to my problem."

"The Herd is the collection of all the Zarticku, all Zartic thought and deed, the sum total of all the Zarticku who have ever lived as well as the aspirations and dreams of the Zarticku for the future."

Garnna watched her as she spoke. She was reciting, giving the traditional answer that was taught to children at the Academies before they were even assigned names. When she finished, he shook his head. "That isn't enough. There must be more."

Again, she gave him a suspicious glance. "How much more should there be?"

"Are you aware that there are intelligent races living on other planets?"

"Yes, I've heard some of the tales of the Explorations. I never gave them much thought, though; my duty demands that I keep most of my attention for matters here on Zarti."

"Are these other intelligences also part of the Herd?"

Norlak did not answer immediately. Instead, she backed away from the table and paced around behind it. She did not look at Garnna while doing so. Garnna waited patiently for her to reach a decision. Finally, she returned to the table and looked him straight in the eye. "You're a strange man, Garnna iff-Almanic. You come to me with a question that has never been asked before and expect an answer on the spot. Even your more routine questions are tinged with the bizarre."

"Does my question have an answer?" Garnna persisted.

"If it does, I think it must depend on the specific circumstances you have in mind. Would you care to relate them to me?"

Garnna shook his head again. "No. I've already explained the circumstances to my iff-group and the Coordinator at my job. I think the nature of the specifics has blinded them to the real problem. If there is an answer to my question, it must be a general one."

Norlak sighed. "Then I'll give you a general answer, but I won't guarantee that there won't be exceptions to it. In general, I would say that these other intelligent beings are not members of the Herd. They have not contributed anything to the welfare of

the Herd, nor have they derived any benefits from it. They exist independent of the activities of the Herd and thus cannot be a part of it."

Garnna pondered this decision for several minutes while Norlak watched him, observing his reactions. He liked the way she had delivered her decision; not like Rettin and Yari, who had treated it as a personal triumph. She had stated it simply and factually. He might not like the verdict, but he could not fault the Counselor. *She's a shrewd old woman*, Garnna thought. Aloud, he said, "Is there anything greater than the Herd?"

"In what way greater? If you mean more powerful, the Offasü are undoubtedly so, and there are probably numerous races..."

"No, I was speaking in terms of organizational heir-archy. Is it possible that there is some organization—a... a Superherd—that is related to the Herd in the same way that the Herd is related to the iff-group?"

Norlak spread her hands. "Anything is possible."

"You're evading me," Garnna said. "You're deliberately refusing to answer my question."

"You didn't come here for answers," the Counselor replied, and her voice was even. "You had decided on the answers to these questions before you even came into my office. What you want me to do is confirm your answers, to lend the authority of a Counselor to the conclusions you have already reached. I do not function that way. My duty is to settle problems and give advice. If you need me in that capacity, I'll be pleased to serve you. But I will not demean my position by allowing it to be used as a tool with which you can combat your Coordinator and your iff-group. Is that clear?"

"Yes," Garnna mumbled as he headed for the door. "I thank you for your assistance, Counselor."

"Garnna iff-Almanic," she called.

He stopped right on the threshold of her doorway and turned.

"Yes?"

"If you do have a falling out with your Coordinator and iff-group, you will definitely be needing the services of a Counselor. Please don't hesitate to call on me." There was a tender warmth to her voice.

Garnna gave her a smile. "Thank you," he said, and left the office.

CHAPTER VIII

"You're not sick, are you Debby?" Joanne Kefauver asked. Ever since Polaski had driven off with the sheriff that morning, Debby had sat apart from the rest of the commune group, unable to do any work or talk to her friends. Now the sun had set and dinner was being eaten by most of the commune, but Debby still sat alone on her rock, staring unseeing at the trees on the nearby mountainside. Joanne, her best friend in the camp, was concerned.

"No, I'm not sick," Debby answered in a monotone.

"Then what's the matter?"

"I'm worried."

"About what?"

"About everything." She turned to face her friend and there were tears in her eyes. "Joanne, it's been eight hours since the sheriff took Carl away."

"I wouldn't worry too much about that. Some old bat was probably mising her socks again and they're holding him for questioning until they find them. It's happened before. Remember what Carl always says about sticks and stones. He'll be back all right in a little while."

"But it's never been the sheriff before," Debby protested. "It's always one of the deputies who comes. And I have this Feeling,

like a total disaster. You know how my Feelings are, they're almost always right. Something bad's going to happen today. I told Carl and he didn't believe me and now he's in jail. It's going to happen soon, now, a total disaster."

Joanne looked worried, but more for Debby's sake than the camp's. "I think maybe you should eat something or go lie down. Whatever this thing is, it can't be all that bad."

A pair of headlights could be seen coming along the road. No one in the camp was alarmed, because they knew it would be one of their own people. The commune as a group possessed one vehicle, a jeep, for occasional trips into San Marcos. Evan Carpinton's ax handle had splintered that afternoon, and he'd had to go into town to get a new one. Now he was on his way back, driving recklessly at top speed along the winding dirt road that led to the commune. "I wonder what's on his tail?" someone commented as they watched him drive up.

Evan pulled into the central cleared area of the camp and screeched to a stop. "They've arrested Carl!" he cried.

There was an awkward silence as people digested that. Then someone asked, "How bad is it?"

"The worst," Evan said. "They've accused him of murder."

Joanne shot a quick glance at Debby. The younger girl seemed barely to have heard, but was nodding quietly to herself.

The camp's reaction was an uproar. "That's impossible!"

"He'd never do anything like that."

"They're against us, we all knew it."

"How'd they ever arrive at a crazy thing like that?"

"It's all in here," Evan said bitterly, holding up a copy of the *San Marcos Clarion*. "That old lady Stone-ham, you know, where Carl goes up to type, she got knocked off in her cabin. I mean really hacked to bits. Her husband's the big chicken-shitter of

the town, he owns the whole thing and tells everybody what to do. So because Carl's from the commune and he's up at the cabin a lot, Stoneham decides that he's the killer. He had his buddy the sheriff lock Carl up, and now they're holding him incommunicado. I tried to go in to see him and they wouldn't let me."

The enormity of the situation took time to filter through the collective consciousness of the group. There had been arrests before, but always of a trivial nature, more for harassment of the communites than anything else. Nothing this serious had ever happened. And especially not to Carl, who took great pains to be the straightest of the group. He was the one who kept everyone else in line, and now he was the one in trouble.

The confusion was total. People turned to their neighbors and babbled meaninglessly. One voice was finally heard above the general racket asking, "What do we do now?"

"I'll tell you what we do," Evan said, standing up on the hood of the jeep and subconsciously striking a pose. "They've declared war on us and taken one of our best guys prisoner. So we fight back. We all march down into the town and storm the sheriff's office. We tell those mothers exactly what we think of them, and we demand that they release Carl. If they don't, we show them what real war is. We'll tear that town to pieces until they give him back and let us alone. Why should we be the ones who are always getting harrassed? Let's harrass them for a change!"

A loud cheer went up, and the general level of conversation increased as the members discussed the idea of a march. From the other side of the camp, someone said, "No, that won't work." Heads turned, and people saw that the speaker was Bob Preston.

"What do you mean, it won't work?" Evan called. "We've got thirty-seven good, strong young people, all angry, against a small townful of old fogeys who don't even have their own teeth."

"They may not have teeth, but they've got guns and rifles. And they'll be just as angry as we are if we go tearing up their homes. I'd rather not invade a hornet's nest without adequate protection."

"Coward!" sneered Evan.

"No, just sensible," Bob retorted evenly. "Everybody, think for a minute. What would Carl tell us to do if he were here now? Have patience, wait and see how the situation develops, then work through legal channels. The old sticks and stones bit. I don't like it either, but that's Carl's way of doing things and he's never been wrong about something major yet."

"Yeah? Well, while you're waiting for situations to develop, the people of the town are going to be holding a 'citizens' rally' tonight. How much do you want to bet that it doesn't turn into a lynch mob? If we don't act first, there won't be any Carl Polaski left to save."

"He's quite capable of taking care of himself," Bob persisted. "And our place is here. We came to this camp because we were trying to get away from the corruption of the world. We musn't lose sight of that purpose."

"I agree there," said one of the girls. "The less we have to do with those bastards out there, the better I like it."

"Sure," Evan replied. "Under ideal circumstances, I'd agree with you. But the outside world won't leave us alone. They keep poking their noses into our affairs. It's time we taught them that if they keep poking at us, they'll have to expect to get their noses cut off."

"We musn't stoop to their level," Bob said, trying hard to project a reasonable quality to his voice. "If we got out and riot, then we'll be no better than the lynch mob you were talking about a second ago, and the whole point of the commune—all these months we've worked here—all that will have been wasted."

"We could argue all night and not get anywhere," Evan said. "Look, I'm going into town and do what I can to help Carl. Anybody who wants to come along will be more than welcome. As for the rest of you who'd stay behind when one of our comrades is in deadly danger, I say the hell with you!"

Throughout the argument, Deborah Bauer continued to sit on

her rock. The general confusion was taking a ferocious toll on her psyche. She had always been extremely sensitive to the feelings and emotions of the people around her, and now, with misunderstanding rampant and tempers at the boiling point, the sheer volume of emotional static was a cannonade against her brain. The fears, frustrations, anxieties and angers of those around her, reinforced by the fact that these were all close friends, were drumming a psychic tattoo on her mind. She started to reach her hands up to her ears to shut it out, then realized that would be useless. So she sat and endured the silent torture as the roiling of emotional forces continued unchecked around her.

It had been impossible to conceal the fact that an arrest had been made in the Stella Stoneham murder. Less than an hour after the charges had been filed, the networks and wire services had all learned that a Dr. Carl Polaski had been taken into custody. That was all the sheriff's office would say on the issue, but the reporters had other sources of information. Within another hour, it was known that Polaski was the leading member of a youth commune outside of town in Totido Canyon, and the feelings that the townsfolk had for the communites were well documented. Within still another hour, all of the pertinent data about Polaski— aged 39, associate professor of Psychology at UCLA, married but separated from his wife—had been ascertained and a quick interview made with his estranged wife. Thus, by the time the networks were ready to take to the air with their nightly news broadcasts, they had quite a tidy story to report. They explained the details of the gruesome tragedy, emphasizing the gory description of the body. There was footage from Maschen's morning press conference. And there was the Polaski angle. The networks, of course, were very careful not to say he was guilty, while at the same time lauding the efficiency of the Sheriff's Department for making an arrest so quickly. It all made for five minutes of coverage on nationwide TV.

Shortly before the newscast, the *Clarion* came out with a special edition, headlining in the largest type available the biggest news story ever to originate from San Marcos. After the broadcast, telephone lines were humming with conversations concerning the murder. Between the three sources—paper,

television and gossip—there was not a soul in San Marcos who hadn't heard about the crime in some version or other by six-thirty. Nor was there a person in town who had escaped the general feeling of rage that had enveloped the normally peaceful community.

Nobody afterwards was precisely sure whose idea it was to call the citizens' rally in the small auditorium. There was nothing in the paper about it, no notices circulated. Those accused of it afterward vigorously denied the charges, and no blame could be placed. But it was a fact that, at eight p.m., the town's small auditorium was jammed with more than a hundred of San Marcos' most irate citizens.

The buzzing of angry conversations was so loud that the floor of the stage rattled. Wesley Stoneham shifted his weight in the chair to minimize the vibrations he could feel through the floorboards. He allowed himself a grim smile as he looked over the gathering. Most of the people here he knew personally; there wasn't a one of them that had ever entertained a thought that hadn't first come from someone else. That was good—it meant they'd be easily led tonight. And they were already worked up into a mood of righteous anger, which would diminish their critical faculties even further.

He was equally as sure of the men on the stage with him. Len Frugal was the city manager, a man who could be counted on for fiery oratory as long as he was not required to know what he was talking about. He was a good friend of Stoneham's. Next to him was Ike Lassky, one of the county Supervisors. Stoneham had financed his last, tough campaign three years ago almost single-handed, and Lassky knew to whom he owed his political life. Then there was Sam Ingram who, like Stoneham, had no official position at all, yet was influential in the minds of the citizens of San Marcos. Stoneham had no hold over him, but the two men thought so much alike that he didn't need one.

The meeting did not come to order when Len Frugal banged his gavel, but the noise level did dip to a gentle din. Frugal began with a general introduction, praising the moral fiber and fervor of the men of San Marcos and thanking everyone for showing up

that evening. He then launched into a long speech which no one afterward could remember very well except that it was very passionate, denouncing a lot of bad qualities such as Violence and pleading the citizenry of San Marcos to a crusade to obliterate all purveyors of such unhealthy dogma. Finally, at the end, he said, "Now I would like to introduce a man who will fill us in on the specifics of why we are here tonight, a man who is demonstrating enormous personal courage and strength merely by appearing in public at such a time of overwhelming private tragedy: Wesley Stoneham."

Stoneham arose and walked slowly to the microphone. As he did so, the room settled into a deathly hush. All faces were on his, and Stoneham knew, from years of public speaking, how to hold them. When he reached the podium he stopped, turned slowly forward and did not speak for the space of several long heartbeats.

"As all of you know," he intoned, "my wife was murdered last night." He paused to let that line have effect. "It sounds so neat, all compacted into one sentence like that. But the act itself was not neat. It was the work of a madman, or perhaps several. And we tonight are faced with the debris left in the killer's wake.

"I don't know how many of you ever met Stella. Those who did, I'm sure, must treasure their acquaintance with her as one of the best in their lives. I know I did. We were married for almost fifteen years, and every day of it was the best day of my life. Stella's smiles were sunshine and to me she was always as beautiful as the day I married her. She loved children very much, and it was our great misfortune that we never had any. And now we never will."

He paused again and gazed placidly over the audience. People shifted uncomfortably in their seats, but the stillness continued. "Stella was a very sensitive woman," he went on. "She was very well attuned to the world around her. She was involved in at least half a dozen charities, and there was no one so badly off that Stella wouldn't try to help. This very sensitivity caused some of her worst problems. The pressures of day-to-day living, even in a comparatively quiet town like San Marcos, would often affect

her. She would become jittery and she smoked a lot. There would be times when she would need complete relaxation. I built her a cabin overlooking the ocean especially so that she would have someplace to go when the world upset her too badly.

"She was there alone last night while I was driving back home late from San Francisco. Sometime after midnight, the killer or killers arrived. They must have knocked, because there was no sign that the door was forced. She let them in because she was a very trusting person. Then suddenly, without either reason or warning, they turned on her. They grabbed her by the throat and calmly choked the life out of her. She must have struggled some, but it was no use. They were stronger than she was and there was no contest.

"She probably died quickly. But the killers were not through. Actually, I dignify them with the word 'killers'. They were *beasts!* Deranged, blood-crazed animals! They weren't satisfied just to leave her lifeless body lying on the floor. They were on an orgy of death, and nothing would fill their ghoulish cravings but gore. They tied her up, then took a knife from the wall and began butchering her as though she were a hog in a meat market." The crowd buzzed slightly, and Stone-ham raised his voice to match. "They slit her throat. They gouged her belly and slashed her breasts. Then they..." His voice faltered. "They cut her eyes out."

