

The Beyond -- Jean and Jeff Sutton -- (1967)

(Version 2002.08.21 -- Done)

For Mary Hansen, Denmark, Wisconsin

Prologue

The planet Engo turns about the Giza sun, a dusky orange star that stands at the very apex of the galaxy's third spiral arm. Across a vast, sunless gulf, it stares toward the distant Magellanic Clouds.

Racing along its lonely path, Engo carries with it a strange orange moon. At times the moon comes within 150,000 miles of the planet's brooding face; at times it accelerates outward to a distance of over 330,000 miles.

When the moon is closest, rumbling land tides roil Engo's surface and violent winds, born of the moon's gravitational pull, bend and toss its giant weeping agora trees. At that time torrential rains lash its surface and its rivers tumble and roar from grotesquely serrated mountains, spilling out over the fields of bulla grass. At other times the heat comes -- the season of orange heat -- and the world is still and stifling.

The captain of the survey ship Star Probe that discovered the planet in Galactic Year 2850 had given it its name, a Vegan word meaning "outcast," and noted: "It is the single planet of a star which itself is incredibly remote, lying at the very brink of an unbridgeable abyss."

Following a brief exploration, he described the planet and concluded: "Climate unsuitable for permanent development." Proceeding along the opposite side of the spiral arm in the direction of the seventeen island galaxies that formed the great cosmic corridor leading to the magnificent spiral nebula Andromeda, he promptly forgot that such a world as Engo existed.

Over three standard centuries later, in GY 3155, an obscure official in the Planning Branch of Sector Three Social Administration ran across the notation and studied it with more than casual interest. Engo, it appeared, was a planet where humans could survive...for a while. It also was far from the mainstream of commerce and travel.

Forwarding the survey report to his superior, he noted that this might prove a suitable planet on which to exile citizens of the Federation's Third Sector found "dangerous to the public weal" under Public Law 2435-T2-M, a sweeping edict recently passed by the High Council to control "telepaths, mutants, and other paranormal minds" (and thus quiet public hysteria arising from an alleged mutant conspiracy to infiltrate and seize the reins of galactic government).

His superior agreed.

In time the recommendation reached the highest level of government and was signed by the Emperor. In a short while a village was born on Engo. The planet promptly was decreed out of bounds to all but official ships. Commerce with it was prohibited, and all mention of the planet disappeared from the public media.

Engo ceased to exist except for a few persons high in the Social Administration and, of course, the High Council of Ten which, headed by the Emperor, administered the affairs of the Federation's Ten Sectors with their almost three thousand inhabited planets.

But the village clung to the edge of life.

Despite periodic shipments of "dangerous elements," its size remained almost static; only its graveyard grew -- a small plot which became an acre, and then two acres of round white river stones which marked the closely packed

graves.

Lying at the edge of a towering forest of weeping agora trees, the village huddled defensively against the cruel climate, at times all but lifeless; and yet life struggled on, a spark which even the planet's harsh climate couldn't extinguish.

Then, in GY 3180, an incident occurred that brought Engo under the immediate scrutiny of the galactic overlords; a crisis loomed. In reality, the crisis started when a tramp freighter, violating the prohibition against commerce with the exile planet, put into Engo to trade utensils, tools, and cloth for the thick, furry catmel pelts so much in demand by the women of the three thousand planets.

The freighter was the Cosmic Wind.

One

GORDON CROMWELL, captain of the Cosmic Wind, gulped noisily from a silver flask as he watched the dusky orange glow of Engo in the starport. For two days, since coming out of the time stream, the planet had grown steadily larger and -- in his mind -- more baleful. The exile planet. The planet of mutants, telepaths. Planet of death...Orange like its sun, orange like its racing moon -- orange and deadly and beyond the law.

Cromwell regarded it philosophically.

