

Those Who Watch

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One

The explosion was painfully bright against the dark back-drop of the moonless New Mexico sky. To those who looked up at that precise moment - and there were many who happened to look up - it was as though a new star had momentarily blossomed in blue-white incandescence.

The brightness moved in a track from northeast to south-west. It came sputteringly alive in the sacred mountains east of Taos, and grew more fierce as it carved a track roughly over the valley of the Rio Grande, passing above the dusty little pueblos and the bustling city of Santa Fe. Just south of Santa Fe the brightness became unbearable, and eyes were averted as the sudden radiation stabbed at retinas. But now the actinic peak was past. Was the savage flare burning itself out, or was the blaze simply damped by the city lights of sprawling Albuquerque? No matter. The arc of light speared past Isleta Pueblo and was lost somewhere over the Mesa del Oro.

Darkness returned, rolling back over the New Mexico sky like the returning tide.

In the broad plaza of San Miguel Pueblo, forty miles south of Santa Fe, Charley Estancia put his knuckles to his eyes a moment, crushed away the pain, and grinned up at the inverted black bowl of night.

'Shooting star!' he whispered sharply. 'Shooting star! Beauty! Beauty!' He laughed. He was eleven years old, skinny and smudge-faced, and he had often seen the ragged tails of the meteors as they sped across the sky. He knew what they were, even if no one else in the pueblo did. But Charley had never seen one like that before. He could still feel the track of it sizzling in his skull. When he blinked, the line of whiteness remained.

Others in the village had seen it too. The plaza was a crowded, busy place tonight, for in another week came the Fire Society dance, and many white folk would travel out from the cities to watch and take pictures and, perhaps, spend money. Charley Estancia heard the gasps, saw the pointing arms of his uncles and cousins and sisters.

'Maiyanyi!' someone muttered. 'Spirits!'

Talk of demons, whispers of bad magic, anguished exclamations of doubt and fear crisscrossed the plaza. Charley saw two of his maternal uncles rush toward the tall round windowless kiva, the ceremonial house, and clamber quickly down the ladder to take refuge within. He saw his sister Rosita pull forth the crucifix that hung between her breasts and clasp it against her cheek like some sort of amulet. He saw his father's brother Juan make the sign of the cross, and three more men rush into the kiva. They were all talking of evil spirits, now. The pueblo bristled with television aerials, and shiny automobiles stood outside the adobe houses, but it took nothing more than a shooting star to send everybody wild with superstitious awe. Charley kicked at the dusty ground. His sister Lupe flashed past him, looking terrified. He reached out and caught her thin wrist.

'Where are you going?'

'Into the house. Devils are in the sky!'

'Sure. The *kachinas* are coming. They're going to do the Fire Society dance because we don't do it right anymore,' Charley said. He laughed.

Lupe was in no mood for Charley's brand of sarcasm. She twisted at his grip. 'Let go! Let go! She was twelve, and only a girl, but she was much stronger than he was. She planted her hand in the middle of his shallow chest and pushed hard, yanking her arm from his grasp at the same time. Charley went over on his back and lay in the dust, looking up at a sky that now had returned to normal. Lupe fled, sobbing. Charley shook his head. Crazy, all of them. Crazy with fear, crazy with religion. Why couldn't they think? Why did they have to be Indians all the time? Look at them, running around madly, scattering cornmeal, blurt-ing out prayers whose words were only empty sound to them, diving into the kiva, sprinting toward the church!

'Shooting star!' Charley shouted. 'Nothing to be afraid of! Just a big shooting star!'

As usual, no one paid attention to him. He was thought to be a little crazy in the head, a skinny boy full of dreams and white man's ideas. His voice was lost in the night wind. He picked himself up, shivering, and brushed the plaza's dust from his jeans. It would be funny, this superstitious panic, if it were not so sad.

Ah! There was the padre now! Charley grinned.

The priest came out of the whitewashed little church and held up both arms in what Charley supposed was intended to be a comforting gesture. He called out in Spanish: 'Don't be

afraid! It's all right! Into the church, everyone, and stay calm!

Some of the women moved toward the church. Most of the men were in the kiva, now - and, of course, women were forbidden there. Charley watched the priest. Padre Herrera was a small, bald-headed man who had come up from El Paso a few years ago, after the old priest had died. He had a hard time here. Everybody in San Miguel was a Roman , Catholic, but everybody also believed in the old pueblo religion, and in a way nobody believed much in any religion,

So at a time of stress like this, people ran in all directions, very few of them into Padre Herrera's church, and the padre did not look pleased.

Charley went up to the priest. 'What was it, Padre? A shooting star, is all?'

The priest glowered. 'Perhaps a sign of Heaven, Charley.'

'I saw it with these eyes! A shooting star!'

Padre Herrera flashed a quick, hollow smile and turned away, going about the business of shepherding his worried flock into the house of God. Charley realized he had been dismissed. The priest had once told Rosita Estancia that her younger brother Charley was a damned soul, and Charley had found out about it. In a way, he was rather flattered.

Hopefully, Charley looked to the sky. But there were no more shooting stars. Now the plaza was empty; the dozens of Indians who had been in it a few minutes ago had taken refuge. Charley looked across the way, toward the gift shop. The door opened and Marty Moquino came out. He was holding a little spray can of liquor, and a cigarette drooped from the corner of his mouth.

'Where'd everybody go?' Marty Moquino asked.

'They ran away. Scared.' Charley forced a chuckle. 'You should've seen them go!'

He was a little afraid of Marty Moquino, and despised him a good deal; yet at the same time Charley looked up to him as a man who had done things and gone places. Marty was nineteen years old. Two years ago he had left the pueblo and gone to live in Albuquerque, and he was supposed to have been all the way out to Los Angeles, too. He was a mocker, a troublemaker, but more than anyone else around here he had lived in the white man's world. Now Marty was back because he had lost his job. People whispered that he made love to Rosita Estancia these days. Charley hated him for that; Still, he felt that he had much to learn from Marty Moquino. Charley hoped to escape from San Miguel himself, one day.

They stood together in the middle of the empty plaza, Charley short and thin, Marty tall and thin. Marty offered him a cigarette. Charley took it and expertly flipped its ignition cap. They grinned at each other like brothers.

'Did you see it?' Charley asked. 'The shooting star?'

Marty nodded. He gave the spray can of whiskey a squirt into his mouth. 'I was out back,' he said after a moment. 'I saw it. But it wasn't any shooting star.'

'It was the *kachinas* coming to visit, huh?'

Laughing, Marty said, 'Kid, don't you know what that thing was? You never saw a shooting star like that. That was a flying saucer blowing up over Taos!'

Kathryn Mason saw the light in the sky only by accident. Ordinarily on these dark winter nights she stayed indoors after nightfall. The house was warm and bright, purring with its array of electrical appliances, and she felt comfortable indoors. Anything might lurk outside. Anything. But her daughter's kitten had been missing for three days now, which was the biggest crisis in the Mason family for a long time. It seemed to Kathryn that she heard faint meows outside. Finding the kitten was more important to her than remaining locked indoors in this cozy shelter of an automatic house.

She rushed outside, hoping against hope to see the fluffy black-and-white thing scratching against the doormat. But there was no kitten there; and, abruptly, a streak of light lanced through the sky.

She had no way of knowing that it had already begun to lose intensity. It was the brightest thing she had ever seen in the sky, so bright that instinctively she clapped her hands to her eyes. An instant later, though, she pulled her hands away and forced herself to watch as it completed its fiery trajectory.

What could it be?

Kathryn's mind supplied an immediate answer: it was the trail of an exploding Air Force jet, one of the boys out of the Kirtland base at Albuquerque going to his death on a training flight. Of course. Of course. And tonight there would be a new widow somewhere, a new set of mourners. Kathryn shivered. To her surprise, tears did not come this time.

She followed the path of light. She watched it curve away toward the south, toward down Albuquerque, and then it disappeared, lost in the haze of brightness that rose from the city. Instantly Kathryn manufactured a new catastrophe, for in her private world catastrophe was always readily at hand. She saw the flaming jet crashing at Mach Three into Central Avenue, plowing up a dozen streets, taking a thousand lives, sending gas mains erupting with volcanic fury. Sirens wailing, women screaming, ambulances, hearses. . . .

Fighting back the hysteria she knew to be foolish, she tried more calmly to assess what she had just seen. The light was gone now, and the world was back to usual again, as usual as it could ever get in these days of her sudden, snowy widow-hood. It seemed to her that she heard a muffled boom far in the distance, as of a crash. But all of her experience around Air Force environments told her that that giant streak of light in the sky could not have been an exploding jet, unless there were experimental models with yet-unannounced characteristics. She had seen jets blow up a couple of times, and they made a gaudy burst of light, but nothing like that.

What then? An intercontinental rocket, maybe, carrying five hundred passengers to a fiery doom?

She could hear her husband's voice saying. Think it through, Kate. Think it through.' He had said that a great deal, before he was killed. Kathryn tried to think it through. The brightness had come from the north, from Santa Fe or Taos, heading south. The intercontinental rockets traveled on east-west courses. Unless one of them was badly off course, her theory was faulty. And the rockets weren't supposed to go off course. The guidance systems were infallible. Think, Kate, think it through. A Chinese missile, maybe? The war beginning at last? But she'd have seen the night turn into day, then. She'd have felt the terrible explosion as the fusion bomb ripped New Mexico apart. Think. . . . Some kind of meteor, maybe? How about a flying saucer, coming in for a landing at Kirtland? People talked so much about the saucers these days. Creatures from space, so they said, watching us, snooping around. Green men with

ropy tentacles and bulging eyes? Kathryn shook her head. There might be something about it on video, she thought.

The sky seemed peaceful now, as though nothing at all had happened.

She drew her wrap closer around her. At night, here at the edge of the desert, the wind ripped in as if it came straight from the Pole. Kathryn lived at the northernmost house of her subdivision; she could look out and see only the dry wasteland of sagebrush and sand ahead of her. When she and Ted had bought the house, two years ago, the agent had solemnly told her that new houses soon would be built to the north of theirs. It hadn't happened. Financial problems, shortage of money, something like that, and Kathryn still lived on the boundary between somewhere and nowhere. South of her lay the town of Bernalillo, a suburb of Albuquerque, and civilization was spreading in an ever-widening strip along Highway 25 up from Albuquerque to here. But out to the north was nothing, open country full of coyotes and God knows what else. The coyotes had probably devoured her daughter's kitten. Remembering the kitten, Kathryn clenched her fists and listened once more for the feeble sounds that had brought her outside in the first place.

Nothing. She heard only the whistling of the wind, or perhaps the mocking song of the coyotes. She looked warily at the sky; then, quickly, she turned and went indoors, closing the door, sealing it, putting her thumb to the alarm switch and waiting until the central office gave her the signal. It was good to be inside, in this well-lit, cozy house. She had loved it here at first, while Ted was alive. Now, the best she could do was hang on, and bar the doors to death, and wait for the numbness of widowhood to leave her. She was only thirty. Too young to remain numb forever.

A sleepy voice. 'Mommy, where are you?'

'Here, Jilly. Here.'

'Did you find Kitten-cat?'

'No, sweet.'

'Why'd you go outside?'

'Just to look.'

'Did Kitten-cat go to look for Daddy, Mommy?'

The words stabbed her. Kathryn went into her daughter's bedroom. The little girl lay snug and well covered in her bed, with the golden eye of the monitor peering solemnly down at her. At not quite three, Jill was old enough to climb out of the bed, not old enough to make a safe landing by herself, and so Kathryn still left the baby-monitor on, the watchful electronic guardian. You were supposed to stop using the monitor once a child was past its second birthday, but Kathryn could not bring herself to give up the added security.

Kathryn switched on the night lamp. Jill blinked. She had her father's dark hair, her father's delicate features. Some day she'd be beautiful, not a plain jane like her mother at all, for which Kathryn was grateful. But what good was it all, if • Ted hadn't lived to see it? Lost in action over Syria during the Peace Offensive of 1981. What had Syria ment to him? Why had a foreign land taken from her the only thing that mattered?

Correction: *almost* the only thing.

'Will Kitten-cat find Daddy and bring him back?' Jill asked.

'I hope so, love. Go to sleep and dream about Kitten-cat. And Daddy.'

Kathryn adjusted the monitor's control console, setting up a gentle vibration in the girl's mattress. Jill smiled. Her eyes closed. Kathryn nudged the light lower, and then off. As she stepped back into the living room, she decided to see if there was something on the eight o'clock news about that thing in the sky. 'Flying saucers have landed - ' something like that. She cupped her hand over the wall stud, and the video screen bloomed into vibrant life. She was just in time.

' - reports from Taos as far south as Albuquerque. Also observed at Los Alamos, Grants, and Jemez Pueblo. The meteor was one of the brightest ever seen, according to Dr J. F. Kelly, of the Los Alamos technical staff. A scientific team will begin searching for the remnants of the big fireball tomorrow. For those who missed it, we've got a tape replay coming up in just ninety seconds. And we repeat, there's no cause for alarm, absolutely no cause for alarm over this unusual meteor.'

Thank God, Kathryn thought. A meteor. A shooting star. Not an exploding jet, not a crashing rocket. No new widows tonight. She did not want anyone else to suffer as she had had to suffer.

If only the kitten would return now. She could not hope that Ted would walk through the door, but the kitten might still be alive, perhaps safe somewhere, living in a garage down the block. Kathryn switched off the video. She listened for meows. Everything was silent out there.

Colonel Tom Falkner did not see the fireball. While it streaked across the sky he was in the officers' lounge at the Air Force base, drinking too much cheap Japanese Scotch and watching without interest a televised basketball game between New York and San Diego. He heard, above the buzz of the announcer's voice, two lieutenants talking in low tones about saucers. One man was pretty passionately convinced that they were the real thing, ships from space. The other man took an orthodox skeptic's tack: show me a man from another world, show me a piece of a saucer's landing gear, show me anything I can touch, and I'll believe it. Not until then. They were both a little liquored up, Falkner knew, or they wouldn't be talking about saucers at all. Not with him in the room. As it was, they thought they were keeping their conversation to themselves, sparing Colonel Falkner the em-barrassment of having to hear the silly words 'flying saucer' once again. Everyone was very tactful to poor Colonel Falkner around the base. Everyone knew that he had been handed a slicing by fate, and they tried to make things as easy as possible for him.

He elbowed out of his vibrator chair and walked stiffly over to the bar. The obliging young noncom on bar duty gave him a bright smile.

'Sir?'

'Another Scotch. Make it a double.'

Was that a hint of reproach in the bartender's eyes? A flicker of contempt for the boozy colonel? Barkeeps weren't supposed to be patronizing toward their customers, even if the barkeep happened to be a clean-cut Oklahoma kid who wouldn't touch the stuff except on a direct order from an officer. Falkner scowled. He told himself that he was too sensitive, that he was reading much too much into every-body's expressions and words and even their silences these days. He was just a bundle of raw nerve endings, that was the trouble. And he drank this stinking ersatz-san pseudo-Glenlivet to ease his

tensions, only it just left him with a new load of guilt and misery.

The boy pushed a glass toward him. Spray cans weren't fashionable here in the officers' lounge. So long as there was personnel around to pour, officers who were gentlemen liked to have their alcoholic beverages poured decently into glasses, not squirted like medicine in the approved 1982 manner. Falkner grunted in acknowledgment and slid a hairy-knuckled hand around the glass. Down the hatch. *Foosh*. He winced.

"Pardon my inquisitiveness, sir, but how is that Japanese stuff, anyway?"

'You've never had it?'

'Oh, no, sir.' The bartender looked at Falkner as though the colonel had just suggested some particularly foul form of self-abuse. 'Never. I'm just not a drinking man at all. I guess that's why the computer put me on bar duty here. Heh. Heh.'

'Heh,' Falkner said sourly. He eyed the Scotch bottle, so-called. 'It'll do, I guess. It's got spirits in it and it tastes almost like the real thing, only terrible. And until we can do business with Scotland again, I'll just have to go on drinking it. This damned crazy embargo. The President ought to have his - ' Falkner caught himself. The boy grinned shyly. Despite himself, Falkner grinned too, and made his way back to his seat.

He stared at the glowing screen. That San Diego center, the seven-foot-six fellow, went high to dunk the ball through the net. You just wait, you lousy long-legged goon, Falkner told him silently. Next season there'll be a couple of eight-footers in the league, I bet. They'll knock you off your high horse.

A wisp of talk drifted his way: 'If there are aliens from space watching us, how come they haven't contacted us yet, eh?'

'Maybe they have.'

'Sure, and Frederic Storm is the prophet of the century, too. Don't tell me you belong to a Contact Cult!'

I didn't say...."

Falkner kept his head rigidly trained toward the television wall. He would not, could not, let himself think about flying saucers during his free time. He hated even the very name of the things. It was all a bad joke, this saucer thing, and the joke was on him.

He was 43 years old, though he sometimes felt 143. He could remember, vaguely, when flying saucers first had come into the news. That had been in 1947, right after the Second World War. Falkner couldn't remember the war itself - he had been born in 1939, on the day Poland was invaded, and he'd been in first grade when the war ended - but he did remember the flying saucer thing, because it had scared him. He had read about it in one of the slick magazines, and it had left him chilly with terror to think that a man out in Oregon or wherever was seeing ships from other worlds. Little Tommy Falkner had always been curious about the planets, about space, the original space bug himself at a time when such things were mysteries to the general public, but it had given him a crawly feeling and a week of night-mares to think about those 1947 saucers.

Saucer stories had come and gone. Crackpots had crept out of the woodwork to talk about their rides in space. Tom Falkner was also after a ride in space, but a real one. By the time he entered the Air Force Academy in 1957 he had forgotten all about the saucer craze, had thrown his science fiction magazines

away. He was going to enroll in the American space program, if it ever got started. He was going to be a spaceman.

Falkner took an angry gulp at his drink.

A couple of weeks after he became a cadet, the Russians had a sputnik in orbit. Eventually an American space pro-gram materialized, lame, overdue, but authentic. Funny how the word *spaceman* dropped from the vocabulary, once science fiction started to turn real. *Astronauts*, that's what they were called. Lieutenant Thomas Falkner enrolled in the astronaut program. He was a lot too young for Project Mercury, he watched in envy as the Gemini astronauts went up and came down; but there was room for him in Project Apollo. He was down on the list for a trip to the Moon in 1973. With luck, he figured, he might even make it to Mars before he turned forty.

In those years, space was real, space was earnest. He spent his days in flight simulation, his nights wrestling with mathe-matics. Flying saucers? For lunatics. 'California stuff', Falkner called the stories, even when they came from Michi-gan or South Dakota. In California they'd believe anything, including purple people eaters from the stars. He worked at his trade. His trade was space. Along the way, he got mar-ried, and it wasn't a bad marriage, except there were no children.

He remembered a night in 1970 when he and a couple of the' other Apollo boys did too much justice to a fifth of Scotch, the authentic item, twelve-year-old Ambassador. And Ned Reynolds, looped and incautious, turned to him and said, 'You aren't going to get off Earth, Tom. You want to know why? It's because you don't have any kids. Bad public relations. The astronaut's got to have a couple clean-cut kids waiting for him to come home, or it spoils the TV part.'

Falkner had been amused, in a strained sort of way. It wasn't the sort of thing a sober man would say to a friend, or the sort of thing a sober man would take from a friend, but he had laughed. 'You aren't going to get off Earth, Tom.'*In vino veritas*. Six months later, in a routine physical, they

had discovered something awry in his inner ear, something out of kilter in the thing that governs the body's equilibrium, and that was the end of his career with Project Apollo. Serenely they flunked him out, explaining with all regret that they couldn't put a vertigo-prone man into orbit, even if he had so far displayed no overt tendencies.. ..

They found him a job. It was with Project Bluebook, the Air Force's three-bit program that was set up to reassure the public that the flying saucers didn't exist after all. That was a decade ago. Project Bluebook had expanded after the man-ner of any bureaucracy, and now was AOS, the Atmospheric Objects Survey. And poor old Tom Falkner, the flunked astronaut, was the AOS stringer for Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado. He was a colonel in the flying saucer brigade. If he gritted his teeth and held on long enough, he'd be the next flying saucer general the Air Force would have.

He finished the drink he was holding. At the same moment he became aware that the basketball game had been inter-rupted, half a minute ago, for a local news bulletin. Some-thing about a meteor, a big streak of light... no cause for alarm, absolutely no cause for alarm ____

Falkner tried to focus his mind. Out of its depths an unwelcome thought came swimming upward. *Saucer sight-ing*. At last. The blue-faced bastards from Betelgeuse are here. No cause for alarm, but they just ate Washington, DC. Everything's all right. Only a meteor.

He heard the telephone's insistent chiming back of the bar.

And then the bartender came over and said, 'It's for you, Colonel Falkner. It's your office calling. Somebody sounds awfully upset, sir!'

Two

Aboard the Dirnan craft trouble had started over the Pole. It was a standard watcher ship, of the kind that had been patrolling the Earth for decades now, and the possibility of malfunction was so slight that a sane person did not think of such things. The ships worked well; that was all there was to it. But aboard this one there was a failure.

The first indication of problems came at ninety thousand feet, when the safety lamp began to glow. At once, warning signals throbbed beneath the flesh of the three members of the ship's crew. Among the various useful circuits implanted in their bodies was one that let them know instantly if technical difficulties were arising. The essence of the mission called for the watchers to keep aloof from the watched, and the last thing any Dirnan wanted was a crash landing on Earth.

The crew was busy. It consisted of a standard three-facet sexual group, in this case two males and a female. They had been together for close to a century as Earth calculates time, and for the past ten of those years they had been performing watcher duty above Earth. The female, Glair, presided over the recording equipment that sought out information from the planet below. Mirtin processed and analyzed the information. Vorneen transmitted it to the mother world. In addition, they had various other duties that they shared on an informal basis: ship maintenance, food preparation, contact with other watchers, and such. They were a good team. When the warning signals came, each looked up from his own work instantly, ready to take whatever action was necessary for the safety of the craft.

Mirtin - the oldest, the calmest, wearing as his chosen disguise the body of a middle-aged Earthman - was the first to reach the analysis board. His fingers moved swiftly. He gathered the data and turned to the others.

'The plasma pinch is giving out. We're going to blow within six minutes.'

'But that's impossible,' Glair protested. 'We - ' Vorneen smiled gently. 'It's happening, Glair. It's possible.' He wore a younger man's body, and he was perhaps too vain about his looks. But, of course, a Dirnan on watcher duty had to adopt the outer form of an Earthman, and it was merely sane to choose the configuration that best expressed the inner being. If Vorneen chose to look slightly too handsome, if Glair had erred in the direction of voluptuousness, if Mirtin wished to be self-effacingly unglamorous, those all were permissible options.

Glair, recovering from her momentary foolishness, was all business. 'If we shunt the current around the opaquer circuit, that might keep the plasma together, right?'

'Try it,' Vorneen said. But Glair's hands were already at work.

Mirtin laughed. 'We're visible now. It gives one a naked feeling, doesn't it? Like standing in the marketplace at noon, stripped to one's bones.'

'We can't stay visible for long,' said Vorneen. 'We'll be smashing into every detector net the Earthmen have. There'll be warheads flying.'

'I doubt it,' said Glair crisply. 'They've seen our ships before and haven't attacked them. Give them credit. They know we're up here. At least, the governments do. Five minutes without our opaquer won't be that serious.'

Vorneen knew that she was right. What was important now was to avert the explosion, not to fret about the fact that they had exposed themselves to every kind of Earthly detection system from the neutron screen to naked-eye observation. He pried open the hatch and wriggled into the power department.

The Dirnan ship was designed for indefinite flight without refueling. Its hull, a flattened sphere, tapered below to a cupola in which a fusion generator was mounted: nothing more nor less than a miniature sun, from which the ship drew all its necessary power. At the core of the system was a plasma - a fiercely hot soup of electrons and stripped atomic nuclei - kept in check by a powerful magnetic field. Nothing solid could contain that plasma without itself becoming part of the plasma, for what was there in the universe that could serve as a bottle for a gas whose heat was measured in the hundreds of millions of degrees? But the magnetic field set up a pinch effect that controlled the plasma, keeping it apart from anything it might devour. So long as the fiery plasma remained in check, the Dimans could tap power from it forever, or as close to forever as made no difference to living beings. But if the pinch gave way, the three would find themselves living a dozen feet away from a full-fledged sun. Briefly.

Entering the crawl space, Vorneen approached the power core and saw to his dismay that five of the control rods had fused already, and ominous bluish arcs were flickering back and forth over the housing of the generator. He had no particular fear of dying, and of all ways to die this would surely be the quickest, but the professionalism in his nature drove him to try to reverse the situation if at all possible. About all he could do, he realized, was to try to draw power from elsewhere in the ship and shore up the magnetic pinch, and hope that the system would stabilize itself through the homeostatic controls that supposedly came into automatic play at times like this.

Already, the opaquer circuit had been killed, rendering the ship visible to Earthman eyes. That was regrettable, but it had happened before, too often for Vorneen to worry about it now. There'd be a new 'flying saucer' story on the video down there tonight, he thought. But if the fusion generator blew up, and happened to take a couple of cities with it, it would be a news story bigger than he cared to create.

'Cut the transmitter circuits,' he called.

'They're cut,' Mirtin answered. 'Twenty seconds ago. You didn't notice?'

'No effect.'

'I'll knock out the lights,' said Glair.

'Better knock out everything,' Vorneen shouted. 'I'm not getting any gain. I'm losing pinch steadily!'

The ship went dark. The poor Earthmen would be de-prived of the flashing red and green lights they loved so dearly; in fact, they'd be unable to see the saucer at all now, except on governmental detection equipment. Sourly Vor-neen realized that he was writing a new chapter in the vast archive of secret documentary information on the watcher ships that the governments down there were known to possess. He hated the thought that he had joined the legion of bunglers giving the show away. But it was hardly his fault. What was happening now was purely a statistical phenomenon: given so many watcher ships in orbit above Earth, at least one was bound to malfunction in some spec-tacular way. And it happened to be theirs.

By now, of course, a distress signal had gone booming out across the galaxy. The moment a crew cut its transmitter circuits, breaking contact with the mother world, an SOS was automatically registered. Because of the light-year lag between Earth and Dirna, a couple of decades would pass before anyone at home knew that this particular ship was having problems, but the same distress signal was reaching

hundreds of other Dirnan craft closer at hand. That was some comfort.

Vorneen came back into the heart of the ship. 'No use,' he said. 'She's going to blow. We've got to abandon ship.'

Glair looked flustered. 'But -'

Mirtin was at the controls. 'I'll take the ship higher. We want to be above the danger range. Thirty miles up, yes?'

'Higher,' said Vorneen. 'As high as you can manage. And keep on course. We ought to be over desert country, any-way.'

'Can we take anything?' asked Glair.

'Ourselves,' said Vorneen.

The ship had been their home for many years. It was painful to leave it now: more painful for her, perhaps, than for us, Vorneen told himself. It was Glair who tended the little garden of Dirnan flowers they kept aboard, Glair who added all the little feminine touches to the harshness of the ship's decor. Now they must leave garden and ship and all to their fate, and hurl themselves down onto the dark bosom of Earth. It was something every watcher had to live with, this possibility, but it had never seemed quite real to Vorneen, and he knew what an upheaval this must be for Glair. Only Mirtin seemed wholly detached from the calamity.

They soared high into the night sky.

Strange rumbling sounds were coming from the power compartment now. Vorneen tried not to think of what might be going on in there, or how close they might be to the actual explosion. Glair was getting into her jump equipment. He seized his. Mirtin, locking the controls in place, started to slip his harness on.

'We're going to be scattered,' Vorneen said. 'We may land hundreds of miles apart from each other.' He saw Glair's frightened eyes. Ruthlessly, he went on, 'We may be injured in landing, or perhaps even killed. But we've got to jump. Somehow we'll find each other again.' He yanked the ejection lever, and

the hatch they had never expected to use yawned wide. The atmosphere rushed from the ship's cabin;

but the jump equipment protected them from the airlessness. Hastily they moved toward the hatch.

'Out,' Vorneen said to Glair.

She jumped. He watched in cold horror as she spun away from the ship, arcing out into nothingness with such violence that he feared she had lost consciousness. She had not been trained to jump so clumsily. But it was a long time since they had run a jump drill aboard this ship. Sickened, he knew that Glair must have jumped to her death, and at the loss of one of his mates he felt an anguish far more terrible than he had ever known. Abandoning the ship was nothing, really; but losing Glair ...

'Out,' said Mirtin behind him.

And then Vorneen left the ship. For all his torment, he executed the jump perfectly. This was the moment when nightmares became solid; any watcher dreamed hundreds of times of making the jump, but for most it remained just a dream. Here he was, hurtling downward with thirty miles of void beneath him, and Glair probably dead already, and a planet of hostile strangers waiting for him. Yet with strange calmness he cut in his life-support system and felt the sudden impact as his deployment screen steadied his fall. He would live.

And Mirtin?

It was difficult to look up. Vorneen tried. But he was thousands of feet below the ship now, and he could see neither the ship itself nor any sign of Mirtin. Had he jumped? Of course he had. Mirtin made a fetish of ration-ality; no last-minute panic for him, no staying aboard the doomed ship. No doubt Mirtin was smoothly falling Earth-ward at this moment. Vorneen looked downward once again.

An instant later the explosion came.

It was more horrifying than he would ever have dreamed it might be. If it had happened a moment before, while he was stupidly looking up, it would have boiled away his eyes. As it was he shook with awe as the heavens above him glowed with the quick light of a sudden sun. There was no

hard radiation in a fusion generator, of course; neither he nor the distant towns below would suffer. Nor did the well-spaced atmospheric molecules up here transmit much sound. He felt heat on his back and shoulders, but after all, this had been only a tiny sun, strong enough to power one small spacecraft, and he was not charred, nor would anyone below be aware of warmth. What was frightening was the light, that savage glare passing above him and streaking through the sky. It was as though the universe had cracked open up there, allowing the primal light of first creation to shine through. Closing his eyes scarcely helped. What would it look like, down on Earth, he wondered? Would they experience terror and awe? Or would it seem like no more than a robust meteor trail?