He stopped talking suddenly, turned and went back to his seat. His face was buried in his hands. The audience's buzzing became a roar of indignation. Each man turned to his neighbor to express his shock and disgust, and tumult reigned in the small hall.

Stoneham was well satisfied. As a lawyer, he knew that there wouldn't be sufficient evidence to convict Polaski of the murder. What he was trying to do was confuse the issue as much as possible. There would never be any way to prove that he did it, either, but he had to make sure that the finger of suspicion would not point even slightly in his direction; at least until Chottman retired and Stoneham was officially a member of the Board of Supervisors. Then he'd be able to sneer at any suspicions with impunity. But Chottman was a puritan and a

stickler for primness in the private lives of public men. To keep even the hint of suspicion away from himself until Chottman forwarded his name to the Governor, he had to create as much chaos as possible.

Ike Lassky spoke next. He pointed out that Mrs. Stoneham's murder was not the work of any normal man. It had to be done by a person or persons whose mind was twisted away from the normal standards of decency and Tightness, someone who wanted to flaunt his perversion to the entire world. And in all of San Marcos County, there was only one group of people like that—the hippies living up in Totido Canyon. They rejoiced in doing things that were unwholesome and far from decent standards of behavior. They defied traditions and thumbed their noses at respectable people.

Finally, Sam Ingram got up to speak. He reminded them of all the trouble the hippies had been ever since they had arrived, and of all the times they'd been questioned by the police. They were no-good troublemakers, and now possibly killers. Because the townsfolk had been soft in dealing with these upstart youngsters, San Marcos now had a rattlesnake den right out-side of town. Who knew where these hippies might strike next? If something was not done, they might kill your wife while she was alone. The time had come for righteous citizens to take action. Sam Ingram was going up to Totido Canyon and show those hippies that they couldn't intimidate decent people. Did anyone want to come with him?

A roar filled the auditorium and shook the walls as a spontaneous cheer arose from the audience.

"Would you mind if I go off duty now?" Deputy Simpson asked. "I doubt that anything further can be learned tonight, and my wife has been phoning to ask when I'll be coming home."

Maschen yawned and looked at the reports on his desk. The coroner had concluded that Mrs. Stoneham had died sometime between midnight and two o'clock. As Simpson had surmised, the cause of death was strangulation, and the body had been tied up and mutilated afterward. Crazy. Simpson's studies had shown that the lipstick prints on the cigarette that had been dropped

on the floor belonged to Mrs. Stoneham. The blue paper match that was in the ashtray had obviously come from a book, but there was none in evidence. The door to the cabin had not been forced. There was no indication of sexual assault. Other attempts at finding evidence were equally inconclusive. Fingerprints of three people had so far been found in the cabin—the victim's, Stoneham's and Polaski's... all of which could rightfully be expected there if their stories were correct.

The sheriff looked at his watch. Nine-thirty. It had been a very long and exasperating day, with little to show for it except aggravation. Simpson was right, they should both be getting back to their wives. Nothing further could be gained by staying here tonight.

"Sure, Don, go ahead. And give my love to Karen. Tell her I'm sorry to keep monopolizing you, but that's what she gets for marrying a brilliant husband."

Simpson departed, and Maschen made a pretense at straightening out the mess of papers in front of him. *Oh hell, he finally decide, what's the use? There'll only be more of them tomorrow, anyhow.* He left the mess piled on the desk and walked out of his office.

Just as he reached the bottom of the stairs, Deputy Whitmore called to him. "Oh, Sheriff, I was just about to buzz your office. There's a call for you, supposed to be urgent."

"Who is it?"

"She wouldn't say. Just keeps asking for you and saying it's urgent."

With a sigh, Maschen took the receiver. "Hello?"

"Is this the sheriff?" asked the female voice at the other end.

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"It's about my husband. I'm afraid he might be getting himself into trouble."

"Who is your husband, and what kind of trouble?"

"He went to attend the rally, and..."

"What rally?"

"The citizens' rally about the murder. He came back from the auditorium to get his car and said they were finally going to do something about the hippies. I asked him what, and he didn't say, only that a lot of people were going up to Totido Canyon."

A mob, thought Maschen. The perfect end to a perfect day. "Thank you for letting me know about it," he said into the phone.

"My husband won't get arrested for doing what he's doing, will he?" asked the anxious voice.

"That depends on what he does," Maschen said as he hung up. He turned to his deputy. "How many men do we have on duty at the moment, Tom?"

"Let's see, Simpson just went off, so that leaves us with nineteen, including you and me."

Nineteen men, plus another dozen off duty that could be called. And no riot control equipment—San Marcos had never needed any. There was some tear gas and a bullhorn. Other than that, the deputies all had standard armament, which was not the best for handling a rampaging mob. Once more, modern times were popping up at him and catching him unprepared.

"Well, I guess that should be enough men. Send out a message to all units to meet up in Totido Canyon. Tell them there's a mob of people headed in that direction, and they are to stop it by any means short of shooting. I'll be heading out there myself with the tear gas. You stay here and handle communications. Oh, and alert the Fire Department that they'll probably be needed. Mobs like to set fire to things."

As he drove up along the coast alone, Maschen blamed himself for allowing this situation to get out of hand. He was responsible for keeping the peace in San Marcos, and that

entailed knowing everything that was going on. Under normal circumstances, he would have known about this rally and taken precautions beforehand to make sure it stayed within control. But today he had been swamped with the details of the murder and had almost forgotten that the outside world existed. Had he done it as a defense mechanism, purposely burying himself in work so that he wouldn't have to face reality? Whether that was so or not, he was still responsible for the domestic tranquility and he had failed in his duty.

As he swung into the dirt road that led to the canyon, he could see the sky lit red with fires. He had been right in notifying the Fire Department, then. He comforted himself in the fact that he was not totally incompetent, just slightly out of touch.

He was only able to drive halfway up the road, though, for it was blocked with parked cars, both police and civilian, so that the road was impassable. He saw some activity up ahead.

"Tom," he called to Deputy Whitmore over the radio, "tell the Fire Department to hurry on out here. And tell them to come around by the east road—the south one is clogged with cars and they won't be able to get through." Then he left his car and walked up the road to see what was happening.

Just beyond the barricade of cars, a clump of people was milling. Two deputies and slightly over a dozen very abashed civilians were standing around peacefully. Maschen went up to one of his men, Larmer, and asked what had happened.

"We got here too late," the deputy explained. "Everything was over. There was a skirmish right here, where the group from San Marcos encountered a small number of hippies coming into town. One of the hippies got hurt in the fight," and he pointed to a body lying beside the road, "I've called for an ambulance for him. The rest of the hippies scattered into the underbrush and we don't know where they are. The main body of the mob moved on into the canyon itself, and the rest of our men went after them. We stayed back here to take care of these few stragglers."

Maschen patted him on the back and muttered a few words of praise, then walked on along the road to the camp. He had his

flashlight to guide him, although it wasn't necessary; the red flickering from the fires provided enough of a glow to enable him to see his way.

It took him half an hour to make it up to the commune in his exhausted condition. By the time he arrived, the county fire fighting units were on the scene and efficiently dealing with the blazes. In the central clearing stood the main body of the mob, milling aimlessly and looking rather pathetic. They were being kept in line by the rest of the deputies. There was no sign of the communites.

"The mob chased the hippies out," a deputy reported. "They came in with guns, but I don't think they shot anyone. They mostly threw stones and sticks, and the hippies ran into the woods. Then they started setting fire to the buildings. By the time we got here, they had pretty much used up all their anger and were looking confused, like they didn't know what to do next."

Maschen walked over to the fire chief who was super-vising the operations of his own men. "Everything all right, Ned?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think we got here in time. I was worried. We haven't had any rain in months, and this whole mountainside could have gone up. As it is, we'll lose these cabins and some of the brush around the immediate vicinity, but we'll have it under control in an hour or so." He shook his head and looked back at the mob of confused townsfolk. "Damn fools! What did they think they were accomplishing, anyway?"

Maschen patted the fire chief on the shoulder and let him go back to his business. Walking idly around, the sheriff surveyed what was left of the camp. All the buildings were ablaze, and the firemen were trampling through a grain field that had made an abortive start over to the side. The small vegetable and herb gardens that had been everywhere on Maschen's earlier visit were now trodden into oblivion by the heedless feet of the rioters. Where before there had been the excitement of youthful energy, there was now only a scene of tragedy left. The sheriff shook his head. He had not been in sympathy with the aims of the

commune members, but at least they had been trying to do something. Now the air was bitter with the taste of destruction.

Suddenly Maschen stopped. Facing him, about ten yards away,¹ was one of the girls from the commune. She was short and a bit plump, and her hair was stringy and disheveled. Her lips were swollen and there were numerous cuts and bruises on her face, one, particularly, under her left eye. Her dress was dirty and torn open in several places. She was looking straight at him with an expression he could not decipher.

They continued to stare at one another for a long moment. Then Maschen took a step toward her and the tableau broke. The girl turned and bolted back into the woods. "Wait," the sheriff called. "Come back. I'd like to help you." He started after her through the brush, but she was much faster and he quickly gave up. Fear was her motivation, and he would never be able to reach her. He hoped she wouldn't catch cold during the night in that torn dress.

Maschen turned back in the direction of the rest of the people. Sadly, he began walking through the ruins of the camp on his way back to his car.

CHAPTER IX

Garnna found a note on his desk when he arrived back at his office. He also noticed that the pen and the writing pad had been picked up from where he'd thrown them and placed neatly on the desk top.

He picked up the note and looked at it. It was neatly written and precise, not just a casual memo. It read: For the good of the Herd:

It has come to our attention that your behavior since your last Exploration has been erratic. You have questioned the decisions of your Coordinator and your iff-group, both without sufficient cause. You have broken the rule against observing individual situations during an Exploration. You have betrayed your duty as an Explorer by breaking the primary principle and allowing

your emotions to prejudice your observations. In view of these abuses, it is no longer in the best interests of the Herd for you to remain in your present position as an Explorer. Effective immediately, you will assume probationary status as an Exploration Evaluator. Should you prove incapable in that position, you will be sent to the Academy of your choice for reTesting and reTraining.

Counselor: Blauw iff-Rackin

Coordinators: Rettin iff-Laziel

Pogor iff-Tennamit

Nanz iff-Gohnal

Space Exploration Project

So there it was, the retaliatory blow at least. He supposed it must have been inevitable that some action would be taken against him after his odd behavior, but the actuality shocked him. He was no longer an Explorer. No more would his mind run free through the Universe, thrilling to the discovery of a new planet and a new race. Now he would be only an Evaluator at best. He would read the reports made by other Explorers and file them according to various dull rules. The excitement would belong to others, while he would examine and catalogue their experiences.

Was this action really for the good of the Herd? Possibly, from their point of view. Looking dispassionately back on his actions, Garnna himself was shocked by them. By all normal standards of social behavior, he had acted like a misfit, almost an outlaw. By the working definition of insanity in Zartic society, he could be considered mad. If he were to spot anyone else behaving the way he had, he would have requested that the fellow be held for intensive psychiatric treatment at once.

But Garnna was no longer shackled to the standard mode of behavior. True, he would still act for the welfare of the Herd under all advisable conditions—that training was strong, and he had no quarrel with the concept. But he had just come to realize

that there was something bigger to which he owed his first loyalty.

He had thought, on his way back from the Counselor's office, about what she had told him. She had been right about his motivation—he hadn't gone to her for answers or advice, but because he wanted support, ammunition to use in his arguments against Rettin. The authority of a Counselor agreeing with him would have ensured his getting what he wanted.

When he had asked his question about the Super-herd, he had already made up his mind that there was such a group. It was certainly not a formal organization —perhaps he was the only being in the Universe who was aware that it existed at all—but that would not alter the fact that it did exist. All intelligent life in the Universe belonged to it, because all intelligent life shared a common bond; it was their very intelligence, the questing to understand the workings of the Universe. It was this common factor that had created the need for a Superherd. When one race found an answer to some cosmic question, it had to be for the benefit of the entire Superherd because all intelligence wanted to know it.

There was a tie between all races, then, a brotherhood that ignored planetary barriers. As long as one sought after knowledge he was a member, and any small piece of information, no matter how seemingly insignificant, was an enrichment to the entire Superherd. And it was this tie of kinship that demanded that Garnna act in the case of the killing he had witnessed on that alien planet, for to leave such an incident unchecked would be to the detriment of the Superherd.

There was only one flaw he could find in his theory. In order for it to be universal, it would have to include the Offasü as well, since they were obviously intelligent creatures. But no member of the Zartic race, no matter how unprejudiced, would ever be able to consider a kinship between himself and the tyrannical race of former masters. Could the Offasü be a race of degenerates within the Superherd, much like that alien killer was degenerate within his own Herd? Garnna didn't know, but he refused to let the problem worry him too much at present; no cosmic philosophy

could be constructed entirely in the space of one afternoon. That problem could be reasoned out later.

Garnna weighed his alternatives. Those around him had ordered him not to take action because to do so might be detrimental to the Herd; and perhaps the alien society was corrupt anyway and should be allowed to disintegrate. But Norlak had told him that any order, even corrupt order, was better than chaos, and that all attempts must be made to preserve it. Perhaps allowing the aliens to learn about the Herd would be harmful, although Garnna doubted that very much. But allowing a crime to go unpunished would be harmful to the Superherd, for it would spread disorder. It was a question of which took precedence. On Zarti, one acted for the welfare of the Herd, even though it might have bad effects on any particular iff-group. The Herd always took precedence over the iff-group and the individual. In the larger scheme of things, the Herd was in the same relation to the Superherd that the iff-group occupied with respect to the Herd. Therefore, matters pertaining to the welfare of the Superherd would naturally take precedence over those of the Herd.

Garnna reread the note that had removed him from his job. By changing his position, Rettin and the others in charge of the Project were trying to neutralize his effectiveness in implementing his new philosophy. They were putting him in a position of impotence. He crushed the piece of paper angrily and threw it to the floor. *Can't they see what I'm trying to accomplish?* he moaned silently.

Or maybe that was the problem. Maybe they could see the same thing he saw. They need not be aware of it consciously, but down in the bottom of their minds they might see the basic structure rising. And they were afraid of it. It was big, it was new, it was different. They had lived all their lives for the Herd. Now they were asked to replace that concept with a bigger one, and their minds rebelled.

It had been the same with his iff-group, of course. The Superherd was unknown and therefore dangerous. It represented something that was not substantial, something they had not seen

with their own eyes and could not believe in. The Herd was safe and secure. Their responsibilities to it were well defined, and the benefits they derived from it were equally well delineated. It was a constant quality that gave them stability because it was familiar.