Beyond the law? He chuckled at the thought. Perhaps to the rest of the Federation, but not to him. The Cosmic Wind went where the profit lay, and the profit lay there, on Engo, where thick, furry catmel pelts were to be had, as many as the Cosmic Wind could carry. And no competition! The profit in the black markets of the Third Sector alone was a thousandfold, and the Federation be cursed, he thought. A trader's business was to trade.

Aside from that, he made additional profit carrying cargo to the planet for a man known only to him as "Mr. Olaf." That cargo was given to the inhabitants free, a charitable attitude which Cromwell considered detrimental to the spirit of trade. Not that he objected; the space which it occupied returned a fair fee; he had to admit that was better than empty space, which returned nothing.

At times Cromwell found himself vaguely perturbed over Mr. Olaf. But, he told himself, the man was merely a do-gooder, a breed that appeared to abound on the fringes of misery, eyeing the less fortunate much as a jackal eyes a potential meal. In more honest moments, he admitted that the man must be a hidden telepath, or perhaps even a member of the mutant underground which people spoke of in whispers. Yet he couldn't complain, he reflected. It all added up to profit.

"She's a rarin' back on her heels," Snorkel called from behind him.

Cromwell grunted. Snorkel, his first mate, made the comment every time the aged tramper went into retrofire. But it was true; the ship bucked and vibrated, the howl through her bulkheads giving the impression that she was coming apart at the seams. Not that it worried him; she had sounded that way since the day he'd bought her secondhand -- or was it third-hand? -- from a junk dealer on Mypor over forty years before. Snorkel had come aboard as first mate at the same time.

Perhaps the old gal was coming apart, he reflected, but so was he. And so was Snorkel, and Prim the purser. And Grimp, the engineer. Especially Grimp. All he did was eat and sleep and play chess. Yes, they were all getting there together. But that was the way to go, in space somewhere, with the engines pounding, not planet-bound like an ordinary mortal.

He took another pull from his flask and asked, "Checking the screens?"

"Clear," Snorkel replied. He had a high screechy voice that suited his

scrawny figure. "No patrols in this godforsaken hole."

"Don't be too certain," admonished Cromwell.

Snorkel chortled. "Never caught us yet."

"You're getting cocky. That's bad, Snorky." Cromwell shook his head warningly. Although the sleek Federation patrols mainly were concerned with smuggling and occasional acts of piracy within the Ten Sectors, a region containing almost three thousand inhabited planets and a thousand and one suns, they weren't entirely unknown in the region the Cosmic Wind was traversing. The thought was perturbing.

He peered more closely at the starport. Off to one side, the dull orange Giza sun burned like a cooling ember against a backdrop almost devoid of light. Higher up, the perpetual purple-black was broken by two faintly glowing patches -- the Magellanic Clouds, which lay like detached fragments of the Milky Way. For all practical purposes the Giza sun, with its single miserable planet, lay at the edge of a tremendous gulf -- unbridged and unbridgeable -- the gulf between galaxies that man could never span. Giza lay at the edge of nowhere.

Watching it, he thought of the patrols again and fidgeted uneasily. On occasion they did come. So did the SocAd ship. Two or three times every standard year -- and at times more often a black ship crawled out along the edge of the third spiral arm, bearing a wretched cargo of mutants caught by the "searchers," the police arm of the Social Administration -- men, women, and children doomed to exile on Engo's storm-ravaged surface. It came bringing a load of humanity to populate Engo's growing graveyard, he thought, for only a few survived. If he were caught...

"Dropping retro to three-quarters," Snorkel called.

Cromwell nodded, watching their oblique rush toward the orange planet. Thinking of it, he regarded himself more as a saviour than a smuggler. Were it not for the medicine, tools, and equipment he traded for the catmel pelts, the exiles might perish altogether, as he suspected the government intended they should.

Cromwell regarded the Federation wonderingly. Under Sol Golom, the Emperor -- Absolute Ruler of the High Council of Ten -- the Federation was all-powerful, all-benevolent. Its uncounted billions of citizens enjoyed a greater degree of security, freedom, and luxury than any people in the long and twisted history of man; the Emperor proclaimed that often and with assurance.