There it went, following the trajectory of what had been the ship. At least there would be no fragments of the craft to arouse mystery on Earth: a small blessing. But that light! That monstrous light!

Vorneen lost consciousness.

When he regained control of himself, he was appalled to find a row of houses not far below his dangling feet. On Earth, so soon? Another thousand yards and he would at last be touching the soil of the planet he had watched so long. Down ... down....

By now Glair would have landed. He tried not to think about her fate. It was Mirtin he had to find, the sooner the better, and together they'd await the rescue crew that shortly would be here to pick them up. Meanwhile the problem was survival. He cursed the luck that had brought him down in civilization, with all this good wilderness about. Vorneen did what he could to steer himself away from the houses, toward the flat scrubby plateau just beyond.

Now the ground was rushing toward him. He had never expected the landing to be like this. Didn't one waft gently to the ground? No. No. He was falling like a bomb. He would smash right through the roof of the last house in that row. He would -

He swerved, but only by a matter of feet.

Then the most savage pain he had ever experienced, in a life that had been almost wholly free from pain, struck him and stunned him, and the man from the stars toppled heavily forward and lay still, more dead than alive.

Three

At the Albuquerque office of the Atmospheric Objects Survey, everything was ready to roll half an hour after the fireball had been sighted. The maintenance men had loaded fully charged batteries into the six electric half-tracks; the computer had already produced a vector chart showing possible landing sites for the space debris, if any; Bronstein, Colonel Falkner's adjutant, had summoned the off-duty men. Now they stood in an uneasy semicircle around the glow-board in the main office, staring at the streaky red line that marked the plotted path of the Atmospheric Object.

Fifteen feet away, behind the locked and bolted door of the bathroom, Tom Falkner was trying hard to sober up.

On the jeep ride over here from the officers' lounge Falkner had swallowed an antistim tablet. They were handy little things, guaranteed to clear the cobwebs out of an alcohol-woozy mind in half an hour or so. But the process wasn't pleasant. What the pills did was to deliver a neat double jolt to the thyroid and the pituitary, temporarily

deranging the hormone balance and putting the metabolism into high gear. All bodily processes were accelerated, including the one that burned the alcohol out of the blood. Under antistims, you lived six or seven hours in a realtime environmental situation lasting about ten minutes. It was rugged, but it worked. When you had settled down to a leisurely evening of stupefying yourself, and suddenly discovered that it was vital to destupefy yourself at once, there was no alternative but to use the tablets.

Falkner crouched on the bathroom's tiled floor, gripping the towel rack with both hands. He was shaking. Great blotches of sweat darkened his uniform. His face was red, his pulse rate was over a hundred and climbing, and the terrible thunder of his heart was like a drum pounding in his rib cage. He had already vomited, getting rid of the last four or five ounces of Scotch before it had had a chance to filter very far into his system, and this violent inner purge was taking care of the rest. His brain was clearing. This was only the fourth or fifth time in his life he had found it necessary to take the antistims, and each time he hoped it would be the last.

After a long time he rose.

His fingers, extended experimentally before him, waggled as though he were typing a letter. He fought to steady them. The blood had drained from his face now. Falkner eyed him-self in the mirror, and shuddered at what he saw. He was a big man, blocky-shouldered, with close-cropped black curly hair and a little bristly mustache and bloodshot eyes. In his astronaut days he had been careful not to let his weight get above 165, but those days were long gone, and now he had fleshed out to the full capacity of his frame and then some. In uniform he looked burly and massive. Stripped of that khaki exoskeleton, he tended to sag and bulge a little. He wasn't proud of what he had become in his middle years. But he hadn't asked for any of this, neither the inner-ear problem nor the flying saucer detail.

He felt a little better now. He dabbed cold water on his face, wiped the sweat, adjusted his collar. Though not whollysober even now, he no longer felt the worse effects of his binge. That prickly sensation at the tip of his nose was gone; his ears no longer felt like slabs of cardboard; his eyes worked as eyes were supposed to work. Moving with great care, Falkner opened the bathroom door and went into the office.

Captain Bronstein seemed to have everything under con-trol, as usual. There he was, briefing the men, speaking crisply, never slurring so much as a syllable. When he caught sight of Falkner, Bronstein turned smoothly and said, 'We're ready to go when you say the word, Colonel.'

'Everything calculated? The routes allotted?'

'Everything,' Bronstein said. He flashed a quick, possibly mocking smile. 'The board's lit up like a Christmas tree. We've had a thousand reports on the AO so far, and they're still coming in. It's a live one this time.'

'Swell,' Falkner muttered. 'We'll be famous. Extraterres-trial spaceship crash-lands; pilot bails out; brave officers of AOS subdue with bare hands. We -'

Falkner caught himself. He had begun to run off at the mouth again, a sign that perhaps he wasn't so sober after all. The warning glance from Bronstein had been explicit. For a moment their eyes met, and Falkner was infuriated to see how sorry for him Bronstein looked. A surge of pure hatred ran through the colonel's body.

At times like this Falkner stubbornly insisted to himself that he did not hate Bronstein merely because Bronstein was Jewish. Jewishness had nothing to do with it. He hated Bronstein because the dapper little captain was ambitious, because he was capable, because he was always in full con-trol of himself, and because he believed that the flying saucers came from another world. Bronstein was the only officer Falkner knew who had*volunteered* for AOS. The department was considered a dumping-ground for career men whose usefulness had otherwise been expended, but Bronstein had clawed his way into the job. Why? Because he believed the saucers were the coming thing, the biggest job the Air Force had

ever handled. Honestly. And he wanted to be right there, soaking up the glory and collecting the head-lines, when fantasy turned into open reality. To Bronstein the saucer patrol was the gateway to greater things.

Senator Bronstein. President Bronstein.

Falkner's mood grew more foul. He snapped, 'All right, let's get moving. Out into the desert and find that meteorite before dawn!*Schnell!*'

The men hurried from the room. Bronstein lingered. In a soft voice he said, 'Tom, I think this one's really *it*. The bailout situation we've been waiting for.'

'Go to hell.'

'Won't you be surprised when you find an interstellar ambassador sitting in the sagebrush?'

'It was a meteor,' said Falkner frozenly.

'Did you see it?'

'No. I was - studying reports.'

'I saw it,' Bronstein said. 'It wasn't any meteor. It damn near burned my eyes out. That was some kind of fusion generator blowing up, above the stratosphere. It was like a little sun turning on for a couple of minutes, Tom. That's what the boys at Los Alamos said, too. You know of any Air Force projects that fly fusion generators?'

'No.'

'Neither do I. So -'

'So it was a Chinese spy ship,' Falkner said.

Bronstein laughed. 'You know something, Tom? I think it's a hell of a lot more probable that that ship came from Procyon Twelve, or someplace like that, from another solar system, than from Peking. So tell me I'm crazy. It's what I believe.'

Falkner did not reply. He swung back and forth on the balls of his feet for a moment, trying to persuade himself that he was living this and not merely dreaming it. Then, scowling, he gestured to Bronstein and they went out into the night.

Four of the half-tracks had already left. Falkner got into one of the remaining ones, Bronstein into the other, and they were rumbling away from the base. Falkner's cabin contained a complete communications link that hooked him in to the other search vehicles, to the Albuquerque office, to the main headquarters of AOS in Topeka, and to the various local headquarters under his jurisdiction in the four south-western states. The board was plenty busy just now, too. A dozen message lights were flashing all at once.

Falkner keyed in Topeka and watched the face of his commanding officer, General Weyerland, take on form and color in the little screen.

Weyerland, like Falkner himself, was cosmic debris, a wash-up from the space program who had been transferred to the dead end that was AOS. At least Weyerland had four stars on his shoulder by way of consolation, though. Con-sidering that he held personal responsibility for the deaths of two astronauts who perished in a space experiment, Weyer-land was pretty lucky to have a job at all, even with AOS, Falkner figured. But he kept up a good front. Weyerland always acted as though this thing meant something to him.

The general said, 'What's the story up to now, Tom?'

'Nothing much, sir. Streak of light in the sky, a lot of citizens upset, and now a standard check. I'm going out with six half-tracks from here, and we're sending a couple north from Santa Fe. Plus the usual metal-detector sweeps. It's routine, like all these sightings.'

'I'm not so sure,' said Weyerland.

'Sir?'

'Washington's been on the phone twice. I mean the big man, too. He's upset. You know, this streak of light was seen over thousands of square miles? They picked it up in Cali-fornia and it's driving them wild out there.'

'California.' Falkner made the word sound unutterably obscene.

'Yes, I know. But the public's alarmed. They're pressuring the White House, and he's pressuring us.'

'There's a One-o-seven already out, isn't there?'

'On every channel,' said Weyerland. The designation '107' was the code term for a soft-peddling announcement that the mysterious object was merely a natural phenomenon and there was nothing to worry about. 'But we've sent out so many One-o-sevens, Tom, that nobody believes them. We say "meteor", everybody translates it "flying saucer". The time's coming when we'll have to start telling the truth.'

What truth? Falkner wanted to ask. He didn't.

He said, 'Tell the President we'll report back as soon as we've got anything solid.'

'Check in with me every hour,' Weyerland said. 'Whether there's anything solid or not.'

The general broke the circuit. Immediately, Falkner began to key in the others. On four of them he was getting data from the detector nets spotted around the national defense periphery. Sure enough, they had all recorded a massive object coming down across the Pole at an altitude of ninety-thousand feet and climbing still higher over Manitoba, then smashing up completely above Central New Mexico. Well, sure, something had been up there tonight. But there was a rational explanation for it, as well as a fantastic one. The thing had been a heavy blob of iron that had drifted into our atmosphere and burned up. Why conjure up galactic space-ships when meteors were so common?

Falkner's half-track crunched steadily onward, now head-ing northwest out of Albuquerque in the general direction of Cibola National Forest. To his left, the colonel could see the distant headlights of cars swooshing rapidly along Highway 40. He was nearing the Rio Puerco - just a dry wash, right now, after a rainless autumn. The stars seemed exceptionally sharp, hard-edged. It was a good night for snow, but he

knew no snow would fall tonight. Moodily, he continued to jab at the control panel before him, going through all the motions of doing his job.

The public was worried. *The public!* Let a helicopter buzz by overhead and a million people rushed to their telephones to tell the police about the flying saucer. Tonight's little heavenly display, Falkner thought sullenly, had probably brought a small fortune in extra revenues to Mountain States Tel and Tel. Jammed lines all evening. The whole deal was just a promotional scheme dreamed up by the phone company. Sure.

One of the things that bothered Falkner about the flying saucer stories was the ascending graph line of reported sightings. Saucer sightings seemed to fluctuate in keeping with the temperature of international events: the first ones just after the Second World War, in the new atomic tensions of the U.S.-Russian rivalry, and then a lull for a while in the Eisenhower years, followed by a fresh flareup of the things about 1960. Then, after the Kennedy assassination, saucers spotted all over the place, and since 1966 or so a steadily mounting frequency, tending to bunch into the seasons when the quarrel with China was closest to bursting wide open.

You couldn't correlate meteor showers with global politics. You could, though, blame the saucer stories on private anxieties, to some extent. Perhaps 99 percent of the sightings, Falkner figured, were inspired by edgy nerves.

But the others -

The trouble was that the quality of the sighters was changing. At first, most of the saucer stories had come from menopausal matrons and goitrous, slab-jawed rustics with steel-framed eyeglasses, but gradually there had been a shift away from the obvious crank segment of the population and toward those whose words carried intrinsic weight. When bank presidents, policemen, congressmen, and physics professors all began seeing round shapes in the sky, the thing was past the crackpot stage, Falkner had to admit. And, particularly since 1975, the number of sightings and the number of respectable sighters had risen sharply. The lunatic fringe, the i-rode-in-a-flying-saucer fringe, was always around. Falkner ignored them. He could not ignore the others

Still, he had a deep and abiding emotional commitment to his work, of a negative sort. He could not allow himself to believe that the so-called saucers were anything more than natural phenomena. If they really were ships from space, then his assignment to AOS was really important, and the pang of bitterness that pricked him would withdraw. Tom Falkner needed that pang as his spur. And so he growled with hostility at any suggestion that his job might really be concerned with actual events, or that it might have any relevance to his country's security.

He jacked out the data banks and keyed in the news from the metal-detectors.

Nothing. No unusual objects seen on the desert.

He talked to Bronstein, who by now was eighty miles south of him, in the vicinity of Acoma Pueblo.

'Any news? Any reports?'

'Nothing from here,' said Bronstein. 'They saw the sky-streak at Acoma, though. Also at Laguna. The chief says a lot of his people are scared.'

'Tell them there's nothing to worry about.'

'I did. It doesn't help. They're spooked, Tom.'

'Tell them to do a spook dance, then.'

'Tom - '

'Okay, I'm sorry.*Sir.*' Falkner hit the sarcasm heavily. Yawning, he said, 'You know, the White House is spooked too? Poor Weyerland's been getting the needles for the last hour. He wants results, or else.'

'I know. He called me.'

Falkner frowned. He didn't like the idea of his superior officer conferring with his adjutant. There was a chain of command to deal with such situations. He broke off and switched to a different channel. The half-track clunked along westward. On its roof sensitive antennae twirled, seeking data, anything useful. A glint of metal on the desert, and he'd know about it. The thermal detectors were hunting for the infrared radiation of any living body larger than the size of a kangaroo rat. Every thirty seconds a laser beam pinged out, bounced off a focal sphere eighty miles away, and came back newsless.

Restlessly, Falkner pushed buttons, twisted dials, jacked circuits in and out. On each of these fruitless search trips through the desert after some kind of sighting, he took a dry pleasure in letting his hands rove over the intricate control panel, making full use of his electronic gadgetry even though

he was firmly convinced that he would never find anything. A couple of months ago it had finally dawned on him what he was doing when he fiddled with the equipment in this compulsive way. He was playing astronaut.

Sitting here hunched in his warm half-track, he might just as well be hunched in a space capsule orbiting four hundred miles up. Except, of course, that his buttocks registered the jolting crunch of track against sand. But he had the whole array of bright lights and tiny screens, a child's dream of spaceman's hardware, and he could punch in data to his heart's content. He had not been happy to draw the parallel, because it brought home to him the futility of these saucer searches, and his own shattering failure of career. Yet he went on, randomly stabbing buttons.

He talked to Topeka again. He chatted with the boys in the two northern half-tracks, one out past Taos by now and the other cruising near the Spanish towns on the other side of Santa Fe National Forest. He monitored the four southern half-tracks that were fanned out from Socorro to Isleta, and as far west as Pie Town. He exchanged brief comments with Bronstein, who was in the forlorn, empty country south of Acoma Pueblo, and heading vaguely toward the Zuni Reservation. Between them, they maintained a total surveillance spread over the entire trajectory area of the alleged meteor, but nobody had found anything. Every hour on the hour Falkner cut in on the commercial radio and video outlets and picked up the news. Evidently a lot of people were yelling 'Flying saucer!' tonight, because the announcers were going to great pains to insist that it was nothing but a meteor. Moving from station to station, Falkner heard the same bland assertions. They were all quoting Kelly from Los Alamos. Who was Kelly? An astronomer, maybe? No, just 'of the technical staff', whatever that meant. Probably a janitor. But the media were using the magic of his Los Alamos affiliation as a talisman to reassure the troubled listeners.

And now they were tossing in a few astronomers, too. A certain Alvarez, from Mount Palomar, had released a statement. So had one Matsuoko, a leading Japanese astronomer. Had Alvarez seen the fireball himself? Nothing in his words indicated that. Had Matsuoko? Of course not. Yet both of them were speaking learnedly of meteors, prissily drawing the distinction between meteor and meteorite,

smothering any anxiety in a torrent of comforting verbiage. By mid-night, the Government was releasing selected bits of information from the detector nets and the eye satellites. Yes, the eyes up there had seen the meteor. No, there was nothing to fear. Purely natural phenomena. Falkner felt sick.

His ingrained obstinate skepticism about the Atmospheric Objects was matched only by his ingrained obstinate skepticism about official Government announcements. If the Government was going to all this trouble to keep people calm, then there had to be something big to worry about. That much was axiomatic. On the other hand, trained as he was in interpreting the phoniness of official handouts, Falkner had a deep and abiding need to believe in the futility and emptiness of his own assignment. He could not let himself believe in real saucers. But he did not believe the Government, either. It was well past midnight now. He peered at the thick neck of his driver, sealed off from him in the front compartment, and fought back a yawn. He would ride all night. There was nothing waiting for him back in Albuquerque but an empty bed and a day of crushed cigarette butts. His wife was vacationing in Buenos Aires with her new husband. Falkner had grown accustomed to being alone by now, but he did not like it much. Other men soothed themselves in their work at such times, but Falkner's work was no work for a grown man, he often said.

At three in the morning he was right up at the edge of the mountains. There was a logging road through the national forest that he could take if he wanted to take it, but he ordered the driver to swing around. He would return to Albuquerque on a big loop, around the Mesa Prieta, skirting Jemez Pueblo, and down the western side of the Rio Grande to home. They were still awake in Topeka, and probably in

Washington as well. Good for them, the heroes.

The information flow on the various channels was slowing down. To fill in the time, Falkner ran off the taped playback of the fireball a few times. By this time, he had picked up half a dozen relayed shots of it from several points along its trajectory. He studied them carefully, and had to admit that the sudden glowing streak must have been an impressive sight. Too bad he had been indoors tanking up and had missed it. But it still looked like a meteor track, Falkner told himself stubbornly. A big meteor, but what of that? How about the one that had slashed its way through the Siberian forest in 1908 and cut such a swath? Or the giant meteor crater in Arizona? What were those, if not natural phenomena?

And the ferocity of the actinic radiation?

Simple. He had been arguing about that with Bronstein two hours ago.

'Postulate a lump of contraterrene matter dropping into our atmosphere,' Falkner said. 'A couple of tons of anti-iron, say. A great slew of antiprotons and antineutrons meeting and annihilating terrene matter.'

'That's old hat, Tom.'

'So what? It's plausible, isn't it?'

'Not plausible enough. It involves the necessity to postulate a large mass of antimatter somewhere in our part of the universe,' said Bronstein, 'and there's no real evidence that such a mass exists, or even can exist. It's a far simpler hypothesis to postulate an intelligent extraterrestrial race sending observers here. Just apply Occam's Razor to your antimatter idea and you'll see what a lousy theory it is.'

'Apply Occam's Razor to your throat, Bronstein. And press hard.'

Falkner liked the idea despite Bronstein's objections. Sure, it violated the law of the least complex

hypothesis. But Occam's Razor was a logical tool, not an inflexible condition of the universe, and it didn't hold good in all conditions. Falkner blinked hard, and wished he had some Scotch. Pale streaks of dawn were beginning to strain the eastern sky. In

the nation's capital it was morning already, and they were up and forming their traffic jams. Now, if we look at this notion of antimatter in a rigorous fashion, we find -

Something went *ping* on one of the half-track's external detector systems.

'Stop the truck!' Falkner yelled to the driver.

The vehicle halted. The pinging didn't. Very carefully, Colonel Falkner examined his inputs and tried to discover what the hell was going on. He isolated the cause of the disturbance. The detectors were picking up the thermals of a human being with a mass of some eighty to one hundred pounds within a radius of a thousand yards. Sure enough, the metal-detectors were confirming it, coming up with plenty of data. Someone was out there.

The nearest town was twenty miles away. There wasn't even a road within a dozen miles. This was lonely country, nothing but lots of sagebrush, a few tufts of yucca and bear grass, here and there a misplaced juniper or pinon tree that belonged to the highlands. No streams, no ponds, no houses. Nothing. And nobody belonged out here. This land wasn't good for anything. Falkner told himself that his detector was picking up an Eagle Scout camping for the night, or some-thing equally innocuous. Nevertheless, he had to check. Leaving the driver in the half-track, Falkner got out.

Which way?

A thousand yards to cover - that was plenty, when you converted radius to circumference and started thinking in terms of area. He switched on the mercury beacon at his hip, but it didn't do much good; in this gray predawn light, artificial illumination was little help. He decided to look around for fifteen minutes and then call for a copter to bring a search party. The trouble with these fancy detecting systems was that they didn't function well at really close range.

He chose a direction at random and picked his way over the rough, sandy ground. When he had gone fifty paces, he saw what looked like a bundle of old clothes lying in a clump of sage, and ran toward it, feeling a kind of wild, fearful excitement that he could not understand.

When he reached the bundle of old clothes, he saw that it was a woman, blond, young, a pretty face except for the smears of blood on her lips and chin. She was alive. She didn't seem to be conscious. She was wearing some sort of spacesuit of a design Falkner had never seen before, with elaborate personnel-transport jets, a sleek faceplate, and fabric of a shimmering, oddly lovely texture. Instantly he suspected that the girl must be a Chinese or Russian observer who had been forced to bail out from some kind of overflight. Racially, of course, she was anything but Chinese, but there was no reason why Peking could not hire a blonde from Brooklyn as a spy, if necessary. If this was what a Chinese spacesuit looked like these days, you had to take your hat off to them.

She had clearly had a bumpy landing, though. He couldn't see much of her body, but from the way she was hunched up Falkner suspected that she had a couple of broken legs, for openers, and probably internal injuries. Well, there was a power stretcher in the half-track; he'd scoop her up, get her safely back to town, and turn her over to the medics. At least she wasn't from some other galaxy, unless there

was a galaxy out there that produced beautiful blondes.

Her faceplate had been jarred open in the landing. Falkner saw that she was stirring, that she appeared to be murmuring something, and he nudged the clear plate away from his lips, bending close to listen.

She wasn't talking Russian: the words were too liquid for that. She wasn't talking Chinese: the inflection was a mono-tone. She wasn't talking any language Falkner had ever heard. That made him a little queasy. He refused to let himself believe that she was speaking a language of another world. This was delirium he was hearing. Mere ravings.

Was that something in English, now?

If they will help . . . they speak which here? English. Yes ...English...'

He looked the spacesuit over again, saw how alien it was, and his flesh began to crawl;

The girl's eyes opened. Beautiful eyes. Frightened eyes. Pain-misted eyes.

'Help me,' she said.

Four

As he fell toward Earth, Mirtin knew that he was going to be severely injured. He took that calmly, as he took every-thing else. The matter was out of his hands. What he re-gretted was the notoriety that this involuntary exploit would win him at home, not the pain his body would suffer in the immediate future. Sooner or later, some watcher ship had been bound by probability to malfunction and force its crew to make an unscheduled landing on Earth, but Mirtin had never thought the malfunctioning ship would be his own.

There were techniques for calming one's spirit in a time of stress. He used them as he hurtled toward the dark world below.

The loss of the ship was a minor matter to him. The embarrassment of this accident was also minor. The

dangers he would encounter on Earth were less minor, but also no real source of sorrow; he would survive, or he would not survive, and why weep? Nor did he brood over the injuries he was certain to receive in landing. Those could be repaired.

No, what troubled Mirtin now was the disruption of his sexual group. As the oldest, the steadiest, he felt a responsibility for protecting the other two, and now they were beyond his help.

Glair was probably dead. That was a harsh blow. Mirtin had watched her make her clumsy leap, had seen her go pinwheeling out into emptiness in the worst of all possible dives. Perhaps she had pulled out of it, but what was most likely was that she had fallen, stonelike, to a quick and horrid death. Mirtin had lost group partners before, long ago, and he knew the trauma it brought. And Glair was special, uniquely sensitive to the needs of the group, the perfect female bridge to link the two males. She could not easily be replaced.

Vorneen had made a better jump, and in any case Vorneen could look out for himself. But he would land many miles from Mirtin's impact point, and they might never find each other. Even if they did, their position would not be an easy one - especially without Glair.

Mirtin calmed himself.

Impact could not be far away, now.

They said that making a jump like this delivered an impact equal to dropping from a height of a hundred feet. Such a fall would not kill a Dirnan, but it would still be a substantial jolt. Since they had left the ship at an altitude far above the recommended one for a jump, it was reasonable to expect severe bodily damage. Mirtin did what he could, coiling his Dirnan interior securely within his fleshy outer shell, his Earthman disguise. That was all he could do. The bones that supported his shell would probably break; the Dirnan gristle and cartilage within was safe. But it would cause him pain and inconvenience to break bones, all the same. This housing he wore was now his body, even though he had not been born in it.

Down.

Consciousness threatened to leave him in the last few moments. Making a strenuous effort, Mirtin maintained his awareness. He saw that he was landing far from any large city. To the east he observed the rectangular mud buildings of an Indian village, one of those living curios of the past that the Earthmen preserved so carefully in this part of their world. To the west, in the distance, was the great cleft of a canyon. In between was his landing area, a furrowed plain marked by deep gorges, eroded terraces, steeply rising mesas. Down here he was subject to atmospheric currents; Mirtin felt them lift him slightly, deflect him toward the Indian village a mile or two. He checked the trend with his stabilizer jets, and cut in the deployment screen to spare himself the worse effects of impact.

At the last moment he blanked out anyway, despite his hard work. It was just as well; for when he regained his consciousness, Mirtin knew that he was badly injured.

The first order of business was to deal with the pain. He went down the rows of ganglia, deliberately switching them off. Some, of course, had to remain active - the ones that operated his autonomous nervous system. He needed the breathing reflex and the cluster of nerves that powered his digestive/respiratory/circulatory nexus. But anything that could be spared was disconnected, for the time being. Without that feverish haze of pain, he could survey his situation more clearly and see what else

needed to be done.

More than an hour passed before Mirtin had shut off enough of his nervous system to reduce the pain to a tolerable level. He needed half an hour more to wash the accumulated pain-poisons from his body. Then he took stock.

He was lying on his back, toward the eastern end of a triangular wedge of land slightly elevated above the surrounding terrain. To his left ran the dry gully of what must be a stream in springtime. To his right was a steeply rising cliff, and by the faint light of approaching morning he saw that the stone was soft and sandy, pocked with many small openings. No more than a dozen body-lengths behind him was the dark mouth of a cave. If he could crawl in there somehow, he would have the sanctuary he needed while his body went through the healing process,

But he could not crawl.

He could not move at all.

It was difficult to evaluate the bodily damage with so much of his nervous system disconnected, but Mirtin guessed that he had suffered a perpendicular break across his central inner column. His legs and arms seemed to be all right, but there was no motor response in them, which meant that he must have snapped his spine. He could repair that, given enough time. First the bone would have to knit, and then he would have to regenerate the paths of the nerves. It would take, say, two months of local time. His inner, Dirman, body was basically whole, so all he had to do was recreate his shell.

Lying out here on his back in the open, though? In winter? Without food?

His body had many special abilities unknown on Earth, but it could not do without food indefinitely. Mirtin estimated that he would starve to death long before he was healed enough to rise and seek food. That was academic, anyway; a week without water would finish him off. He needed shelter and food and water, and in his present state he could get none of those things unaided, which meant that he needed help.

Vorneen? Glair? If they were alive, they had problems of their own. Mirtin was unable to activate his communicator, which was mounted on his side just above his hip, and there was no way of signaling them. His only hope was the arrival of some friendly Earthman. And, in this wasteland, Mirtin did not find that very probable.

He realized that he was going to die.

Not yet, though. He resolved to wait three days, and see what happened. By then, the lack of water would be causing him great distress, and he would have just enough strength left to disconnect the rest of his nervous system and slip into a peaceful death. His corpse would decay swiftly, even in this dry climate, and some day only his empty suit would be discovered. These artificial Earthman bodies were designed to rot in a hurry, bones and all, once the inner spark of Dirman life was withdrawn; the planners took every pre-caution to keep the watched from learning of the presence of the watchers. Mirtin waited.

Morning came, a slow increase of brightness rising out of the gully. He lay patiently. Another morning, and then another, and all would be over. He reviewed his life. He thought of Glair and Vorneen, and how deeply he had loved them. He wondered, in a calm way, whether it had been fruitful to give his life for his world like this.

He became aware, eventually, that someone was approach-ing him.

Mirtin had not expected that. He was already resigned to lying broken-backed in the desert for his arbitrarily chosen three days, letting the clock run out, and extinguishing him-self. Yet it seemed he would be discovered after all.

Though he could not lift his head, he could roll his eyes. In the distance he saw an Earthman and a pet animal coming toward him, though not in any purposeful way. They moved circuitously, the animal leaping and frolicking, the Earthman pausing to hurl stones into the gully. Mirtin debated the proper course to take. A quick death, now, before he was discovered? If any risk existed that he would be brought before authorities, he was bound by oath to destroy himself. But the Earthman looked young. A boy, merely. Mirtin forced himself to think in English, to shift his entire frame of reference. What was the animal? He had forgotten most of what he knew about local mammals. Cat, rat, bat? *Dog*. Dog. The dog was on his scent, now. A small lean brown creature with a long white-tufted tail, a bristly nose, yellow eyes. Heading this way. Sniffing. Mirtin could see the bony ridges along the dog's back. The boy followed.

The black snout was up against his faceplate now. The boy stood over him, eyes wide, mouth agape. Mirtin summoned his knowledge. The boy was in the prepuberty stage, perhaps ten or eleven years old. Black hair, black-brown eyes, light brown skin. A Negro-group member? No. The hair was straight. The lips were thin. The nose was narrow-bridged. A member of the surviving aborigines of this continent. Does he speak English? Is he malevolent? The mouth no longer gaped. Now it was closed, its corners turning upward. A smile. A sign of friendliness. Mirtin tried to smile too, and was relieved to find that his facial muscles worked.

'Hello,' the boy said. 'Are you hurt?'

'I - Yes. I'm hurt very badly.'

The boy knelt beside him. Shining dark eyes peered into his own. The dog, tail wagging, nosed around Mirtin, prod-ding at him. With a quick slap the boy sent the animal away. Mirtin sensed sympathy from the young Earthman.

'Where'd you come from?' the boy whispered. 'You fall out of an airplane?'

Mirtin let the awkward question slide past. 'I need food ... water ___'

'Yeah. What should I do, call the chief? They can send a truck out. Take you to the hospital in Albuquerque, maybe.'