His new theory had seemed to threaten that stability. They saw it as an attempt to topple the Herd and put some new entity in its place. That was why both Yari and Rettin had been so ferocious in their attacks on his ideas—they treated them, not as concepts to be debated, but as enemies of all they stood for and believed.

This was wrong. Garnna was not trying to do away with the Herd or the individual's responsibility to it. He was merely trying to put it in its proper perspective in the universal picture. Instead of being of primary importance in every single instance, the Herd must now occasionally take a secondary role to the Superherd in deciding some issues.

There was a crucial difference between himself and the others. He had been Trained to observe impartially, to look at facts without prejudice or emotion and draw conclusions from them. It was necessary for being an Explorer, for the normal Zartic instincts rebelled at the sight of anything strange. Flight was the herbivore defense mechanism. In order to study aliens, he had to disconnect this mechanism and observe without fear. And this same training enabled him to accept the concept of the Superherd without being frightened by it.

But people who were not Trained as Explorers could not do this. They were still prey to all the fearful instincts that the ancestral herds had possessed in the forests and grasslands of Zarti. Anything new was a threat, to be run from or, if necessary, fought. And this was why Garnna's plans faced such stiff competition.

But what was there to do now? Garnna stood at his desk and thought. He could not allow this neutralization of his abilities to succeed, for that would be detrimental to the Superherd. Action had to be taken. It would have to be both incisive and decisive, with no wasted motion.

As he saw it, he had two duties to the Superherd. The first, obviously, was to find out whether the killer on that alien planet had been brought to justice and, if not, take some steps (he didn't know what) to make sure that it was. This was his duty to the other Herd so that the whole of the Superherd would remain harmonious.

But his second duty was much grander. He must teach the rest of his fellows about the existence of the Superherd, make them face the reality until they could accept it. They must be made to realize that they had a higher responsibility than just to the Herd, that they were guilty of regionalism. An iff-group that set itself apart from the Herd could not be tolerated, nor could a Herd that tried to isolate itself from the Superherd. The Zarticku had knowledge and abilities that could be useful to the community of intelligence, and this knowledge must be shared. If nothing else, the Zarticku seemed unique in their ability to project minds through space. The other races must be informed of this so that they, too, could explore the vast reaches of space which they also inhabited. As long as the Zarticku held back this information, the community of intelligence would be diminished by that much.

As he stood there at his desk, a plan started forming within his mind. Again he amazed himself, for the plan called for the contravention of the express orders of the Herd as rendered by a Counselor and three Coordinators. His determination wavered for an instant—had anyone else behaved this way, he would have labeled them insane or degenerate. For a moment, he harbored doubts about his own mental state. But he bolstered himself with the thought of the Superherd, and his resolution returned. He knew he was right, and so his plan could not be wrong.

He left the building at quitting time and went directly home. The tram ride seemed abnormally long, and he had to fight the temptation to get out and run instead. To calm himself, he forced his mind back to the plan, contemplating it and turning it over mentally, reviewing it from all angles. He would need an accomplice for it, but he thought he knew where he could find one.

He paid as little attention to dinner as he had to breakfast, but for a slightly different reason. Conversation flew over and around him as he ate silently. When the subject could no longer be avoided, he informed the rest of his iff-group that his position had been changed from Explorer to Evaluator. There was the shock and surprise he had expected, and he fielded the questions that naturally came at him as easily as he could. The people in charge, he explained, had noted his strange behavior since his return yesterday and decided that further Exploration might have an even worse effect on his psyche, reducing his usefulness to the Herd. Therefore, he had been switched to a new position. No, he didn't know much about it, but he would learn.

He noticed Yari standing at the end of the trough and looking smug. Once again, no doubt, he thought he had triumphed over the forces of change and chaos. He would be sorry for his younger, iff-brother, of course, but he would feel that this way would be of greatest benefit to the Herd. Garnna, in turn, felt sorry for someone with such a narrowly ruled mind that he couldn't see the bigger and more glorious order that was confronting him.

After dinner was through and everyone had retired to their sleeping cubicles, Garnna spoke to his mate. "I'd like you to help me," he said.

"What do you want?" Aliyenna asked innocently.

"I want you to help me go on another Exploration."

"But you're no longer an Explorer. You're not allowed to go any more."

"But I must go. It's my duty!"

"Your duty to the Herd is not to go. Yari proved yesterday that..."

"Not my duty to the Herd, but my duty to a larger body, the Superherd. There is something greater than the Herd, Aliyenna. It's composed of every intelligent creature in the Galaxy. The Herd is to it what an iff-group is to the Herd. It's to this

Superherd that we owe our first allegiance."

"But the Herd has forbidden you from making any more Explorations!"

"When the Superherd's welfare is at stake, the Herd has no authority to order me to do anything. If the Herd tries to stop me, then the Herd is wrong. I can't let that deter me from following my responsibility to the Superherd."

"You're mad," Aliyenna said, and there was a note of fear in her voice. "There is nothing greater than the Herd. We owe everything to the Herd."

"It's time we broadened our horizons, then. You do accept the fact that there are other intelligent beings in the Galaxy, don't you?"

She calmed down again as he took a more reasonable tone, but there was still wariness in her mien. "You and all the other Explorers have said there are. I see no reason to doubt your collective word."

"Do you doubt that these other beings have Herds of their own, in one form or another?"

Aliyenna hesitated. "I've never given it much thought. I suppose they must have something that keeps them in order. A Herd is probably necessary in, as you said, one form or another to keep them together."

"Good. But let's look at this situation on a larger scale. What happens when there is an interaction between two of these Herds? What power is it that will decide the pattern of behavior? Who will define the morals for different cultures? Where is the principle of order to be found between Herds?"

Aliyenna was shaking with fright again as the sheer size of his concept overwhelmed her. "I don't know, I don't know, I don't know."

Garnna held his mate tenderly, stroking the bristles along the

back of her neck and moving his body closer to hers to reassure her. "From the Superherd. It isn't a functional organization, at least not yet, but it must exist as a fundamental principle to stave off disorder. Just as members of the Herd owe their primary obligations to the Herd rather than the iff-group, so members of the Superherd must give *it* their first consideration, rather than their Herd. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Aliyenna closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. "Individually, every word you say makes sense, but when I try to put them all together... It's so big, Garnna. I can't grasp hold of it. It's too frightening."

Garnna sighed. His process of educating all of Zarti was going to take quite a bit of time if he couldn't even explain things well to his own mate. "Will you help me, though?"

She moved away from him and turned her head to the side so that she wouldn't have to look at him. "I... I don't know. You're asking me to disobey the direct wishes of the Herd..."

"For the good of the Superherd," Garnna said softly.

"I can't believe in your Superherd. The words sound logical, but I can't bring my emotions to *believe* them."

"Then believe in me. Do you believe me capable of disobeying the Herd without some good reason?"

"No." Her voice was barely audible.

"Then help me."

"I don't know how," she protested, trying to fight her way clear of the dilemma. "I can't operate the machines or tend to you once you're on the Exploration."

"You don't have to," Garnna explained. "Once the process is Started, the Exploration box functions automatically. I'll show you how to set the mechanism. But I can't do it alone. There are controls that have to be set after I enter the box. I need someone on the outside to start the process in motion. Will you help me?"

In the darkness, her silence seemed to stretch for years. Then her whole body trembled, as though from one icy blast of wind. "All right," she whispered.

"Let's go, then."

"Now? But it's nighttime!"

"If we tried to do it during the day, they'd stop us. We have to do it when no one else is there."

Reluctantly, Aliyenna went with him. They slipped silently out of the house without rousing anyone else. The public trams worked all night as well as all day in case some emergency should arise, and they took one that was otherwise deserted to the Space Exploration Project headquarters building. The city streets were exceptionally dark and gloomy—except for those few who provided essential services, all Zarticku worked during the day and slept at night. There was very little night lighting, and very few people wandered about after darkness fell. They saw no one else, and no one saw them.

The building was unlocked and unguarded because there was no need for such precautions. Crime, particularly theft, was unknown on Zarti and there were no "enemies of the state" from whom the information had to be kept. The Project was for the good of the Herd, and every member was entitled to know exactly what was going on. If very few of them stopped by to find out, it was only because their interests were absorbed by more immediate problems and they had no time to wonder what the stars were up to.

Garnna turned the lights on upon entering, totally unmindful of the possibility of detection. His thoughts were with the Exploration box on the second floor. He and Aliyenna went in silence up the stairs, turning on lights as they went. The light, as well as making it easier for them to see, also helped bolster Aliyenna's courage, for she felt that Garnna was banishing the darkness, and anything done in the light couldn't be wrong.

They went straight to the Exploration chamber. "You've been here before," Garnna said as they entered.

"Yes, to help you come out of the Exploration box."

"Well, now you're going to help me go in. There it is over there."

He took her over to it and let her feel and touch it so that it would become more familiar to her. Then he took her to the control panel at one side of the room. The complexity of the console frightened her at first and she despaired that she would ever be able to make it function correctly. But he took his time in showing the knobs and dials to her and explaining what each one was meant to do and how it worked. He had her repeat what he said, and then he had her go over the board, explaining it to him, until he was sure she had a working knowledge of all its functions. Then he explained the procedure that was necessary to make the machinery operate, and the two of them went over it until both were sure that Aliyenna could handle what was required of her.

Finally, Garnna went back to the Exploration box. With his mate's help he climbed in, attached all the wires to the correct places and made sure all systems were in working order. At last, he was ready to go.

"Be careful," Aliyenna told him before she closed the lid.

"There's no need," he reminded her. "Nothing can hurt me as long as all systems are functioning properly. I'll be a pure mind, remember?"

She nodded and closed the lid. Garnna closed his eyes and tried to relax in the cramped confines of the box. It would just be a couple of minutes more, and he tried to control his eager emotions.

He felt the tingling that started in his hooves and rapidly spread throughout the rest of his body. Then jarring vibrations. He could feel the drugs that were automatically injected into his bloodstream starting to work, to relax the body and free the mind. He began his mental exercises to help facilitate the separation. All his training came to the fore. His mind gave an orderly push against the confines of his brain. There was a

shock...

And he was free. He didn't waste a second. At the speed of thought, he streaked up through the atmosphere and away from Zarti, bent on a mission that would take him back to that double third planet of the yellow star over a hundred parsecs away.

CHAPTER X

Throughout the long and bitter argument, Debby sat on her stone. She absorbed the emotions of the people around her like a dry sponge soaking up water. Anger and fear were both prevalent, well mixed with the indecision of not knowing where to turn or what to do. Debby trembled slightly but did not react physically in any other way. Mentally, she was feeling sick.

The debate ended with animosity between the communities as well as against the townspeople. Evan Carpinton and a group of people left to go into town, disgusted with their fellows who had felt it was advisable to stay back at the camp and await further developments. Evan let it be known that he had little sympathy for those who were afraid to stand up and fight for their convictions, and that he was sorry he had ever hitched up with such a group of cowards. Bob Preston reminded him that membership in the commune was voluntary, and that he was free to leave at any time. Evan replied that he just might do that, but first he had work to do —getting a friend out of jail.

After Evan and his followers had left, the camp became very quiet. It did not require a psychic to sense the terrible vibrations in the air, and no one wanted to speak for fear of making it worse. They tried to resume eating the dinner that had been interrupted by the news of Polaski's arrest, but too much had occurred in the meantime and their meal had a dusty flavor. The remaining communitites ended up sitting around the campsite and staring dejectedly at one another.

Then the sound of people walking up the road to the camp was heard. The first thought was that it was Evan and his bunch returning, after having had a sudden attack of common sense. But that impression was dispelled almost instantly. There were

too many people in this new group for it to *be* that; and besides, they were carrying flashlights, which none of the communities possessed. The commune members gathered at the edge of the road in puzzlement, trying to see who the newcomers might be.

A collective holler rang out as the townspeople caught sight of their enemies and charged ahead. Before the commune members quite realized what was going on, they were in the middle of a donnybrook. The villagers, who outnumbered them more than four to one, had guns and rifles with them, but in the excitement of the melee they forgot to use them. The fighting brought itself down to a very personal level. Fists, sticks and rocks were the major weapons used, as well as barbed epithets from both sides. Emotions erupted as the townspeople pounded the communities mercilessly with any solid objects they could lay their hands on.

Caught by surprise and outnumbered, the members of the commune had only one tactic open to them—retreat. They fled into the hills surrounding the camp like animals before a forest fire. They were bleeding, battered and bruised, their clothes were torn and their spirits dashed. They ran blindly from their persecutors, through the brush and into the darkness.

The mob of townspeople was left standing in the middle of the deserted camp, still filled with anger and no longer having anyone to vent it on. In unthinking rage, they set fire to the camp cabins, cheering on the flames as they began burning with crackling orange luminescence. Then came the arrival of the sheriff's deputies. The mob's rage had been totally spent on the fires, and now they were only a confused group of people that the deputies could round up into a small herd in the center of the clearing. They bleated that they were only trying to protect themselves or their wives or their property from the hippies, but the deputies remained laconic and continued to keep them under guard.

Debby had fled the commune with the rest, more confused and stunned than any of them. One of the townsmen had hit her across the face with a tree branch, leaving a plethora of tiny bleeding cuts all across her features. There had been several other blows with the branch, too, but they had fallen on her body

leaving bruises and torn clothing in their wake. In escaping that man, she had run into another group who proceeded to throw rocks at her; one of the projectiles had hit her ankle, making a large purple bruise and causing her to limp slightly. Other stones had left marks over other portions of her body. Another man had struck her in the face with the butt of his pistol. As a result, there was a deep gash under her left eye that was bleeding profusely and making seeing difficult.

She ran from the camp, but more slowly than the others. She moved as if in a trance. The tidal wave of raw emotion had caught her unprepared, just after her sensitivity had been strained by the argument in the camp. She barely had control of her limbs as her mind was swimming for survival in this flood of feelings.

She stumbled a couple of times as she went, picked herself up automatically and continued on. She did not go very far. She was still tied to the camp by emotional bonds and the feelings that surrounded it and her. She moved into the bushes just out of range of the clearing, hidden from the sight of the townspeople. Then she stopped and watched them, without any emotion of her own. She watched as the people below her set fire to the buildings she had shared with others for the past three months. She watched as the deputies came and rounded up the rioters. She watched as the fire units arrived and began working frantically to keep the flames from spreading into the hills.

A man started walking in her direction. She stood up quickly but didn't move from the spot. It was Sheriff Maschen. He saw her and stopped. The two stared at one another for what seemed to Debby like an eternity. The flickering red light of the fires below lit up his face in an eerie, demonic way. He suddenly seemed to her like Satan risen out of the depths of Hell to claim her soul. She stood rigid on the spot, paralyzed by fear.