And it was true, Cromwell knew. The third millennium of the Federation was an age of play, pleasure, sensual abandon -- absolute freedom from war, strife, poverty. People never had it so good. Yet he believed it a sterile life, mechanistic, routine, completely without adventure. Machines controlled machines that controlled machines -- that was his view. The Federation was a giant machine within which the people moved, stalking the lands like puppets, no longer their own masters. In eliminating war, poverty, insecurity, in conquering his total environment, man had eliminated challenge, hence had vitiated his own soul; he'd argued that with Grimp many times. It was imperative to be the same, unthinkable to be different. He suspected that was why the telepaths were feared and hated; they were different. He looked at the orange planet again. Wasn't exile the same as the death sentence? Puzzling over it, he nipped at the flask.

As the planet grew in the starport, its orange atmosphere was broken by a darker blur that gradually resolved into a huge continent which, he knew, bordered the pinkish Badek Sea. Next, the jagged purplish slash of the Kavuu range emerged, flanked by yellowish splotches which he knew to be meadows of ochre bulla grass that cut fingerlike into the towering agora forests.

Cromwell glanced at the crude ephemeris he had plotted of the Giza system. At the moment the hurtling orange moon was near apogee, hence land

tides on the planet would be at a minimum, nor would the atmosphere be seething from the moon's gravitational pull. And if the rains held off...He calculated, thinking he might wind up his business within a single day; he liked to keep his visits short.

"Closing at orbital speed," Snorkel called. "You're positioned for communications."

"Don't I know that?" Cromwell grunted. He punched a button and sent out a series of call letters. A speaker beside him crackled to life almost immediately. He wasn't surprised. So dear was cargo that the villagers kept the radio shack manned continuously on the off chance that a stray smuggler might come in.

The static settled down and a voice wheezed, "Simon, come in, Cosmic Wind."

"Any visitors?" Cromwell asked cautiously.

"Nary a soul, Cap'n."

"How's the weather?"

"So calm and clear you'd never believe it," cackled Simon. "The wind's at standard thirty. You'd better hurry; it won't last long."

"Got a good load of pelts?"

"More'n you can carry." Simon's voice grew anxious. "What's your cargo?"

"Medicine, blankets, boots and tools, mainly. Some Ankara cloth for the ladies."

"Anything else, Cap'n?"

"Might have." Cromwell chuckled. The old caretaker liked his nip.

"You more'n welcome," Simon declared.

As the Cosmic Wind coasted in orbit, Snorkel plotted their position and extrapolated it against speed and direction. When the purplish Kavu mountains came around again, he put the main engines into full retrofire, bringing a pounding and bucking that caused Cromwell to reach for the silver flask.

"You might pass it back," Snorkel remarked aggrievedly.

Cromwell shook his head. "You know the rules, Snorky. Not till you land."

"You could take her down."

"Nope, you need the practice, Snorky."

"Practice? I've been practicing for forty years."

"Maybe next trip." Cromwell returned his attention to the planet, watching as its features took color and shape. Because no human hand had ever tilled its soil or crowned it with the artifacts of man, it was a completely ungeometric world -- a place of beauty, to Cromwell's eyes. If only it weren't for the rugged climate. No, he thought, it was better this way. If the planet were livable, a billion people would descend on it overnight.

He watched the land flee past. Plains of bulla grass, towering agora forests, pinkish lakes, and jagged purplish mountains wheeled underfoot. The roaring and vibration increased as the tramper lost headway and began letting down on its powerful landing jets. Danged if the old gal wasn't really jumpin', he thought. Perhaps he'd better put her in for overhaul, get her face lifted.