Mirtin tensed. Hospital? Internal examination? He couldn't risk it. Let an Earthman doctor shine one of their radiation machines through his body and see what was coiled within it, and the game was up. He was pledged to die first.

Shaping his words with care, Mirtin said, 'Could you bring me food out here? Something to drink? Help me into that cave, maybe? Just until I'm all right.'

There was a long silence.

Then - a lucky stab, an intuitive leap, perhaps? - the boy narrowed his mouth and made a whistling sound and said, 'Hey, I know! You fell off the flying saucer!'

It was a direct hit, and Mirtin flinched. He hadn't been prepared for anything like that. Automatically he said, 'Fly-ing saucer? No ... No, not a flying saucer. I was riding in a car. There was an accident. I was thrown from it.'

'Where's the car, then?'

Mirtin's eyes looked toward the gully. 'Down there, I suppose. I don't know. I was unconscious.'

'There isn't any car. You couldn't drive anything in here. Look, you came off that flying saucer, mister. You aren't fooling me. What planet you from, huh? How come you look so much like Earthpeople there?'

Mirtin felt like laughing. There was so much intelligence in the pinched, angular little face, such a keen, skeptical mind behind those shining eyes. He liked the boy tremendously. Just a shabby child, who didn't even speak English very well, and yet Mirtin could sense a potential within him, a spark of something. He wished he could be honest with the boy and drop this elaborate facade of lies.

Mirtin said, 'Can you bring me food? Something to drink?'

'You mean, bring it to you out here?'

'Yes. If I could just stay in that cave - until I'm well again -'

'But I could get help from the pueblo. We'd take you to a hospital.'

'I don't want to go to a hospital. I just want to stay out here... alone.'

Silence for a moment.

The boy said, 'You don't look like a jailbird. You aren't running away. So why don't you want the hospital? You in this funny suit. And you talk kind of funny, around the edges. Come on, mister. What planet you from? Mars? Saturn? You can trust me. I don't get along so good with the pueblo, nohow. I help you, you help me. Yeah?'

Mirtin saw his opportunity. Why not confide in the boy? After all, he wasn't under any binding oath to keep all Earthmen in ignorance of his extraterrestrial origin. He had to use his judgment about that. He might have more to gain by telling the truth to the smudge-faced boy, and getting help that way, than by maintaining secrecy. Especially if the only alternatives were to die out here or to go to a hospital and have his secret discovered by those most likely to expose it widely.

'Can I trust you?' Mirtin asked.

'You help me, I'll help you. Sure.'

'All right. I baled out of a watcher ship. A saucer. You saw it explode last night?'

'You bet I did!'

'Well, that was me. Us. I landed here. I'm hurt - a broken back. It'll take me a long time to get well. But if you take care of me, and bring me food and water, and don't tell anybody I'm out here, I'll be all right. And then I'll try to help you, anything you want. But you mustn't tell anyone about this.'

'You think anybody would believe me, anyway? A flying saucer man out in the desert? I won't tell.'

'Good. What's your name?'

'Charley Estancia. San Miguel tribe. I got two sisters Lupe and Rosita, and two brothers. They're all dopes. What's your name?'

'Mirtin.'

Charley repeated it. 'That's all? Just Mirtin?'

'That's all.'

'What does it mean?'

'It's a coded pattern of sound. It includes information on the place of my birth, the names of the members of my parent-group, and my vocational skills. There's a lot packed into those two syllables.'

'So how come you look like an Earthman, Mirtin?'

'It's a disguise. I'm different inside. That's why I don't want to go to a hospital.'

'They'd X-ray you and find out, huh?'

'Right.'

'What are you like inside?'

'You'd say I was plenty strange. I'll try to tell you what I'm like. Later.'

'Will you show me?'

'I can't do that,' said Mirtin. 'My disguise - doesn't come off that easily, Charley. It's part of me. But I'll tell you what's underneath it, when we have time. I'll tell you all about it.'

'You speak English pretty good.'

'I've had a long time to study it. I've been assigned to Earth since - ' he paused, calculating ' - since 1972. Ten years.'

'You speak any other languages? Spanish?' 'Pretty well.'

'What about Tewa? That's my pueblo language. You know that?'

'I'm afraid not,' Mirtin confessed.

The boy exploded with laughter. 'That's okay! Because we don't know it so good ourselves. The old people, they think they can say things in Tewa, but they don't really understand each other anymore. They just think so, but they're fooling themselves. It's pretty funny. Hey, you from Saturn? Neptune?'

'I'm from a different solar system,' Mirtin said. 'Far from here. From a planet that goes around another star. You know what a solar system is? And stars and planets? This is a planet right here, this Earth, and there are other -'

'You think I'm a dumb Indian?' Charley Estancia said hotly. 'I know stars and planets. And galaxies and nebulas. The whole deal. I'm no dope. I can read. They got a library truck, it comes around even to a pueblo. Where you from? When the stars come out tonight, point to it.'

'I can't point to anything, Charley. I can't lift my arm. Paralyzed.'

'It's that bad, huh?'

'For now. I'll get better, if you take care of me. But I'll show you where to look, tonight. You can see the three bright stars, right in a row.'

'You mean, Orion's belt?'

Pausing, Mirtin considered the constellations as seen from Earth. 'Yes. That's the one.'

'And that's where you from?'

'That's where I'm from. The fifth planet of the star on the eastern end. It's a long way from here.'

'And you came all the way from there in a flying saucer?'

Mirtin smiled. 'In a watcher ship, yes. To patrol Earth. And tonight our ship exploded. We got free just in time, and this is where I landed. I don't know about the other two.'

The boy was silent, staring at him, the gleaming eyes picking out details of Mirtin's suit, searching Mirtin's face perhaps for some hint of alienness. At length Charley said, 'I don't know who's crazier. You for telling, me for believing.'

'Don't you think it's the truth?'

'I don't know. What should I do? Take a knife and cut you open, see what's inside?'

'I'd rather you didn't'

The boy laughed in his explosive way. 'Don't worry, I won't. It all sounds so crazy, though. A flying saucer man dropping right here. Look, you got to tell me what it's like out there, huh? You talk, I listen, then I'll know if it's real. I can tell if you're fooling me. I'll get you into that cave, and then you'll talk to me about the stars. I got to know every-thing. I never been away from home, and you're from a planet. You're going to tell me, okay?'

'Okay,' Mirtin said.

'Now we got to get you into that cave, though. Then I'll get you something to eat, drink. The pueblo isn't far. Will it hurt if I help you stand up? You could lean on me.'

'That won't work. My legs are paralyzed too. You'll have to pull me along the ground.'

'Drag you by the arms? With you hurt bad like this? You won't like that. Hey, I got a better idea, Mirtin. I'll put you on a stretcher. It's better that way.'

Mirtin watched as the boy leaped up, pulling a hunting knife from a sheath at his side, and began to slash at the nearby vegetation. He cut two slim poles from a scrawny tree, pruned away the branches, and started to hack at the stems of scrubby gray-green plants growing low to the ground. His face was set tight in concentration, lips clamped. The boy's fingers moved rapidly, weaving a network of fibers between the two poles. The sight fascinated Mirtin. It was so primitive, and yet so efficient!

After a silent hour of energetic work, the stretcher was done.

'This is gonna hurt,' Charley said. I got to haul you onto that stretcher somehow. Once you're on it it'll be okay, but while I'm hauling you -'

'I can shut off my body,' Mirtin told him. 'I won't feel

anything for several minutes. Longer than that and I'll die.'

'Just turn it off? Like a switch?'

'Something like that. When my eyes close, you move fast and get me on the stretcher.'

For the first time, Mirtin saw something like genuine awe, even terror, come into the boy's eyes. But only for a moment. It was as though Charley had still half believed it was all a joke, until Mirtin had offered to shut down his central nervous system, and the boy had come to realize that he might actually be in the presence of a genuine extraterrestrial. But the terror passed swiftly. Charley Estancia did not seem to fear him at all. Mirtin knew that he had been amazingly lucky in his discoverer. He and Charley were going to get along fine.

'Whenever you're ready,' Charley said.;

'Now,' said Mirtin.

He knocked out the remaining ganglia. Briefly, he felt thin, cold hands grasping his wrists, and then he descended into the darkness of a temporary death.

About midnight Kathryn thought she heard the whimpering of Jill's kitten once again. She rolled over, telling herself it was just a dream, but the sound came again, insistently, and this time Kathryn sat up and listened. Yes, there was something out there. She could hear the soft, high-pitched mewling noise. She was certain the kitten was back. Thank God, thank God, thank God! How happy Jill would be!

She sprang from the bed. Her robe lay somewhere on the floor by the foot of the bed; she snatched it up and wriggled into it, belting it tightly. Unsealing the door, neutralizing the house alarm, she stepped outside. A chilly breeze off the desert struck her broadside, cutting through her thin robe and the flimsy nightgown beneath, and she shivered at the icy hand on her flesh. Where was the kitten, now?

She did not see it anywhere. But she still heard the soft high-pitched sound.

And now it seemed to her that what she heard was less of a meow, more of a moan.

Kathryn fought back her impulse to rush inside the house and seal it again. Someone might be hurt out here. An auto accident, maybe. She hadn't heard the sound of a crash, but perhaps she had slept through it. Warily she glanced around, looking at the neighboring house to her left, looking at the open desert to her right. She took a few hesitant steps.

She saw the man, sprawled some twenty feet from her front door on a bare patch of sandy soil.

He lay on his side, facing her, wearing some kind of high-altitude suit. The faceplate had split, evidently upon impact, and was dangling open. Kathryn saw smears of blood on his lips and cheeks. His eyes were shut. He was moaning steadily, but he was not moving. By his side lay three or four gleaming metal things, tools of some sort, that might have fallen out of pockets in his suit.

She thought about that fireball she had seen a few hours before. Only a meteor? Or had it really been an exploding ship, and was this one of the survivors of the disaster?

Kathryn rushed toward him. He stirred as she approached, but his eyes remained closed. She crouched by him, ignoring the roughness of the sand against her knees.

It was difficult to tell how badly hurt he was. He seemed young - thirtyish - and in pain. And very handsome, Kathryn was surprised and shaken by the intensity of her response to the injured man's good looks. She felt herself in the grip of an instant sexual pull, and that astonished her. In annoyance she clamped her thighs tight together and bent forward to peer at him more closely.

Gingerly she nudged the faceplate out of the way. His face was flecked with blood, but she had expected to find him perspiration-soaked as well, and he was not. The bloodstains seemed odd too, Kathryn thought. By the dim starlight it appeared to her that there was a distinct orange tinge to the blood. Imagination? Perhaps. She had seen blood before, in her nursing days, and she had never seen blood like this.

I ought to call the police, she told herself. Or get an ambulance, or something.

Yet she held back. She did not want to involve the outside authorities in this, just now, and she did not know why. Carefully she slipped her hand into the open helmet and touched the injured man's cheek. Feverish. But no perspiration? Why was that? She turned one of his eyelids up, and a cool gray eye stared briefly at her. The eye closed when she removed her finger, and the man quivered and grunted.

His moans were congealing into words now. Kathryn could not make sense of them. Was he speaking some foreign language, or was this just the delirium of extreme pain? She struggled to catch even a syllable, without success. One sound seemed to flow into another.

The wind howled around them. Kathryn looked up, half expecting to find the neighbors watching. But all was still. She was puzzled by her own attitude to this unexpected visitor. Something fiercely protective was welling up within her, something that told her, *Take him into your house, nurse him back to health*. But that was nonsense. He was a stranger, and she feared and disliked strangers. There were hospitals available. She had no business with this man who had dropped from the sky, this agent of some Communist nation. How could she even consider taking him inside for a moment?

She did not understand any of this. But she leaned close, studying the seamless fabric of the man's suit, struggling to learn something of his origin. Idly she picked up the tools that lay beside him. One looked something like a flashlight, with a stud at one end. Casually Kathryn touched the stud, and gasped in shock as a golden beam flicked out and sliced across a limb of a nearby tree. The limb fell to the ground. Kathryn dropped the little metallic tube as though it had burned her. What was it? Some kind of hand-laser? A heat ray?

Where does this man come from?

She did not touch the other tools. She could not begin to guess their function, but suddenly they seemed incredibly strange and . . . otherworldly. She felt lightheaded. This encounter was becoming unreal.

She knew that she had to get him into the house, get that

suit off him, and find out what help he needed. It did not seem to her that this man, injured as he was, posed any threat to her or to her sleeping child. Last year in Syria a man had fallen from the skies just as this one had. Her husband, Ted. Had he been alive when he landed? Did anyone help him? Or did they let him lie alone in the desert until all his life had trickled away? Kathryn wondered how she could bring him inside. You weren't supposed to move an injured person at all, of course. But it wasn't far. Could she lift him?

She slipped one arm around his shoulders and put the other behind his knees. She didn't intend to pick him up, simply to see how he reacted to being moved. To her bewilderment, she found him improbably light. Although he was the size of a full-grown man, he seemed to weigh no more than seventy or eighty pounds. Without quite realizing what she was doing, Kathryn rose to her feet, holding him in her arms with effort but without intolerable strain, and moved toward her house. She nudged the door open and carried him within, and, gasping a little, hurried into the bedroom.

She set him delicately down on the only convenient place -her bed, the big double bed that she had shared for six years with a husband who now was only a fading memory. The injured man moaned again and spoke rapidly in his strange language, but he did not awaken. Nor did he show any ill effects from having been carried. Good. Good. Kathryn rushed from the room, her heart pounding, her body suddenly ablaze with bewildering sensations, her mind thick with confusion.

What now? Lock and seal the door again, first. Switch on the alarm. And then -

She checked her daughter's bedroom. Jill was still sound asleep. Kathryn adjusted the monitor so that it would vibrate her mattress and keep her from waking up for a while.

Into the bathroom now. She scooped things from the medicine cabinet, almost at random. Bandages,

tape, scissors, quickheal, antiseptic spray, a bottle of paindamp, and seven

or eight other things, stuffing them into the pockets of her robe. The man on her bed had not moved. She had to get that suit off him first. She searched for a zipper, a catch, a button, anything. She could find none. The fabric was smooth and unbroken. Kathryn pinched some of it between two fingers and tried to cut it, but it resisted the scissors as easily as if it had been a sheet of steel. She did not dare roll him over to search for the zipper that might be on the other side.

He stirred. 'Glair?' he said clearly. 'Glair?'

'Don't try to move. You'll be all right. Just lie still and let me help you.'

He subsided again. More anxiously now, Kathryn fumbled for a way to get the suit off him. But it was as snug as a second skin, and she despaired of the job until she noticed a tiny, almost imperceptible button at the throat. Pressing it did nothing, but when she twisted it gently to the left some-thing beneath the surface of the suit appeared to yield, and then, quite rapidly, she found the suit opening of its own accord, splitting down a fissure line from head to foot. In moments it was open, and she could lift the upper half away to reveal the man within.

He was nearly naked, wearing only a rubbery yellow wrapping around his loins. His body was slim, very pale, hairless, and . . . beautiful. The word thrust itself unbidden into Kathryn's consciousness. There was an almost feminine kind of beauty about him, a sleekness, a smoothness, a slenderness; his skin was virtually translucent. But even with-out removing the loincloth Kathryn knew he was undeniably male. Powerful muscles, flexing and coiling now in pain, lay beneath the ivory skin. His shoulders were wide, his hips narrow, his chest and belly flat and firm. He could have been a Greek statue come to life. Only the pain evident in his features, the streaks of blood on his chin, the distorted pose of his anguish-racked body, marred the Athenian serenity and symmetry of his form. How badly hurt was he, Kathryn wondered? She touched him gently, probing for the injuries. Hospital skills she had not used in many years flooded back from the vault of her memory. Her hands passed over his cool skin. She saw that his left leg was broken; it was only a simple fracture, though, and that troubled her. From the way the limb was bent and crumpled, there surely should be a jagged spear of bone thrusting through the skin, and yet the skin was whole. Could a bone snap that way, cleanly, while not penetrating the flesh? How could he have avoided a com-: pound fracture, with the leg askew like that?

She could not find any other fractures, though he was bruised in a dozen places. Doubtless there were internal injuries. That would explain the blood around his lips and chin. That blood, Kathryn saw plainly under the bright light of the bedroom, definitely had an orange tinge. She looked at it in disbelief, and at the twisted leg once again, and she examined the open suit on which he still lay, noticing the assortment of mysterious compartments and instruments along the suit's inner surface. She did not want to leap immediately to the wild conclusion that this man came from some other world, and so she thrust that line of speculation aside and concentrated on examining him.

She used a damp cloth to wipe away the blood on his face. He didn't seem to be bleeding anymore. Hesitantly she put her hands to the broken leg, trying to guide it into place even though she knew she had no business setting a broken bone. To her amazement the limb yielded easily to pressure, as though it were nothing more than modeling clay, and with the slightest prod she succeeded in realigning it. The man on the bed grimaced; but now his leg was straight again, and Kathryn suspected that the two halves of the snapped bone were in line. He was breathing more easily, with his mouth open. Kathryn picked up the bottle of paindamp and allowed a few drops of the all-purpose anesthetic to slide between his lips. He swallowed.

He'd feel better now . . . assuming that a body like his responded to paindamp at all.

She realized that she had done about as much as she could do for him, just now. There were no external wounds that needed bandaging. He had stopped moaning, and appeared merely to be asleep. She looked worriedly at him. Sooner or later he would wake, and then what?

Kathryn brushed all those fears away. He would be more comfortable, she decided, without that old rubbery loincloth. He'd need to pass wastes, and he couldn't very well do that with his middle encased in rubber. Nor did she see any kind of opening in the garment, which puzzled her all the more. *He did* pass wastes, didn't he? She had to get it off him.

At the thought of it, that curious sexual throbbing surged through her again. Kathryn quirked her lips in anger. Before her marriage, as a nurse, she had handled male patients the way a nurse was supposed to handle them, as so much live meat, with no concern for their bodies. Yet now she utterly failed to recapture that dispassionate attitude. Had a year of chaste widowhood made her so eager to see a man's body, she wondered? Or was it something else, a powerful attraction exerted only by this man in particular? Perhaps it was mere snoopiness, the desire to find out what was under there. If he did come from some other world -

Kathryn seized the scissors, placed them against his right thigh, slid them under the fabric, and tried to cut. She did not succeed. The undergarment was as tough as his spacesuit, and the blade bounded away from the resilient material.

She was sure she could roll the garment down, but she did not want to subject his injured leg to that much jouncing about. Perplexed, she searched for a hidden catch such as the outer garment had had, and as her hands slid up and down his hips she became so involved in what she was doing that she failed to notice he had returned to consciousness.

'What are you doing?' he asked in a pleasantly resonant voice.

Kathryn leaped back, panicky. 'Oh - you're awake!'

'More or less. Where am I?'

'In my house. Near Bernalillo. About twenty miles from Albuquerque. Does any of that mean anything to you?'

'A little.' He looked down at his leg. 'Have I been uncon-scious long?'

'I found you about an hour ago. You were just outside my house. You... landed there.'

'Yes. I landed.' He smiled. His eyes were lively, probing, ironical. He was implausibly handsome with the artificial good looks of a movie star. Kathryn kept her distance. She was uncomfortably aware of the whiteness of his skin, of her own light nightgown and wrap, of the sleeping child in the next room. She began to wish she had not yielded to this wild impulse to bring him into her house. He said, 'Where is the rest of your sexual group?'

'My sexual group?' - blankly.

He laughed. 'Sorry. My stupidity. I mean, your mate. Your - husband.'

'He's dead,' Kathryn murmured. 'He was killed last year' I live with my child.'

'I see.' He tried to get up, but clenched his teeth as soon as he moved his left leg. Kathryn went toward him and held out her hand.

'No. Lie there. Your leg's broken.'

'So it seems.' He forced a grin. 'Are you a doctor?'

'I've had medical training. I was a nurse before I was married. Your leg will be all right, but you mustn't put any weight on it for a while. In the morning I'll phone a doctor and he'll put it in a cast.'

The amiability left the stranger's face. 'Do you have to do that?'

'What?'

'Get a doctor. Can't you take care of me?'

'Me? But I-you-'

'Is it forbidden morally? The formerly married woman accepting a strange man in her dwelling? I can -pay you. There's money in my suit. Just let me stay here until my leg is better. I'll be no trouble for you, I promise that. I - ' A spasm of sudden pain racked him. He knotted his hands together, interlocking the fingertips and pulling outward from the center.

'Drink some of this,' Kathryn said, holding out the pain-' damp,

'It won't do any good. I can - deal with it -'

She watched, mystified, as he went through some silent inner process. Whatever he was doing, it seemed to work. The strain lines left his face; he relaxed again; the expression of detached irony returned.

'May I stay here?' he asked.

'Perhaps. For a while.' She did not dare to ask now where he had come from or who he was. 'Does your leg "hurt you very badly?'

'I'll manage. I think the real injuries may be inside. I took a bad jolt when I - when I came down.' He seemed very calm about it, she thought. He went on, 'You won't have to do much for me. I need rest, food, a little help. I'll burden you only for a few weeks. Why were you taking off my waistband?'

Color stippled her cheeks. 'To make you more comfort-able. And - and in case you had to go to the bathroom. But I couldn't get it off. It wouldn't open, and I wasn't able to cut it. And then you woke up.'

His hand went to his left hip and did something Kathryn could not follow, and the yellow garment snapped open and fell away, all so swiftly that she put her hand to her lips in sudden surprise. Oddly, there was nothing strange about his nakedness. She did not know what she had expected to see -some alien organ, perhaps, or more likely a smoothly sexless expanse of doll-like skin - but he was quite conventionally constructed. Kathryn looked, and looked away.

'You have a strong nudity taboo?' he asked.

'Not really. It's just that - oh, all of this is so peculiar! I ought to be afraid of you, but I'm not, and I should be calling the police, but I won't, and - ' She checked herself. 'I'll give you a bedpan. Do you want me to cook something for you to eat? Some soup, some toast, maybe? And here, let me try to get that suit out from under you. You'll be able to sleep better without it there.'

He showed a flicker of pain as she eased the suit off the bed, but he said nothing. She drew the waistband out the same way. Lying slim and nude on her bed, he smiled gratefully up at her. Kathryn covered him. He was keeping very calm, but surely he was in greater pain that he was letting her know about.

He said, 'Will you put the suit in a safe place? A place where no one is likely to discover it?'

'Is the back of my closet all right?'

'For now,' he said. 'I would not want anyone but you to come upon it.'

She hid the suit behind her summer clothes. His eyes did not leave her. Pulling the coverlet up over him, she said, 'Now, how about something to eat?'

'In the morning, I think.' His hand touched hers briefly. 'What's your name?'

'Kathryn. Kathryn Mason.'

He did not offer his own name, and she could not bring herself to ask for it.

'Can I trust you, Kathryn?'

'In what way?'

'To keep my presence here a secret.'

She chuckled thinly. 'I'm not looking for a neighborhood scandal. No one's going to find out you're here.'

'Excellent.'

'I'll get you the bedpan now.'

She felt a certain relief at escaping from him. He fright-ened her, and her fear was growing, rather than lessening, as the moment passed. His very calmness was the most terrify-ing thing of all. He seemed unreal, synthetic; everything about him struck a false note, from his too-pretty face to his too-smooth voice with its too-bland accentless tones. And to recover from delirious unconsciousness to rationality within fifteen minutes, that way, was even weirder. It was as if he had thrown a switch inside himself that shunted the pain impulses elsewhere.

Kathryn trembled. She drew the bedpan from the kitchen closet and rinsed it out.

There was a strange man in her house, which was upset-ting.

There was a stranger in her house who might not be a man, and that was far more upsetting.

She returned to him, and he smiled as she slipped the bedpan under the sheets. Trying to regain her old nursely objectivity, Kathryn said, 'Is there anything else I can do for you now?'

'You could give me some information.'

'Of course.'

'On the radio, the television, tonight. Was there any un-usual news in this neighborhood?'

'The meteor,' she said. 'I saw it. The big ball of fire in the sky.'

'It was a meteor, then?'

'That's what they said on television.'

He digested that for a moment. She waited, hoping for some revelation, waiting for the blunt admission of his origin. But he was giving nothing away. He regarded her in silence.

'Would you like me to turn out the light?' she asked.

He nodded.

She darkened the room. Only then did she realize she had left herself no place to sleep. He had the bed, and she could hardly climb in alongside him.

She curled up on the living-room couch. But she did not sleep at all, and when she returned to his room, several hours before dawn, she saw that his eyes were open too. Once again his face was fixed in the rigid lines of pain,

'Glair?'he asked.

'Kathryn. What can I do for you?'

'Just hold my hand in yours,' he whispered, and she took it, and they remained that way until morning.

The spectacular destruction of the Dirnan watcher ship was observed by many eyes that night, not all of them human. At the instant the generator in the ship went critical and exploded, a Kranazoi scout was swinging through its assigned surveillance arc above Montana, bound on an eastward route. The first flaring light of the blowup impinged on the sensors of the Kranazoi vessel, and only moments later the event came to the awareness of the pilot, who swung quickly into action.

The pilot's genetic designation was Bar-48-Codon-adf. For the purposes of this mission he cloaked the angular, rough-skinned Kranazoi body with which he had been born in a mass of plump Earthman flesh, giving him a jolly, roly-poly appearance hardly in keeping with his inner nature. He shared his ship with three other members of his current mating unit, two of whom were asleep. The third, whose genetic designation was Bar-51-Codon-bgt, was processing data when the explosion came. She-it - that was her-itsambivalent role in the mating unit - looked up instantly at Bar-48-Codon-adf and said, 'The Dirnan ship just blew up!'

'I know. The photon screens are going crazy.' Bar-48-Codon-adf ran his fingers over the Kranazoi ship's sensor inputs, while Bar-51-Codon-bgt began to check the roster of known Dirnan watcher ships in the vicinity. By the time she-it had identified the particular ship on the master chart, he had found the bit of information he most feared to find: three shapes of approximately Dirnan mass, bailing out and dropping Earthward.

This is some kind of trick,' he muttered. 'They're staging a landing. Three of them just dropped from that ship before it blew!'

'Are you sure they're alive?' Bar-51-Codon-bgt asked.

He scowled at her-it. 'They got away moments before the explosion. It's a deliberate landing! They're violating all the covenants! We've got to get after them and trace them, or we're in the stew!'

Calmly, calmly. You aren't making sense. If they were pulling a deliberate landing, why would they let their ship explode? That splash might be registered on every screen the Earthmen have. If you'd been ordered to land on Earth, would you do it so publicly?'

Bar-48-Codon-adf subsided. 'Even so, deliberate or not, they've landed.'

'Dead on landing, possibly.'

'Possibly. Possibly not. You want to risk it? I wouldn't. They'll brainburn us at Headquarters if we mess this up. We've got to land and track those damned Dirnans, and find out what they're up to!'

Bar-51-Coden-bgt looked horrified. '*Land? OnEarth? We'rewatchers!*'

"The covenants permit landing in case of questionable behavior by the other side. If a couple of Kranazoi happened to drop down on Earth like that, don't you think the Dirnans would have a swarm of their watchers following us right away? We can't afford to let them get a jump on us. At least, I can't. Wake the others up.'

She-it objected. The other two had had a successful mating a few hours earlier; they were entitled to their sleep. But Bar-48-Codon-adf was insistent, and when he got into a mood like that, there was no refusing him. Shortly, the remaining two members of the mating unit came stumbling from their sleep compartments, looking disgruntled and re-sentful, and not at all perturbed by the apparent landing of

three members of the rival power on the neutral territory of Earth. It perturbed them much more that Bar-48-Codon-adf had intruded on their sleep, and they let him know about it. The bickering continued for several minutes, during which time Bar-48-Codon-adf altered the ship's course to take it south toward the site of the Dirnan landing. He allowed the others to purge themselves of their hostilities.

When they were reasonably rational again he said, 'We'll bring the ship down to cruising altitude and I make a jump. Notify Headquarters of what we're doing, and stay within pickup range until you hear from me again.'

'You're going down there *alone*?' Bar-51-Codon-bgt asked fearfully.

'I won't get into trouble. No one harms a fat man. I'll look around, track the Dirnans, try to get some angle on what they're up to. When I know something, I'll have you come and get me.'

Bar-79-Codon-zzz said scornfully, 'Hero! Medal-hunter!'

'Cut it out. Where's your sense of responsibility? Where's your patriotism?'

Bar-79-Codon-zzz, who was a total-female in the mating unit and also wore the disguise of a female Earthman, glowered at him. 'Don't talk to me of patriotism, will you? We're a long way from home, doing a dull, pointless, idiotic assignment for purely ritualistic reasons, and I'll be fried if I'll take it as seriously as you do. Cops-and-robbers! Skim-ming around over this hideous planet like filthy snoops! Why don't we just let the Dirnans have it, and -'

Bar-51-Codon-bgt gave her a nudge. 'Save it,' she-it mur-mured. 'His mind's made up. Anyway, it might just be important. Let him go down there, if he wants/

The matter was settled. The Kranazoi ship dipped Earth-ward, slicing through the night sky on full opaquers. Bar-48-Codon-adf was annoyed by the attitude of his shipmates, but he had no wish to get into a prolonged argument with them now. Duty was duty. They were posted here not only to keep watch over Earth, but over the activities of their rivals, the Dirnans, as well. Duty required him to land and pursue -and, if necessary, to arrest the three on violation of the covenants.

With the ship at an altitude of thirty-thousand feet, Bar-48-Codon-adf filed a formal notice of his intent to land, and his reasons for so doing. At an altitude of twenty-thousand feet he donned his drop equipment, which he had never expected to use. At an altitude of ten-thousand feet he stepped through the hatch with supreme confidence and let himself fall.

The landing was bumpy, but not really bad. Bar-48-Codon-adf removed his drop gear and twisted the self-destruct stud. It ignited satisfyingly and moments later was wholly atom-ized. Now he wore the garments as well as the body of a heavy-set Earthman of middle years. He activated his identity training and discovered that his Earthman name was David Bridger, that he was forty-six years old, unmarried, a native of Circleville, Ohio, and a resident of San Francisco, Cali-fornia. He had landed several miles from the city limits of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Dawn was still four or five hours away; he would be safely within the city by morning, and he could begin his quest.