He took a step toward her, and her paralysis broke. *He is the enemy. He took Carl away. He'll take you too. Run! RUN!*

In .panic, she ran. She didn't even notice the soreness in her ankle where the stone had hit. Up, up, into the hills, that was her only thought. Outstretched branches and bushes reached for her,

grabbed at her skin and clothing, leaving scratches and tears as she pulled away from them in instinctive horror. The night was closing in around her, a black ogre with a menacing stare, trying to smother her with its dark pillow. She ran and the night followed, growing darker and darker the further she got from the fires at the camp. The sea air was cold, damp, heavy; she could barely manage to inhale enough to sustain her on her flight. There was a cramp in her side, but she ran. She cared not where her feet took her, as long as it was away, away from that pit of mental vipers.

She tripped over a rock and fell, and could not find the strength to get back on her feet to run some more. She lay there with her face in the dirt and cried. Her tears mixed with the blood from the gash under her eye and moistened the dry ground beneath her face. The cramp in her side was now a spear twisting through her guts. Her ankle throbbed with pain at the abuse it had received. She clenched her fists to ward off some of the pain, but it did little good.

In time, the pain eased. She recovered her breath and a portion of her strength. With a great effort, she leaned on her arms and drew her legs up under her in a sitting position. She inhaled great lungfuls of air, though each breath was a fire in her chest. The muscles in her side relaxed and the cramp faded away. Her ankle did not throb quite so fiercely. Her brain started functioning again as the adrenalin in her bloodstream sank to an acceptable level.

She was aware of a million tiny stings and sores all over her body, and she was having trouble keeping her left eye open. She reached up a hand to touch it, and it came away sticky from half-dried blood. She bent over and tore off a piece of cloth from the bottom of her dress, then daubed it gently over the gash until the blood seemed dry.

It was a while before she moved again. She sat on the ground, thinking bitter thoughts. She had warned them that something tragic had been about to happen. They had refused to listen. The full fury of the riot had even caught her unprepared. *I ought to be named Cassandra*, she thought ruefully.

Her muscles complained strenuously as she stood up. She looked around her, wondering where she would go now. Down at the bottom of the hill, it seemed like miles, the red fires at the camp were flickering feebly and illuminating the night with their hellish glow. Part of her mind wanted to go back, but another part rebelled. As long as the fires were still there, the firemen would be trying to put them out. At the moment, she wanted no contact with anyone, least of all anyone from San Marcos. She needed time just to be alone with her own mind, to let the mental scars heal themselves over and return her to a semblance of normalcy.

She wandered around the mountainside without direction, her way lit by the gradually dying light of the fires at the camp. She favored her bruised ankle and picked her way carefully around the bushes. She was in no hurry, she was not going anywhere specific. She just let her feet pick the path they wanted to go, while she divested her mind of all thoughts.

The night now had changed from an ogre to an ally. The stars were gleaming smartly down, assuring her of their amity with their steady light. The night insects sang her a chorus of warmth and peace as she walked, and a bird—was it an owl?—hooted softly at her passing. The bushes no longer grabbed at her, and even seemed to part slightly as she stepped between them.

After awhile, she realized that she was walking in a big circle through the hills, keeping herself about the same distance from the campsite, afraid to approach it, unable to leave. She filed the information indifferently in her mind and continued walking.

Several hours passed. The county fire fighting units extinguished the last of the fires, searched the area thoroughly to make sure that there were no hot spots smoldering secretly, and left. With the fires gone, most of the light had departed but the waning moon had finally risen and was providing a modicum of light for Debby to see by. She walked some more, a trifle slower as she had to pick her way with less light. She found that her feet were leading her down to the now-empty camp. She let them go in that direction. Emotionally, she was still numb and subject to the whims of her subconscious.

The night was no longer quite as friendly by the time Debby reached the bottom of the hill. A cold wind had picked up from the sea less than a mile away, blowing a wet breeze through the tatters of Debby's dress and chilling her to the bone. She picked her way through the wreckage of the camp, hugging herself tightly to conserve the warmth. She made her way to the exact center of the clearing and sat down cross-legged on the damp ground. Her eyes roamed over the moonlit devastation as she surveyed the past, the dismal present and the beautiful might-have-beens.

It had been a dream they had all believed in, that people could live in a simple, natural way even in the midst of the technological age. They had all worked to make it a reality, perhaps worked too hard. Now only ashes remained. The wooden buildings were charred and empty, their roofs gone and their walls threatening to collapse in a stiff breeze. The fields and gardens that she and the others had tended were trampled under by a parade of uncaring feet. But, while it had lasted, the commune had provided all of its members with a security few of them had known before. It had been comforting to know that, whatever your problem, you had thirty-seven good friends with whom you could share it, who wouldn't laugh at you or turn away from you just because you were in trouble. Was it inevitable, as Carl seemed to think, that the commune would be destroyed? Even though he had done his best to help, he had always been convinced that the experiment would fail, like all the other communes that had ever been tried. He had been looking for a reason, to try to determine *why* they kept failing.

The dream lay in ruins now. Debby missed it more than anything else in her entire life. But she could not cry for it. Her reservoir of emotions had been drained too badly that night.

A familiar hulk came jogging up to her—Chairman Mao, the Irish setter that had been the unofficial mascot of the commune. He sat down beside her with his tongue lolling out, and she stroked his back and said soothing words to him—words that she herself could not believe. She had more intelligence than a dog. But if the animal drew comfort from her words, she supposed that was enough.

The chill was getting worse. She pulled the dog over to her and tried to snuggle against it for warmth, but the dog was not very snuggly. It tried its best, but it did nothing to assuage the cold that was seeping through Debby's torn clothing.

It's the loneliness, she thought. It's not enough. It's a loud loneliness, echoing with the shouts of past memories and the jading din of dreams. Being without anyone else here isn't enough. I have to be at ease with myself, too.

She "got up slowly and went over to the lightning-blasted cypress at the south end of the camp where her stash of grass was buried. Now, more than ever, she needed the soothing effect that only pot seemed to give her, the ability to calm her raw nerves and protect her from the hostile world around her. Even though Carl had made a rule absolutely forbidding the use of illegal drugs at the commune, she had hidden her stash by this tree just in case she might someday need it. Carl had known all along that she had had it somewhere, but he'd never bothered her about it. All he was concerned with was that it remain hidden and unused, so that the commune wouldn't get in trouble with the law.

Her lips twisted in an ironic smile. Poor Carl, who had been such a stickler for obeying the law, was the one who had gotten busted. And now, because of that, the entire commune had been destroyed. There was no one to care and no one to worry if she were to light up a joint now. Only Chairman Mao would be a silent witness to her crime. The irony was that her smoking the pot was the result of the camp's destruction, not the cause of it.

She was half afraid that the stash wouldn't be there, that all the trampling around the area had led to its discovery. She pawed at the loose dirt at the base of the cypress, and it was with great relief that her fingers found the small metal cookie tin. The box felt rusty as she pried it out of the ground with trembling hands and took it with her to the center of the camp where the dog sat waiting.

She opened the cookie box. Inside was a baby food jar that contained a plastic bag full of grass, a small packet of papers and a package of waterproof hunter's matches. Debby sighed,

wishing she'd thought to bury a Bambu roller, too. This joint would have to be hand-rolled.

After laying the papers out on the cookie tin lid, she nervously took out the grass, pleased to see that it was still dry. Her fingers were shaking and she spilled more than a joint's worth on the top of the cookie tin before she managed to get it right. Finally she had it rolled, and it was with positive pleasure that she licked the paper and twisted the ends shut.

She looked around for, and finally found, a small rock on which to strike her matches. The first three matches snapped in her frantic attempts to light them, but the fourth one caught. She lit her joint, then sat cross-legged on the ground, waiting for the marijuana to take effect and trying to ignore the chilling blasts of wind that roared through Totido Canyon.

After the fourth token she began to feel the customary tingling in her toes and fingertips that marked the start of a high. The grass began to massage her temples with a slow, rhythmic throbbing. As she continued to smoke, she could feel the cutting of her puppet strings and the freedom flowing up from her fingers. The involuntary tension lessened as all her muscles melted. By the time she was totally high, all of her was feeling warm and safe in the pleasant easiness induced by the drug.

At first she had been worried that she might have a bumner because of being depressed when she started, but this one was good and she felt just the gentle relaxation that always accompanied a high. Even the myriad of tiny pains vanished under the balm of the drug's influence. She became very aware of the palms of her hands, the arches of her feet and the skin between her eyebrows. She became aware that she was alone, really alone, at last, with no one to bug her. She had forgotten how good it could feel to be absolutely alone with oneself after three months of drug abstinence in the friendly but crowded atmosphere of the commune. Too much company, she decided in a flash of insight, is as bad as none at all. There has to be a balance struck somewhere. She had been too long with other people, worrying about their problems and involving them in her own. It was time to be alone, now, to meditate.

She was sitting alone and peaceful in the center of the camp. Beside her, she could hear Chairman Mao panting doggishly, sounding like an old steam locomotive climbing a hill. She opened her eyes (which she hadn't realized she'd closed) and looked at him. No longer was he just a big red dog. He was a cut-out from some coloring book done in burnt sienna crayon. He was the living essence of burnt sienna, all the red-brown aspects merged into one being. She stared at him for a long time, wondering how she could possibly have missed the connection before. Not red; burnt sienna. Now they'd have to rename him. But what kind of a name would go with burnt sienna?

Then she remembered that "they" wouldn't be doing anything any more. The commune was over. Done. Kaput. Finis. She found a lonely tear curled up within her tear ducts and pushed it out, letting it fall in memory of the nice things that had been in camp.

She pushed her mind from that subject. It was still too tender a wound to touch, even under the influence of grass. Think about other things.

(An image formed of Carl Polaski, a perfect likeness down to the tiny scar beside his nose. His mouse-brown beard and mustache were a slightly darker shade than his hair. He was smiling in his polite, friendly way, and she saw his tall, lean body stripped to the waist for washing in the morning.)

No! That's the past! Think about now, the present.

Debby looked around the camp and tried to ignore all the ghosts that kept popping out at her from behind the deserted buildings. Ghosts of past friendships and dead events. Echoes of old laughter. *No more*. She put the brakes to those thoughts as she caught the incipient bummer. *Think of now*.

One cold and lonely little girl sitting in the dirt next to a burnt sienna coloring book dog late at night in the middle of fire-charred ruins. That was the now. How sad. How very, very sad. She searched her tear ducts but try as she would she could not find another tear to spare.

She lay back against the ground and stared up at the stars. She had never looked at the stars while she was high before. It was as though she'd never seen them at all. She moved her head quickly to the side and the stars flashed past in blurs and streaks. Like comets arching their bright tails across the dark sky. She whipped her head back the other way. More comets answered. A cluster of comets, a corps of comets, a cavalcade of comets. *Debby Bauer, comet maker*, she thought gleefully.

She spent half an eternity shaking her head before she finally tired of the comets. She relaxed, lay back and just admired the star show overhead. Why had she never looked at the sky before? "Hello stars," she said. "You've come to keep me company, haven't you? I don't need company, but you're welcome anyway."

They were so close, the stars. If she sat up suddenly, she'd bump her head on them. She wondered if her comets would feel all sparkly on her fingers. Would they fly around her knuckles as rings? She closed her eyes and reached up for them...

BUMP.

For a moment she was startled. She opened her eyes and looked around her for something that might have caused that sensation. But there was nothing near her that could have done it—even the burnt sienna coloring book dog had wandered over by one of the charred cabins. She was alone on the ground, with nothing nearby to disturb her.

But she had felt something. Something had bumped into her, or she into it. If she hadn't actually touched anything, then it had to be in her head. She'd never felt anything like it before. Closing her eyes again, she settled back. Maybe it was still there and she could find out what it was.

She reached out once more for the stars...

BUMP.

There it was again, the same thing she'd hit before. It was as though her mind were a car driving in fog and continuing to run into some solid object. She tried a third time and bumped once

more.

She was suddenly frightened. *What can it be? How can there be anything there when I'm alone with my own mind? Is... is it a ghost? I've never heard of anyone finding anything like this before.*

She was determined to find out what it was. Out of sheer stubbornness she banged the fringes of her mind against it repeatedly, and got only a mild headache for her efforts. Whatever it was, it could not be touched by brute force.

She decided that a second joint might help her reach it. Very calmly, she began rolling herself another. This time her hands were steady, no nervousness left. She rolled the joint effortlessly, without a shake of the hand or a particle spilled. She eyed her final creation with pride. *Not even John Wayne could have rolled a better one,* she thought.

As she smoked it, she continued her earlier analogy. *All right, I'm in a car that keeps knocking into something. I can't see what it is. So the smart thing to do is get out and investigate, right?*

Only how could she get out of her own mind? She puzzled on that for long eons as the joint burned down to nothing. Well, her mind was far from solid, perhaps she could find a crack and ooze out through it, though what she would do when she got outside was a complete mystery to her. Perhaps she would never be able to get back in again. That thought made her hesitate, but only briefly. *Well, what have I got to lose?* she finally decided.

Very gingerly, she pushed at the boundaries of her mind, exploring for the nooks and crannies that she was sure must be there. When she got up close and took a good look, it surprised her exactly how porous it was. There was no problem at all of being able to find a hole and slip through into the eerie void beyond. When she was completely free, she looked around and...

CONTACT!

CHAPTER XI

Twenty-five hours, Maschen thought as he rubbed a hand through his already-mussed hair. Twenty-five goddamned consecutive hours at this job. I'm getting too old for this sort of thing. I really am.

His eyes were refusing point-blank to focus on the wall in front of him. He was sure that they must be glowing like red embers by this time, he felt so bloodshot. He had had very little sleep the night before, being awakened early because of the Stoneham case. Then he had worked hard on that all day, and when he had been about to leave, the riot started. He had spent the rest of the night taking care of the administrative details that always followed in the wake of mass arrests. The cells at the Sheriff's Station had never been made to hold seventy-three people at one time, and so he had had to go through the exhausting process of weeding out the ones who had actually done damage from those who had just been along for the ride. That entailed elaborate questioning and crosschecking of stories, prodding people's memories and threatening them with perjury if they lied. None of the commune members was around to testify, so the only evidence was the word of the rioters themselves, and their stories conflicted more often than not. He had finally booked all of them and remanded the ones he thought were slightly less guilty than others to their own custody. They were all, under normal circumstances, respectable citizens, and he knew he'd be able to find them when he wanted to.

In listening to all the stories of the rally and the riot, Maschen thought he had detected a false note. Something that had been said jarred with what he knew was right. He pored over the transcripts, searching for the clue he knew instinctively was there. But whatever it was remained hidden by fatigue, buried at the base of his subconscious and stubbornly refusing to surface.

And in the meantime, while he'd been busy with that, the night had completely escaped him. The sky was lightening in the east outside his window, and his mouth was stretched in an almost perpetual yawn. "That's it, Tom, I've had it for today," he told his deputy. "I'm going home now and I'll probably sleep for

eighteen hours solid. Try not to interrupt me for anything short of the end of the world. Come to think of it, I'd rather sleep through that, too."