The engine sound changed and far ahead he discerned the small region of bulla grass that served as Engo's spaceport. As they drew closer, a scattering of log huts appeared, huddled against the forest edge. Here and there he caught glimpses of the black, sullen Dimbo river as it twisted among the trees and crossed small patches of meadow. Off to one side, several acres of small white river stones marked the graveyard. Bigger with each visit, he reflected. He disliked the graveyard from a practical viewpoint: dead people made poor catmel hunters.

The trees and cabins wheeled toward him at an ever slower rate. The roaring grew to a din, ceasing abruptly as the Cosmic Wind touched down with a

distinct thump.

"Rough," Cromwell commented.

"Never saw you do it any better," Snorkel snapped.

"You need practice, Snorky."

As Cromwell emerged from the ship with Snorkel at his heels, Simon emerged from the log shanty that served as the communication center and limped to meet them. Thin and bent, his snow-white hair and scraggly beard whipped in the wind.

"Good to see you, Cap'n," he greeted. "You, too, Mr. Snorkel." His face took on an expectant look.

Cromwell reached into his pocket and brought forth a twin to his own flask. "Drop of medicine," he said.

"Thank you, Cap'n. I'm feeling poorly."

As Simon unscrewed the cap, Cromwell glanced around. He'd never seen it so calm. The standard thirty wind Simon had mentioned scarcely rippled the tops of the bulla grass and only a faint sigh came from the slow-moving branches of the agora trees. Scattered clouds trailed like small ships across the orange sky. It was almost pleasant, he reflected.

Simon sampled the flask, smacked his lips and screwing on the cap, dropped it into his own pocket. Cromwell didn't appear to notice.

"Any newcomers?" he asked.

"Several dozen a few months back." Simon gestured toward the graveyard. "Mostly dead now."

"So soon?"

"They don't last long," Simon cackled. "No, sir, especially them from the hot planets."

Cromwell gazed at the village. Aside from a wisp of smoke trailing upward from one of the chimneys, it gave no indication of life. But then it always did appear deserted, he reflected. Aside from old Simon, the mutants were an elusive lot. There was a time when it had bothered him, but no more.

Simon caught his glance and explained, "Most everyone's out trapping catmels."

"Can't get too many," he observed.

While Prim, the purser, set up the tables and piled them high with goods for trade, Cromwell drew Snorkel to one side. "Keep a sharp eye," he cautioned. "I'm going to stroll through the village."

The first mate glanced at the cabins under the towering trees. "Ever see it so quiet?" he asked. "It's like a bloomin' morgue."

Cromwell suppressed a shudder and said, "It won't stay this way long. Make the dealing quick."

Gazing back at the village, he started across the clearing. Although the wind was light, it was cold and he drew his coat tightly around him. Strange, the orange sun gleamed like a furnace, yet seldom gave much heat. But it felt good to tramp the sodden ground after three months in space, just as it would feel good to get back into space again. He particularly liked it when they entered the time stream, for then there was neither planet nor star; the Cosmic Wind was but a mote in some strange infinity.

Drawing closer, he eyed the village interestedly. Despite more than a score of trips to the planet, he'd never really seen it before. Usually the wind was howling, the rain sweeping down, or a numbing cold kept him penned inside the ship while Snorkel and the purser conducted business with old Simon, who was the only inhabitant who ever approached the ship. But today was beautiful.

Reaching the first of the crude log houses, he saw it was chinked against the harsh climate with some sort of clay or cement, and made a mental note to include weatherstripping in the next cargo. That should be worth quite a few pelts.

The sucking sound of his boots pulling through the mud brought the realization of how quiet it was, how still the village. Aside from the single column of smoke, he saw no evidence of life. Strange, there should be voices, the laughter of children; but there wasn't. No one, no one at all, he thought. It was, he reflected uneasily, as if old Simon were Engo's sole inhabitant. Silly, of course, but that's the way it felt. And yet...

Perhaps a hundred eyes were watching him. For the first time he became conscious that perhaps someone was watching him, or reading his mind. It was an eerie sensation. Strange, but he'd never felt that way before, never thought of them as mutants, telepaths. Certainly not Simon. But here...He quickened his step.