If those three Dirnans were up to anything illegal, he vowed, they'd pay for this. He'd get them before the Covenant Commission and denounce them as meddlers! He'd have them brainburned! Who did they think they were, landing on Earth as though the planet belonged to them?

Scowling, David Bridger of San Francisco - until recently the Kranazoi agent and watcher Bar-48-Codon-adf - trudged briskly toward nearby Albuquerque, thinking dark thoughts about the planet Dirna and all its misbegotten citizens.

Seven

For three days Glair hovered on the threshold of consciousness. Her limbs throbbed with fiery pain; her entire body felt bloated and puffy. She knew she was hideous now, and that appalled her. That was harder to take than the pain itself.

A kind of feedback oscillation kept her moving along the border of awareness. When she was awake, the pain was severe, and she began to use her conscious control to knock out any nerve ganglion that she could dispense with. When she had knocked out enough, she began to relax and slide into the non-pain of unconsciousness. But she did not trust herself to go under with her nervous system shut down, and so when she felt herself sliding she would open the ganglia again, and draw back from the gray haze of nothingness in renewed pain. The pain brought a kind of unconsciousness of its own, when she allowed it to go unchecked. Not only the nerves of her outer housing but the nerves of her Dirman body within were affected by the impulses, which at times were so strong that the neural channels tended to overload.

Dimly, Glair knew that she had been found in the desert and brought to some Earthman dwelling. Dimly, she realized that her suit and even her waistband had been taken from her. She sensed the succession of night and day. She had the idea that she was being given pain-killing drugs - a useless gesture; she couldn't respond to them - and that something had been done to set her injured legs, which was more useful. But she did not rise fully to consciousness, and took no surveys of her surroundings. She remained quiet in her bath of pain.

Had Vorneen survived the explosion? Had Mirtin lived?

She had been too busy trying to counteract her own faulty jump to pay any attention to what was happening above her. Glair assumed that her two mates had jumped in time, but she had no way of being certain. Again and again she relived her jump - that stupidly awkward stumble, that moment of total paralysis as terror invaded her soul, that horrid un-broken plummeting fall. And then the recovery, after a drop of thousands of feet, and the feeling of relief as the deployment screen took hold and broke her

descent. Of course, there was no hope of a smooth landing by then; she had already built up a ferocious velocity, and the screen couldn't possibly decelerate her in time. The best it could do was keep her from being smashed to jelly. She had landed - though she had choked off consciousness before the moment of impact came. She had been badly hurt. She had been found. Glair was sure of nothing else.

On the fourth day she woke.

She felt a tickling sensation against her arm, first, and though it was something she had felt before in these days of pain, this time it amused her rather than annoyed her. Glair opened her eyes to see what was happening. A muscular Earthman stood above her, pressing a small glossy brown ceramic tube against the fleshy part of her arm. He straight-ened up instantly when her eyes met his.

'You're finally awake,' he said. 'How do you feel?'

'Ghastly. What were you trying to do to my arm?'

'Give you an intravenous injection. I'm trying to feed you. But I've been having trouble finding your veins.'

Glair attempted to laugh. Laughing, she knew, was what the Earthmen did to relieve social stress. But it was a long time since she had gone through her Earthman-customs drill, and her facial muscles did not easily produce the configura-tion that was laughter. She had to struggle, and the result must have seemed more like a grimace of anguish than like a laugh, for it drew a sympathetic sigh from the Earthman.

He said, 'You're in pain. I have some paindamp here - '

Glair shook her head. 'No. No, I'm going to be all right. Is this a hospital? Are you a doctor?'

'No. And no.'

She was relieved and puzzled. 'Where am T, then?'

'At my home. In Albuquerque. I've been taking care of you since I found you that night.'

Glair studied him. He was the first Earthman she had ever seen in the flesh - as opposed to the solidograph recordings that every Dirnan watcher dealt with during the training period - and the sight of him fascinated her. How thick his body was! How heavy his shoulders! Her sensitive nostrils picked up the scent of his body, fragrant and exciting, against the sharper scent of Earth's air. He looked almost as much like a beast as like an intelligent creature, so primor-dially powerful was his frame.

And it seemed to Glair that this man, her rescuer, was in mortal pain. Inexperienced as she was with Earthmen, she could read the signs of distress on their faces. This man held his jaws clamped so tensely that the muscles bunched and rippled in his cheeks. His tongue moved swiftly and cease-lessly over his lips; his nostrils were rigid. His eyes, rimmed with dark lines, bore the red tracks of sleeplessness. There was something terrifying about the sight of such strain on the face of a sentient being. Forgetting her own difficulties for the moment, her injuries, her isolation from her own kind, her fear of discovery, Glair tried to radiate warm sympathy for this man's problems, whatever they were.

She looked about the room. It was small, austere, with a low ceiling and modest furnishings. Through a

translucent part of one wall sunlight flooded in. She was lying on a narrow bed, unclothed, a light blanket drawn up as far as her waist. The firm globes of her breasts were exposed, which was of no concern to her but which seemed to be causing some sexual disturbance to her host, considering the obvious conflicting pull that drew his eyes to her chest and away from it again instantly. The Earthman appeared to be suffering from half a dozen different sorts of tension at once.

She lay still, exhausted from the effort of translating the-oretical terms learned long ago into realities. She had been well prepared, like any watcher, for the likelihood that she might have to make a forced landing on Earth. All the same, it required conscious effort to adapt herself to her new environment, to think: This is a bed, these are blankets, that is a wall, the Earthman is wearing a gray shirt and brown trousers. It was not just a matter of finding Earthman equivalents for Dirnan words, but of identifying whole concepts. Dirnans did not use beds, blankets, shirts, or trousers. Or many other things that had abruptly become of vital concern to her.

He said, 'Both your legs were broken. I've set them. I've been able to get some food down your throat. I've watched over you for three days and nights. I thought you were going to die, the first day and a half. But you said "Help me," do you remember that? You were conscious when I found you, and that's what you said to me. Those were the last words I heard from you until just now. I've helped you, I hope.'

'You've been very kind. Probably I would have died with-out your help.'

'But I'm a lunatic. I should never have brought you here. I should have driven you right to town, to the military hos-pital. Under tight security.' He was quivering as if every muscle in his huge body were at war with every other muscle. 'I'm inviting a court-martial doing this. It's pure madness.'

She did not know what a court-martial was, but the

Earthman seemed obviously close to collapse. Soothingly she said, 'You need rest. You must not have slept at all, talcing care of me. You look unhappy.'

He knelt beside the bed. He flipped the blanket up, cover-ing her to the chin, as though the sight of her breasts were disturbing or perhaps disgusting to him. His face was close to hers, and Glair saw the torment in his eyes.

In a low, edgy voice he whispered, *What are you?'*

Her improvised cover story flowed easily to her lips. 'I'm a student pilot,' she said. 'I took off with my trainer from the Taos airport right after dinner and we developed engine trouble over Santa Fe - '

His hands balled into massive fists. 'Look, that sounds very slick, but I'm not going to buy it. You've been lying here three days naked in my house. I've been doctoring you. I've had a good chance to look you over. I don't know what you are, but I know what you aren't. You aren't a sweet little girl from Taos who happened to bail out when your jet went haywire. You aren't human at all. Don't pretend. For God's sake, tell me what you are, where you're from! I've been living in hell for the whole time you've been here.'

Glair hesitated. She knew what the rules were that gov-erned accidental contact with Earthmen. You were supposed to guard at all costs against being found out for what you were, particularly against discovery by any sort of govern-mental authority. But the rules were not inflexible. You were entitled to take what steps you could to preserve your own life, and in certain cases a judicious disclosure of your true identity might be deemed permissible. The object was to survive, and get off Earth as fast as you

could. But in her injured state she could go nowhere, and this man was her only means of survival. Glair construed the regulations to mean that she could confide in him for the sake of staying alive, under the assumption that once she had made good her escape no one would believe his story, anyway.

'What do you think I am?' she said.

'You landed in the desert after the damnedest fireball anybody's ever seen in the sky. You didn't have a parachute, only a kind of rubber suit full of weird tools and equipment. You were muttering to yourself in a language I had never heard before. All right, I could still believe that you were a spy from some foreign country. But I took you home. I shouldn't have done it, and I don't know why I did, but I did it, and I had my half-track driver transferred to Wyoming so he wouldn't say anything, and I put you in bed and got that suit off you, and your rubber underwear too. All the time I was doing that, I was trying to tell myself that you were a human being.'

He rose and walked to the window and folded one big hand inside the other. Glair heard a popping, crackling sound as he applied pressure to his knuckles.

He went on, 'I examined you. Both legs broken. While I was examining one of your legs, just touching it a little to find out how bad the damage was, I felt the bone sliding back into place. What kind of bones do you have, anyway? They must have broken clean across, and they popped right back. You don't perspire, either. And you don't excrete. The equipment's there, but you don't use it. Your body temperature is eighty-five degrees. I couldn't figure out your pulse rate at all. When I tried to give you intravenous injections of food, I couldn't find any of the right veins, so I had to slop the food into your mouth. But I don't even know if you needed the food.' He walked over to her again and stared levelly into her eyes. 'You aren't a human being. You're the perfect plastic shell of a beautiful girl, wrapped around God knows what. You're human from the skin out. So what are you?'

In a quiet voice Glair said, 'I'm a watcher. I come from Dirna. That's a distant planet of another sun. Does it make you happy to know that?'

He reacted as though she had plunged a dagger into his body. He stepped back, hissing briefly, his face becoming harsh with confusion. His hand came up stiffly and clapped against his breast, and he rubbed it as if in pain. His tone was leaden as he asked, 'You're from a flying saucer, is that it?'

'You call our ships that, yes.'

'Say it! You're from a flying saucer! Say the whole silly sentence!'

'I'm from a flying saucer,' Glair murmured, feeling foolish as she used the foolish phrase.

The Earthman turned away from her again. 'I could go downtown and preach to the Contact Cult now,' he said hollowly. 'I could tell them all about the beautiful saucer woman I found in the desert, how I took her home and nursed her to health, how she told me stories of her planet far away. The whole lunatic business, just like the others. Except you're real, aren't you? I'm not hallucinating any of this! Do you understand what I'm saying?'

'Most of it.'

'Is all of this really happening?'

'Yes,' Glair said softly. 'Come here.'

He went to her. She put her hand against the hard, powerful piston that was his arm. She had never touched the flesh of an Earthman before. Her fingers dug in, and the solid flesh resisted her grasp.

'Touch me,' she said.

She brushed the blanket away from her body and whipped it to the floor. The Earthman blinked his eyes as if blinded by sudden light. Looking down at herself, over the hills and valleys of the body that had become so familiar to her in the past ten years, Glair saw the light brown wrappings that covered her legs from ankles to knees. He had cared for her well, tenderly doing what he could do to heal her broken limbs.

He touched her.

With a timidity that seemed out of place in so mature-looking a man, he rested his hands on her shoulders and ran them along her arms. Lightly and only for a moment he touched the resilient mounds of her breasts. He caressed the sides of her abdomen and the taut columns of her thighs. His breath was coarse, ragged, irregular; his hands trembled, and she sensed the acrid odor of his perspiration cutting across the earlier, more pleasant odor of his flesh. She had mastered the technique of smiling now, and her smile did not waver while his hands searched her flesh. Finally he withdrew from her, picked up the blanket, put it back over her.

'Am I real, or am I a dream?' she asked.

'Real. Your skin's so smooth ... so convincing.'

'Watchers must look like Earthmen. Sometimes it becomes necessary for us to come among you. Not often. When it is, we must seem to be of your kind. But there is always a chance that one of you will come too close and discover what lies beneath the skin. We have no way of changing our inner nature to duplicate yours.'

'So it's true, then? Beings from space have been watching Earth from - from flying saucers?'

'It has been true for many years. We have watched Earth longer than you have been alive. Longer than I have been alive. The first patrols came here many thousands of years ago. Today we watch more closely than ever.'

The Earthman's hands swung limply at his sides. His mouth worked, but no words came forth.

Finally he said, 'Do you know what the AOS is? The Atmospheric Objects Survey?'

Glair had heard of it. 'It is the organization that you American Earthmen have established. To watch the watch-ers, so to speak.'

'Yes. To watch the watchers. Well, I work for the AOS. It's my job to track down any reports of what these idiots call flying saucers, and see if there's substance to them. I draw a paycheck every month to hunt for alien beings. Don't you see, I can't keep you here! It's my duty to turn you over to my Government! My duty, dammit!'

Eight

All day long Charley Estancia had gone about his business as though everything were perfectly normal. He had awaked at dawn, as usual; no one could sleep late in the two rooms of whitewashed adobe that housed the four adults and five children of the Estancia family. The baby, Luis, began howling the moment the roosters started to crow. That usually drew a stream of curses from Charley's maternal uncle George, who was a drunk and slept badly anyway; Charley's sister Lupe would answer with curses of her own, and the morning was under way. Everyone moved about at once, sleepy, bad-tempered. Charley's grandmother heated the stove for the tortillas; Charley's mother looked after the baby; Charley's other brother, Ramon, switched on the tele-vision set and planted himself before it, while Charley's father quietly slipped out of the house until breakfast was ready, and his sister Rosita, looking sluttish and thick-bodied in her torn nightgown, got down in front of the altar and prayed in a dull voice, no doubt asking to be pardoned for whatever new sins she had added to her total the night before. It was the same thing every morning, and Charley Estancia hated it. He wished he could live by himself, so that he did not have to put up with Lupe's mischief and Ramon's stupidity and Luis' bawling and Rosita's half-naked body paraded about the place, so that he did not have to listen to his mother's shrill complaints and his father's apologetic, defeated replies, so that he no longer had to be subjected to his grandmother's senile fantasies of a time when the old religion would be followed again. Life in a living museum was not very pleasant. Charley loathed everything about the pueblo: its dusty unpaved streets, its squat mud buildings, its mixture of muddled old customs and un-pleasant new ones, and above all the hordes of white-faced tourists that showed up every July and August to stare at the people of San Miguel as though they were beasts in a zoo.

Now, at least, Charley had something to take his mind off his troubles. There was the man from the stars, Mirtin, living in the cave out near the arroyo.

As he went through the drab routine of his day, Charley clung fervently to the wonder and excitement of knowing that a man from the stars was waiting for him out there. It was just as Marty Moquino said: that flash of light in the sky had been no meteor, but a flying saucer that had blown up. What would Marty Moquino say if he knew about Mirtin?

Charley Estancia was determined not to let that happen. He could not trust Marty. Marty thought only of Marty; he would sell Mirtin to the Albuquerque newspaper for a hundred dollars, and the next day he would buy a bus ticket for Los Angeles and disappear. Charley did not plan to give Marty Moquino even a hint of what might be living in that cave by the arroyo.

From nine to twelve that morning Charley went to school. A rusty old bus arrived at the pueblo five days a week, except in the season of the harvest, and collected all the children between the ages of six and thirteen, taking them to the big brick government school for the Indians. The school didn't teach them

much. Charley figured that that was the idea: keep the Indians dumb, keep them down on the reservation so the tourists will come to look at them. It brings money to the state. Up at Taos, where they had the biggest and fanciest pueblo of all, they charged a couple of dollars just to take a camera onto the grounds. So there wasn't much of an education at the government school - some reading, some writing, a little arithmetic. The history that they taught was the white man's history, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Why didn't they teach the pueblo story, Charley wondered? Teach how the Spaniards came here and turned us into slaves. Teach how we rebelled against them, and how the big Spaniard, Vargas, put the rebellion down. Maybe they don't want to put ideas into our happy little heads.

Sometimes Charley got the best grades in the school. Sometimes he got the worst. It all depended on how interested he cared to be, for the subjects were all easy. He could read, he could write, he could do arithmetic and more. He had taught himself algebra out of a book, because with algebra you could figure out how things were related to each other. He had looked at geometry, a little. He knew stars. He knew how rockets worked. A woman who taught at the school thought he ought to become a carpenter in the pueblo. Charley had other ideas. There was one teacher, a pretty good one, Mr Jamieson; he had said Charley ought to go on to the high school the year after next when he was old enough. At the high school in Albuquerque there was no separation of Indians from the others. If you could learn, you were allowed to learn, no matter if your hair was black and shiny or not. But Charley knew what would happen when he asked his parents about the high school. They would tell him to be smart, to learn how to be a carpenter like the woman said. Marty Moquino had gone to the high school, they would tell him, and what good had that ever been to him? He had learned how to smoke there, how to drink liquor, how to fool around with girls. Did he need the high school for that? They would not let him go, Charley knew, and that meant he would probably have to run away from home.

By one in the afternoon he was back at San Miguel after his empty morning at school. In the afternoon he had different jobs, depending on the time of the year. Spring was planting time, of course. All children, all women worked in the fields. In the summer the tourists came. Charley was supposed to stand around and look helpful and let them take his picture and hope that they'd toss him a quarter. In the fall the crops were harvested. In the winter came the holy rituals, beginning now here in December with the Fire Society dance, and continuing on through the whole calendar of festivals until the spring. The festivals meant work for everyone; the pueblo had to be cleaned up and draped with bright decorations, the men had to repaint their costumes, the women had to bake a lot of pottery to sell. Supposedly the rituals were what brought the kind rains of springtime, but Charley knew that the only thing they really brought were the winter tourists. The white people never tired of watching the quaint primitive rituals of the natives. They started their season up in Hopi country, with the snake dance at the end of summer, and they kept on going, down through Zuni and over here to the pueblos of the Rio Grande.

The Fire Society dance was still a few days away. Charley made a pretense of working half the afternoon. Meanwhile, he quietly collected a little stack of cold tortillas, wrapping them in an embroidered cloth and taking care that no one saw what he was doing. When the early nightfall began to descend, he hid the tortillas by the old abandoned kiva on the far side of the village, where nobody went because there were supposed to be evil spirits there. He filled a plastic canteen with clear water from the spring and hid it beside the tortillas. Then he waited for darkness. He played with his dog and had a fight with his sister Lupe and studied his library book about the stars. He watched the priest trying to round up a few parishioners for evening prayer. He saw Marty Moquino grab Rosita and take her behind the gift shop and put his hand under her skirt. He had a quick, unsatisfying dinner, punctuated by the blare of the television set and the angry bickering of Lupe and Uncle George.

It was night at last.

Everyone was back at work. The important men of the pueblo were giving orders: the cacique, the

lifetime chief, stood by the ladder to the kiva, talking to a priest of the Fire Society, while Jesus Aguilar, the newly elected governor of the village, strutted around giving everyone orders. This was a good time to slip away to Mirtin. Casually, Charley sauntered down to the end of the street of square two-story adobe buildings on which he lived, looked in every direction, ducked into the old kiva to pick up the tortillas and the canteen, and ran off into the scrubby underbrush that bordered the pueblo.

He moved in swift, loping strides. He pictured himself as a grown man, running like the wind; but his legs were so short that it took him a long time to get anywhere, and he had to halt, puffing for breath, when he was no more than half a mile from the village. He rested next to the power substation, looking up admiringly at it. The power company had built it two years ago, because everyone in the pueblo of San Miguel now had a television set and electric lights, and the village needed more electricity. They had taken care to put the substation well back, though, so it wouldn't harm the appearance of the pueblo. The tourists liked to pretend that they were traveling in time, back to the year 1500 or so, when they visited a pueblo. The television aerials and the auto-mobiles didn't seem to bother them much, but a power substation would have been too much. Here it was, then. Charley eyed the big transformers and the glistening insulators, and thought dreamily of the generating plant, some-place far off, where exploding atoms turned steam into electricity to make the pueblo bright at night. He wished his school would take him to visit the power plant some day.

Feeling a second wind, he began to run again. Now he moved effortlessly, threading a path between the clumps of sagebrush and yucca, scrambling down the side of the first arroyo and up the other side, streaking across the wide plain until he came to the second arroyo, the big one, with the cliff on the far side and the man from the stars lying in the cave in the cliff. Charley paused on the brink of the deep gully.

He looked up. The night was moonless again; new moon wasn't due until the night of the Fire Society dance. The stars were extraordinarily bright and sharp. Charley found Orion at once, and his eyes fastened on the star at the eastern end of the belt. He didn't know its name, though he had searched in his book for it, but it seemed the most beautiful star he had ever seen. A tremor of awe shivered down his back. He thought of big planets going around that star, strange cities, creatures that were not men buzzing around in jets and rockets. He tried to imagine what the cities of that other world might look like, and then he sensed the irony of his thought and his nose wrinkled in bitter amusement. Why look to the stars? What did he know of the cities of his own world? Could he imagine Los Angeles and Chicago and New York, let alone Mirtin's city? He had never been anywhere at all.

In sudden furious energy he raced into the arroyo and up its far side, and across the little plateau to the cliff. He entered the cave. It was no more than a dozen feet high and perhaps twenty feet deep. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he saw Mirtin lying where he had left him, on his back, arms and legs carefully outspread. The star-man did not move. His eyes were open, and they glistened in the faint starlight that penetrated the cave.

'Mirtin? You all right, Mirtin? You didn't die?'

'Hello, Charley.'

Limp with relief, Charley knelt beside the injured being. "I brought you food, water. How you feeling, anyway? I came soon as I could get away.'

'I'm much better. I feel the bone healing. I may be strong again sooner than I thought.'

'Here. Here. I got tortillas for you. They're cold, but they're good.'

'The water first.'

'Sure,' said Charley. 'Sorry.' He unscrewed the top of the

canteen and put it to Mirtin's lips. Water trickled slowly into the star-man's mouth. When Charley thought Mirtin had had enough, he took the canteen away, but Mirtin asked for more. Charley watched in surprise as he drained the entire canteen. How much he drank! How fast!

'Now the tortillas?'

'Yes. Now.'

Charley fed Mirtin steadily. No part of Mirtin's body moved except his lower jaw, which went snap, snap, snap, biting steadily. Mirtin gobbled five tortillas before he indicated that he had had enough for now.

He said, 'What are those made off?'

'Cornmeal. You know corn? The plant we grow.'

'Yes. I know.'

'We grind it up, we bake it on a hot stone. Just like they did long ago. We do a lot like they did long ago.'

'You sound angry about that,' Mirtin observed.

'Why not? What year is this, 1982 or 1492? Why can't we be civilized like the others? Why we have to go on doing everything the old way?'

'Who makes you do things that way, Charley?'

'The white men!'

Mirtin frowned. 'Do you mean, they force you to use old-fashioned methods? They pass laws about it?'

'No, no, nothing like that' Charley groped for the right words. 'They let us do what we like, as long as we stay peaceful. We can elect our own governor for the pueblo, our own policemen, everything. If we wanted, we could tear the pueblo down and build a new one out of plastic. But then there'd be no tourists. No cameras. Look, we're *amuseum*. We're the funny men out of the past. You follow me?'

'I think so,' Mirtin murmured. 'A deliberate retention of archaic ways.'

'What ways?'

'Old-fashioned.'

'That's it. We voted it ourselves, the people. We got to put on a good show for the tourists. They bring the money. We don't have money ourselves. A few of us, they left the pueblo, they run stores in Albuquerque or something, but most of us, we're poor, we need the money the tourists bring. We dance

for them, we paint our faces, we do everything the old way. But it's phony, because we forgot what it all means. We got the secret societies, only we don't remember the initiation words, so we made up new ones. Phony! Phony!" Charley shook with anger. 'You want another tortilla, maybe?'

'Yes. Please.'

In satisfaction, Charley watched the paralyzed star-man eat.

He said, 'We ought to have refrigerators, heat, pavement, real houses, roads, everything. Instead we live in mud. We got television and cars, that's all. Everything else like it was in 1500. That's how they voted. It makes me sick. You know what I want, Mirtin? I want to get out. Go to Los Angeles and learn to build rockets. Or be a spaceman. I know lots of things. And I could learn lots more.'

'But you're too young to leave home?'

'Yeah. Eleven! Hell, who wants to be eleven? I leave home, they arrest me fast. You don't learn electronics in reform school. I'm stuck here.' He scooped up some cool earth from the cave floor and hurled it at the far wall. 'Look,' Charley said, 'I don't want to talk about my little mud village. Tell me about your world, will you? Tell me everything!'

Mirtin laughed. 'That's a great deal to ask. Where should I begin?'

Pausing a moment, Charley said, 'You have big cities there?'

'Yes, very big.'

'Bigger than New York? Than L.A.?'

'Some of them.'

'You got jet planes?'

'Something similar,' said Mirtin. 'They use - ' he chuckled ' - they use fusion generators. You saw one explode in the sky, remember?'

'Oh. Yeah. What a dope I am! The flying saucers! What drives them? Like sun energy?'

'Yes,' said Mirtin. 'A small fusion generator that creates a plasma we house in a strong magnetic field. What hap-pened to our ship was that the magnetic field weakened.'

'Oh, oh!*Boom!*'

'A very big boom. But that's how we travel, in flat, round ships. That you call flying saucers.'

'How fast they go?' Charley asked. 'Five thousand miles an hour?'

'More or less,' Mirtin answered, literally but obliquely.

Charley took this as an affirmative. 'So you can go from here to New York in an hour, huh? And on your planet you get around just as fast. How many people you got on your planet?'

Mirtin laughed. 'I shouldn't be telling you any of this. It's - what do they say? - classified information. Top secret.'

'Come on! I won't tell the newspapers!'

'Well - '

Charley dangled a tortilla over the star-man's lips. 'You want another one, or don't you?'

Mirtin sighed. His eyes twinkled in the darkness. 'We've got eight billion people,' he said. 'Our world's somewhat larger than yours, although the gravity's about the same. Also, we don't take up as much room as you do. We're quite small. I'll have that tortilla, now.'

Charley gave it to him. While Mirtin chewed, Charley puzzled over his last remarks.

'You mean, you don't look like us, really?'

'No.'

'That's right, you said you were different inside. But I figured you had different bones, maybe your heart and your stomach in different places. You're more different than that?'

'Much more different,' said Mirtin.

'Like how? Tell me how you'd look without the disguise.'

'Small. Three feet long, I guess. We have no bones at all, just a stiffening of cartilage. We - ' Mirtin stopped. 'I'd rather not describe myself, Charley.'

'You mean, right now, inside you, inside what I see, you got a thing like that? No bigger than a baby, all curled up in you? Is that it?'

'That's it,' Mirtin admitted.

Charley rose and walked to the mouth of the cave. He felt shaken/by that, and he couldn't say why. In the short time since he had known Mirtin, he had come to think of the man from the stars as just that, a man, someone who had been born on another planet the way some people are born in other countries, but not too different, really. Smarter than an Earthman, but not all that different except in the way his insides were arranged. But Mirtin seemed to be some kind of big worm, really. Or worse. He hadn't actually described himself. Charley looked up at the three bright stars, and it seemed to him that for the first time he knew what an alien thing he had befriended.

'I could use another tortilla,' Mirtin said.

'This is the last one. I didn't think you'd be so hungry, you being hurt and all.'

'You'd be surprised.'

Charley fed it to him. Then they talked some more. They talked of Mirtin's planet, whose name was Dirna, and they talked of the watchers and why they watched Earth, and they talked of stars and planets and flying saucers. When Mirtin grew tired of that, the conversation turned around, and they talked of

San Miguel. Charley tried to explain what it was like to grow up in a village that still kept to prehistoric ways. The words bubbled from him as he tried to express the frustration he felt, tried to communicate the seething im-patience within him, the hunger to learn, to know, to see, to do.

Mirtin listened. He was a good listener, who knew when to be silent and when to ask a question. He seemed to under-stand. He told Charley not to worry, just to go on looking at things and asking questions, and a time would come when he'd get away from San Miguel into the real world. That was encouraging. Charley stared at the little man with the friendly eyes and the gray fringe of hair, and it was impossible for him to accept the fact that Mirtin was a rubbery thing without bones, underneath it all. Mirtin seemed so human, so kind. Like a doctor or a teacher, except he wasn't absentminded and distant, the way the doctors and teachers Charley knew were. The only one who had ever talked to Charley like this before was the good teacher, Mr Jamieson; and there were times when Mr Jamieson forgot Charley's name, and called him Juan, or Jesus or Felipe. Mirtin would never forget my name, Charley told himself.

After a while he decided that he must be tiring the star-man out. And he couldn't risk staying away from the pueblo for long. 'I got to go now,' he said. 'I'll be back after dark tomorrow night. I'll bring more tortillas, lots of them. And we can talk again. All right, Mirtin?' 'It sounds fine, Charley.'

'You're sure you're okay? You're not too cold, or any-thing?'

'I'm quite comfortable,' Mirtin assured him. 'I simply need to lie here until I mend. And if you come to me, and bring tortillas and water, and we talk a little while every night, I think I'll mend much faster.'

Charley grinned. 'I like you, you know? You're, like, a friend. It isn't so easy, finding friends. So long, Mirtin. Take care, now.'

He backed out of the cave, spun around, and went running full tilt back to the pueblo, leaping and prancing in his happiness. His head was dizzied with talk of the other world and its superscience, but more than that he tingled with the excitement of having been sitting there talking, actually *talk-ing*, with the man from the stars. Charley felt warm all over despite the December chill that was in the air. The warmth came straight from Mirtin. He isn't just passing the time with me because he needs me to bring him food, Charley thought. He likes me. He likes talking to me. And he can teach me things.

Happiness made Charley's legs move more swiftly. In no time at all, he was approaching the pueblo. He was at the power substation, now, and he ran with his head in the air, looking up at the thick high-tension line that came looping in from the tower across the arroyo. He wasn't bothering to watch where he was going, and that was how he happened to stumble upon the couple making love by the substation's wire fence.

In the coldness of the night, they both were fully clothed, but there was no doubt at all about what they were doing. Charley was familiar with the facts of life; he had no interest in spying on anyone, and even less interest in being seen returning from the direction of the arroyo. When he ran into the outstretched leg, therefore, he gasped and clawed the air for balance, and tried to make a quick, unobtrusive getaway.