As he was walking out the door, he nearly stepped on the girl who was coming in. He asked her to excuse him and was halfway down the steps before he recognized her. She was the girl he had seen at the camp, the one who had run from him when he'd tried to help her. She had not changed her clothes, which were dirtier and grubbier than before, as well as more torn. The cut under her left eye had closed up, leaving just a blue swelling and a line of dried blood. She walked with a limp that he didn't recall, but Maschen was sure she was the same girl.

What's she doing coming in here now? he wondered. The very tired man in him said that the reason wasn't important and that he needed some sleep, while the peace officer part of his soul was saying that this might be a very significant event. The sheriff section won. With a weary sigh, he turned around and walked back into the station.

The girl was in the process of arguing with the Deputy Whitmore as Maschen entered. "Okay, what seems to be the problem here?" the sheriff asked, trying his best to keep the fatigue out of his voice.

Whitmore looked up, surprised and relieved to spot his superior. "I thought you were on your way home, sir."

"I'm not. Now what's this lady's problem?"

"She wants to see Polaski, and I told her that you said no visitors were allowed except his lawyer."

Maschen had made that rule to keep reporters out, hoping to keep the sensationalism of the press to a minimum. He also wanted to foil any possible escapes, on the off chance that the commune had planned any. But the commune was no longer a viable force, and the press were all busy with riot stories. Maschen looked at the girl. "Are you any relation to the prisoner?" he asked.

"Just a friend," she replied. "It's very important that I talk to him."

"Can you tell me why?"

"I'd rather tell him."

Maschen sighed. "All right, Tom, you can let her see him, I suppose. Have her sign in, then take her to the visiting room."

The deputy complied, and Maschen waited in the outer room. *It's probably something trivial*, he thought to himself, *But just in case it isn't, I suppose I should be here to find out.*

Polaski was surprised to be awakened at this early hour for a visitor. All the commotion with the mass arrests several hours ago had woken him up, and he had learned from the general conversation that there had been a riot and that the townspeople had busted up the commune. He had been anxious to learn more specific details, but no one had wanted to talk with him. He had worried about it privately for awhile, until he had finally decided that such concern was useless in his present circumstances. He had lain down again and had just fallen asleep, it seemed, when they woke him up and told him he had a visitor. The sheriff had said that only his lawyer would be allowed in and this was an awfully early hour for lawyers. He started wondering whether they were actually trying some of the Oriental brainwashing techniques on him. But his doubts were dispelled when he entered the plain white visiting room and saw who was waiting there.

"Debby!" he cried, delighted to see a friendly face. "How did you get them to let you in here?" Then he took a closer look and saw her battle scars. "My God, what's happened to you?"

"I got hit with sticks and stones," she said sarcastically. The deputy who had brought Polaski in left the room, closing the door behind him. "That's not important at the moment, though. I've come to help you get out of here."

"Not a jailbreak, I hope," Polaski said warily. He had enough confidence in the fact that he didn't commit the crime, and that

there didn't appear to be very substantial evidence against him. He didn't want to jeopardize his position by doing anything foolish.

Debby shook her head. "No, nothing like that. I've found someone who was a witness to the crime, who actually saw the man who did it."

"Great!" Polaski exclaimed, leaping up from his chair. "Have you told the sheriff about this yet?"

"No, I wanted to talk to you about it first."

The psychologist looked at her, puzzled. "Why?"

Debby seemed pained. On closer inspection, Polaski noticed that her eyes were dilated and bloodshot. *She's been smoking grass again*, he thought. He wondered whether that would have any bearing on what she was about to tell him, and he hoped that the sheriff wouldn't notice her stoned condition.

"Well," Debby explained, "he's not exactly the type of witness that you can use very easily. He couldn't be called into a courtroom to testify, or..."

"Who is he?" Polaski interrupted.

"His... his name is Garnna, and he's from outer space."

Polaski just stared at her. He felt that some reaction was called for, but he honestly didn't know what. Should he laugh or cry or tell her she was crazy?

"I know it sounds dumb, but it's the truth, I swear it," Debby continued hurriedly. "He talks to me through my mind, like telepathy only it's very garbled."

"Can he talk to anyone else?"

"I don't think so. I think it's very lucky that he was able to talk to me. You've always said I have some form of latent ESP powers, and last night I was..." She looked self-consciously around her

and lowered her voice. "Last night I was smoking some pot, which helped me project my mind further. And I ran into him. It's very hard to understand him, because he doesn't think in the same way we do, but he's been able to get some ideas across."

Polaski paced about the room, avoiding looking at the girl. "Can you tell me anything more about this spaceman?"

"Like I said, it's hard for him to get his ideas across. But he comes from a far away planet. He's a space explorer—the way they do it is to separate their minds from their bodies and send the minds out to explore, so what I'm in contact with is a pure mind. He says he was exploring our planet two nights ago and just happened to witness the murder."

"What's taken him so long to come forward?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's very hard for him to contact us. Like I said, I think it was sheer luck that the conditions happened to be right for him to reach me."

The psychologist paced some more. He was aware that Debby was watching him, but he didn't speak for some time. Finally, he said, "Debby, we can't tell the sheriff a story like that."

"Why not? I know it sounds crazy, but it's the truth."

He sat down beside her and looked at her intently. "I know you're hearing voices that say I'm innocent. But I have to look at the phenomenon from a psychological standpoint. Because of your strong feelings toward me, you may be susceptible to suggestions from your subconscious telling you things that you want to hear..."

"In other words," Debby said bitterly, "you think I'm faking all this because I love you."

"No, not faking. I believe that you're really hearing something; you're too honest a person to fake it. But the subconscious is a clever beast, it plays tricks on all of us. You want very much for me to be found innocent, don't you?"

"Yes," Debby admitted, "but..."

"Well, your subconscious is trying to give you what you want. It's invented a hypothetical man from outer space, a *deus ex machina* who is going to solve all your problems by proving me innocent. Only he isn't real. He's a product of your wishes and dreams."

"If I were going to make something up, don't you think I would have made it a little more logical and believable than this?"

"The subconscious is not always logical," Polaski said quietly.

There was another long silence. Then Debby said, "Isn't there some way that I can prove to you he does exist?"

"I don't know. I suppose there must be some scientific procedure that could establish whether this voice was real or imagined. But that isn't my field. I'm not sure exactly how to go about it."

"You've always been saying that you'd like to test me with some cards. Wouldn't that work?"

"The Rhine cards are meant to show whether you have telepathic or precognitive abilities. I don't know whether they could be used to indicate whether you are actually in communication with someone from outer space." He thought it over for a moment. "Hmm, maybe. But I don't have any cards with me. I'd have to ask the sheriff for them, and we'd have to prove to him that this communication is genuine. Would you be willing to do that? Are you so sure that this voice is real that you would risk proving it in front of witnesses?"

Debby didn't even blink. "Sure. I'll prove it in front of anybody you want. Just give me the chance."

Polaski hesitated. "Debby, there's something you ought to be made aware of. If this is a subconscious phenomenon, as I'm afraid it is, then these tests could hurt you. If they should prove that you aren't in contact with this... what did you say his name

was?"

"Garnna."

"If we prove that there is no Garnna, it will put you in a bad position. The subconscious mind doesn't like to be proved wrong. Bringing you into a direct confrontation with your subconscious could trigger an emotional shock that would leave you in a pretty bad way."

"I *know* this voice is real," Debby insisted.

The psychologist sighed. "Okay, but remember what I said about the consequences."

Polaski called for the sheriff. To the psychologist, Maschen was looking more bedraggled than he had yesterday. His face was covered with a two-day growth of stubble, his hair was mussed and his eyes looked like they could barely manage to stay open. His uniform was sweatstained and soiled, with dirt firmly embedded in the many creases and wrinkles. *He must have had a pretty rough time over this past twenty-four hours*, Polaski thought.

"All right," Maschen said, "I'm here. Tell me what's going on."

Polaski did most of the talking, with occasional comment or corrections by Debby. He told the sheriff first about the girl's sensitivity to psychic phenomena, then told him about the voice she claimed to hear. He omitted all reference to her smoking marijuana—the sheriff did not need to know that, and it would only complicate the situation. He explained that Debby's contact claimed to have witnessed the murder. Then he gave his own interpretation of the phenomenon.

Maschen was silent for the whole time and for quite a while afterward. When he did speak, all the fatigue of the previous day showed in his voice. "How can I possibly believe a story like this? You don't even sound as though you believe it."

"I don't," Polaski admitted, ignoring the startled glance Debby threw at him. "But I'm willing to give it a test, under conditions

that are as scientific as possible."

"And you want me to help?"

"The more impartial witnesses we have, the better we can assure ourselves that there is no fraud involved. If I were to do this myself and find that Debby was right, you wouldn't believe me. You'd have to see the proof for yourself, anyway."

Maschen was still skeptical. "I don't know whether I should lend the dignity of my office to stunts like this. It's highly unorthodox..."

"We're dealing with an unorthodox situation," Polaski pressed. "And if it doesn't work out, all you'll have lost will be a little time. Debby is the one who is taking the risk here. Because if this is just a manifestation of her subconscious and not an extraterrestrial visitor as she claims, it would be psychologically damaging to her. A lot of hard can be done by forcing someone to face up to their subconscious too suddenly. If she's willing to take that chance, then we should be willing to test her."

The sheriff exhaled loudly. "Things just aren't very simple nowadays, are they? All right, we'll test her. Do we need any kind of equipment?"

"Just an ordinary deck of cards should do, if you can find us one."

"That shouldn't be too hard. Somewhere in this entire Sheriff's Station there ought to be a deck of cards."

Garnna was becoming edgy. His time here on this planet was limited, and it was being wasted with games. The minds of these creatures seemed filled with suspicions of all sorts. It made him wonder for a moment whether he was right after all in his theories about the Superherd. Were these creatures truly kinsmen of his, iff-sibs in a larger group? Soon he would have to return to his body and he had accomplished nothing so far.

He had despaired, at first, of ever being able to make contact at all. Theoretically it couldn't be done, and he had never heard

of any other instances of it occurring in practice. He was just a pure mind, without any reality upon this world and thus, supposedly, just a viewer of what went on. That had been one of Rettin's best arguments, that a trip back to this planet would be useless and therefore a waste of time and energy.

He had come back first to the initial spot of the crime, but it was deserted. He could not be sure what that had meant, but someone must have removed the body and so he supposed that the crime had been discovered. He had next to check and see whether the guilty party had been apprehended and punished. He had spread himself like a net over the entire surrounding area for a hundred square miles—not a difficult feat, when he was accustomed to spreading over much vaster distances than that in the initial stages of Exploration. And he had found the killer, still free and exercising power over the actions of others of its race. By tuning in on the killer's thoughts, Garnna could see that the other's plan was working, that some innocent person had been charged with the crime and that the killer was taking further steps to confuse its fellows.

So his fears had proven justified after all. But now came the hard part. He would have to do something, somehow, to show these aliens that they were wrong in their thinking and that another creature was responsible for the crime. But how was he to do that? He was a pure mentality. He could not affect substance in any way. He could not try making clues or leaving a note, because he could not touch anything. The only possible way would be through the minds of others. He had a telepathic ability of a sort, in that he could see what passed through other people's minds. Was there some way he could reverse that, make someone see what was in his mind? He had to try.

He had tried, first, to contact an alien whose mind showed it to be responsible for maintaining the peace within the community. There was not the faintest response. He also had tried to contact the innocent victim of the deception, likewise without success. He went from mind to mind at random throughout the small town, and each time it was the same. It was as though their minds were huddled deep within themselves, separated from him not only by a barrier but also by a mental

distance. One or the other obstacle might be surmountable, but not both.

He had watched helplessly as the mob from town had stormed the small commune. He hadn't been able to detect a logical motive in their efforts, but feelings of anger, fear and frustration were strong. As he'd watched the destruction and chaos, Rettin's argument had returned to haunt him. Perhaps this civilization would be better off if it were allowed to disintegrate. They did not have a very cohesive Herd, perhaps no Herd at all. Maybe he shouldn't interfere and instead allow darkness to gobble up this tiny corner of the Universe. These beings would hardly be missed in the larger order of things.

But there was Norlak's advice to counter that. *Any* order, however imperfect, was better than chaos. It had sounded right when she had said it, it must be right in practice. And so even this culture, with its deceits and iniquities, must be worth salvaging, if only so that it could perhaps grow into something better.

After the riot, Garnna had stayed on the scene until all had departed. All but one. A smaller one of the creatures, feeling very hurt, and despairing almost as much as Garnna himself. This one was different from the others. Its mind was not quite so distant. He tried shouting to it, but still it could not hear him. Then it did something unexpected—it took a drug. Garnna had never seen a drug ingested by inhalation—he was only acquainted with injection and digestion—but the effects on the individual were unmistakable. The drug acted on the nervous system much like those that were used in Zartic space exploration. The alien's mind drifted up, and Garnna's rushed down to meet it. They touched...

But there was still the barrier, a wall around the alien's mind. No two-way communication could pass through that. The creature could sense his presence, for it kept throwing its mind at the barrier, trying to get through. Garnna yelled at it, saying that that was not the way. Perhaps the creature heard him, for it stopped those efforts, took more of the drug and tried to squeeze through the barrier. In a short time, it had made it and Garnna

lunged forward to embrace it eagerly.

CONTACT!

That first rippling explosion of minds had startled both of them. Initially, the alien mind tried to flee from his in panic, but he held it firmly, talking to it in words it could not possibly understand and soothing it until eventually its panic subsided. Then Garnna explained— or tried to—exactly who he was and what he wanted to do. The other listened; skeptically, at first, but then with more and more conviction that he was telling it the truth. It had agreed to go to the proper authority and tell the story, and Garnna had followed along with it to make sure that everything went as it should.

But now there were all these delays, and he was finding it hard to understand the motivation. The alien he had contacted knew the story of what had happened, but first the others would have to test for his existence before they could believe. He had to detach his own pre-conceptions and use all his Explorer's Training in thinking along alien lines before he could even partway satisfy himself as to their behavior.

Alien contacts obviously did not come along as an everyday occurrence here, just as they did not on Zarti. Therefore, this one was new and highly unusual for them. Then, too, these creatures lived on a world where deception was, if not an ideal, then at least a reality that had to be accounted for. When examining a phenomenon so utterly unique, suspicion was called for as a matter of necessity. On Zarti, if any individual had claimed mental contact with a member of an alien race, he would have been readily believed and questioned about it at once. It would have been implicitly assumed that he was acting for the good of the Herd and therefore could not be lying. Here, though, all motives were suspect. Garnna did not like these conditions, but there was nothing he could do to change them.

They had set up a test, his alien explained. One of the other aliens—the Peacekeeper, as closely as Garnna could read its function—would be in one room holding a stack of papers on which were printed symbols of various types and colors. Garnna's alien would be in another room. The Peacekeeper-alien

would hold up one of the papers at a time. Garnna was to observe what was printed on it and give a mental image of it to his alien, who would then record what it was. By comparing the reported designs with the actual, the aliens hoped that they could confirm Garnna's existence.