A low booming reached his ears and he looked ahead, seeing a small meadow among the trees. The Dimbo river. He'd seen it coming down, a black torrent that rushed from the Kavu mountains, winding through the agora forests toward some unknown destination. It sounded as if it were tumbling over rocks.

He reached the edge of the meadow and stopped, watching the froth of water thunder from the forest to swirl and eddy across the clearing. It formed a small lake in the distance. Inflatable boats and rafts, fishing lines and hooks -- items like that should be in demand. He'd have a talk with Simon.

Abruptly he caught movement out of the corner of his eye and jerked his head around, momentarily startled. A boy! It took him an instant to comprehend that the boy was sitting on a low knoll facing the river, his arm around the neck of a shaggy yellow beast. A dog, he thought, and marveled at it. For some reason he'd never thought of a boy on Engo, much less a dog.

Gazing at the two, Cromwell wondered at his surprise. Of course there would be children, even on this godforsaken planet. But he'd never really considered the possibility. Somehow he'd come to believe that the planet was inhabited solely by adults like Simon, doddering and creaking, waiting for the day when they would take their places under the white headstones in the graveyard.

This fellow couldn't be more than ten or twelve, he reflected. But what a hellish place for a child. Did he know he was doomed? Probably not. Children had an amazing adaptability. A hundred planets gave testimony to that.

Cromwell felt a touch of nostalgia. How long had it been since he'd sat with his dog, watching the bright yellow sun Capella slide below the soft hills of Mypor? Over fifty years, half a century; closer to sixty, when he thought of it. Kolo, the dog's name had been, a big, shaggy beast like the one ahead of him. Kolo had bounded at his side throughout his childhood years. And when he died, he had buried him on a hillside and cried.

"I'll get you another dog," his father promised. But there wasn't another dog, nor could there be. No other could take Kolo's place. Somehow his father had understood. Now, standing on the meadow, he let the memories rush back.

But that was long ago. For over fifty years now he'd been a wanderer among the stars. He'd watched the sun rise and set on a hundred forgotten planets. He'd grown old under the stars. Not that he could complain; they had been good years, filled with freedom, danger, hardship -- the solitude he loved. There was little he hadn't seen or done. And when he died someday, it would be in space. He would be buried by whatever sun happened to be nearest. Who could ask for more?

He brought back his attention as the boy scrambled to his feet and threw a stick. "Get it! Get it!" he yelled in a thin, piping voice. Cromwell remembered his own youth and smiled sadly.

The dog yelped and bounded forward to seize the stick when it leaped to a new spot. Barking and prancing, the dog looked around expectantly.

"Very clever," Cromwell murmured, wondering how the toy worked. He could sell a million of them with ease, two million, and he wouldn't have to resort

to the black market. It was the kind of thing any child would love, and adults too. No doubt it was a local invention, perhaps the boy's. If so, he could get it easily. A few saws and hammers should do the trick.

The dog barked, subsiding on its haunches, its head cocked as it regarded the stick. Suddenly the stick moved upward, dangling a dozen or so feet in the air while the dog leaped and yelped frantically.

"Get it, Rok," the boy cried. He jumped and clapped his hands. "Get it, get it."

Cromwell was trying to comprehend the sight when the dog suddenly shot a dozen feet into the air and grasped the stick in its jaws, then remained floating in space to the accompaniment of the boy's pealing laughter.

"My God, a freak..." Cromwell caught his breath, feeling his heart begin to pound. Telepaths, yes...but this! His mind reeled at the sight. Psychokinesis! He'd heard the term -- the power to move objects by thought. But that had been a fairy tale; no one could...He watched, his eyes bulging, and all at once he began to tremble.

Wheeling, he stumbled back through the village.