The girl shouted something filthy at him. The man, rolling over, glared and shook his fist. Charley noticed, in the quick clarity of the single instant that he saw them, that the girl was his sister Rosita's best friend Maria Aguilar, and that the man was Marty Moquino. He was sorry that he had interrupted their fun, but he was much more sorry that he had let himself be seen this way by the one person who could make real trouble for him. A shaft of fear cut through Charley Estancia's slim body, and he ran off worriedly to-ward the village.

Nine

The distress signal sent out by the doomed Dirnan ship in the moments before its destruction had been received in a thousand places at once. Every Dirnan ship on watcher duty over Earth had picked the signal up, for the broad-band Dirnan communication system was not hampered by line-of-sight problems or in need of an ionospheric bounce, and it pervaded that entire region of space at the speed of light. The twenty watchers over China learned of the ship's fate. So did the eighteen watcher ships currently patrolling the skies over the Soviet Union, the other nineteen in various orbits over North America, and the isolated groups of watchers keeping tabs on India, Brazil, the African Federation, Antarctica, Japan, and other high-technology nodes throughout the world. All in all, close to four hundred Dirnan watcher ships were on duty in atmospheric levels, and all of them learned about the catastrophe within the first few moments.

As the signal spread, it came to the attention of the four ships stationed permanently around Earth's moon. It reached the roving ships that regularly checked the artificial space satellites of the Earth nations to make sure that no lethal weapons had been placed in orbit. It impinged on the detectors of the Dirnan ships posted in the vicinities of Mars and Venus. It aroused attention at the Dirnan ground base on Ganymede, Jupiter's plant-sized moon, where some ninety watcher ships were parked while their crews enjoyed their allotted holidays. It was noticed by the fifty-odd Dirnan relief ships on their way from Ganymede to other posts in the systems now occupied by crews awaiting vacation. The wave spread, minute by minute, to the ships currently located out by Neptune's orbit, and as far out as Pluto. In time - a great deal of time - that imperishable signal would reach as far as the home world itself.

Others who learned of the fate of the Mirtin-Vorneen' Glair ship were certain representatives of the opposing race, the Kranazoi, who were able covertly to tune in on the wavelength of a Dirnan distress signal. But in this instance the Kranazoi headquarters had no need to pick up the signal, since they were receiving a full report on the explosion from one of their ships that had happened to be in the vicinity.

Then, too, the distress signal activated the receptors at the Dirnan headquarters on Earth.

There wasn't supposed to be any Dirnan headquarters on Earth. Dirha and Kranaz had signed covenants governing the permissible contacts between the two galactic races and the people of Earth, and one of the things that was forbidden was any sort of physical landing on the planet by Dirnan or Kranazoi personnel - let alone a permanent presence down there. But covenants sometimes prove to work against global security; and the Dirnans had found it necessary, for their own protection, to station a pocket of agents on the surface of Earth. The station was well hidden, more to keep it from the attention of the

Kranazoi than to keep it from the attention of the Earthmen. Earthmen would merely be skeptical if they found out that aliens were living among them; the Kranazoi, though, would be furious, perhaps to the point of war.

At the hidden Dirnan station, an infinity of messages came flooding in, moments after the distress signal had been received. Every ship in the system was on the air at once, commenting, asking, informing. For several minutes the entire communication link was crippled by a general tie-up of all wavelengths. Then the command station on Earth managed to cut in, silencing the hubbub and letting every-body know it was aware of the situation and meant to do something about it. The ships in their orbits continued to discuss the crash, but they ceased to bother the base on Earth about it.

In the command station, master computers were plotting possible landing vectors for the crew.

"There were survivors,' one agent reported. 'We've picked up tracks of the bailout.'

'Did all three get away?'

'Yes. At least, they left the ship.'

'I knew Glair at Ganymede. She's a remarkable girl.'

"All three of them are remarkable. Orwere.'

They're alive. We'll find them.'

'Any news from the trackers yet?'

'The three of them came down in New Mexico. But they've damaged their communicators.'

'How could that have happened?'

They dropped from an unusually high altitude to avoid trouble when the generator blew. They must have hit hard. We're getting fuzzy signals from one of them, but we can't plot a fix at all. The other two aren't even coming in.'

They're dead.'

'Don't be so sure. Injured maybe. But not dead. These bodies of ours are pretty sturdy.'

'Sturdy enough to survive a crash that can break a communicator?'

'Communicators don't have much give. Flesh and bone do. I say they're alive.'

'Well, alive or dead, we've got to locate them.'

'Right. If one of them gets autopsied-'

'You arrogant dogmatic bastard, they aren't dead! Will you get off that notion?'

'All right, injured then. If it makes you feel any better. Injured and taken to a hospital and ex-rayed. That'll cause as much trouble as if they're autopsied. What's the matter? You in love with Glair? Why

can't you accept the fact that they may have been killed?'

'As a matter of fact he's hung up on Vorneen.'

'Well, who isn't? Look, how many agents can we move into New Mexico this week?'

'A dozen if we have to.'

'Get them moving, then. The cover story is that they're investigating the so-called giant meteor. Some of them can be scientists who claim to be hunting the debris. And re-porters who interview people who saw the fireball. Cover the state. We'll continue to prod the computer here, refining the landing vectors as we get a clearer notion of the actual trajectory of the ship before it exploded.'

'You know where we can get the best trajectory figures?'

'Where?'

'U.S. Air Force. I bet AOS taped everything.'

'Good thought. Call our man in AOS right away and have him checking the data banks.'

'AOS is probably looking for the ship's wreckage now too.'

'But they don't know about the crew. We'll find them first.'

'It's going to be tough. What's that Earthman proverb? Needle in a smokestack?'

'Haystack.'

'Yeah. Haystack. Where are the new vectors? Get that man moving!'

'You're sure they're alive?' 'I know they are.'

Ten

Vorneen seemed to be sleeping now, Kathryn thought. She couldn't be sure of it, though. In the four days she had sheltered him in her house, the one certain thing she had learned about him was that she

couldn't be sure of anything about him.

She stood beside the bed, watching him. Eyes closed. No motion of the eyeballs beneath the lids. Slow, deep, regular breathing. All the symptoms of sleep. But sometimes it seemed that he only pretended to sleep, because she expected it of him. At other times he went to sleep in a fantastic way, evidently turning himself off as though he were a machine, *click!* Either way, the effect was far from human.

Kathryn was convinced now that she was playing hostess to a being from another world.

It was such a bizarre concept that it was taking a long time to sink in. She had played with the thought from the first night, when it had occurred to her that the meteor had been a flying saucer and that this man might have dropped from it. The evidence had been overwhelming, right from the start. And it had grown, day by day, as she watched him closely.

The orange tinge to his blood. The strange suit in her closet. The strange tools that had fallen from it, like the little flashlight-thing that was a disintegrator ray. The smoothness and coolness of his skin. The nonsense words he spoke while he was delirious. Delirium without fever. The peculiar fractures of his leg that had been so easy to set. The curious lightness of his body, which weighed forty or fifty pounds less than a man of his size ought to weigh.

How could she pretend that all these things were mere oddities?

In four days, he had not used the bedpan at all. He had quietly put it under the bed, empty, and it was still there. She checked it from time to time while he seemed to be asleep. How could a man go four days without moving his bowels or passing urine? He was eating regularly, he was drinking plenty of water, yet he neither excreted nor perspired. Kathryn could overlook a lot of odd things about Vorneen, but not that. Where did the waste products go? What kind of metabolism did he have? She was not by nature a woman who had speculated much about other worlds, other forms of life; such notions had simply never been part of her intellectual furniture. But it was hard to avoid the conclusion now that Vorneen came from far away.

Even the name - Vorneen. What kind of name was that? He had volunteered it, half shyly, on the second day, and she had frowned and made him spell it, and he had stumbled a little over the spelling as if he wasn't accustomed to thinking of it in terms of an alphabet, but only in terms of sound. *Vorneen*. Was that his first name, or his last name, or his only name? She did not know. She was afraid to ask too many questions. He would tell her what he chose to tell her, all in his own good time, and she would have to be grateful for that.

She studied him as he slept.

He seemed so peaceful. He had not left the bed since she had lowered him into it, the first night. Kathryn slept on the sofa, poorly, although Vorneen had suggested rather bluntly that she share the bed with him. 'It's big enough for two, isn't it?' he asked. Yes, it was. She wondered whether he was being deliberately innocent about the significance of a man and a woman sharing the same bed, or whether, because he was not a man, it had never occurred to him that there might be any significance to it at all. Possibly he did not think in terms of sex.

She had turned away, reddening like a silly virgin, when he had suggested she share the bed with him. Her own reaction puzzled her. She had been widowed for a year, now, and she owed nothing to Ted's memory. She could sleep wherever she chose, exactly as she had done when she was nineteen and single. Yet she was mysteriously prudish, suddenly. During her months of mourning it had been

unthinkable to get involved with a man; she had withdrawn from the world almost completely, making a little warm nest here for herself and Jill in this house, and rarely going beyond the local shopping center, but she had been telling herself since the summer that it was time to begin emerging from that and finding a new father for Jill. Well, this man who had dropped from the skies was hardly a candidate for that responsibility, but even so there was no reason why she couldn't allow herself to get close to him, even to make love with him if his inclinations inclined that way and his broken leg permitted any such strenuous activities. The leg seemed to be healing with fantastic swiftness, anyway; she had it taped, and the swelling had gone down, and he no longer indicated feeling any pain in it.

Why, then, did she shy back from the bed with such maidenly reserve?

Kathryn thought she understood. It was not because she was afraid of sleeping with Vorneen. It was because she was afraid of the intensity of her own desires. Something about this slim, pale, improbably handsome man called out physi-cally to her. It had been that way from the first moment Kathryn did not believe in love at first sight, but desire at first sight was a different story, and she was in the grip of it. She drew back, terrified by the intensity of what she felt for Vorneen. If she allowed the barrier between herself and him to slip, even a little, anything might happen.

Anything.

She had to know more about him first.

She adjusted his coverlet and picked up the notepad that lay on the night table. *I'll be back in a couple of hours, she wrote. Going into Albuquerque to shop. Don't fret. K.* Pin-ning the note to the unused pillow beside him on the double bed, she tiptoed from the room and went into her daughter's playroom. The little girl was making something sinister and ropy out of the flexiputty Kathryn had bought her, and the thing was writhing like an octopus. Or like a Martian, if there were any Martians. Kathryn was seeing unearthly beings all over the place.

'Look, Mommy, it's a snake!' Jill cried.

'Snakes don't have legs, honey,' Kathryn said. 'But it's beautiful, anyway. Here, let me put your coat on.'

'Where are we going?'

'I've got to drive into town. You'll go over to play at Mrs Webster's for a little while, all right?'

Uncomplainingly, Jill let Kathryn pull her coat on. She had a three-year-old's easy adaptability to changes in sur-roundings and circumstances. She still remembered her dead father, but only vaguely, remembering more the fact that she had had someone called 'Daddy' than anything specific about him; if Ted were to walk through the door now, Jill probably would not recognize him. The strayed kitten was fading into memory the same way, in a far shorter time. As for the abrupt and inexplicable arrival of Vorneen in the household, Jill did not seem to worry about it at all. She had accepted it as a phenomenon of the universe, like the setting of the sun or the coming of the postman. Shrewdly Kathryn had not warned Jill about mentioning Vorneen to other people, for then the girl surely would. To Jill, Vorneen was a visitor, someone staying with the family, and after thesecond day she lost all apparent interest in the man in the bed.

Kathryn scooped Jill up and took her across the street to a neighbor with whom she maintained a vague, distant friend-ship. The neighbor had four children under ten, and an extra one never seemed to matter to her. 'Can you watch Jill until about five?' Kathryn asked. 'I've got to go to town.' It was as simple as that.

Jill waved a solemn goodbye to her.

Five minutes later, Kathryn was on the highway, buzzing toward Albuquerque at eighty miles an hour. The smooth, silent battery-powered engine of her car throbbed with power. She shot past Bernalillo on the freeway and glided into suburban Albuquerque. At this hour, the traffic was light. The winter sky was speckled with gray clouds, and the lofty skyline ahead of her seemed blurred. It might snow today, perhaps. But there were people in town who could tell her about flying saucers, and this was a good day for talking to them.

When she'd parked the car in the big city lot underneath Rio Grande Boulevard, Kathryn walked eastward toward the Old Town. The telephone book gave the Contact Cult office an address on Romero Street. Of course, it didn't call itself a Contact Cult; that was the newspaper name, and Kathryn understood that the cultists resented being thought of as cultists. The official name of the group was the Society for the Brotherhood of Worlds. Kathryn had found it listed in the telephone book under 'Religious Organizations'.

A burnished bronze plaque mounted on the front of a ramshackle old building identified the local office - church? - of the Society for the Brotherhood of Worlds. Kathryn held back at the entrance. Her cheeks suddenly flamed as she recalled how acidly Ted had spoken of this organization, with its trappings of mystic pomp, its seances at Stonehenge and Mesa Verde, its pious mingling of ancient ritual and modern scientific gadgetry. Ted had said something to the effect that half the members of the Contact Cult were con men and the other half were willing marks, and that Frederic Storm, the leader, was the biggest con man of all. Kathryn shook off her hesitation. Ted's opinions didn't matter now. She hadn't come here to join the cult, merely to try to find information.

She went in.

The lavishly appointed interior belied the building's shabby facade. Kathryn found herself in a small, high-vaulted anteroom that was empty save for a couple of elegant chairs and a gleaming bronze replica of the statue that was the Contact Cult's trademark, a naked woman, her eyes closed, her arms outstretched, reaching in welcome toward the stars. Kathryn had always thought that that emblem was marvelously silly, but now, to her discomfort, she was not so sure. On three sides of the room sumptuous mahogany doors led to inner offices.

She was being scanned, she knew. A moment passed, and one of the doors opened. A woman of about forty came out, flashing a quick professional smile. Her hair was pulled severely back from her forehead; her clothing was fashion-ably austere; pinned to her collar she wore the little stylized emblem of a flying saucer that served as the Contact Cult's identifying badge.

'Good afternoon. Can I can help you?'

'Ah - yes,' Kathryn said uncertainly. 'I'd like - some information -'

'Would you come this way?'

She found herself being brusquely conveyed into an office that would have delighted a bank president. The severe, no-nonsense woman seated herself behind an angular desk. Kathryn saw the brooding, consciously mystic features of Frederic Storm staring down from the wall in a tridim photo at least six feet high. *Der Fuhrer*, she thought, *He'd!*

'You're a little early for our evening service of blessing and universal unity,' the woman said. 'We'll be

having Frederic Storm on the screen at eight tonight, and it should be an inspiring event. But in the meantime we can go through the preliminary orientation. Have you belonged to any chapter of the Society prior to this?'

'No,' Kathryn said. 'I -'

'There's just this simple routine, then.' The woman pushed a recording cube toward her. 'If you'll answer a few questions for us, we can register you right away, and begin to draw you into the harmony of our group. I take it you're aware of our general purposes and beliefs?' The woman nodded meaningfully toward the glowering image of Frederic Storm on the wall. 'Perhaps you've read several of Frederic Storm's books about his contacts with our brothers from space? He's a miraculous writer, wouldn't you say? I don't understand how any rational person can read his books and fail to see that -'

Desperately, Kathryn cut in. 'I'm sorry, I haven't read any of his books. I didn't come here for the service, either. Or to join, really. I just wanted some information.'

The look of professional warmth vanished. 'Are you from the media?' the woman asked crossly.

'You mean a reporter? Oh, no. I'm just a - ' Kathryn paused and realized the right approach to take. 'Just an ordinary housewife. I'm troubled about this space thing, the saucers and all, and I don't really know where to begin asking questions, except that I want to know more about it, whether there are beings out in space, you know, and what they want with us, and everything. I've been meaning to stop by for a long time. And when I saw the fireball a few nights ago, well, that clinched it. I came here first chance I got. But I'm really ignorant. You'll have to start from the beginning with me.'

The Contact Cult woman relaxed, no longer on guard against a poking newshound. She said, 'Perhaps you should start with our literature. This is the introductory kit.' She took a thick manila envelope from her desk and slid it toward Kathryn. 'You'll find all the basic brochures in there. Then - ' she added a stout paperback book to the pile' - this is the most recent edition of Frederic Storm's *Our Friends, the Galaxy*. It's quite inspiring.'

'I'll look everything over.'

'There's a charge of two dollars for the material.'

Kathryn was startled at that. Proselyters didn't usually

dive for the profits so early in the conversion process. She pursed her lips and handed over the two bills, all the same.

'There's also a fifteen-minute information film. We show it in our auditorium on the second floor every half hour. The next show takes place in about five minutes.' A quick grin. 'There's no admission fee.'

'I'll watch it,' Kathryn promised.

'Fine. Afterwards, if you feel you'd like to participate more deeply in the experience Frederic Storm offers the world, come back here and we'll talk, and I'll register you on a preliminary basis. That'll entitle you to attend tonight's service.'

'Fine,' Kathryn said. 'And now could I ask you just one thing - something about saucers, not exactly about the Society here?'

'Of course.'

'The fireball on Monday night. That wasn't really a meteor, was it? Don't you think it was a flying saucer, maybe an exploding one?'

'Frederic Storm believes that it was indeed a vehicle of the galactic people,' said the woman primly. She was like some sort of robot, mouthing the words of the leader, always taking care to call him by his full name. 'He released a brief statement about it yesterday. He plans a fuller exposition of his thinking at a service early next week.'

'And he says it was a saucer? What about its crew?'

'He has not issued any statement about the crew.'

'Suppose,' Kathryn said uneasily, 'suppose the crew -bailed out. Suppose they landed alive. Is that possible? That they could land, and look like human beings, and maybe be discovered by us and come into our houses? Has anything like that ever happened, could you say?'

She was afraid she was being too transparent. Surely this woman would pounce on her and demand to be taken in-stantly to the injured galactic visitor in her home. But no, there was no appearance of personal involvement, only the shifting of the gears and the declaiming of the appropriate segment of the party line.

'Certainly the galactics have landed on Earth many times, and have come among us in human form. For they *are* human, merely more advanced, more closely approaching the godlike that is the ultimate in our destiny. Frederic Storm would say that it is quite probable that the beings aboard the ship made a safe landing. But we have nothing to fear from them. You must understand that: they are benevolent. Come, now. You'll miss our film. When you return to my office, you'll be much more deeply aware of the meaning of this unique and wonderful moment in human and transhuman history.'

Kathryn was ushered smoothly out of the office. She found herself alone in the sterile anteroom. A sign pointed to the upstairs auditorium, and she followed it. A ramp took her into a large abstract-looking room. The rear wall was a viewing screen; there were about two dozen rows of seats, and the customary emblems, portraits of Frederic Storm, star maps, and other Contact Cult paraphernalia along the walls. Four other people, all of them elderly women, were in the room. Kathryn took a seat in the back row, and almost at once the lights dimmed and the screen came to life.

A narrator's voice said in portentous tones, '*Out of the immeasurable void of the cosmos, across the inconceivably vast depths of intergalactic space, toward our humble, struggling planet, come friendly visitors.*'

On screen: the stars. The Milky Way. Camera closing in on a group of stars. Suddenly a view of our solar system, the planets strung like beads across the sky. Saturn, Mars, Venus. Earth with the continents unnaturally prominent, an obviously phony shot, nothing at all like a real view from space. And there came a flying saucer soaring out, infinitely small, growing and growing as it neared Earth. Kathryn had to repress the temptation to burst out laughing. The saucer was a comical thing, all portholes and periscopes and flashing lights. So far the film looked like nothing more than a standard sci-fi thriller, handled with the usual degree of subtlety,

'Beings of godlike grace - transhuman in their abilities-*benevolent, all-seeing, all-wise - grieving for*

our trouble-ridden civilization -'

Now the screen showed the interior of the flying saucer. Gadgetry everywhere, computers and clicking things and gauges. There were the saucer people: superb specimens of transhuman life, muscular, magnificent, with expressions of ineffable wisdom. Now the ship was landing on Earth, pop-ping down as easily as a feather. The action became violent: farmers firing shotguns at the visitors, grim-faced men in uniforms attacking them, hysterical women cowering behind trees. And the galactic visitors remaining calm throughout, warding off bullets and bombs, smiling sadly, beckoning to the frightened Earthmen to take heart.

'In this time of crisis and doubt, Frederic Storm came forward to offer himself as a bridge between humankind and transhumankind -'

The great man fearlessly advancing toward the parked saucer. Smiling. Holding out his hands in salute. Drawing geometrical figures in the soil. Resonantly offering welcome. There was Storm aboard the saucer, now. The galactics appeared to be at least eight feet tall. They were clasping his hand solemnly.

'To a hostile, fear-engulfed mankind, Frederic Storm brought the message of peace. At first he met only the jeers and mockery that other great leaders of mankind had known -'

A crowd smashing the windshield of Storm's car. Setting it afire. The police saving the prophet just in time. Angry fists shaking. Faces contorted with hatred.

' -but there were those who recognized the truth of this persecuted man's mission -'

A shot of women queueing up in a supermarket to buy copies of one of Storm's books. Disciples. Storm smiling, addressing a crowd in the Los Angeles Coliseum. A sense of quickening tempo, of a latter-day religious movement getting under way.

Kathryn fidgeted in her seat.

With a kind of empty-headed adroitness the film was shifting madly now, offering a shot of Storm among the saucer people again, Storm leading his followers in prayer and meditation, Storm speaking directly out of the screen urging all mankind to put aside mistrust and suspicion and welcome the benevolent space people with all their hearts. Shots of other saucer-sighters came across the screen: tense women declaring they had seen the galactics, 'Yes I surely did,' and lean, trembling men announcing they had ridden in the ships of the saucer folk, 'actually and literally'. And a final sequence of shots showing an authentic service of the Society for the Brotherhood of Worlds. It was nothing else but a revival session, full of shouted benedictions and affirmations, of waving arms and glistening foreheads and staring eyes, of rapturous statements of contact with the galactics. The film ended with a rhapsody of organ chords that shook the building. When the lights came on, the other four women of the audience sat motionless, stunned, as if they had experienced a shattering epiphany.

Kathryn left quickly, slipping through the anteroom downstairs before anyone could see her. It had been a waste of time to come here, she realized now. Everything she had heard about the Contact Cult was true: it was nothing but a moneymaking dodge, an attempt to exploit the easily deluded. Kathryn felt tempted to burst into that elegant office and shout, "Frederic Storm's never seen a galactic in his life! If you want to see one, come home with me!" Were the galactics eight feet tall and supernally benevolent of mien? No; at least one of them wasn't. Kathryn saw no connection between the guest in her home and

the glossy beings of the film. Frederic Storm was a fraud, and his followers were cranks, just as most intelligent people had always insisted. To Kathryn, it seemed bitterly amusing that Vorneen had chosen to drop into a skeptic's garden. What if he had fallen beside the home of a true believer?

She laughed over that. Surely it would demolish Storm overnight if one of his followers showed up at the evening service with an authentic galactic in tow! It would be like bringing Jesus along to High Mass ... an embarrassment for the authorities.

Too bad, though, that the trip had been useless. In what she now saw had been hopeless naivete, she had gone to Albuquerque expecting to find genuine comfort and counsel at the Contact Cult - someone who would be able to guide her and interpret for her the presence in her home of this mysterious being. Instead she had received a machine-turned promotional razzle-dazzle and had been milked of a couple of dollars. So much for the Society for the Brotherhood of Worlds, she thought, as she sped homeward along a freeway just beginning to thicken with early rush-hour traffic. The Contact Cult had nothing to offer. She was strictly on her own in her dealings with Vorneen.

Collecting Jill from the neighbor, Kathryn entered the house and began thinking about dinner. She went into Vorneen's room. He was awake.

'Have a good trip?' he asked.

'Not really. I didn't accomplish anything.'

'What's that in your hand?'

She realized she was holding the brochures and booklets she had bought at the Contact Club. Her cheeks flared. 'Nothing much. Just some junk.'

'I could use something to read.'

Kathryn sought for a way out, found none, and said, 'All right. For what it's worth, here.' She tossed the material onto the bed. Vorneen fanned the booklets out.

'What is all this?' he asked.

She said evenly, 'It's literature about flying saucers. I got it at the Contact Cult in Albuquerque. You know what a Contact Cult is?'

'The new religion. Based on supposed meetings between Earthmen and beings from space.'

'That's right,' Kathryn said.

'Why should you be interested in such things?' he asked, and there was no mistaking the slyness in his voice.

Her eyes met his. 'I'm interested in many things. But I wasted my time with them. They're talking through their hats down there. They've invented their whole religion. They wouldn't know a real galactic being if it walked up and saluted them.'

'You're sure of that?'

'Yes,' she said firmly. 'Yes!'

Eleven

In the darker moments over the past few years, Tom Falkner had liked to tell himself that he was living in hell. But now, in the few days since he had taken Glair into his house, he came to realize that that had been an exaggeration. He hadn't really been in hell at all, only living on the outskirts. At last he had arrived in the true downtown section.

He wasn't sure how much longer he could take it without cracking altogether.

He had taken a lot of punishment in his day - the washout of his astronaut career, his relegation to the AOS scrap heap, the breakup of his marriage - without cracking. Bend-ing, yes. But remaining whole. This latest thing was too much, though. It hit him right along the line of irreconcil-able conflicts that lay at the core of his being, and he was on the verge of splitting like the San Andreas Fault.

Glair said, 'Go ahead and have a drink.'

'How do you know I want one?'

'It isn't hard to tell. Poor Tom! I feel so sorry for you!'

'That makes two of us.'

'I know,' she said, letting a smile cross her face.

'You little devil! That isn't fair, picking on my weakness. Can I help it if I'm a born self-pitier?'

'You could try a little harder. But go have your drink, anyway.'

'Do you want one?'

'You know I shouldn't touch alcohol,' Glair said. She was sitting up in bed, the blankets bunched around her waist. The upper half of her body was engulfed in one of his pajama tops. He had insisted on that; she had no clothes of her own but for the rubber undergarment and the outer suit, both of which were

hidden deep in his basement security chamber, and he found her casual outlook on nudity troublesome in his present frame of mind. Her breasts were extraordinarily well developed - implausibly so, in fact - and the sight of them filled him with such a fury of need that he had asked her to cover them. The temptation to climb into bed with her was overpowering enough as it was. And he had plenty of other problems about her presence here, right now, without getting involved in that.

He took a spray can of Japanese Scotch from his pocket drink-case and activated it. Right into the veins; that was the way. No bother about the vile taste, just mainline the alcohol to the bloodstream where it belonged, and start it on its way to the brain. Glair watched his impassively. Within moments, he imagined that he was more relaxed.

'Won't you have to report to your office one of these days?' she asked him.

'I'm on sick leave. No one will bother me until Monday, now. That gives me a few more days to figure things out.' 'You're still planning to turn me in?' 'I should. I can't. I won't.'

'My legs are getting better fast,' she said. 'They'll be healed in another two weeks, perhaps. Then I'll get off your hands. I'll clear out and my people will take me away and you can go back to work.'

'How are they going to find you, if that communicator in your suit is broken?'

'Don't worry about that, Tom. They'll find me or I'll find them, and I'll be off Earth in a hurry.' 'Heading where? Back to Dirna?'

'Probably not. Just to our relief base for a medical check-up and a rest.'

He frowned. 'Where's that?'

'I don't want to tell you, Tom. I've told you a lot too much already.'

'Sure,' he said morosely. 'And when I've pried all your galactic secrets out of you, I'm going to file a full report to the Air Force. You think I'm keeping you here for fun? I'm just pretending to be hiding you. Actually, AOS knows all about it, and this is our subtle way of -' 'Tom, why do you hate yourself so much?' 'Hate myself?'

'It shows in everything you say, in your movements, even.-You're so full of bitterness, of tension. Your sarcasm. The look on your face. What's the matter?'

'I thought you knew. I was supposed to be an astronaut, and I flunked out, and they stuck me in a garbage assignment where I spent five days a week comforting crackpots and chasing around the country after mysterious blinking lights. Isn't that a reason to be bitter?'

'Because you didn't believe in your work, yes. But now you know that your AOS assignment wasn't all wasted time. There really *was* something up there above the Earth. Isn't that better? Don't you feel now that there was a purpose to your work?'

'No,' he said sullenly. 'What I was doing wasn't worth a damn. And still isn't.' He reached for a second spray can. 'Glair, Glair, Glair, I didn't *want* it to be real! I didn't *want* to find any flying saucer girl in the desert! I -' He stopped, feeling absurd at what he had blurted. Glair said softly, 'You preferred to have a worthless, empty job, because that way you could go on torturing yourself about your wasted career. Things became a lot worse for you when you found me, didn't they? Suddenly you had to face up to the

fact that your motive for self-torture was gone.' 'Quit it, Glair. Change the subject.'

'Look at me, Tom. Why *do* you hate yourself like this? Why do you want to go on hurting yourself?'
'Glair-'

'You're still finding new ways to torment yourself, too. You told me that it was your duty to report me. You didn't do it. The one man in all of AOS that actually found an extraterrestrial being, and instead of doing the naturally mili-tary thing you took her home and hid her in your house and opaqued the windows. Why? So you could feel good and guilty about the way you were violating your orders.'

His hand shook so vehemently that he could barely get the next spray can lined up with his vein.

'One more thing, Tom. Then I'll let you alone. Why are you keeping your distance from me, if not for the same idea that you've got to keep hurting yourself? You want me, and we both know it. But you punish yourself by covering my body in this thing and telling yourself you're being virtuous. There's a word for your kind of personality in your language. Vorneen told me, once. A mato - mati -'

'Masochist,' Falkner said. His heart was hammering against the cage of his ribs.

'Masochist, yes. I don't mean you whip yourself and wear tight boots. I mean you find ways to hurt your soul.' 'Who's Vorneen?' Falkner asked. 'One of my mates.' 'You mean, one of your shipmates?' That too. But I mean, a sexual mate. Vorneen and Mirtin and I, we were a crew together. A three-facet sexual group. Two males and me.'