Garnna acceded to their requests for the test, even though he regretted the need for it. It seemed at least logical, if simpleminded.

The test proceeded with agonizing slowness. They went one design at a time, with Garnna relaying the picture to his alien who then proceeded to write it down. Design after design after design he looked at, growing angrier and more impatient with each one.

"I don't believe it," Maschen said.

"Neither do I," Polaski agreed, his voice resonating subdued incredulity. "But you and I set up the test. There was no way Debby could have cheated or known the answers in advance."

"Don't keep me in suspense," Debby said. "Did I do all right?"

"You got a hundred percent," Polaski told her. "Not only did you get all the numbers right, but the suits as well."

Debby beamed. "It was easy. Garnna didn't know anything about cards, but all he had to do was show me a picture of it and I could figure out what it was. Most of our conversation has been in pictures."

Maschen was shaking his head. "Even so, this doesn't prove that there's any little spaceman talking to her."

"No," Polaski agreed. "All it shows is that she's got some kind of psychic power operating for her that we don't know anything about. I'm not up on previous cases, but I'm positive that a score of a hundred percent is completely unheard of. Even fifty percent would probably have been phenomenal. You'll have to admit, sheriff, that whatever is responsible for her performance this morning, she has access to informational sources that normal

people don't."

Maschen nodded and rubbed at his eyes. He was feeling more tired than ever before in his life. "All right, Miss Bauer, you say that this... this creature tells you that Dr. Polaski did not kill Mrs. Stoneham. Does he know who did?"

"Yes, sir. Her husband, Mr. Stoneham."

CHAPTER XII

Maschen sat down hard in the chair behind him, letting the concept sink into his brain. Wesley Stoneham, the murderer. The thought was intriguing; he did not like the big attorney at all. The man was certainly capable of murder, with that huge, muscular body and hair-trigger temper. But Stoneham was a respected citizen, and a powerful one. Before taking any irresponsible—and irreversible—actions, Maschen had better be sure of what he was doing.

"You could still be lying," he said, and his voice sounded hoarse even to himself. "Just because you have ESP doesn't necessarily make you any more truthful than anyone else. Or maybe your spaceman friend is lying."

"Why should he do that?" Debby protested. "Maybe it's all part of a plot to take over the world!" Maschen exploded. Then he lowered his head and rested his forehead on his hand. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to yell. I've been up for more than a day without any sleep, and I'm tired and grumpy and I'm saying things I shouldn't say. The whole world is changing around me, and I'm having to hold on for my life, not to mention my sanity." He raised his head again and gave her a grandfatherly look. "Would you please describe the circumstances of the murder as your friend saw it?"

Garnna had given the story to her in the form of a silent movie, and Debby relayed it as he had shown it to her. She described Stoneham getting angry and strangling his wife, then becoming overwhelmed by what he had done and sitting on the sofa for a minute to think. Then he had come up with a plan for

fooling everybody, taken the handkerchief from his pocket and used the knife from the utensil set on the wall to slice up his wife's body. And that was exactly how the crime was done.

Maschen listened very intently to her story. When she had finished, he stood up and walked about the room. "That's a very interesting story, Miss Bauer. And not a word of it is provable in a court of law."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the state would have to prove its case against Stoneham 'beyond a reasonable doubt'. Those are the words that are always used. The facts as you have presented them are filled with reasonable doubt. There were no fingerprints on the knife, which means that anyone could have done it. Stoneham's fingerprints are in the cabin, but it's his cabin, they have every right to be there. Stoneham claims that at the time of the murder, he was driving down the coast from San Francisco alone. No one can vouch for the truth of that claim, but no one can prove otherwise, either, which would be what we'd have to do. Nobody saw him during that time."

"Garnna saw him," Debby said meekly.

" 'Garnna saw him'!" Maschen threw up his hands. "And would you please tell me how I am to go into a court of law and present an invisible witness from outer space? We'd be laughed right out of the courtroom."

"I could testify that Garnna told me..."

"Hearsay evidence," Maschen said, dismissing it with a wave of his hand. "Even if the jury believed it, it wouldn't be admissible."

"Isn't there anything in what she's said that can give you a clue?" Polaski wanted to know.

"Let's hear your story again, Miss Bauer," the sheriff sighed. He was tired. What he wanted most in the world was to fall into a bed and go to sleep. But he couldn't shuck his duty, no matter

how hard he tried.

Debby repeated what Garnna had told her, going very carefully and trying not to miss the slightest detail. When she'd finished, Maschen said slowly, "Well, your story does confirm what we had discovered independently, namely that Mrs. Stoneham was strangled *before* she was tied up and mutilated. I never released that detail to the press; it's been kept a secret between the coroner, my deputy and me."

"Then the fact that she knows this detail is proof that her story is correct," Polaski said triumphantly.

"Not necessarily. For example, if you were the murderer you could have told her about it when the two of you were alone in the visiting room. That story is very nice, but it is completely inconclu..."

His voice trailed off as an idea suddenly came to him. It was the clue that had eluded him earlier when he had been reading over the stories of the men from the riot. All of them stated that Stoneham had addressed the rally, and several of them had reported what he'd said.

"You know, it's funny," Maschen mused aloud, "but when Stoneham spoke at the rally last night he described the murder the same way. He said that his wife had been strangled first and then mutilated. Yet, as I said, that particular detail has been kept a secret until now."

Polaski and Debby both jumped on that fact. "Then there's your proof. Stoneham couldn't have known that unless he was the murderer."

Maschen was silent for a moment, then shook his head sadly. "No, even that won't work. Stoneham could simply say he deduced it the same way Simpson did, from the small amount of blood. I wouldn't believe it, but it is possible. It's the problem of 'reasonable doubt' again. I need facts, raw, hard facts, that can be shoved down a jury's throat, proving beyond question that Stoneham was with his wife when she died and not driving alone down the coast as he says."

"What kind of facts would it take?" Debby asked bitterly.

"I don't know. They come in all sizes, shapes and colors. Give me the right ones, and I'll tell you what they are."

"This is impossible," the girl said, getting up and starting to walk out of the room. "You don't want to believe the truth, even if it's hitting you on the head. You arrested Carl without having half as many facts as I've just given you. I think you're afraid to arrest one of your own townspeople."

"Come back here, young lady, and sit down!" Maschen bellowed. The strength of his voice surprised even him, and Debby meekly complied. "I arrested Dr. Polaski on suspicion. If no new clues had come in within the next forty-eight hours, I would have been compelled to release him. I could arrest Wesley Stoneham under the same circumstances..."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because it would be futile, based on what we know at present. In two days, he would be out on the street again, and we'd be no better off than we were before. There are also certain realities of the situation which I doubt you're aware of. Wesley Stoneham is one of the most important men in the county."

"And that makes him immune to arrest," Debby declared.

"No. But it does mean that I will have to tread very carefully and make sure that all my bets are covered before I can take action against him. I value my job, and I can't perform it efficiently if I'm having to fight for my life at the same time."

My God, he thought suddenly as he listened to himself speaking. *Do I really believe that? Am I that big a hypocrite?* The girl's charges had disturbed him deeply. He had been quick enough to arrest Polaski on almost no evidence at all, just because Stoneham had threatened him subtly with the loss of his job. But wasn't he losing his job now? Wasn't betrayal a loss? He was admitting through his words and actions that he was enforcing the law unequally, with some people being sheltered by it while others were left out in the storm. He was using his job as

a tool to his own personal advantage, which was a corruption of the law he had sworn to uphold.

"I have been unfair," he went on more quietly, "in my treatment of Dr. Polaski. I'll talk to the District Attorney as soon as he gets in this morning and have the charges dropped for insufficient evidence. But I'm afraid I still can't arrest Stoneham until I have more to go on." He settled back in his chair and rubbed at his eyelids with his knuckles. "Now, Miss Bauer, let's have your story once again, please."

Garnna was rapidly becoming disgusted with the petty stubbornness of these alien creatures. They had heard his story several times over, in great and exaggerated detail. They even believed it—he could tell that from surface glances at their minds. But they refused to act. They made him go over and over the details of the killing like a child reciting its lessons. How obtuse could these creatures be? Finally, on the fourth repetition, he balked. He would not say the same things over one more time.

The alien he was in contact with sympathized with his refusal. It relayed the decision to the others, who were annoyed. Reluctantly, his alien implored him to continue.

Garnna relayed to his contact an image of confusion, of not knowing what was desired of him. The creature informed him that proof of some tangible sort was needed before punishment could be meted out.

Garnna's anger flared. Proof! What kind of cheap, piteously deceitful creatures were these that needed proof before anything could be done? The word of one member of the Herd should be more than sufficient. Both the Peacekeeper and the Psychologist believed his story, and both of them occupied important positions in their society. Didn't that in itself make them trustworthy? Or did these creatures actually give positions of responsibility to corrupt individuals? Could it be possible that this world was so embedded in lies that it couldn't even accept the truth from two intelligent men of authority? Then Rettin *had* been right. This world deserved to dissolve and disintegrate under its own deceitfulness;

The first warning bell rang in his mind, cutting off his thoughts. His alien contact asked him what that "sound" had been, and he told it that the warning meant that he had only a short time left before he would have to return to his body. That seemed to panic the other. It conversed hurriedly with its fellows and pleaded with Garnna to try to think of any detail, however slight, that might have been overlooked.

This is useless, Garnna decided. They want more than I can give them. Maybe my story is being garbled in the translation. It's certainly of poor enough quality. But whatever the problem, I can do no more. I have done my best. They must resolve the situation themselves. He informed his contact that he was about to leave.

The alien protested. They still had to try as long as possible. There must be something more. Garnna replied that their connection was not very good, and that he was having enough trouble making himself understood without having to try his patience any longer with trivial details. The alien shot back that they should then try to improve the quality of their communication. Garnna thought it was worth the effort, but he wondered how to do it. Closer contact, the alien suggested.

The two minds strained at invisible bonds as they tried to draw nearer each other. They kept bumping into outer shells of their minds that prohibited them from coming closer. Like surface tension holds a drop of water together, these shells held in the minds of the two different creatures, keeping them from spilling into the barren continuum around them. The minds danced slowly around each other like two dogs circling before a fight. Then, on cue, they simultaneously leapt at one another, each trying to penetrate the defensive barriers that kept their minds apart.

And like surface tension when two water droplets run into one another, the shells split and formed a single large shell that would encompass both minds. The two became incorporated into one and formed, for an instant, a single entity.

Garnna-Debby. Debby-Garnna. It was equal parts of each with some of neither. It/they existed and merged within the one

shell, one mind, combined memories of two entirely different lives on two widely separated planets, combined thought patterns, shared experiences. It was a commune/ifi-group in miniature, but more compact and close-knit than either of those could ever hope to be. It was a union of essences more complete than any known before.

The second warning bell rang. Return was necessary, or the Garnna-mind might not survive. Dissolution was called for. He/she fought it vigorously, even knowing how essential it was for survival. The union was too complete, they could never be separated again. But even as they thought that, they were pulled apart. Debby became Debby, Garnna became Garnna. The two who had been one were now apart again, dual entities exactly as they had been before the merger took place.

Well, almost.

With fear and a hasty farewell, Garnna sped away from Earth and back to his own planet, Zarti.

CHAPTER XIII

When Debby shrieked and fainted on the floor, both men rushed to her side. Polaski got there first and knelt beside her. Her breathing was shallow, her body still. Her opened eyes gazed upward with a dreamy quality to them. They seemed very tranquil, very at peace with the rest of life. "Get me a blanket, quick," he told the sheriff. "I think she's gone into shock of some sort."

Maschen hurried off to comply, and suddenly the tranquil girl erupted in Polaski's arms. She shrieked some more. She kicked and spit and wriggled. She scratched at him with her fingernails and even tried to bite. She writhed in convulsions that were as violent as they were sudden. Her voice reverberated off the walls with its shrill protests, "No, don't! We can't! Let us alone!"

Then the fit stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Debby's body relaxed and her breathing gradually reduced itself to normal. Her eyelids fluttered and her head lolled from side to

side. Maschen returned with a woolen blanket, and Polaski wrapped it around the girl's prostrate form. Awareness was once again beginning to make an appearance in her eyes. She looked at the psychologist with recognition. "Are you all right?" Polaski asked.

Debby took a moment to answer, as though speaking in a foreign language. "Yes, I think so. Can I have a glass of water, please?"

The sheriff had one for her inside a minute. Debby propped herself up on her elbows and took the glass with her own hand, declining Polaski's assistance. She drank the entire glassful without stopping for breath. "That's better," she said as she handed the glass back to Maschen.

"What happened to you?" Polaski asked.

"Well, Gamna and I were having a communications gap, you might say. Our entire conversation was hard because a lot of thoughts were in words that I didn't understand or in abstract concepts that I could only get a vague idea of. We had to deal mainly with pictures and sensual impressions. He was getting angry at having to repeat his story so many times, and he was thinking that maybe the fault was in the telling. So we tried to bring our minds closer so that we could bridge the gap a little better. And boy, did we ever succeed!

"What happened was that our minds... came together. I can't think of a much better term than that. They sort of melted into a union so that there was only one mind left, a combination of mine and his. I've never felt anything so fantastic in my whole life. There was this whole new part of me that had lived an entirely different life. It wasn't as if something had been added on; it felt like it had been there all my life, only I'd never noticed it. I could see everything he'd ever done or seen or felt or thought, and he could see the same about me. Only there wasn't any him or me, there was only us.

"Then his time for Exploration was up, and he had to leave. You see, they can project their minds completely out of their bodies to explore space, but the minds can't stay away for too

long or the bodies might die. He had to get back, and I had to stay with my body here. We had to break apart again, which was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. But now he's gone again, and I'm alone in my mind. I do have his memories, though, so I can tell you more clearly about the murder."

"What can you tell us?" Maschen asked.

"There's not too much more about the murder it-self—Garnna did a pretty thorough job of picturing that for me already." She suddenly slapped her forehead with her open palm. "Why didn't I think of that earlier?"

"What is it?"

"Well, you see, Garnna was unfamiliar with the way our system of justice works. So am I, for that matter, but I've at least got the cultural background. Garnna thought that all that was necessary was to describe exactly how the crime took place. He didn't even think to mention what happened afterward, but that's the most important thing."

"What happened afterward?" Maschen prodded.

"Stoneham's clothes got all bloody from hacking up his wife, so he changed into some clean ones. Then he buried the bloody ones in the woods about a mile from the cabin."

Maschen jumped up from his chair. "That could be it. If we found those clothes, we could probably find some way to tie them to Stoneham. Did your spaceman friend remember where the clothes were buried?"

"He's not exactly a 'man'," Debby corrected. "He looks more like a short-necked brown giraffe with two arms at his shoulders. But yes, he saw where Stoneham buried them. I can take you there."