'How could an arrangement like that possibly work? Aboard one ship, two males and -'

'It works. We aren't human, Tom. And we don't neces-sarily have the same emotions as human beings. We were very happy together. They may have been killed when the ship blew up, I don't know. I was the first to jump. But you're getting off the subject, Tom. The subject is you.'

'Forget me. I never realized you might have - have a sexual group. I never thought of it at all. You're a married woman, then.'

'You could say that. Unless they're dead. I have no way of communicating with them.'

'But you loved them both?'

Glair's forehead furrowed. 'I loved them both, yes. And I could find room to love someone else, too. Come over here, Tom, and stop looking for ways to make yourself unhappy.'

He walked slowly toward her, thinking of two men and a woman aboard a flying saucer, and telling himself that they were not men, she was not a woman. He was surprised at the power of the jealousy that gripped him. He wondered what their alien lovemaking might be like. He felt dizzy.

Glair looked up, her eyes cool and inviting.

'Take this silly piece of cloth off me, Tom. Please.'

He drew the pajama top over her head, leaving her golden hair in disarray. Her breasts were high and firm and very white, and showed a total disregard for the forces of gravity. They were the sort of breasts one saw on calendar girls, but never on a real woman: mysteriously firm, mysteriously close-set,

mysteriously out-thrust, a sixteen-year-old boy's ideal image of what a woman's breasts were like. She threw back the covers. He looked down at her and reminded himself that her entire body was a sham, a synthetic outer cloak for something terrifyingly strange. She could have the breasts of Aphrodite and the thighs of Diana, she could have every feminine perfection she desired, for she had had this body constructed to suit her own whims. Her flesh felt like flesh, and within it were nerves and bones and conduits for blood, but flesh, nerves, bones, and blood all were the pseudo-living products of a laboratory.

Within that glamorous unreal shape - who could say what horror nested there?

And yet, Falkner told himself, was any human woman lovely beneath her skin? That steaming mass of piled intestines, those tubes and globes and snaky loops, the grinning skull beneath the beautiful face? We all carry nightmare beneath our skins. It was folly to discriminate against Glair's brand of nightmare.

His clothing fell away. She drew him down beside her.:

'Your legs -' he began.

'They're doing fine. Forget about them and show me how an Earthman makes love.'

He touched her. 'Can you - do you - ?'

'The anatomy's all there,' Glair assured him. 'Not the internal organs, but that shouldn't matter. Hold me, Tom. Teach me. Love me.'

Easily, more easily than he had imagined it could happen, he embraced her, and felt her cool, slick skin against his sweating hide, and caressed her just as if she were real and this were real and none of it a dream. Desperately he seized her and found her ready, and with sudden savage relief he broke free of his self-imposed bonds and accepted the gift of love that she was offering.

Twelve

- and can I have your central credit number?' the motel clerk asked.

'I don't have a credit card,' David Bridger said. 'I'll pay cash for the room.' He saw the look of suspicion on the clerk's face, and turned on his ho-ho-ho Santa Claus persona. He boomed out a huge laugh and said, 'I guess I'm the last man in the Western Hemisphere without one, hey? Just don't believe in the

things! Cash was good enough for my daddy, cash is good enough for me! How much?'

The clerk told him. Bridger drew several crumpled bills from the wallet that had been in his emergency kit - every Kranzoi agent carried a wad of Earthman money, just in case he might have to make a forced landing - and spread them out on the counter. The clerk looked more satisfied. A dusty stranger, without baggage, without even a credit card, tramping in here on foot - that was funny business for a motel. But the stranger's money was green. And who could begrudge a room to Santa Claus three weeks before Christ-mas?

'It's Room Two-sixteen,' the clerk told him. 'Second tier, to your left.'

The room was a triangular wedge with scarcely any en-tranceway at all, opening out to perhaps thirty degrees of arc along the outer perimeter of the circular building. Bridger squeezed inside, locked and thumb-sealed the door, and sank down heavily on the bed. Walking these few miles had left his Earth-body exhausted. He was out of shape, he thought, even though they carefully maintained full gravity aboard the ship to keep their muscles in tone.

He stripped off his clothing and thrust everything into the coin-operated ultrasonic cleanser against the right wall. Then he stepped under the shower. He knew in theory how a shower worked, but his Kranazoi conditioning made him hold back from activating it. Kranaz was a dry world, where water was life and power, and it appalled him to think that even here in this driest part of North America he need only touch those studs and an unending supply of water would cascade over him. Feeling shameless, he turned the water on. Bridger wished he could strip away his Earthman body of his, pull it off in great sloppy chunks and expose his true skin to this water. He stood under the shower for half an hour, reveling in it.

He dried and dressed and eyed himself in the mirror. He looked fairly presentable. A fat man didn't have to look really neat. The cosmetics men who had designed his skin had arranged things so that his face always seemed as though it had been shaved three hours ago, and would not need to be shaved again in another half a day. They hadn't yet solved the technical problem of a continuously growing beard. No matter, Bridger thought. This would do.

Now, about those three Dirnans -

He sidled out of the room and walked down to ground level. The motel had a cocktail lounge just below the street, a fancy one with a waterfall thundering over a glass barrier. Water again! Bridger entered the cocktail lounge. He saw little groups of men, three and four at most, sitting about over drinks. They were formally dressed: businessmen, he realized. He took a seat at the bar. A girl came over to serve him. Her scanty costume left plenty of flesh visible, and Bridger observed with some fascination that her nearly bare breasts had been coated with a kind of fluorescing substance. In the dimness of the lounge, the blue-green glow of her bosom was violently conspicuous. A new style, eh? It was not to his taste; but, then, Kranazoi were not mammals, and he failed to appreciate the erotic significance of breasts at all.

She cocked her luminous mammaries at him and said, 'What'll it be?'

'Sherry on the rocks,' Bridger said.

He got a queer look from her for that. Evidently no real man would drink anything so mild. Bridger merely grinned. Sherry, he knew, was only a fortified wine, less than ten percent alcohol in it. Fine. His metabolism regarded alcohol as a poison, and the less of it he consumed, the healthier he'd be. He needed to drink something, as his entree to the conversations of the cocktail lounge, but the lighter it was,

the better.

She gave him his drink. He paid her, and she jiggled off to the next patron. Bridger sipped delicately.

He listened. His auditory system was extremely sensitive.

' - raised the dividend four years in a row, and I've got the word they'll split three to one in April - '

' - so he took her up to the room, you know, but when he got her clothes off her it turned out that - '

' - Braves don't have a chance if Pasquarelli really plays out the season in Japan - '

' - no matter what they say about that damn fireball, I refuse to believe that it was only a - '

' - they's got seven lots left in that subdivision, except three of them's half sold to - '

' - how can you argue with earnings of six bucks a share? - '

' - forty-one home runs with a sprained wrist - '

' - and then she said, give me fifty bucks or I'll call a cop, so he - '

' - flying saucer - '

' - putting in the utility lines, that's an extra cost - '

' - over-the-counter now, but they're going to be listed

in-'

' - sure I believe that stuff! Listen, mac, they're all over the goddam place! - '

' - they got this Mexican shortstop, no, Cuban - '

'-kicked her good and hard - '

' - after the bank forecloses, we can - '

Bridger took another cautious sip of his drink. Then he pulled himself ponderously out of his seat and crossed the room, working hard to look benevolent and friendly. He stood above the group of four men a moment; they took little notice of him. A waitress with purplish thighs flitted by. The men were young, Bridger guessed, but not very young. When a couple of them looked up, the Kranazoi agent beamed broadly and said as affably as he could, 'Excuse me for butting in, fellers, but I couldn't help hearing you talk about that flying saucer - '

Thirteen

Mirtin knew that he was violating regulations by striking up this intimacy with the Indian boy. A Dirnan forced to land on Earth was in general supposed to avoid all contact with Earthmen; for survival, certain exceptions to the letter of the regulations were permitted, but he had gone far beyond their limits. Among the things he was forbidden to do was to explain the purpose of the Dirnan mission, to discuss the location and civilization of Dirna, or to permit any Earthman to handle the equipment that the watcher had brought with him when he landed. Mirtin had done all of these things.

Yet he felt little guilt about it. He had served the mother world well and faithfully through a long lifetime. For what amounted to hundreds of years, by the reckoning of Charley Estancia's species, Mirtin had obeyed all the regulations. He was entitled to a small lapse in his old age.

Besides, there was Charley to consider. Mirtin could see the boy flowering, growing from one night to the next. The raw material had been good: an alert, inquisitive mind, a nature hungry for knowledge and experience. Environment had thwarted Charley by dropping him into an enclave where deliberately primitivistic cultural traits were maintained. Mirtin felt that the universe owed Charley Estancia a glimpse of something greater than his mud pueblo. If, as it happened, the universe had chosen Mirtin of Dirna to be the agent of the boy's awakening, Mirtin would simply have to accept that fact, without worrying too much about the security regulations. Sometimes mere patriotism had to give way to higher obligations.

Charley squatted beside him, fondling the shining tools that Mirtin had allowed him to take from his suit.

'What does this one do?' the boy asked.

That's a - well, we think of it as a portable generator. It makes electricity.'

'But I can hold it in my hand. You got a little magnet in there somewhere? How does it work?'

'It taps the magnetic field of the planet,' said Mirtin. "You know that every planet is like a large magnet?'

'Yeah, yeah, sure.'

'This instrument sets up lines of force that run counter to the planetary magnetic field. You squeeze that lever and it cuts across the magnetic lines to induce a current. We call it a cheater, Charley, because it seems to be stealing power out of thin air. Of course, it's really just borrowing, not stealing.'

'Can I try it?'

"Go ahead. But how will you use it?'

The boy pointed to the canteen. 'You left a little water over. If this really makes a current, I ought to be able to split the water up, right? Into hydrogen, oxygen? What's the word? Electro - electroly -'

'Electrolysis,' Mirtin said. 'Yes, that'll work. Be careful, though.'

'Youbet.'

Mirtin showed the boy how to extrude the electrodes. With great precision Charley readied the tool for use and slipped the electrodes into the water. Then he activated the generator. They both watched in delight as the current shattered the molecules of water in the proper fashion.

'Hey, it works!' Charley cried. 'Listen, can I open it up? I want to see what's in there that makes the current!' 'No,' Mirtin said harshly.

'You won't let me, huh? I'll put it back together again afterward. Just like good. I won't hurt it.'

'Please, Charley. Don't try to open it. You - you'll break it. It's designed to burn out the moment anybody opens the seal.'

It was a lie, and Mirtin was not good at lying to Charley. He tried not to meet the shining dark eyes.

Charley said, 'That's so if anybody from Earth accidentally gets hold of it, he won't be able to open it up and learn how to make one?' 'Y-yes.'

'Maybe you got a second one? I could open the other one up and at least get a look at it before it burns out.'

'There is no other one in my kit,' Mirtin said. He sighed. 'If I had one, I wouldn't let you open it anyway.'

'You're afraid I'd learn too much? That I'd learn some-thing Earth people aren't supposed to know?'

'That's it' Mirtin confessed. I shouldn't even be showing you these things. I'm breaking one rule to do that. But I mustn't let you look inside them. Don't you see, Charley, it isn't any good if we just come down here and hand you our tools and let you study and imitate them. There are some things a planet has to discover for itself. If the discovery doesn't come from within, it's no good. I've seen civilizations rot because they didn't develop their own technology. Not here. Other planets. They borrowed, they stole - and they rotted.'

'So I can't look inside?'

'No. Try to imagine what's in there, yes. But don't peek.' Charley said, 'You can't move your arms or your legs, Mirtin. You couldn't stop me if I opened it up.'

'Correct,' Mirtin replied calmly. 'I couldn't stop you at all. The only one who could stop you is you, Charley.'

It was very quiet in the cave suddenly. Charley ran his hand along the sleekness of the generator's butt, and took two or three quick glances in Mirtin's direction. Reluctantly, he set the tool down beside Mirtin's other equipment.

'You want a tortilla?'

'I'd like one.'

Charley unwrapped the package and drew another tortilla out. As usual, he held it above Mirtin's mouth while the Dirnan, lying flat on his back, bit off chunks of it. This time, Mirtin bit off a chunk but failed to catch it, and it slipped down the side of his chin toward the cave floor. Auto-matically he tried to bring his right hand up to catch the falling piece of tortilla. The tortilla fell away; but he had moved his arm.

'Hey!' Charley yelled. 'You lifted your hand!'

'Just a few inches.'

'But you lifted it! You can move again! When did that start?'

'It's been happening little by little. I noticed it yesterday. I'm regaining the use of my limbs.'

'But your back is broken!'

'The central column is nearly healed. The nerves are beginning to regenerate. It's happening swiftly.'

'It sure is. But I forget, you aren't human. What they got in you, it's artificial. It's better than human bone, isn't it? Would my back grow back if I broke it?'

'Not this way.'

'I didn't think so. How long before you can walk again, Mirtin?'

'A while, yet. Yesterday a couple of fingers, today a whole hand ... but I have some distance to go before I can lift my body.'

'It's great, though. You're getting better.' Instantly, Charley's mood shifted. 'When you can walk again, you'll go back to Dirna, huh?'

'If I can get rescued. I can't just flap my wings and take off, you know. I've got to attract the attention of a rescue team.'

'How you do that? You send up a flare, or something?'

'I have a communicating device in my suit. It broadcasts a signal that they ought to be able to detect.'

There was no eluding Charley's agile mind. 'If you got a thing you can signal for help with, how come you didn't already call for someone to come get you?'

'The communicator is worked with the hand. My hand is paralyzed, right? I am not able to reach the device.'

'Well, then - ' Charley gulped. 'I could do it for you, couldn't I?'

'You already have,' Mirtin said.

'What?'

'While you've examined the equipment of my suit, you've touched the communicator a number of times. The signal's been going out for days. Apparently there's something wrong with the communicator, or they'd have found me by now. If they're looking for me, that is.'

'You didn't tell me any of this.'

'You didn't ask.'

'Will you be able to fix the communicator, Mirtin?'

'Possibly. I won't know until I can use my body again.'

'Could I fix it for you?'

'If you did, and they came, you'd never see me again. Do you want me to go away from you that fast?'

'Hey, no,' Charley said. 'I'd like you to stay here forever, talking to me, teaching me things. But - but - you ought to be back with your own people. You ought to have a doctor. I'd fix the communicator for you, Mirtin. Even if it meant that you'd go away.'

'Thank you, Charley. But not just yet. I'm not whole enough yet to withstand acceleration, anyway. I have to knit a while longer before they can take me away. So we have some more time to talk. And then, perhaps, you can help me fix the communicator. All right?'

'Whatever you say, Mirtin.'

Charley was looking at the tools again. He picked up another one, the disruptor,

'What's this?'

It's a cutting and excavating tool. It gives off an extremely strong beam of light that burns through anything within range.'

'Like a laser, you mean?'

'It is a laser,' said Mirtin. 'But a far more powerful one than any used on Earth. At the right opening it can melt rock or cut through metal.'

'You mean it?'

Mirtin laughed. 'You want to try it, don't you? All right, then. Hold it by the rounded end. That's the control stud. Let me see what range it's set for. Yes, ten feet. Good enough. Now, point it at the cave floor, and make sure your feet aren't in the way, and press the -'

The beam flared out. It consumed a patch of the floor of the cave five inches across and nearly a foot deep in the first moment. Charley yelled and switched the disruptor off. Holding it at arm's length, he stared in wonder.

'You could do anything with this!' he cried.

'It's very useful, yes.'

'Even - even kill somebody!'

'If you wanted to kill somebody,' said Mirtin. 'We don't do much killing in our world.'

'But if you *had* to,' Charley said. 'I mean, it's clean and quick, and - listen, I don't think about killing much. Will you tell me how this works? I suppose I can't open this one up either, but -'

He was full of questions. The disruptor excited him even more than the power tool had, perhaps because he could comprehend the basic principles of the generator, more or less, but the concept of destroying matter through optical pumping baffled him. Mirtin did his best to explain. He used analogies and images, and even a few evasions where the technology of the device was beyond his own grasp. Charley already knew about lasers, but he knew of them as bulky machines requiring an input of light. What puzzled him about this one was, for one, its small size, and for another, its self-contained nature. Where did the light beam come from?

Where was the source? Was it a chemical laser, or a gas laser, or what?

'Neither,' Mirtin said. 'It doesn't work on the same principles as the portable lasers Earth now has.'

'Then-what-?'

Mirtin was silent.

'It's something we aren't supposed to know about? Some-thing we have to discover for ourselves?'

'To some extent, yes.'

Charley brimmed with curiosity. They talked for a while; and then Mirtin visibly tired. The boy got ready to take his leave.

'I'll see you tomorrow,' he promised, and flitted off into the night.

Some time later, Mirtin discovered that the disruptor was gone. He had seen Charley put it back with the other tools, or at least he thought he had; but there was no sign of it now. Mirtin felt a stab of alarm, only briefly. In a way, he had expected something like this. It was the risk he had run by showing Charley his tools.

Would Charley use the disruptor as a weapon? Hardly.

Would he show it to anyone else? Certainly not.

Would he try to get it open and study its mechanism? Quite probably, Mirtin admitted.

However, he could not bring himself to see that as any menace to anyone. Let the boy have it, he thought. He may benefit from it. And in any case there's nothing I can do about it now.

Fourteen

Vorneen had begun to ask himself wonderingly how it had happened, and when. He was in love with Kathryn Mason, there could be no doubt of that. What he felt for her was as strong as what he felt for Mirtin and Glair, and since he loved them, he must love her. But was it possible? Did it make any sense? Where had it begun?

He had wanted to have sexual relations with her, of course, right from the start. But that was not at all the same thing as being in love with her.

Vorneen was by nature a seducer. That was his role in the sexual group: he was the predator, the aggressor who initiated the matings. Mirtin would never take an active role, while Glair provoked sexual activity only in the feminine facet of the healer, the consoler, the soother. Vorneen sought passion for its own sake. That was acceptable, and moreover necessary to the continuity of the group. Within the group, he kindled, he galvanized. If sometimes he found it needful

to go outside the group, neither Glair nor Mirtin objected. Why should they?

Of course, all that had to do with Dirnan mores and the specifically Dirnan type of sexual activity. Vorneen had never considered the possibility of extending his range of seductions to the Earthborn female. Like any watcher, he assumed that there would never be an occasion for him to come in contact with an Earthman, and certainly he had never visualized himself thrown into such intimate circumstances as he now had entered with Kathryn Mason. Nor had it ever crossed his mind that he might feel physical desire for a woman of Earth.

Yet he wore an Earthman's body. It was anatomically perfect, at least externally. Its inner drives were purely Dirnan, or so he thought; his body could ingest Earth food, but if he ate something that Earthmen loved which happened to make Dirnans ill, he would get ill. He had assumed, too, that the governing sexual nature of his outer body would remain purely Dirnan. He went on feeling desire for Mirtin and Glair, even though they were hidden beneath synthetic Earthman flesh. When they had made love aboard the ship, they did so in the Dirnan fashion, making no use of their external Earth-type sexual organs. Why, then, should he expect his counterfeit Earthman body to feel authentic desire for an Earthman female?

Was it simply his inner drives, his Vorneen-drives, seeking an outlet in a different context?

That was it, he told himself at first. As seducer, he was primed to seduce, and his drives related to the appropriate context. With no Dirnans at hand, this female Earthman would have to suffice.

And there was the sense of challenge. Could he seduce her as he seduced so many of his own kind? Would his present body function properly? How successful would he be? Would he give her pleasure? Would there be pleasure for him?

A game, then. No emotional content. Seduction for its own sake, pursuit merely to find out certain aspects of his present condition.

That was not love, Vorneen knew. That was sport.

How then, had this unwanted, unexpected, troublesome element of emotion entered the situation?

It had begun sometime during the second week of his stay with her. He could reconstruct the outline of the process, but not the emotional sequence. He knew what he had done, but not how, or why. Especially not why.

From the day of her visit to the Contact Cult office, Vorneen had been fully aware that she knew of his extraterrestrial origin. Of course, she must have realized what he was almost as soon as she had begun to care for him; she was an intelligent woman, and his body was only an approximate imitation of an Earthman's, beneath the surface. She could gather from the metabolic evidence alone - his body temperature, his lack of any need to excrete wastes - that he was an alien. But until that day, Kathryn had given no outward sign of any awareness. He had seen the look in her eyes, though, when she tossed the bundle of Contact Cult literature on the bed. He had listened to the words between her words as she told him of her visit to the cult's headquarters. Unmistakably she had been telling him, 'Those people are frauds, but I know what a real alien is like, because I've got one living in my house!' So the pretense was over. She did not make a point of exploiting her knowledge; she never said a word about his origin, or asked a question; but she knew, and he knew that she knew, and now they were beyond a certain barrier that had separated them.

Still, she remained aloof. She continued to sleep in the other room. When she bathed him or dressed his broken leg, the sight of his nude body clearly disturbed her. Vorneen expertly diagnosed her sexual dilemma, though his insight was purely intuitive, and not related to any pattern he had ever known among Dirmans. She desired him, and yet she was afraid of him - afraid of her own desire for him. So she kept away.

The first time, when he had suggested she get into bed with him, he had been in real pain, still battered and bruised from his landing, still shocked and dazed over the almost certain death of Glair and the possible death of Mirtin. He had wanted warmth. He had wanted closeness. Well, she had refused that; but she had held his hand, and that was good enough.

After that, though, he had wished for something more than that. He wanted her close enough so that he could work his wiles of seduction on her. But that, naturally, she would not countenance.

He wished he knew more about local sexual beliefs. He had studied Earthman tribal taboos during his indoctrination sessions, of course; and during his ten years of observing these people from the sky, he had come to know a bit about their thinking on the subject. But there were gaps, and just now they were turning out to be distressingly large gaps.

Her mate was dead. Her husband; they had only one mate at a time, always of the opposite sex, in a socially accepted sexual group here. She was a 'widow'. Were widows required by custom to remain chaste for a certain mourning period? If so, how long? Her husband had died a year ago.

There was a child in the house. Was sexual intercourse prohibited within a certain distance of a child? Was it necessary to send the child away, or to go themselves to some permissible place to perform the act?

What about religious rites? Did they invariably precede any physical consummation?

Vorneen did not know the answers. Privately, he suspected that Kathryn was free to give herself to him any time she pleased, and that she could not bring herself to do it.

Certainly she was modest. Her attitude toward his own nakedness was complex, for he had learned that she once had belonged to a social caste - nurses - in which young women were allowed to view and handle ailing males without inhibition. So her half-veiled reactions to his body sprang from some conflict of desires within her, not from any violation of tribal taboo.

She kept her own body concealed from him. In the many days he had lived here, Vorneen had seen Kathryn's nakedness once, and that only by accident. It had happened afterdinner one night. Vorneen was reading; the child was sleeping; Kathryn was in the bath. Suddenly the child awoke from some frightening dream and began to scream. Vorneen, immobilized in the bed, could do nothing. But Kathryn had left the bathroom door open so that she would hear just such a sound. Vorneen saw her rush across the corridor, naked and glossy with moisture, momentarily visible in front of his open door as she raced toward Jill's room. After comforting the child, she retreated just as swiftly. But he had seen her. Her body was quite different from the one Glair had chosen for herself. Glair had made a serious study of North American sexual preferences, and had designed a body crafted for maximum erotic appeal. Kathryn, since she had to make do with her own genetic heritage, fell short of Glair's opulence. Kathryn was taller, with long, thin legs, flat buttocks, small breasts. Her body seemed built for speed and strength, rather than for softness.

Vorneen did not object to that. The criteria by which Glair had designed her body did not happen to be *his* criteria for feminine beauty; Earthfolk were so alien in form to him that he had no such criteria at all. To him Kathryn was just as beautiful as Glair. More so, perhaps, since Kathryn was authentic, Glair only a sleek replica.

He wished Kathryn would be less prudish about her body.

He wished she would step into his room one night, incandescently nude, and give herself to him.

It happened, of course. But it happened without planning and with little employment of his bag of tricks.

His broken leg was knitting rapidly, and he felt the time had come to test its strength. He had lolled in bed long enough. Since his suit's communicator had been shattered in his landing impact, he had to get up and around if he hoped ever to be picked up by a rescue team, and it seemed to him that his leg might already be able to support his weight. One night after Kathryn had gone to sleep he pushed the coverlets back and swung both legs over the side of the bed.

An instant of vertigo swept through him. This was the first time that he had tried to come to a true sitting position in bed. He gasped and clung to the edge of the mattress for a moment while his body adjusted itself.

Then, delicately, he placed the soles of his feet against the floor.

Vorneen sat quite still. He pictured the broken leg buckling and snapping the moment he exerted

pressure on it. His entire outer body might be artificial, but it was linked neurally to his inner Dirman self; as he had had ample opportunity to discover, he felt real pain when he injured his unreal housing. Perhaps it was best to wait another few days?

No.

He moved his center of gravity forward, clung to the table beside the bed, and pulled himself to his feet. Gently, gently, gently-----How was the leg? Supporting him? Yes!

A moment later a wave of dizziness convulsed him like the power of a winter storm.

His body seemed to be falling apart, each limb dropping away from the core. Vorneen cried out and took a wild plunging step with his good leg, then a half-hearted sliding step with the injured one, and finished the maneuver standing in the middle of the room, quivering violently and grasping the back of a handy chair for support. He thought the floor would open wide and engulf him. He could not see for dizziness. He shifted all his weight to the good leg, so that it fired angry protests to his neural center at being imposed upon in this fashion after such long inactivity. His broken leg was whole again, but he had not allowed for the weakness of his muscles, the chaos in his nervous system, that had come upon him from so many days in bed. Momentarily be-wildered, he could not even summon the presence of mind to begin shutting down ganglia.

'What are you doing?'

Kathryn stood in the doorway. She wore a flimsy thigh-length nightgown that concealed nothing of her body, and her face was a study in outrage. Vorneen fought to focus his consciousness.

'My leg-testing it-'

She rushed to him. He was frozen where he stood, seven feet from the bed, unable to go back, unable to go forward, and rapidly losing the strength even to remain standing. Her arms were about him, steadying him. Relief flooded his system. She clutched him fiercely, and in the same instant he lost his grip on the chair and began to fall. Somehow Kathryn absorbed the full thrust of his and held him up just long enough for them to stumble three steps together and topple onto the bed.

Together.

He was nude, and she wore only a millimeter's thickness of fabric. They landed in a confused heap, laughing and panting, Kathryn on top of him, and more by accident than anything else their lips touched, and suddenly, as if he had opened some immediate sensory conduit between their bodies, he felt the fire blazing within her and knew that she was his.

How did one make love to an Earthwoman? Where were the places of excitement?

Vorneen frantically summoned what he could recall of his theory.

It was no use; veteran of a thousand affairs though he was, he was baffled and flustered by this unexpected encounter. His hands surged across her. But where? Elbows, breasts, shoulders, knees, buttocks? He discovered it did not matter. Kathryn was aroused. She ripped her gown away. Her flesh was like flame against him. His body was responding, which solved one question that had perturbed him.

She covered him with her warmth.

He knew the anatomy, but not the method of effecting consummation. Very shortly he learned it. The next thing he did not know was the increment of pleasure: when was he supposed to stop? He learned that, too, when Kathryn cried out in ecstasy and his reflexes supplied the final answer.

Afterward she clung to him, weeping, kissing his cool skin.

After that, she drew back and lectured him for having left the bed. 'You could have hurt yourself! What did you think you were doing?'

'Testing my leg.'

'You shouldn't be walking for weeks yet.' 'I'm not so sure. My bone has knit. I ran into trouble because I got dizzy.' 'Healed so fast?' That's right.'

'But that's impossible! It couldn't have - no broken bone could -'

'No human bone.' 'But you're not -!' 'No.' 'Say it'

'I'm not human, Kathryn.' 'Yes. I wanted you to say it.'

'And if I hadn't left the bed, you wouldn't have come in and caught me, and we wouldn't have -!' 'No.'

'I'm glad, Kathryn. I don't repent at all.' 'Neither do I.' Defiantly. 'Only- I'm afraid, Vorneen.' 'Of what?'

'I don't know.' She took his hand and put it to her breasts.-'What we did - what you are - if you aren't human, how could you make love?'

'The people who built my body knew what they were doing, I guess.' 'Whobuilt your body?'

'My outer body. My disguise. Inside it's different,' 'Vorneen, I'm lost. Tell me -' 'Later. We've got a lot of time to talk. Not now.' 'I feel so strange, Vorneen. As though I've crossed a river into a strange land, a place I've never been before, and I don't know where it is, I don't know where I am.' 'Do you like where you are now, wherever it may be?!' 'I think so,' she said.

'Then why worry? You can pick up a map of the country-side some other time.' She laughed. She embraced him. 'Do you still feel dizzy?' she asked. 'For different reasons, now.'

'And your leg? You didn't hurt it again while you were standing on it?'

'No.'

'Nor while we were -'

'No. Especially not then.'

He kept her close to him. He felt more relaxed than at any time since trouble had begun aboard the ship. And he had answered most of his questions about the body he wore. It responded; it could give pleasure. Functionally he was sufficiently Earthlike to meet the present needs. He found that quite remarkable. He found it even more remarkable how tempestuous Kathryn could be, once she allowed herself to show her emotions.

They got little sleep that night, and Vorneen learned a 'good deal more about North American erotic techniques. Toward morning he heard Kathryn murmuring sleepily, 'I love you, Vor, I love you, I love you!'

Well, that could be part of the ritual too, he told himself. He wondered if he should reply in kind and decided against it. As a being from another world, he was not required to follow the local rituals, and he might look too insincere if he tried. The successful seducer, he had learned in his youth, is always sincere . . . where sincerity is appreciated.

After that, Kathryn slept in his bed every night, and they were lively nights indeed. By day she helped him learn to walk again. She got him a stick to lean on, though he pre-ferred to lean on her arm; he shook off his dizziness, rebuilt his muscles, began to move about with some assurance. His leg was still lame, but that would clear up. Kathryn gave him a robe to wear, evidently so that propriety would be observed in front of the child; Kathryn herself no longer seemed bound by any taboos whatever. He watched her become more radiant day by day, night by night.

She talked a good deal of how much she loved him. She talked very little of where he had come from and what he might be doing on Earth.

Vorneen accepted the talk of love casually, as part of the game. But then, somewhere, he discovered that he had unknowingly crossed a bridge himself, and what had been for him a sport had turned into an emotional union. He realized it when he considered that he might be returning to his own people at any time. That was splendid - and then he felt the unexpectedly powerful pang at the awareness that it meant parting from Kathryn. He did not want to part from her. He wished actively to remain with her. He looked with dismay on the idea of a separation. Which meant he had fallen in love with her.

How had it happened?

It was unthinkable. He was biologically different from her. He had gone to bed with her merely to find out if it were possible. Those thrustings and gruntings - how could they have created an emotional bond between an Earthman and a Dirnan? The whole idea was inexpressibly bewildering. He knew there were some Dimans who would regard this relationship as perverse, while others would have him brain-burned at once. He felt helpless in the fact of events. He had never meant this to happen at all.

In love? With an Earthwoman?

The covenants did not specifically prohibit sexual relation-ships between the watchers and the watched, because those who had drawn the covenants had never entertained the possibility that such relationships might develop. Vorneen took small comfort in knowing that what he had done was not illegal, technically. Soon, he suspected, he would be leav-ing Earth. What would happen to Kathryn then? And to him?

The rescue mission consisted of six Dirnans, two teams of three. Each comprised a complete sexual group: male-female-female in one case, male-female-male in the other. They entered New Mexico the day after the explosion, and began to comb the state for the three possible survivors. The task would have been easier if they had had communicator signals to guide them.

All they had to go by were probabilities, plus one extremely distorted signal. The computers, weighing all the likelihoods, had decided that all three Dirnans must have come down approximately in the center of the state: one in the vicinity of Albuquerque, one closer to Santa Fe, and one west of the line connecting the other two, thus forming a vaguely equilateral triangle. But the best the computers could offer by way of actual locations was an area determination with a built-in error of + 20 miles. That was hardly encouraging.

The rescue team led by Furnil and his two mates had a slight advantage over the other group. Coming down from the north, they were guided by the dim, uncertain bleeping of the damaged communicator, and so they had at least an initial clue. The communicator's signal was emerging as a bleary smear, spread over too many wavelengths, but it provided a clue of sorts. It told them that one of the three Dirnans who had fallen to Earth had almost certainly landed within a few miles of the Rio Grande somewhere not too far south of Santa Fe, and that he was still alive - for the communicator had to be reactivated every time a signal was sent out.

Finding him was a tall order, though. The Dirnans immediately established their local command post in a motel on the lower outskirts of Santa Fe and set up their portable detecting instruments in the hope that they could clean up that blurred signal and trace it to its source. They attempted to factor out the distortion and narrow their search vectors. Their first calculation showed that the missing watcher could have come down in the vicinity of Cochiti Pueblo, but that proved to be incorrect - or, if the Dirnan had landed there, the Indians were keeping it well concealed. A radical correction in the vectors placed the watcher's location across the Rio Grande, out by the ruins of Pecos Pueblo; a quick trip there produced nothing, and some reexamination showed that it had been a mistake. The signal was coming from the western bank of the river. They kept looking.

The other group, working its way up from Albuquerque, had nothing at all to go by except the assurance of the computers that they should look in this area. Their instruments remained totally silent. They had to use other methods: asking careful questions, studying police and military reports, placing cunningly worded advertisements in the newspapers. There were no results.

This group was led by a male named Sartak, who affected a rugged, excessively virile Earthman body. His companions were two Dirnan females, one of them somewhat his senior, the other a young one on her first watcher assignment and also in her first sexual group. Their names were Thuw and Leenor. Leenor had an agreeably innocent air about her that made her useful as an asker of questions. Sartak sent her down to the Albuquerque office of the Contact Cult to see if she could find anything worthwhile

there. Like all Dirnans, Sartak had a hearty contempt for the cynical emptiness of Frederic Storm's organization; but it was just remotely possible that some local citizen, having discovered an injured galactic alien, would choose to report that fact to the cult instead of to the military authorities. Sartak could not afford to ignore any leads.

He was programming one of his detecting instruments later that day when Leenor phoned, greatly agitated.

'I've just left the Contact Cult,' she gasped. 'They don't know anything about anything there. But - oh, Sartak, we've got to do something!'

'About what?'

'About the Kranazoi spy!'

Sartak glared into the telephone screen. 'The*what?*'

'He was at the cult place too. I could smell him across the room. He calls himself David Bridger, and he's fat and horrible, and he's looking for the survivors too!'

'How did you find that out?'

'By eavesdropping. I didn't speak to him at all. I don't think he noticed me. I'm sure he didn't, Sartak.'

Sartak let his breath out in a long, slow snort of disgust. A member of the enemy mixed into this too! Wasn't life hard enough?

He said, 'Do you know where he's staying?'

'A motel not far from ours. The name is - I've got it written down here -'

'What is it?'

She found the slip and told him. Sartak made a note of it. Then he said, 'This is annoying, but we'll make the most of it. Leenor, get over to his motel and let him pick you up. Pretend to be a moron - your usual act. I doubt that he'll try to take you to bed, but if he does, cooperate. And find out

everything he knows. He may already have information that's of use to us.'

'What if he finds out my real nature?'

'He won't. Kranazoi don't have our sense of smell. He's got no way of knowing what's under your skin, and most likely he isn't familiar enough with real Earthpeople to know that you're a fake. Just stay very calm, giggle a lot, and listen carefully to everything he says.'

'But what if *hedoes*, find out, Sartak?'

'You're carrying an antipersonnel grenade, aren't you? We're acting under the covenants here, and he isn't. If he makes any hostile moves, kill him.'

'Killhim?'

'Kill him,' Sartak repeated with deliberate brutality. I know, I know, we're all civilized beings here. But we're rescuers, and he's an obstructor. Put the grenade in his fat belly and let him sizzle, Leenor. If necessary, that is. Clear?'

The girl looked a little dazed.

'Clear,' she said,

Sixteen

Charley Estancia kept the Dirman laser strapped to his belly all the time, even when he slept. He did not dare let it get away from him. It was small enough so that it didn't bulge beneath his clothes, especially if he let his shirttails hang out. The cool metal against his skin was reassuring.

He knew that he shouldn't have stolen it from Mirtin. But he hadn't been able to resist. The little tool had been so fascinating that he had pocketed it while Mirtin looked the other way. He hoped that the man from the stars would forgive him for the theft, but he wasn't sure.

The worst thing was that Charley couldn't find a way to leave the village just now. The Fire Society dances were going on, and it was too risky to slip away. Everyone had to be present. They were staging the initiations, picking the new candidates and taking them into the kiva to mumble the half-forgotten words over them, then emerging to do the fire dance and the stick-swallowing dance. Charley did not expect to be selected for membership of the Fire Society; everybody in the pueblo knew that he was a troublemaker, and trouble--makers were best kept out of the secret societies. But there was always the crazy chance that they had picked him for initiation this year, and if they had, and couldn't find him, he would be in real trouble.

So he had to sit tight, leaving Mirtin to shift for himself. He doubted that Mirtin would starve or die of thirst; what really worried Charley was the thought of Mirtin lying there imagining that Charley had stolen his laser and abandoned him, after all their friendly conversations. Charley hadn't had a chance to explain about the Fire Society dance. He had miscalculated, thinking it would start a day later; he had planned to let Mirtin know about it ahead of time, but now he could not. Miserably, he skulked around the village, hoping for some way to slip off. The place was full of tourists, now. Cameras everywhere, fat white women telling the children how cute they were, bored-looking husbands. The tourists went everywhere,

even right into people's houses. They'd go into the kiva, too, if the governor of the pueblo hadn't posted a couple of muscular boys to guard the entrance.

In the few secret moments Charley had, he examined the tool he had stolen.

He hesitated to try to open it; not yet, anyway. Mirtin's talk about an Earthman learning things he was not supposed to learn did not bother Charley, but he was afraid that in opening the laser he would break it. First he wanted to study it in details from the outside, to see how it worked.

He used it to cut a thick log in half. He turned it on a rock and watched the sandstone melt into a puddle. He dug a ditch a foot deep and ten feet long. He made some mistakes, overshooting his target or covering too wide an area, but in an hour he had mastered the fine controls. Quite a gadget, he thought. It was like a little miracle. These star people, they were really something! He wished he could go off to Mirtin's planet and see it. And go to school there.

Two days passed that way.

The Fire Society dancers came and got Tomas Aguirre.,

the big dope. They initiated him, and then they came for Mark Gachupin. Usually they chose only three new members each year. Charley wondered what he would do if they came for him. Go with them, and burst out laughing in the middle of the sacred rites? Or just turn and run? They would call upon him in his Indian name, Tsiwaiwonyi, the name he never used. Some of the older people tried to call everyone by Indian names, but Charley stuck to the Christian names. They'd say, 'Tsiwaiwonyi, come with us to the kiva', and he'd stand there gaping.

But of course they didn't come for him. They didn't want him. On the morning of the third day they picked Jose Galvan, and Charley knew he was safe for another year. Now he could go out to the desert and apologize to Mirtin and explain to him about the ceremony, and maybe even give him back the laser, because Charley was feeling very guilty about having taken it. He packed a bunch of tortillas, filled a canteen, and quietly left the village while no one was looking.

He was halfway to Mirtin's cave before he realized that he was being followed.

First he heard a crackle of dry twigs behind him. That could be anything, from a jackrabbit heading for its nest to a bobcat looking for lunch. Charley stopped and turned, but he didn't see anything unusual behind him. He was still suspicious, though. Another ten feet along, and he thought he heard a muffled cough. Jackrabbits didn't cough. Charley spun around suddenly and saw the long, lean form of Marty Moquino about a dozen yards in back of him.

'Hi,' Marty said. He chucked out his cigarette and took a fresh one. 'Where you going, Charley?'

'For a walk.'

'All by yourself in the middle of the winter?'

'None of your business what I'm doing,' Charley said. He tried to hide his panic. Why had Marty followed him from the pueblo? Did Marty know about the cave and its occu-pant? If he found out, all would be up for Mirtin. Marty would sell him to the Government, sure as anything. Or to the newspapers.

Marty Moquino said, 'How about taking me where you're heading?'

'I'm just going for a walk.'

'Yeah. And you just happen to go for a walk every night, too. I been watching you, kid. What's out there, anyway?' 'N-nothing.'

'And what you got in that package you're carrying? Let me have a look.'

Marty took a couple of steps forward. Charley grasped the wrapped tortillas tightly and backed away. 'Leave me alone, Marty. I got no business with you.' 'I want to know what's up.' 'Please, Marty-'

'You got a friend hiding out there? Maybe a prisoner got out of jail, you taking care of him? Might be a reward for him, huh? And you just crazy enough to visit him instead. What's the story, Charley?'

Charley quivered a little. Marty kept coming toward him, and Charley kept edging back, but that couldn't continue for long. And if he ran, he'd never be able to outstrip Marty Moquino's long legs. The only thing to do was to bluff.

'There ain't no story,' Charley said stubbornly. 'I don't know what you're after.'

A lean arm shot out. Strong fingers grasped the fleshy part of Charley's arm. Marty Moquino towered above him, looking mean and ugly. He said, 'I been watching you since that night you ran over me and Maria. When it gets dark, you take a canteen, you take a package of maybe food, and you go out onto the desert. So you got a friend out there, right? This time you gonna take me to him, or I gonna make you feel sorry you didn't.' 'Marty - ' 'Take me there.' 'Let-go-'

The fingers dug deep. Charley winced, twisted, managed to pull his arm free. He swung around and ran a dozen paces, then stopped. Marty Moquino came after him, naturally. But Charley pulled the laser out from its hiding place under his shirt and pointed it at Marty's chest, just as though it were a gun.

'What the hell you got there?' Marty demanded.

'It's a death ray,' Charley said. His voice shook so badly he could barely get the words out. 'One squirt from this and it'll burn a hole right through you. I mean it.'

Marty guffawed. 'Now *I* know you're crazy, kid!'

He didn't move, though. Charley kept the laser aimed.

'Turn around and go back to the pueblo, Marty. Or I'll fire. I'll kill you. I honestly will.' Charley's heart thundered. At the moment, he believed his own words. It would please him a great deal to kill Marty Moquino. With the laser, he could do such a thorough job that there would be no body left to find. He'd never get arrested for it.

Sneering, Marty said, 'Put that stupid toy away.'

'It's no toy. Want to see? Want me to burn your left hand off, for openers?'

Now Marty began to move. Charley saw his right leg come forward in the first step.

He activated the laser and swung it toward a big yucca. One quick jolt from the beam and the yucca

vanished. The beam scooped out a crater a foot deep and a yard wide. Marty Moquino jumped back and made the sign of the cross.

'Toy, huh??' Charley cried savagely. 'Toy? I gonna cut your legs off! I gonna slice you in half!'

'What the hell-'

'Go on! Run!' Charley switched the laser on again and aimed it at the ground a couple of feet in front of Marty, so that the edge of the beam singed his boots a little. Marty didn't stay for a further demonstration. His face turned green and he took to his heels in a hurry. Charley had never seen anyone run so fast. On, on he went, down the arroyo, up the other side, past the power substation, vanishing in the distance. Charley shouted curses at him as he disappeared.

Then he realized he was faint with tension. He sank down on his knees for a moment, until the shakes were over. He knew that he had come very close to killing Marty Moquino. If he had been just a little angrier, or a little more afraid, he could have tipped the angle of the beam up a few degrees and blasted Marty to atoms. Only at the last minute had Charley controlled himself, or he'd have a man's death to his name now.

He rose and thrust the laser back out of sight. Biting his lip hard, he raced toward Mirtin's cave. He wasn't sure what would happen now, except that he had to warn Mirtin about this. Marty Moquino had fled in terror, but he might be back, might come snooping around. It wasn't safe for Mirtin to stay here anymore. He'd have to go to another cave, or else get his friends to take him away. Otherwise, sure as anything, Marty Moquino would find out about him some-how and call the government boys.

Charley stumbled up out of the last arroyo and flung himself into Mirtin's cave. Mirtin wasn't there.

For the first dazed instant Charley thought that he must have come to the wrong cave. But there was only one cave like this in this cliff, he knew. And by the daylight creeping into the cave, he could see the strip he had carved out of the cave floor with the laser, the last time he'd been here. It was the right cave, but Mirtin was gone, along with everything that had been with him - his suit, his kit of tools. Everything. What had happened? Where was he? He couldn't have gotten up and walked away; he wasn't able to use his legs yet. So -

Charley saw the note lying on the cave floor. It was a piece of yellowish paper, small and square, and it did not have the feel of paper but rather of some plastic substance. On it were a few words, printed in a kind of loose scrawl, as though the person who had written them could not use his hand very well, or did not know much about how to print English words, or perhaps both. It said:

Charley -

My friends have found me at last. They are taking me

away to finish the healing process. I am sorry I could not say goodbye to you, but I did not know they were coming so soon. I thank you with all my heart for the many good things you did for me here.

About that which you borrowed from me: it is yours to keep now. I am not angry that you took it. Keep it. Study it. Learn what you can from it. Only do not ever show it to another person. Will you promise me that?

Keep your eyes open all the time, try to understand the world, and remember that a man is not eleven

years old forever. You have a wonderful life waiting, if you reach out for it. Some day soon your people will go to the stars. I like to think that you will be among them, and that soon we will meet again out there. Until then -

Mirtin.

Charley read the letter a dozen times. Then, carefully, he folded it and put it in his shirt, next to the laser. He scuffed at the cave floor with his toe.

Out loud he said, 'I'm glad your people found you, Mirtin. I'm glad you weren't mad about the laser.'

Then he threw himself face down in the rich soil of the cave.

He had not cried so much since he was a very small boy.

Seventeen

'Two alien races watching us,' Tom Falkner said. 'Well, I suppose that's logical enough.'

'And watching each other, too,' said Glair. She stood by the opaqued window of Falkner's bedroom, shamelessly nude, balancing herself on two canes. She took an experi-mental step, and another, and another. Her legs felt stronger each time she moved. She was cautiously optimistic. 'How am I doing?' she asked.

'Marvelous. You're in fine shape.'

'I wasn't asking about my shape. I'm asking about the way I walk.'

'That's fine too,' Falkner said. He laughed and came over to her and ran his hands quickly, possessively, over the firm contours of her body. His fingertips dug into the yielding bounciness of her breasts. He murmured, 'I could almost start to believe that this stuff is real!'

'Don't lose your perspective, now,'

'I love you, Glair,'

'I'm a creepy-looking thing from another planet, and I rode here in a flying saucer.'

'I love you anyway.'

'You're a madman.'

'Very likely,' said Falkner complacently. 'But don't let that worry you. Do you love me, Glair?'

'Yes,' she whispered.

The strange thing was that she knew she meant it. She had begun this relationship by feeling sorry for Falkner - the poor Earthman had tied himself into so many psychological knots - and, because he had taken her in and nursed her back to health, she felt grateful to him and wanted to do something for him. He seemed so lonely, so troubled, so confused. A little warmth and reassurance was what he appeared to need, and those commodities were Glair's specialties. Pity and gratitude are never very solid foundations for real love, Glair knew, even when the people involved belong to the same species. She did not expect anything binding to develop out of them here. Yet as he extended his sick leave to be with her day after day, she found herself sliding imperceptibly into a feeling of real affection for Falkner.

He had strength, underneath all the bitterness. His life had taken a bad turn when he had failed as an astronaut, and nothing had ever been right for him since then, but he was not fundamentally the weakling he seemed to be. The drinking, the outrageous self-pity, the deliberate creation of obstacles for himself - these were effects, not causes. They could be reversed, and once they were, the result would be a reasonably happy, healthy, sound human being. Once Glair saw that, she stopped looking upon him as a broken thing that needed to be fixed, and began seeing him in a more immediately equal relationship.

Of course, there could never be anything permanent. She had been a hundred Earth years old when he was born; she would live for hundreds of years after he died. She had experienced vastly more than he could imagine. Even an Earthman of middle years was really a blank-souled child beside the most innocent of Dirnans, and Glair was far from innocent.

Then, too, the physical union was unreal. Glair felt pleasure in his embrace, yes, but mainly it was the pleasure of giving pleasure, coupled with a faint, insignificant throbbing of her outer nervous system. What she and Falkner did in bed together was amusing to her, but it was not sex in any form that was meaningful to her as a Dirnan. Naturally Glair had not let him know this, though probably he suspected it. She had known women who toyed with pets in this fashion.

Yet Falkner was more than a pet to her. Despite her edge in years and maturity, despite the alienness of their natures, despite everything, she felt warm, real affection for him. That surprised her, and pleased her, and - because she must leave him eventually - it troubled her.

'Walk across the room once more and sit down,' he said to her. 'Don't strain yourself too much at the beginning.'

Glair nodded and gripped her canes and started out across the bedroom. A spasm of weakness came over her midway, but she waited for it to pass and continued successfully toward the bed. Sinking down on it, she let the canes fall to the floor.

'How do the legs feel now?' 'Better and better.'

He massaged her calves and the backs of her knees. She lay back, relaxing. The bruises and bumps that had dis-figured her face for the first few days were all gone now. She was radiantly beautiful again, and she liked that idea. Falkner stroked her in an oddly chaste way, not at all as though this were the prelude to making love. He said, 'Two races of watchers? Tell me more,' 'I've already told you too much.'

'The Dirnans and the Kranazoi. Which of you got to us first, anyway?'

'No one knows,' Glair said. 'Each side claims that its scouts were the first to spot Earth. It was all so many thousands of years ago that we can't honestly say. I like to

think that we were the first, that the Kranazoi are just interlopers. But perhaps I'm just starting to believe our own propaganda.'

'So the flying saucers have been looking at us since Cro-Magnon man,' Falkner muttered. 'That explains the wheel Ezekiel saw, I guess, and a lot of other things. But why has it been only in the last thirty or forty years that we've noticed the watchers regularly?'

'Because there are so many more of us now. Until your nineteenth century, one Dirnan ship and one Kranazoi ship watched Earth, and that was all. As your technology de-veloped, we've had to increase the number of watchers. By 1900 we had five ships apiece in your skies. After you got wireless transmission, we added a few more ships to monitor your broadcasts. Then came atomic energy, and we knew we had something special on our hands. I think we had about sixty watchers on duty here in 1947.'

'And the Kranazoi?'

'Oh, they always keep pace with us, and we with them. Neither side lets the other get ahead even an inch.'

"Mutual escalation of watchers, eh?'

Glair grinned. 'Exactly. We add one, they add one. A few more each year, until by now we have -'

She stopped.

'You can tell me,' he said. 'You've already told me so much.'

'Hundreds of ships apiece,' she replied. 'I don't know the exact figure, honestly, but it's probably a thousand of ours and a thousand of theirs, spread out all over the system. We have to. You people have moved so fast. And so it's no surprise that you keep getting reports of Atmospheric Objects. We're pretty thick in your skies, and you've got sophisticated sensing devices. You have access to the files of AOS, Tom. Did you honestly believe the watchers were hallucinations, knowing what your own Government has observed?'

'I tried to wish it all away. I didn't want to believe. But now, I've got no choice, do I?'

Laughing, she said, 'No. You don't'

'But how long are you and the Kranazoi going to keep on watching us?'

'We don't know, Tom. Frankly, we don't know how to handle you at all. Your race is unique in galactic history: the first people who learned how to get out into space before they learned how to control their own belligerence. We've never had an immature race before that could build space vehicles and fusion weapons. Usually the ethical maturity comes a couple of thousand years before the technological maturity. But not here.'

'To you, we're a bunch of dangerous children, is that it?' Falkner asked, reddening.

Glair tried to sound playful as she said, 'I'm afraid that's it. Lovable children, though. Some of you.'

He ignored her tender caress. 'You keep watching us, then. Each of you has your own galactic sphere of influence, and each of you would love to draw us into the right sphere, but you don't dare. And each side is afraid that the other side will somehow come to terms with us. So you aren't really watching us at all. You're watching each other.'

'Both. We have an agreement concerning Earth, though. A covenant. Neither Dirnans nor Kranazoi are allowed to land on Earth at all, or to make contact with Earthmen from space. It's strictly hands off, while we wait for Earth to attain the degree of maturity we think is minimal for entry into interstellar civilization. Once you reach that stage, the am-bassadors will start landing. They'll unroll their mats and begin talking business. Until then, the covenants restrict us from approaching you.'

'What if we never reach the right degree of maturity?' Falkner asked.

'We go on waiting.'

'And if we blow ourselves up first?'

'It solves a sticky problem for us, Tom. Will I shock you if I say that we'd probably be happiest if you blew yourselves up? You're all too powerful already. Once you get out into the galaxy, you're likely to tip over the Dirna-Kranaz

balance that's existed for thousands of years. We're afraid of you. That's why we'd like to tie you up with treaties, but for us the safest thing would be to have you disappear in a puff of smoke.'

'If that's the way you feel about us, why don't you land a couple of dozen meddlers and try to start a nuclear war here?'

Glair said, 'Because we're civilized, Tom.' He was silent for a moment over that. Then he said, 'Didn't you break the covenants by landing on Earth, Glair?'

'I crash-landed, remember? I assure you, it wasn't my idea.'

'And then, letting me discover what you really were?' 'Necessary to my survival. And in terms of the covenants, it's far better for me to be hidden away here with you than being examined in some government hospital. The game would really be up, then.'

'But you've told the whole story to me, everything about the galactic cold war, the Kranazoi and the rest. What's to stop me from filing a full report with AOS?'

Her eyes sparkled. 'What good would it do you? You know all about the contact reports and how they're regarded officially. No day goes by without somebody showing up to say he's had a ride in a

flying saucer. The report goes to AOS, AOS checks it out, and the results are inconclusive. There's no hard data, except for the tracking reports that say something's up there.'

'But if this report came from an AOS officer - 'Think, Tom! Haven't there been reports from all sorts of reputable people? Without hard data -'

'All right, then. I could turn you in along with my report. Here's a Dirman, I could say. Ask her about the watchers. Ask her about the Kranazoi. Open her up and see what she's got under her skin.'

'Yes, you could do that,' Glair conceded. 'Except that you wouldn't do it. In fact, you *couldn't* do it.'

'No,' he said quietly. 'I couldn't. If I could, I would have done it at the beginning, instead of bringing you home.'

'Which is why I trusted you. Which is why I still trust you. Which is why I've told you all kinds of secret things, in violation of covenant. It's because I know that you won't betray me while I'm with you. And after I've gone, it won't matter, since no one would believe you.' She took his hands and put them over her breasts. 'Am I right?'

'You're right, Glair. Only - when are you going to leave me?'

'My legs have nearly healed.'

'Where would you go?'

'There must be rescuers looking for me. I'll try to get in touch with them. Or to find the other members of my - ' she faltered' - my sexual group.'

'You don't want to stay, do you?'

'Permanently?'

'Yes. Stay here and live with me?'

She shook her head gently. 'I'd love to, Tom. But it would never work. I don't belong here, and the differences between us would kill everything.'

'I need you, Glair. I want you. I love you.'

'I know, Tom. But be realistic. How will you feel when you grow old and I don't?'

'You won't?'

'Fifty years from now I'll look the way I do today.'

'Fifty years from now I'll be dead,' he whispered.

'You see? And I have my own people. My - friends.'

'Your mates. Yes. You're right. Glair. Ships that pass in the night, that's what we are. I mustn't fool myself into thinking this can last. I ought to end my sick leave and go back to AOS. And I ought to start

saying goodbye to you.' His hands gripped her body convulsively. '*Glair!*'

She held him.

'I don't want to say goodbye. I don't want to give you back to the stars,' he said. He pulled her close to him. She felt the tremor of despair go through him, and she opened herself to him and eased that despair in the only way she could.

And while that was happening, she thought of Vorneen and Mirtin, and whether they were alive. She thought of leaving this house and searching for them. She thought of Dirna. She thought of the ship that had been destroyed, with its little garden and its small gallery of Dirnan works of art.

Then she clasped her arms around Tom Falkner's broad back and tried to push all such thoughts from her mind. For the moment, at least, she succeeded. For the moment.

Eighteen

All it took, David Bridger told himself, was a little clever-ness and a lot of persistence. What was so hard about tracking a few Dirnans? You kept your ears open, you smiled a lot, you asked questions, and you got what you were after.

Of course, he hadn't actually laid eyes on any of the Dirnans yet. But he was fairly certain that he had found at least one of them, and in a little while he'd know. The first one, perhaps, could lead him to the other two. In any case, finding even one was a major accomplishment. The Kranazoi agent grinned and tugged in delight at his heavy jowls. A little later on, he thought, he'd get into contact with the ship and pass the news along to Bar-79-Codon-zzz. She would have a lot of apologizing to do, when she learned that he had been successful!

He hunched down in his parked car and kept his eyes trained on Colonel Falkner's house.

Putting the story together had been an intricate business.

First had come the rumor that flying saucer people had landed in the desert - true enough. Next came the story that a certain officer in AOS had taken part in the search and had found something out there, but instead of reporting it had deliberately concealed it. That was the tale Bridger had picked up in the cocktail lounge. The way it went, the AOS officer had gone out in a half-track to scout the desert, and had come back with something or someone. The only witness had been the driver of the half-track, who wasn't overly bright, but knew that something funny was going on. The driver, so the story went, had been transferred instantly to a remote military base in the north, but not before he had done some talking.

Bridger's next step had been to find out the names of the AOS officers in that search party. That had been hard, but not impossible. In the course of some days of investigation he discovered that the mission had been headed by the local AOS commander, Falkner, and by a Captain Bronstein. They were the logical men to check on. He found their addresses without great trouble; it was amazing how much detective work could be done at the public library, with a telephone book, a city directory, and a file of newspapers. Then he rented a car and settled down to watch their behavior.

Repeated surveillance periods convinced him that Bronstein could not be his man; The captain was hiding nothing in his home except a harried-looking wife and four children.

But this Falkner -

He lived by himself in a large house. Suspicious. No wife; she had divorced him last year, a neighbor said. He kept his windows opaqued all the time. Suspicious, too. He rarely came out, and then only to make what appeared to be brief shopping expeditions. A phone call to Falkner's office produced the information that he was sick and would be out indefinitely. Because he had a special guest in his home, perhaps?

Bridger watched for five days. He had no clue about what was going on in there, but he was positive that Falkner was harboring one of the missing Dirnans. At last the windows cleared for a moment, and Bridger saw a woman's face. He had no way of telling that she was Dirnan, of course, but it confirmed some of his suspicions. Now what he had to do was wait until Falkner left the house again, and get inside. He didn't expect that the Dirnan would answer the doorbell to anyone, but he carried equipment that would cope with any sort of sealing system. Once inside, he could confront the Dirnan, throw a few triggering words at her point blank, and watch her reactions. Unless he was very wrong about all this, she'd be caught off guard and give herself away, and he could take her into custody on a charge of covenant violation. And then - The door was opening. Colonel Falkner was leaving the house. This time he didn't seem merely to be going shopping, either. Instead of civilian clothes, he wore his uniform, as if he had ended his sick leave and was going to his office. Fine. That gives me all the time I'll need, Bridger thought. He watched the colonel drive away. Then, pocketing his necessary equipment, Bridger eased his bulky body out of his own car and started across the street to the Falkner house. 'David!' a high female voice called. 'David Bridger!' The Kranazoi pivoted about, startled. An uncontrollable spasm rocked his nervous system at the interruption of his concentration. A girl was running toward him - Leonore, that was her name, the foolish child who had picked him up at the motel. He had not been looking for any such involvement, but she was there and eager, and he had just come back from his wasted trip to the nonsensical Contact Cult, and at the moment it had amused him to see what it was like to make love with a girl from Earth. He had had her and forgotten her. What was she doing now, turning up at precisely the wrong moment?

Panting, her breasts bobbling under her jacket, she came up beside him, all smiles. 'Hello, David! You don't look pleased to see me!' 'Leonore? How come - what - ?'

'I live right near here. I saw you getting out of the car, and I recognized you right away. Did you come here to visit me? How nice of you!'

'As a matter of fact, I — I —'

'Yes, David?'