Maschen punched a button on his intercom. "Has Simpson reported in yet?"

"No," replied a deputy's voice from the other end. "He isn't

due in until ten o'clock."

"Well, call him at home and tell him we've gotten a break on the Stoneham murder case, and that I'd like him to accompany me out to the site. I promise he'll get time off for all the overtime he's put in in the past two days, and if he discovers any convincing clues I'll get him a citation. Tell him I'll pick him up in front of his house like I did yesterday." He turned to Debby. "Come on, we'll go out there and you can show me where those clothes are."

"What about me?" asked Polaski. "I'd like to come too, if you don't mind."

"Well, technically you're still in custody, but I think you have a stake in this, too. Will you give me your word that you won't try to escape?"

"Of course. If I did try, it would prove my guilt, wouldn't it?"

"It might not prove it, but it would look awfully funny in view of other things. All right, come along."

They got into the sheriff's car, with Maschen and Polaski in the front seat and Debby in the rear. They stopped at Simpson's house and waited until he was ready, then drove off up the coast to the site of the Stoneham cabin.

To fill the time as he drove—and to help keep himself awake—Maschen asked, "Dr. Polaski, there's something I've been wondering. How did a man with your background and talents become involved with that commune project? You seemed awfully out of place there to me."

"There were times when I felt awfully out of place there, myself, despite all my efforts. It was part of a research project I was working on. I'm a psychologist, and my specialty is social psychology. I study the behavior of people in groups. And what better place for me to do it than among a group of people?"

"But why a commune in particular?"

"Because it's part of the syndrome I'm investigating. If you could boil all the current troubles of the world down into a single word, sheriff, what would it be?"

Maschen thought as best he could, but his brain was not functioning at its sharpest this morning. "I don't know. What?"

"Divisiveness. The splintering off of groups from the whole, the alienation of the individual from his group, and the sheer polarity between groups. Have you noticed that moderation has seemed to become a thing of the past? People are no longer able to agree to disagree any more; they're either violently in favor of something or just as violently opposed. Individuals are feeling more and more set apart from the society in which they're living, which increases tensions. The groups, instead of trying to settle differences, actually go around looking for new ways to disagree. Each group becomes hardened against the problems of another, and then each one splinters into a myriad of subgroups, and the cycle is repeated.

"This is what I'm investigating. I'm trying to find out what the factors are that cause this phenomenon. It's becoming too common to be considered mere chance. There must be social pressures being applied to individuals that are causing them to behave this way.

"I picked the commune for two reasons. First, it's a group that has formally split itself off from the rest of society. Why? No doubt each of the individual members had his own private reason, but by examining all of their motives I was hoping to find some element or elements in common that I could say was a root cause.

"Second, I was treating the commune itself as a microcosm, a miniature version of society at large. I wanted to see what the stresses would be within the group, and whether the commune would split into subgroups via the same process that society as a whole does. Each of the communities was already infected with 'breakaway fever', and I thought that by studying such 'contaminated' people during their social interactions, I could spot what the pressures were that exist in the larger society. By observing the analogues, I might be able to pinpoint the real

problems."

"Did you have any results with your investigations?" Simpson asked from the back seat.

"Nothing I can point at conclusively," Polaski said with regret. "And Debby tells me that the commune is now dead for all practical purposes. I wish I had been there to witness its demise, but if I'd been there, the disruption wouldn't have happened—at least, not in the same way. It's scientifically embarrassing to be the cause of the disruption I was trying to observe naturally. I suppose all my notes will just have to go down as a case history, and be used by someone else, or myself at a later date, as supportive evidence."

"But you must have some theory as to causes," Simpson persisted.

"I do, yes, but I hesitate to state them when I can't substantiate them. It would be a ridiculous oversimplification to blame any one factor, but I think that one of the primary causes is modern rapid communications. In the space of just a few generations, we have moved into a position where we can know instantaneously what is going on anywhere else in the world. We never had that ability before, and consequently we find ourselves faced with worries over food riots in Kurdistan that we would never have even thought about a century ago. There are suddenly too many things that must be cared about, and our minds, which are unused to so many complications, rebel. In order to preserve sanity, they narrow their attention to one specific field and ignore—or worse, despise—all others. Society, which should be a cohesive whole in order to be most effective, is breaking down to a collection of narrow-minded individuals who care nothing for anyone but themselves and their group. And we're going to have to learn how to treat this problem on an immense scale before our world becomes any saner."

Debby spoke up for the first time since getting in the car. "I think you might be interested in Garnna's society then, Carl."

Polaski turned his head and body halfway around to look at the girl in the back seat. "Oh? What's it like?"

"Well, I suppose you'd call it communistic—that's the closest analogy we have here on Earth. They were originally plant-eating animals, and they consider everyone in their race as belonging to an enormous Herd. There isn't any selfishness or lying... everybody does things for the good of the Herd, and no one would think of putting his own needs first. That's why Garnna was getting so impatient with us for having to tell his story over and over again. He couldn't believe that other people on Earth wouldn't believe us when we told them the truth, that we needed tangible proof. He knew intellectually that we did not always act for the good of our own Herd, but he couldn't bring himself to admit it to his instincts."

Debby went on to describe the rest of Zartic society, the Tests that were given to determine an individual's best area for work, the system of Counselors, and most importantly, the iff-group. Polaski was particularly impressed with that institution, and asked Debby a series of sharp, probing questions which she fielded sometimes easily, other times with more difficulty. She also mentioned Garnna's concept of the Superherd that encompassed all intelligent beings.

Polaski was bursting with excitement, the quest for Stoneham's buried clothes all but forgotten in his mind. "This is fantastic. I'm going to have to get notes on all of this. They've been able to set up a working communistic society that is not static, where the government is decentralized and yet they keep moving ahead. And that iff-group concept is fascinating. It looks as though they've found a method for providing the individual with a stable base from which he gains security. It sounds like a cross between the commune we were trying to achieve and the extended family concept that is worked in other societies here on Earth. Except they seem to do it without any kinship ties at all, am I right?"

"Blood relationships mean almost nothing," Debby agreed. "They do keep records, to avoid problems of incest, but other than that there is no thought given to it at all. Children are raised and taught in Academies until they are mature enough to join an iff-group. Their biological mother's role in their lives ends at birth."

"Of course," Polaski mused aloud, "we won't be able to apply their techniques to our own problems."

They are different creatures entirely. The concept of the Herd is apparently more instinctive with them than it could ever be with us, making it easier for them to attain that kind of a balance. They have different drives and a different historical background than we do. Human beings could never adapt to that society. But they have some answers that we don't have. Maybe by making some diligent investigations of them, we could achieve some insights into solutions of our own. Something that's a combination of the two, a little more human than Zartic. I'm going to have to get a lot of details from you..."

"You'll have to get them some other time," Maschen interrupted. "We're here."

They had arrived at the Stoneham cabin. "Bring a shovel," Debby advised as they got out of the car. Maschen got the shovel from his trunk, and the three men stood waiting while the girl looked around to get her bearings. After a moment, she said, "Follow me."

They walked through the woods, weaving a seemingly random path through the trees. Every hundred yards or so, Debby would stop again to check her direction. "It was night when Garnna was seeing this, and he was 'seeing' in a different way. I've got to remember what he saw and then translate it into something that I can understand," she explained.

At last they came to a spot that looked no different from any of the others around them. The area was a bit more open, but the cypress trees were still thick and scattered bushes sprinkled the ground. "It's around here somewhere," Debby informed them.

Simpson's eyes roamed the area. He pointed. "Over there. The ground is all hard from lack of rain, which is why we couldn't find any footprints. But over there the dirt is loose. It's been dug up recently."

He began digging as the other three watched. It was easy

work, for the area had already been dug up before and he was only going over the previous work. In just a couple of minutes, he hit something soft and, bending down, he picked up a bundle of bloodstained clothes all wrapped together.

"That's it!" Debby exclaimed.

Simpson eyed the bundle critically. "This in itself is hardly conclusive. There might be laundry marks or witnesses that attest to this being Stoneham's suit. The bloodstains will probably test out as matching Mrs. Stoneham's type. Let's see what else we can find."

He began searching the pockets. "Ah, here we have something more promising." He pulled out a folded piece of paper on which a note had been scribbled by a feminine hand. It was addressed to "Wes" and told of the person's desire to obtain a divorce. "It's unsigned," Simpson said, "but analysis will probably show it to be in Mrs. Stoneham's handwriting. Besides, there would likely be few other people who would write a note to Stoneham suggesting such a thing."

"That's enough for me," Maschen said. "That gives up a motive for the murder."

"You mean he killed his wife so she wouldn't divorce him?" Debby asked. "That sounds dumb to me."

"Normally it might be. But Leonard Chottman, the Chairman of the county Board of Supervisors, will be retiring from the Board at the end of the week, and the Governor then appoints a successor for him until the next regular election. The rumors have been flying that Chottman was going to recommend Stoneham as the man he wanted to follow him, and his nominee would most likely be accepted by the Governor. But Chottman is extremely old-fashioned about marital affairs, and he looks on divorce as a sin. If news of this had leaked out, Stoneham wouldn't have gotten the position." He started walking back to the car and the rest followed him. "I'll have a crew of men look over the area later today to see if there's anything else we missed, but the clothes and the note are enough of a basis for me to have Stoneham picked up."

"There's more," Simpson said. As they walked, he had continued searching through the pockets of the suit and had found something else. A matchbook, very fancy and personalized, proclaiming Stoneham already a member of the Board of Supervisors. "See," he went on, "the matches inside alternate red, white and blue. There's one match missing, a blue one. I would suspect that the used match found in the cabin will prove to be the missing one."

"That's enough proof for me," Debby said.

They reached the cabin again, and Sheriff Maschen leaned inside the car and turned on the radio transmitter. "This is Maschen," he said. "I'm at the Stone-ham cabin now, and I'm on my way back. I want a car dispatched to Wesley Stoneham's residence. Have the deputy take him in on charges of murdering his wife. Out."

As Maschen clicked off, he was feeling very good. For the first time in over a day, the universe looked as though it might have a positive side to it, after all. He hummed to himself as he politely opened the car for Debby to get in.

CHAPTER XIV

They spent a long afternoon at the Sheriff's Station. It had been getting toward lunchtime as they had come into town, and Maschen was feeling so happy that he had bought lunch for everyone. By the time they had gotten to the Station, Stoneham had already been taken into custody and was awaiting questioning in one of the cells. Howard Willsey, the DA, was also there, looking as nervous as a chicken in a weasel cage. Maschen excused himself and talked to the prosecutor in private.

"What are you trying to do?" Willsey asked hysterically. "Ruin us all?"

"Stoneham's a murderer," Maschen said. "It was him who killed his wife. I'm dropping the charges against Polaski."

"Do you have proof?"

"Yes, I'll show it to you shortly. Right now, I'd like to question Stoneham personally. Care to come along?"

The district attorney hesitated, wondering whether it would be safer not to go, thereby not appearing to be against Stoneham, or to go and try to appear sympathetic. As the sheriff walked toward the cells, Willsey made up his mind and moved to follow.

Stoneham was in a furious mood, his black eyes storming as he paced around his cell. As Maschen came in, Stoneham towered over him, red-faced and angry. "Just what are you trying to pull on me, Maschen?" he bellowed.

"That's funny, I was about to ask you the same question," the sheriff returned. He was feeling strangely calm, and Stoneham's bluster could no longer affect him.

"Don't worry, Wes," Willsey soothed the big man. "I'm sure we'll get all this taken care of before long."

"Both your jobs are on the line," Stoneham went on unappeased. "When I get on the Board of Supervisors, I plan to conduct a lengthy investigation into the efficiency of both your offices."

Willsey blanched, but Maschen just smiled and said, "You're not going to be on the Board. You're going to be in prison for the murder of your wife."

"What are you talking about? You haven't got any evidence against me," Stoneham bluffed.

"Oh, no? I have several depositions from people who were at the rally last night. They all agree that you described the way the murder took place, saying that your wife was strangled first and then tied up and dismembered. I never made that information public, so, aside from myself, the coroner and a few deputies, no one but the murderer knew that fact."

"You'll never even be able to get an indictment against me on evidence like that, let alone a conviction," Stoneham sneered.

"He's right," Willsey put it. "I can't..."

"I have more concrete evidence, which I will show to Mr. Willsey as soon as we are finished in here. I am under no obligation to tell you what it is until the the trial. Would you care to make any statements in the meantime?"

Stoneham sat down on the bunk and folded his arms across his chest. "I refuse to say anything until I've had a chance to confer with my lawyer."

"I somehow thought you would," Maschen smiled. He went to the door of the cell and opened it. "I imagine we'll be seeing a lot of each other in the next few days. Meanwhile, I have other things to attend to. Coming, Howard?"

Maschen led Willsey out and back upstairs to his office. There, with the help of Debby, Polaski and Simpson, he described the case he had against Stoneham. He omitted any references to Garnna's involvement, saying merely that Debby had come by her information through psychic means. He showed the bloodstained suit, the note and the matchbook to Willsey. The DA sat through the presentation nervous and twittery, stammering a lot and asking inane questions at intervals. Even when all the facts had been presented to him, he was afraid to believe them. Maschen had to coax him, soothe him, wheedle him into agreeing that there was enough evidence to seek an indictment Willsey left the office a very troubled man.

"What's the matter with that worm?" Debby asked.

"He's frightened, and I suppose he has a right to be. He's an incompetent prosecutor, and what's worse, he knows it. He's been able to survive here because nothing of major consequence has ever happened in San Marcos before. Now he's out of his depth. Added to that, Stoneham was pulling his usual routine about using his political influence to kick us out of our jobs. Without his job, Willsey knows he has nothing."

"What about you?" Polaski asked quietly. "Aren't you worried about yours?"

"Not any more," Maschen said. "I've decided not to run for reelection next year. I'm getting old, and the events of the past day have convinced me that I've been passed by. Law enforcement isn't what it was when I got my training, and I've been too afraid of change to keep up with it. I don't know what I'll do with myself yet, but I know I don't deserve to stay here any longer. San Marcos needs someone better than me."

There was an awkward silence as the other people in the room digested the sheriff's admission. Finally, to fill the void, Polaski asked, "What about Stoneham? Do you really think that little pipsqueak of a DA will be able to convict him of murder?"

Maschen frowned. "That will be a problem. I'll be there to kick him in the butt if he tries to go too easy, of course, but it will be a struggle. Stoneham's a lawyer himself, and he knows what his best chances are in court. He won't say one word that will help put him away. And our evidence is awfully damning, but it isn't necessarily conclusive. We can prove that he did more in the cabin than he originally told us he did, got his wife's blood all over his clothes and then buried them in the woods. But there are those words again —'reasonable doubt'. Stoneham's lawyer can come up with a convincing enough story to explain those facts, a jury just might let him off. And Stoneham can afford the best lawyer in the country. Pitted against a man like Willsey, I suppose there is a slight chance that he might get off."