'Look, I'm here to see somebody else now, Leonore. I didn't know you lived here. I - I'll see you some other time.'

She pouted. 'All right. Who are you visiting?'

'Does it matter?'

'I was just wondering. Maybe it's someone I know.'

'It isn't, I assure you. I -'

Bridger's words died away. Something small and cold was pressing against the meat of his back. A low male voice said, 'Get into the car, Kranazoi, and don't make trouble. This is an antipersonnel grenade, and I'll use it on you right out here if you resist.'

David Bridger - Bar-48-Codon-adf - felt the sidewalk turn into a yawning gulf beneath his feet.

'No,' he said. 'You're making a mistake. I'm not Krana — whoever you said. I'm David Bridger of San Francisco, and-'

The low voice cut in. 'We can smell your miserable Kranazoi stink a block away, so save your breath. You've been caught, and get used to it. Into the car, now.'

'This is an outrage,' Bar-48-Codon-adf said thickly. 'I'm merely checking on a covenant violation. Three Dirnans unlawfully descended to Earth, and obviously there were more than that. You'll all be brainburned for this! You -'

'Into the car. Ten seconds, then you get the grenade. One? Two? Three? Four?'

Bar-48-Codon-adf got into the car. Not his own, but one he had not even noticed, that had come quietly up the street while he was eyeing the Falkner house. For the first time he saw his captor: a big, blocky Earthman who clearly was no Earthman at all. He sat beside Bar-48-Codon-adf, holding the grenade lightly but alertly. The girl he had known as Leonore was in the front seat. She still looked youthful and innocent, but Bar-48-Codon-adf realized that she must be a Dirnan agent too, and had deliberately picked him up so that she could check on his identity. This planet must be crawling with them! If he ever had a chance to file a report, he'd have to let the Kranazoi authorities know that the Dirnans were flagrantly breaking the covenants. But he suspected uncom-fortly that he never was going to get a chance to file that report.

There was a third person in the car - an older woman. Bar-48-Codon-adf watched dismally as she got out, walked across the street, and rang the bell of the Falkner house. He had tracked down one of the lost Dirnans, all right. But he had found her only to lose her to her own devilish kind.

Nineteen

Glair listened apprehensively to the melodious chime of the doorbell. Who could that be? Not Tom coming back; Tom would use his thumb-print to open the door. A salesman? A poll-taker? A policeman? She froze. She was in the bedroom, practicing her walking. Tom had warned her not to open the door to anyone. The chime sounded again, and Glair walked warily over to the scanner and switched it on.

An Earthwoman in middle years stood in front of the house. Glair's first reaction was to shut the scanner off and wait for the woman to go away. Then the plump, pleasant outlines of the visitor's face registered on Glair's memory hanks.

Thuw? Was that Thuw standing there?

Thuw belonged to the Sartak-Thuw-Leenor sexual group. Glair had known them some years now. They had all been on Ganymede together during their last rest period. In fact, she and Sartak had -

But the tiny gray viewing field of the door-scanner, no

more than three inches in diameter, might be misleading her. Glair peered intently at the uncertain image. If she were mistaken, there would be trouble.

'Who is it?' she said.

'Glair?' came a warm voice. 'You can open up. We've found you, Glair.'

The voice was speaking in Dirnan.

'I'm coming, Thuw! I'll be right there!'

Glair hobbled to the front door, unsealed it, waited in joyous suspense as it all too slowly rolled back. An instant later she was in Thuw's arms, and the sweet scent of her own people flooded her nostrils, and she trembled with delight and relief, and also with sadness.

Thuw stepped inside. Glair closed the door and sealed it again.

'We have a car outside,' Thuw said. 'Sartak and Leenor are waiting in it.'

'How did you find me?'

'It wasn't easy.' Thuw laughed. 'Actually, what we did was put a fat Kranazoi spy on your trail, and then followed *him*. It was Leenor's idea. Wasn't it clever?'

'A - Kranazoi spy - ?'

'He's outside in the car, too. Sartak's got him covered with a grenade. He must have come to Earth to find the three of you, and managed to pick up rumors about an AOS officer who had found something in the desert. He traced you to here. We followed him and took custody.'

Glair caught her breath. 'So it's that easy to find out -about me and Tom?'

'Tom?'

'The AOS man.'

Shrugging, Thuw said, 'It's possible to find anything out, with work. The important thing is that we've located you, now, and you'll be safe on Ganymede in a little while. How badly were you injured when you landed?'

'I broke both my legs. Tom's been taking good care of me. As you see, these bodies heal fast.' 'Well, you'll be getting a real medical going-over at the

base.' Thuw looked around. 'Where's your suit?'

'It's hidden away,' Glair said. 'I can get it. It's in good shape, except the communicator broke when I landed.'

'So we discovered,' said Thuw. 'Well, get it, and I'll take it out to the car. And put some clothes on, so we can drive you through the streets without being arrested. We'll take you to the rendezvous point in the desert, and in another hour you'll be on your way to - '-

'No,' Glair said.

'No? I don't-'

'I have to wait till Tom comes home,' she said. 'Sit down. Talk to me a while, Thuw. There's no rush to leave, is there? You haven't said a word to me about Mirtin and Vorneen, Are they alive? Do you know where they are?'

'Mirtin's back on Ganymede already,' Thuw said.

Glair shivered in relief. 'Oh, wonderful! He wasn't hurt, then?'

'His back was broken. But he's recovering well, A differ-! ent search group spotted him a couple of weeks back. His communicator was still operating, only the signal was dis-torted, and a team working

down from Sante Fe found him in a cave in the desert near one of the Indian villages. I talked to him. He sends his best, Glair.'

'And Vorneen?'

'We've traced him ourselves. He's right here in this city, or rather in the suburbs of it. He's been living on the northern outskirts, in the home of a woman named Kathryn Mason.'

Glair laughed. 'Good old Vorneen. He'd find himself a woman any time, on any world! Have you been in contact with him?'

'Not yet. But we've scouted the house. He's limping, but he seems to be in good health. So the three of you came through a rough time without any real damage. And now you can all relax a while.'

'Yes,' Glair murmured. 'We can relax. How did you find Vorneen?'

'Through the local Contact Cult, as a matter of fact.'

'Really? You mean, the woman he's living with is a member, and told the cult about him?'

'Evidently she didn't tell the cult anything,' Thuw said. 'We aren't sure. What we did was monitor the visitor lists of the cult office, on the assumption that anybody who found a stranger from another world would check with the cult for information. We tapped their computer bank, took down a list of everyone who had been at the office since the night of the crash, and checked them all out. Kathryn Mason was about the hundredth one we surveyed. The neighbors said she'd been acting strangely. A couple of gossipy ones let us know that she was living with a man. We put a peeper through the window last night, and there was Vorneen. Now we can pick him up, and -'

'What about this woman?' Glair asked. 'What do you know about her?'

'She's a young widow with a small child.' 'That's all? What's she like? Why did she give shelter to Vorneen?'

'We've had no contact with her,' said Thuw flatly. She looked at her watch. 'When is this Earthman of yours going to come back, anyway?' 'Not until four this afternoon.' 'But that's -'

I know. A long time from now. I can wait. Take your Kranazoi away and do whatever you're going to do with him, and come back for me after four. I can't leave without saying goodbye to Tom.'

Thuw gave her a searching look. 'Out of gratitude, Glair, or out of something else?'

'Something else. Something deeper. I came to be quite fond of him.'

'In love with an *Earthman*, Glair?'

'Thuw, be a good girl and don't ask questions, will you? Just go away and come back later. Come back at five o'clock and I'll be ready to leave then.'

'Very well. We'll pick up Vorneen in the meanwhile.' 'Don't do that either,' said Glair.

Thuw looked annoyed. 'Why not?'

'I'll be the one to get Vorneen. He's my mate, remember? I'll claim him. And I want to speak to the woman he's been living with, too. Just keep away from both of them and let me handle it.'

'Honestly, Glair -'

Glair took her by the arm and gently led her to the door. 'Darling, it was wonderful of you and Sartak and Leenor to trace us like this. But there are certain things we have to handle for ourselves. Please: just go away and come back later.'

Thuw looked bothered by it all. But she left; and the moment she was gone, Glair sealed the door and sank down on the hall divan, quivering with tension.

So it had happened. They had found her. That much was inevitable. And before long she'd be in hospital on Gany-mede, having the lingering effects of her crash-landing combed out of her system. Fine.

Mirtin and Vorneen were alive. Glorious!

And now - all she had to do was say goodbye to Tom —

It would be painful. Farewells always were. But he had already begun to brace himself against the certainty that she must leave him. What they had built, the bridge between Earthman and Dirnan, was by its nature unstable, doomed to fall. Only... so soon?

She knew that in a few weeks she would remember him only as a kind, troubled man who had helped her in a moment of stress. What she thought of as her love for him would fade to mere affection, once she was back among Vorneen and Mirtin, to whom she was linked by the deepest of bonds. But what about him? How would he react, cast back into the depths of his despair, all his certainties shat-tered by this encounter? He had not even believed in his despised Atmospheric Objects when he had found her. And now he knew more about the watchers than any man on Earth, and knew at first hand what it was like to hold a being from the stars in his arms and listen to her cries of pleasure. How could he return to ordinary life after that?

Glair thought she knew a way to help him return. It was worth trying, anyway. It might heal him in a way that her own relationship with him could never have done, and healing, after all, was her specialty.

She waited the long day through.

And then at last he was here, unsealing the door, coming into the house, taking her in his arms, crushing her up against him. She waited until he had kissed her, until he had shrugged out of his coat, until he had unburdened himself of a few hundred words about the stupidity and blindness of AOS. She listened, beaming.

Then she said in a cool, level voice, 'Tom, my people came for me today. I'm going home.'

Twenty

Night had fallen. Jill had been given dinner and was asleep; Vorneen, moving more agilely than ever, was testing his healing leg; Kathryn had programmed the dishwasher and was finishing her last household chores. The evening was theirs. She had begun to feel married again, in a curious way, and she liked the feeling. Now that all the barriers were down between herself and Vorneen, including the physical ones, she had ceased to fear him and could no longer deny that she was in love with him.

Of course, he seemed terribly strange to her, and always would, when she paused to think about his strangeness. Kathryn realized that there was no way to forget that he was human only on the surface, or that he had been born before George Washington lived, or that he had seen other suns, other worlds. Yet these things could be overlooked. There he stood, handsome, *too* handsome, tender, sympathetic, vastly interested in her, a god of love who had dropped from the skies.

She had always wondered if she would feel guilty about Ted the first time she fell in love again. Now she had the answer: she did not. She still loved the memory of Ted, and always would; but her dead husband's hand did not hold her in a chilly grip, as she had feared. Ted was gone. Vorneen was here. Simply thinking about tonight sent a warm flush of excitement spilling through the conduits of her body.

It had surprised her that he could have sex with her; that his imitation body could perform and react as if it were real. His did. Oh, there were differences, and certain aspects that were missing and that always would be; but they did not matter. Vorneen surged with erotic vitality. Kathryn suspected that on his own world he was a devil with the women ... if they had anything corresponding to 'women' there.

She was happy, at any rate.

She tried not to ask herself how long it would last. A time must come when she could no longer hide Vorneen in her house. He would have to affiliate himself with outside life, in some fashion, if he meant to remain here. And if he did not mean to stay here -

Kathryn's mouth jerked into a tight line. It was unrealistic to think that he would stay with her forever. But he was here with her now. That was what counted. He was here with her now.

As she finished in the kitchen, she heard the sound of a car door opening and closing outside the house. Footsteps came, and then a ring at the door.

The scanner showed her the face of a young blond woman.

'Who is it?' Kathryn asked.

'Mrs Mason? My name's Glair. I'm a friend of Vorneen's. May I come in?'

Glair. A friend of Vorneen's.

He had mentioned that name in his delirium. Kathryn heard the brittle silent sound of a shattering world within her skull. Ladenly she unsealed the door.

Glair was short, full-bodied, beautiful. She looked like a screen star - like a female equivalent of Vorneen, in fact, with the same radiant flawless attractiveness. Her eyes were warm and kind, and her skin was creamy-pale and without blemish. Kathryn knew that if she put her hand to Glair's skin, she would find it as smooth and cool and unearthly as Vorneen's.

For a long moment the two women faced one another. Then Vorneen emerged from the bedroom, leaning on his cane, and said, 'Kathryn, did I hear the door - 'Hello, Vorneen.' 'Glair. You.'

They did not run toward each other, as Kathryn had feared they would. They remained fifteen feet apart, and whatever passed between them was unvoiced, hidden from her awareness. For the first time Kathryn realized that Glair was supporting herself on a pair of aluminium canes. Into the deafening silence Kathryn said, trying not to shout it, 'I guess you've come to get him.'

'I'm sorry, Mrs Mason. Kathryn. I know exactly what it's like for you,' Glair told her softly. 'How could you know?'

'I know. Believe me.' Glair looked at Vorneen. 'Mirtin's alive too. They've already picked him up and taken him offplanet. Does she - '

'Know? Yes. She knows enough.'

Then I can speak freely. There's a ship waiting for us, Vorneen. They came for me earlier today. I've been living in Albuquerque. Someone was kind enough to take me in and care for me until I was well.' 'You look fine, Glair,' said Vorneen. 'So do you. Obviously you've had good care.' The best.' He glanced at Kathryn. 'I've had wonderful care.'

Glair said, That's good to hear. Vorneen, will you go into the other room? I want to talk to Kathryn for a few minutes. Then I'll let the two of you be alone a while. For as long as you like. I'm not going to rush you. I've just been through the same thing myself.'

Vorneen nodded. Without a word, he turned and went back into the bedroom, closing the door.

Glair regarded Kathryn steadily. 'Do you hate me very much?' Glair asked.

Kathryn's lips trembled. 'Hate you? Why should I hate you?'

'I'm going to take Vorneen away from you.'

'He belongs with his people,' said Kathryn. 'I've got no claim on him.'

'Except the claim of love.'

'How do you know I love him?'

Glair smiled. 'I have certain gifts, Kathryn. I can see how you feel. I see that he loves you, too.' Awkwardly she sat down and put her canes aside; then she reached her hands toward Kathryn's and took them. Glair's skin did not feel cool against hers, Kathryn noticed. Which must mean that my own

skin is very cool right now. Glair said gently, 'Aside from what I can see, Kathryn, I have other ways of know-ing. I told you, I've been through the same thing myself. A man took me in. I lived with him. I - loved him, if it's possible for one of us to love one of you, and I think it is. And then my people came, and said they had found me, it was time for me to go. So I know how it is.'

Kathryn felt as though her brain were swathed in layers of thick wool. She was scarcely reacting at all. This had hap-pened so swiftly that the severing of her link to Vorneen had not yet become real to her.

She said, 'Vorneen and I were very happy together. But he - he's yours, isn't he? You're his mate?'

'One of his mates. There are two of us. Did he explain that to you?'

'A little. Not too clearly.'

'I want him back,' Glair said. 'You can understand that. You know that, because you know *him*. Will you forgive me for taking him away?'

Kathryn shrugged. 'It's going to hurt. As soon as I - as I realize that it's happening. Will he go tonight?'

'It's best that way.'

'How soon?'

'A few hours from now is soon enough. There's time for a fond farewell. Then a clean break, Kathryn. He doesn't belong on this world. He can't ever return. Did he tell you about the covenants?'

'Yes.'

'You see the situation, then.'

'I see it. But I don't want to see it. I tried to believe he'd always stay with me. I wanted to go on taking care of him, loving him, holding him.'

'You like to take care of people?' Glair asked.

Kathryn smiled. 'Isn't that obvious?'

'Would you take care of someone else, then? For me? There's a man in Albuquerque - the man who cared for me. He's alone now. He needs someone warm, someone to help him. I've told him a little about you. In a day or two, Kathryn, go to see him. Talk to him. You and he have so much in common.'

'That's all you want me to do? Talk to him?'

'I can't ask more than that,' said Glair. 'Try to make him happy, though. And perhaps you'll make yourself happy by making him happy. Or perhaps not. Who can predict these things? See him anyway. Will you?'

'All right,' Kathryn said. 'Yes.'

'Here's his name, his address.'

She handed Kathryn a card. Kathryn glanced at it and put it down. Tom Falkner - the name meant nothing to her. They would meet, anyway. And talk.

Glair was trying to rise, without using her canes. Kathryn saw the tension in her face, and went to her, taking the blond girl's elbows, lifting her gently to her feet. Glair, still cane-less, swayed a little, seemingly planting herself. Her arms went out and about Kathryn, and they embraced. Kathryn closed her eyes and thought of the strange alien thing within this girl's soft flesh.

Glair said, 'I want to ... thank you, Kathryn. For caring for him. For keeping him. I can't say anything more than that. Just my thanks.'

'I guess I'm grateful too. For having had him with me even this short time.'

Glair released her. 'I'll go in and talk to him now. Then I'll leave the two of you alone.'

She took up her canes again and moved with care into the bedroom. She did not close the door after her. When they spoke, they spoke in English, and Kathryn realized that she was meant to hear what she was hearing now.

Glair said, 'You were very lucky, Vorneen. You were found by exactly the right person.'

'Yes. I was.'

'You don't want to leave her now?'

'I've grown fond of her, Glair. More than I can easily put into words now. But I can't stay, can I?'

'No.'

'The covenants -'

'The covenants, yes.'

'How did you find me?'

'That doesn't matter much now. Sartak found you, actually. And found me. I'll tell you the whole story later. Are you all right, Vorneen?'

'A little battered around the edges. Nothing serious. You?'

'The same. Where's your suit?'

'Hidden.'

'Don't forget it when you leave. Take everything you landed with.'

'Naturally.'

'And try to explain to her that this is - necessary. That it's impossible for you to stay here any longer. That watchers shouldn't get too close to the watched. The whole lousy business, Vorneen. I've just been through it with Tom. With the man who sheltered me.'

'It hurt you to leave him, didn't it, Glair?'

'You know it did. But I left him. And you'll leave Kathryn. And the pain will stop after a while.'

'For us or for them?'

'For all of us,' said Glair. 'I'll see you later. Turn the porch light on when you're ready to leave. Our car's parked down the street. You don't need to hurry.'

Glair emerged from the bedroom. Kathryn stood frozen by the door. The fact of her loss was seeping in now. Kathryn tried to tell herself that she had not lost anything, because Vorneen had never been hers at all. A guest. A visitor. What had existed between them had been a moment's warmth, butterfly love dying at winter's first blast.

Glair embraced her again. She began to say something, and choked the words off before they passed her lips. Kathryn fought back the tears.

'I won't keep him very long,' Kathryn murmured.

She opened the door for Glair and let the Dirnan woman out. Then she turned and went into the bedroom. Vorneen was standing by the window. Without an awareness of motion, Kathryn found herself beside him. Their bodies moved together.

They had so much to say to one another and so little time in which to say it.

Twenty-One

Tom Falkner said, 'Be it ever so humble, et cetera. Will you come in for a while?'

'Of course,' Kathryn told him.

He opened the door and switched on the light. They had been driving around Albuquerque all afternoon. She had left her little girl with a neighbor, she said, and kept repeating that she really ought to get home and prepare dinner. But each time it had actually come down to going home, Kathryn had agreed to stay

with him a little longer. And now they were at his house.

He looked at her closely for what seemed the first time. In the car, with her beside him, he had not been able to see her properly. Now he stared without hesitation. She was tall and slim, past her first youth but much younger than he was, and of the kind of physique that he suspected would not begin to show any signs of aging for fifteen or twenty more years. She could not be called pretty, with those blade-like cheekbones and those thin lips and the too-wide mouth, but no one would

find her unattractive. Right now her eyes were bordered by dark crescents. She had not slept much lately, it would seem. Neither had he. Neither had he.

He said, 'Of course, we can't tell a soul about what we experienced.'

'No. We don't want to be branded as lunatics, do we?'

He chuckled. 'We could always found a new cult. Frederic Storm could use some competition. We'll set up a temple, and preach the gospel of the watchers, and -'

'Tom, let's not.'

'I'm not serious. Would you care for a drink?'

'I think so.'

'I've got a very limited assortment. Ersatz Scotch, and some bourbon, and -'

'Anything,' Kathryn said. 'I don't really care for the taste of liquor. Just give me a spray can.'

'That's hardly an elegant way to drink.'

'I'm hardly an elegant person,' Kathryn said.

He smiled and offered a tray of spray cans. She took one, and, to be polite about it, so did he, and they put the nozzles to their arms in silence. Afterward he said, 'Your husband was an Air Force man, you said?'

'That's right. Theodore Mason. He was killed in Syria.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't know him. He was stationed at Kirt-land?'

'Until they shipped him overseas.'

'It's a big base,' he said. 'I wish I had known him, though.'

'Why do you say that?'

He felt his cheeks glowing. 'I don't know. Just because -well, because he was your husband, and I - it would have been nice - if - oh, hell. I sound like a tongue-tied kid, don't I? A big overgrown adolescent of forty-three. Another drink?'

'Not just yet.'

He didn't take one either. She produced a photograph of her daughter. Falkner's hand shook a little as he took the glossy tridim print from her, and saw a nude little girl of about two or three grinning at him from a clump of greenery.

'Shameless hussy, isn't she?' he asked.

'I'm trying to teach her some modesty. Maybe in another fifteen years I'll succeed.'

'How old is she now?'

'Three.'

'Better teach her faster,' Falkner said.

The conversation faltered. He was trying not to talk about the star people, and so was she, even though that was what had brought them together. But the topic could not be kept submerged for long.

He said finally, 'I suppose they've reached their relief base by now. They're undergoing treatment by their own doctors. Do you think they're talking about us?'

'I'm sure of it,' Kathryn said. 'They must be.'

'Describing to each other the good-hearted shaggy apes who took care of them.'

'That isn't fair. They think more of us than that.'

'Do they? Aren't we just apes to them? Dangerous apes, with big bombs?'

'Maybe as a race, we are. But not as individuals. I don't know about you and Glair, but I have the feeling that Vorneen respected me as a person. That he made allowances for the fact that I was human, but that he never looked down at me, never was inwardly sneering.'

'It was that way with me and Glair, too. I take it back.'

'They're pretty special people,' Kathryn said. 'I believe that whatever you and I felt for them was reciprocated. They're warm - kind -'

'I wonder what the Kranazoi are like,' Falkner said suddenly.

'Who?'

'The other race. The galactic rivals. Didn't Vorneen tell you about the political situation, the cold war out there?'

'Oh. Yes.'

'It's funny, Kathryn. We don't even know if the Dirnans are the good guys or the bad guys. The two we met were pretty good, but suppose the Kranazoi are the ones we should root for? We got such a thin slice of a view into their affairs. That's why I called us apes. There's a struggle going on out there, and we have an inkling of it, but we don't really know what's what. And the sky is full of Dirnan ships and

Krana-zoi ships, watching us, hatching schemes, outmaneuvering each other.' Falkner shrugged. 'It makes me dizzy to think of it'

'Vorneen said that one day the covenants would end and they'd be able to make open contact with us.' 'Glair said that too.' 'How soon do you think that will be?' 'Fifty years, maybe. A hundred. A thousand. I don't know.'

'I hope it's soon.' 'Why, Kathryn?'

'So that Vorneen will come back - Vorneen and Glair, both of them, and we'll see them again.'

He shook his head somberly. 'That's a dangerous delusion to carry around, Kathryn. They aren't coming back. Even if the covenants are canceled next week, you'll never see Vorneen again. And I'll never see Glair. You can be certain of that. The break is final. It has to be. There's no future in a love affair between people from different worlds. They'll see to it that we never meet them again. There's a wound, when love is cut off that way, and they mean to let that wound heal and stay healed.'

'Do you really think it would have been impossible?'

'Look,' he said, 'it's hard enough for two human beings

to keep love alive. It's always difficult to share your life with

another person. And if the other person isn't even a person -'

'I don't think it's so difficult to fall in love,' said Kathryn.

'Or to stay in love. And if the other person is a Dirnan, well,

it may be harder, but - ' She paused. 'All right. I'm being

foolish. They're gone. We've each had a strange and wonderful experience, and now we've got to pick up the pieces of our lives.'

Falkner sensed that she had thrown him a cue. But he could not respond to it, not now, not so soon. In time, he realized, he and Kathryn might help each other pick those pieces up. For the moment he had to move warily, learning who she was and perhaps even learning who he was. Before he dared to open himself once again. Despite what she said, he still believed that it was a difficult thing, this business of joining your life to another person's.

'It's dark out now,' she said. 'I'd better start for home. Jill's going to get cranky if I don't show up soon.'

'I'll take you back.'

Outside the house, they could see the stars, even though the young moon and the city lights of Albuquerque competed with them in the sky. Involuntarily, they both looked up. He knew what she must be thinking. Their eyes met, and he grinned, and she grinned, and they laughed.

'We aren't doing a very good job of forgetting them, are we?' Kathryn said.

'Not yet. And we won't really forget them, not ever. For a few weeks of our lives the stars came down

to us. That can't be forgotten. But it has to be survived. The stars are gone now, and we're still here.'

They got into his car.

'I enjoyed this today,' she said.

'So did I. We'll do it again.'

'Soon.'

'Very soon,' Falkner told her. There was more he wanted to say, much more. It would be said, in time. He was not much for blurting things to strangers. He suspected, though, that he and Kathryn shortly would cease to be strangers to one another. Too much bound them. A shared knowledge of smooth, cool skins and galactic politics, of broken legs and sudden farewells. That much drew them together, setting them apart from the rest of this planet's four billion people. He felt a sensation within him as of a coiled spring begin-ning to unwind after too many years of compression. Hewas smiling as he kicked the starter and got the car moving. She smiled too. Above the windshield curved the vault of the heavens. Glair and Vorneen were out there somewhere. He wished them a safe voyage home.

Twenty-Two

The pueblo was quiet now. The Fire Society festival was over, the white folk had gone back to Albuquerque and Santa Fe. Long streaks of moonlight splashed across the plaza of the village. The television set was on in the Estancia house. Ramon and Lupe sat entranced before it, as did their grandmother. Uncle George was out getting drunk. Charley Estancia's father was in the kiva, gambling with his friends. Rosita sulked in the kitchen. She was without a man tonight. Charley knew why, but he didn't tell her. Marty Moquino had left the pueblo. He hadn't been seen in San Miguel, in fact, since the time not long back when Charley had fright-ened him with the Dirman laser. They said he had gone to Los Angeles again. Charley doubted that he'd come back, this time. Not after he'd shown his yellowness to the eleven-year-old.

Standing outside his house, staring in at the bluish glow of the screen, Charley shivered a little. Winter was closing downon the Rio Grande. There had been a few wisps of snow this afternoon; there would be a heavier fall, perhaps, by Christ-mas. Charley didn't mind the cold. Under his ragged jacket he had two things to keep him warm: a letter written in a loose scrawl on a square piece of shiny plastic, and a small

metal tube that could hurl forth a beam of fantastic light.

He walked across the plaza, going nowhere in particular. His dog trailed behind him.

The moon was very bright tonight. He could see the stars, though, clearly enough. There were the three bright stars of Orion's belt. There was Mirtin's star. It made Charley feel good just to see it up there.'

Year after next, he told himself, I start the high school. Whether they like it or not, I start. If they say no, I run away, and when the police catch me, I tell them why. I can tell the newspapers, too. I say, Here I am, smart Indian boy, wants to improve his lot in life, only parents won't let me go to the high school. Then everybody makes a fuss over me. They take me away, put me in school. I can learn . . . learn rockets, learn stars, learn space. Learn everything.

And someday I go out there into the night and visit you, Mirtin! Right up to your star! Didn't you say we'd be getting there soon? That I'd be with them, when we did?

He sauntered out of the village, through the empty plaza and past the ruins of the old kiva, and across the scrubby flats, past the power substation. He did not go all the way to Mirtin's cave. He knew it would be empty. Several times Charley had gone there, just to look around, but there was no need to make that pilgrimage on this cold night. He paused at the edge of an arroyo, thinking about the high school and all he would learn there, thinking too about what it would be like to get away from this village and its sleepy ways, out into the world of the white men, where someone with a mind could learn all the new things.

Charley looked up at the sky.

'Hey, you Dimans!' he called. 'Are you up there tonight? Can you see me? Hey, it's me, Charley Estancia! I'm the one who brought tortillas for Mirtin!'

How high did they fly, the saucers? Was one of them swooping back and forth, ten miles over his head, right now? Did they have machines that could pick up voices from Earth?

'You hear me?' Charley called. 'I'm the one! Come on, fly low, let me see you! I know all about you!'

Nothing happened. Somehow, he had not expected any-thing. But he knew they were there. Up above . . . watching.

He took the laser from its hiding place and caressed it. Setting it for a quick spurt, he touched the stud and watched the beam lick out and slice through the barren lowest limb of a cottonwood tree. It was a clever thing, a great toy. Charley promised himself that he would know what made it work, some day.

He put it away.

Quietly he said, 'Listen, I know you're up there. Just do me a favor. Just tell Mirtin for me that I hope he's better fast. And tell him, thanks for talking to me. Thanks for teaching me so much. That's all. Thank Mirtin for me, yeah?'

He waited. After a moment, when nothing happened, he began to move away, toward the pueblo. He stopped, picked up a rock, shied it into the arroyo. His dog barked and leaped high, as though snapping his teeth at the stars. A sudden gust of wind howled across the flats.

Then Charley saw a streak of brightness above him - a wobbly line of light that seemed to sprout from

the very top of the sky and dribble downward, losing itself near the horizon. His pulse pounded, and he laughed. That hadn't been any Dirnan ship, this time. Just an ordinary old shoot-ing star, was all. He could tell the difference. He knew. This was nothing special, only a hunk of rock and metal burning itself up as it shot through the atmosphere.

But he took it as a sign, all the same. Mirtin's people were answering him, acknowledging him. They were up there in their ships right this minute. They would look after him. He waved at the stars.

'Thank's,' he said. 'Hey, thanks, you Dirnans!'

He loped back to the village, the dog yipping at his heels,

and neither of them paused for breath until the old adobe

buildings had come into sight.