Debby started to protest that that was unfair, but Maschen raised a hand to silence her. "However, if that fails, there are other things we can do. Men like Stoneham have made sure that there are an awful lot of laws on the books against incitement to riot. We have an ironclad case against him there—plus there is the fact that a number of those laws are at the federal level, which means he will face a federal prosecutor, who would have to be better than ours.

"And if that fails, Dr. Polaski can file a complaint against Stoneham for assault. I was in here yesterday when Stoneham tried it, and I would be one hell of a witness. These other two charges, though, are har-rassment tactics; I'm still going to dig up all I can and shoot for the murder conviction. Who knows, we

may dig up even more evidence before the trial.

"But regardless of what happens on the legal level, we've already given him the worst punishment of all. Stoneham is an ambitious man, mad for power. Now he won't ever get any. Chottman certainly won't recommend him as his successor, not with the murder charges up against him. And his chances of ever winning an elective office are nil; people won't vote for a man who has been charged with a capital crime, even if he's innocent. Stoneham's political career is dead as of now, and he knows it. That must be an awfully bitter pill for him to swallow."

The rest of the afternoon was occupied with a string of endless formalities. The charges against Polaski had to be officially dropped, and he signed a waiver of any claims to false arrest he might choose to make later. Then he, Debby, Simpson and the sheriff all wrote up statements of their activities during the day. It was nearly quitting time before everything was straightened out. Maschen took Polaski and Debby to the door.

"I had my doubts about you yesterday, sheriff," Polaski said, shaking Maschen's hand, "but I believe now that you're an honest man. Whatever happens to you, I wish you the best of luck."

"Thanks," Maschen replied. "I only wish we'd never had to meet under circumstances like these. What will you be doing with yourself now?"

"Well, the commune's no longer in existence, so my project there is ended. I'll write up my notes and file a report with some technical journal or other. But I've got a new project now, maybe the most exciting one in Man's history. Garnna gave us a whole new universe to play with. It would take a whole team of sociologists years just to digest all the information about Garnna's world that Debby has locked up inside her mind. And there's more than just that. Debby tells me that Garnna knew something about the technology behind the mind-projection method. Working with her, we may learn how to do it for ourselves. Just imagine the human mind being able to roam through the stars at will."

"I can't," Maschen said. "I'm just a dumb, unimaginative small-county cop who has to struggle to understand the morning newspaper. On top of all that, I have been up for thirty-seven consecutive hours, and I am about to suffer an exhaustion breakdown. Now that everything has finally been taken care of to my satisfaction, I am going to go home and sleep for a full day solid. I'll leave the exploration of the universe to you."

"Sheriff!" called his secretary from upstairs.

Maschen closed his eyes. "What is it, Carroll?"

"You've got a call from Leonard Chottman."

"Chottman? I wonder what he could be wanting. Oh well, I guess we say goodbye here then. Good luck with your project, professor." And he turned and went wearily up the stairs to his office.

As Polaski and Debby walked down the stairs to the street, the psychologist turned to his companion and asked, "I hope I wasn't presuming on you when I spoke about the project. Would you mind being an *idiot savante* at the center of a study like that?"

"I want to very much," she replied. "In fact, I have an even stronger reason for wanting it that you do. You see, when Garnna's and my mind united it was something totally unique. Sort of like sex, but much closer. It was like being married, too, but even that doesn't explain it. The two of us were one mind, and now that I'm apart from him I don't feel exactly complete. I don't think I can explain it adequately..."

"Probably not, but I think I can grasp it on an intellectual level. I also think it's done you some good. You've changed, matured since that meeting with him."

Traces of a smile flickered at the corners of her mouth. "He's been a good influence, I think. But you see why I've got to help with that project. I've got to get back to him. How long do you think it will take?"

Polaski shrugged. "That depends on a number of factors. How

much do you know about the procedure?"

"I know everything Garnna knew, which is nearly everything. I know about the machinery that keeps the body alive while the mind's away, I know about the drugs that separate body and mind, and I know the mental discipline involved in making the jump. I also know gobs of stuff about astronomy, geology, chemistry, alienology..."

"There are still a lot of ifs. The government's bound to get involved in something of this magnitude, which would mean appropriations hassles, red tape and all the other blessings of a benevolent bureaucracy. I know a couple of people I can approach to get the ball rolling, but once we start it in motion we'll have damned little control over it. The most optimistic minimum time I could give you is a year and a half. Probably much longer."

"A year and a half!" Debby looked pained. "But what's going to happen to Garnna during that time? He broke his law by coming back here to help us. What will they do to him? Will he be able to convince his people that there is a Superherd? Will..."

Polaski put his arm around the girl's shoulders to steady her. "There's no way we can answer those questions tonight, and in the meantime I'm starving. I'm also tired of all those vegetarian meals we've had for the last three months. Come on, let me treat you to a steak dinner."

CHAPTER XV

Garnna's reunion with his body was doubly confusing this time, both because of the normal reassociation with the bodily functions and because of the fact that his mind had undergone a drastic change in the last few minutes after merging with the mind of the Earth girl, Debby. He floundered in a sea of chaos and some of his reaction was physical—he was kicking at the bottom of the Exploration box with his hooves. This caused someone to lift the lid of the box to check on his situation.

Garnna blinked as the bright light invaded his eyes. Hands

reached in, grabbing his own roughly and yanking him up. He struggled, but whether in opposition or assistance to those hands he himself could not say.

His iff-group was not present at this awakening. Even Aliyenna was not there; presumably, she had been discovered and removed from the room. There were only four others gathered around him—Blauw iff-Rackin, Counselor for the Project, and the three main Coordinators: Rettin iff-Laziel, Pogor iff-Tennamit and Nanz iff-Gohnal.

Rettin gave him no time to reorient himself. "Garnna iff-Almanic," he said stiffly, "how do you justify this completely unauthorized Exploration you have made?"

"I revisited the planet I Explored two days ago in order to expose the killer I told you about."

"This was against my express command. In fact, you are no longer classified as an Explorer at all, so any Explorations are forbidden."

"I know all this," Garnna said quietly. "But my duty to the Superherd compelled my actions."

"Duty to the what?" asked Blauw, startled.

"The Superherd, the universal gathering of intelligence to which our own Herd is but an iff-group."

"Nonsense," Pogor stated flatly. "There is no such thing."

Garnna did not feel up to arguing philosophy at the moment. Explorations were never supposed to be made closer than twelve days apart, and the sheer physical strain had worn him down. The union with Debby's mind had left him with an even deeper feeling of disorientation. Coupled with this was his frustration over the Earthmen's stubborn refusal to believe what he had told them. The reasons for their disbelief were in the memories he had inherited from Debby, but he would need time to sort and comprehend them. He didn't even know whether his mission had succeeded, which was the most frustrating thing of all.

Consequently, he let Pogor's remark fall unchallenged.

"You were showing deep signs of instability yesterday," said Rettin, "which prompted us to remove you from the position of Explorer for the good of the Herd. Obviously we were too lenient with you; your instability has reached dangerous proportions, threatening the Project. Tell us what happened, quickly."

Garnna related his story of returning to the planet, of contacting a member of the race and of telling it about the crime he had witnessed. He was about to mention the mind merger but something—was it the Debby part of his mind?—made him stop.

The four listeners were horrorstruck. "Then... these other beings know of our existence?" Nanz asked. Garnna nodded.

There was a pause that weighed heavily on them all as the meaning of that sunk in. Finally Rettin spoke up. "Do they know our location?"

"No," Garnna lied. "Translation problems made it impossible to communicate anything more than simple concepts and pictures." Inwardly the Zartic was horrified at what he was doing. *Have I been contaminated with the deceit of the Earth people?* he wondered.

But the others accepted his statement with genuine relief. "Then we are not in too much danger," Pogor said. "They may know that we exist somewhere, but space is large and they have no interstellar drive as yet. It would probably take them centuries to find us, even if they began a concerted effort at once."

"There is still," Rettin pointed out, "the problem of what to do with Garnna. He must be removed from the Project completely, of course—we cannot risk ourselves again with someone so demonstrably unstable. But beyond that, there are additional steps we must take. Garnna's actions, whatever his motivation, have threatened the security of the Herd. I feel a Counselor should be consulted for further action, including possible reTesting and reTraining."

The others concurred in the verdict. Blauw turned to Garnna. "Would you prefer to consult me or some other Counselor of your choice?"

Garnna barely hesitated. "I choose Norlak iff-Delicon," he said, remembering how helpful she had been yesterday.

Blauw nodded and went to phone Norlak to tell her to come to the Space Exploration Project building on a matter of urgency. While waiting, Garnna stood silently. His mind was assimilating the new set of memories he had received from the Earth girl, Debby. This new mode of thinking, an omnivore mode, was both repulsive and exciting. It opened new vistas of comprehension, which the Explorer part of him loved. But at the same time there was evidence that it was influencing his behavior to some extent, making him deceive his superiors for reasons that even he didn't know, except a general feeling that it might be wise to "hold something back" until later.

Frustration was also bothering him. He had risked his job, his reputation and everything he valued to return to Earth, yet the success of his mission was still in doubt. Had he managed to persuade the sheriff that Polaski was innocent? Debby's mind was convinced of the sheriff's prejudice against the psychologist. Would she, with Garnna's memories, be able to convince him otherwise?

There was a larger question, too. Debby would know perfectly well where Zarti was—she had all of Garnna's memories, just as he had hers. She would know how to make the machines and drugs that would enable her mind to travel through space and come here to visit. Would she and her race make use of this knowledge?

His thoughts were interrupted as Norlak came into the room. She recognized him instantly. "Garnna iff-Almanic!" she exclaimed.

"You remember my name despite all the people you see every day," he said. "I'm nattered."

"Don't be," she replied. "I make it a point to remember

potential trouble spots." She returned to her colleague, Blauw. "What's the problem with him?"

Blauw explained the officials' version of the story. Norlak listened with interest. She nodded occasionally, but never interrupted. When Blauw had finished, she paced the room once, then said, "I would like to speak privately with Garnna. Would you all please leave?"

When they'd gone, she turned to the Explorer. "You're in serious trouble—but I'm sure you know that. You have violated the orders of your Coordinator, seduced your mate into helping you with your illicit acts, and betrayed the Herd to outsiders. That's a lot for one day. Would you care to explain yourself?"

Slowly, with as much detail as he could, Garnna told her everything that had happened since his initial Exploration to Earth except his merger with Debby's mind. He explained his theory of the Superherd and told why it had compelled him to behave the way he'd done. As before, Norlak listened without interruption.

When he'd finished she said slowly, "Your concept of the Superherd fascinates me. Logically, the idea of joining all intelligences together in one such group is a sensible one, though how practical it would be is another matter. Can predators and prey become iS-brothers merely because they share the attribute of intelligence? And what of the Offasü? Are we their iff-brothers as well?"

Garnna started to speak, but Norlak waved him to silence. "I said your concept was interesting, not that it was an excuse. As a Counselor, I am appointed by the Herd, not the Superherd. Just as you felt compelled to do your duty to the Superherd, I must do mine to the Herd. Your mate, Aliyenna, is not guilty of anything more than misplaced faith, so she'll get a reprimand but no real punishment. You, on the other hand, pose a more serious threat. Your actions were reckless, dangerous and, in the official view of the Herd, totally inexcusable. You performed these acts with deliberation and forethought, which leads inescapably to the conclusion that you are suffering from a dangerous and severe aberration. It's not even safe to allow you to associate with others

in close contact, because of your demonstrated ability to lead them astray."

She paused, taking a deep breath before continuing. "I have only had to do this once before, and it's a heavy burden on me. I see no other choice, though. I must declare you iff-less."

Iff-less! The word embedded itself in his brain. No more would he be allowed to share closeness and intimacy with the Almanic iff-group—or any other. The stability and security that the iff-groups gave any normal Zartic would be denied him. He would have to get food where he could scrounge it, find shelter where he could. He was not cut off from the Herd itself—ostracism was a punishment for only the most severe of trespasses, and the offender usually committed suicide—but his life would be devoid of the little pleasantries that made it livable. He could still work and speak with other Herd members, but there would always be a gap. He was a social outcast, to be treated with scorn and derision anywhere he went.

"But because of your motivations," Norlak went on, "I find it difficult to make my sentence permanent. Therefore, I decree that you shall consult with me periodically, and I will continually review your fitness for decent society. If your behavior shows a return to normal, you will be reinstated to an appropriate iff-group. In addition, since you are no longer in any way connected with the Space Exploration Project, I shall arrange for you to be reTesred and reTrained so that you can work at some other job for the good of the Herd."

She came over to him and laid a hand on the back of his neck. "I'm sorry for you," she said softly. "You were compelled to do your duty and I was compelled to do mine. Service to conscience is the hardest task of all, and I have the distinct feeling that yours is only beginning." She started to say something else, then thought better of it. Turning away, she walked with dignity out of the room.

Garnna was left with his thoughts. Norlak, as she admitted, had been compelled to do what she had done. He could not blame her, and he still somehow had the feeling that she believed his theories about the Super-herd. But at the moment that did

not matter. What did matter was what he chose to do with the rest of his life.

As he saw it he had two options. He could repudiate his theory of the Superherd and carry on as though none of this business had happened. By becoming a model member of the Herd, he was sure that Norlak would reinstate him with an iff-group in the near future.

But could he ignore what he had done? Even as he thought that, his mind rebelled. And it was not his mind alone, either; there was a ghost in the background, the ghost of a young alien female. He was no longer a simple Zartic, and he could not pretend to be. For better or worse, his mind had been "tainted" and he could not return to the ordinary.

Then the only alternative left was to fight, a strange choice for a peaceful herbivore. He had convinced Nor-lak of the truth of his theories—or at least, she was sympathetic to them. There would be others who would listen to him if he spoke loudly enough. He would explain about the Superherd to anyone who would listen, and even some who wouldn't. He would become a zitfly, stinging their tails until they were forced to pay attention to him.

Time was on his side, he knew. Earth now had the secret of mind projection and, from what he had seen in Debby's memory, the Earth people enjoyed exploring. Sooner or later, with Debby leading them, they would be coming to Zarti. And then the authorities would have no choice—they would have to turn to Garnna, their only expert on this other race, to tell them what to do. On the other hand, if some Explorer should finally find the Offasü, the omnivore part of Garnna's mind would help him face the enemy better than any other Zartic could. He was, he realized, carrying a secret weapon around in his mind.

But could he last until it was needed? Iff-less as he was, the loneliness might bring him to despair and suicide. And then he realized he was not alone. There was always Debby looking over his shoulder, and with her was an entire new world of memories to be sampled and explored. How could he be lonely when he had another person's lifetime to share?

Come when you can, Debby, he thought out into space. I'll be waiting for you.

On Earth, Debby Bauer smiled in her sleep.