Two

ASCENDING the marble stairs which led to the Social Administration building, Alek Selby wondered again at the sudden conference called by Director Korl Smithson. Right in the middle of the holidays; the thought was faintly perturbing. A new cultural deviation which threatened the general welfare? A new edict from on High? (The High Council of Ten, representing the ten sectors that comprised the Federation, had convened recently on Earth, administrative center for the Federation's nearly three thousand planets; it seemed likely that the conference was related.) Or was it something else?

Selby glanced at the yellow-white sun of Altair rising above the stately buildings of Mekla before he passed into the shadows of the arched doorway. It was the something else which bothered him, the almost nameless fear that had lurked deep in his mind for more years than he cared to remember.

Nameless? Not quite, but a fear so deeply recessed that not even Psymaster Hallam Vogel's probing had touched it. (Thank God for that!) Or was the fear utterly groundless, an irrational fantasy born of his childhood imagination and unshakable throughout the years? No, he knew that with certainty; the fear was not groundless.

The big building appeared empty. With most of the population celebrating the 3181st anniversary of the Federation's founding -- signed into existence at the Vegan Conference following the Thirty-Year War which ended in the collapse of the Hanhight Dynasty -- only essential maintenance and guard units were at work. As he entered the main hall, a voice in the distance echoed hollowly, emphasizing the silence that followed.

Invisible rays probed him for security clearance as he turned into a side corridor; ahead, bronze doors swung silently open at his approach. He slowed his pace, regrouping his thoughts in a final effort to fathom the reason for the meeting. He ticked off a dozen possibilities, dismissing them all.

Sighing, he entered the director's conference room and saw four men sitting at the long table.

Philip Wig! He caught his breath at sight of the dark, saturnine figure who headed Department 404, SocAd's secret police arm. Philip Wig, a shadowy figure, was charged with enforcement of the mutant control laws. His assistants, Derek Jonman and Jabor Conrad, flanked him on either side. So, the conference was concerned with the mutant problem? Then why had he been summoned? The question alarmed him.

He switched his eyes to the fourth man. Psymaster Hallam Vogel! Selby's unease grew stronger than ever. Before his appointment as principal investigator on the director's staff, he had been required to have his psyche and stability certified. Vogel had been the probe master. Although that time was five years in the past, he seldom encountered the psymaster without sensing a vague fear. Yet Vogel had found nothing, nothing at all. Selby clung to that knowledge as an antidote to his fear.

Nothing of that showed on his face as he crossed the room. Smiling briefly, he nodded toward the others and settled into a chair across from Vogel. Wig, conversing in a subdued voice with his assistants, appeared not to notice him. Selby didn't mind. He disliked the executor intensely, and his aides as well. They had what he liked to think of as the police mind, in which the psychic probing was by force.

He eyed the psymaster speculatively. "What's it all about?"

Vogel shrugged. "Don't know. I just received the summons." Leaning back, he closed his eyes, his way of saying he didn't want to talk.

Selby studied him thoughtfully. Vogel was fiftyish, of average height, average build, average appearance -- "Mr. Nobody," he'd once heard him described. And it was true, at least superficially; Vogel's voice, looks, and personality were designed to total anonymity. But he had risen high, held power -- the power to certify the existence of the telepathic trait, the power to exile mutants to Engo. Yet he appeared so mild and retiring...Selby wondered why he feared him.

He switched his eyes to the executor.

Philip Wig was another matter. Slender, fortyish, with a domed forehead and pale, sharp features, he was ambitious, vain, a man driven by the pursuit of power. The mutant laws were his weapon; he was relentless in his pursuit of any actual or suspected telepath, relentless in his constant cry of a "mutant underground" which, he warned, was plotting to overthrow the Federation government. But more to the point, he was rumored to be a favorite of Ewol Strang, the Third Sector representative on the High Council of Ten. As such, he was considered as Smithson's successor when the 78-year-old director stepped down. Philip Wig was the crown prince -- the whispers ran through the offices and corridors of Sector Three SocAd.

Selby watched him, his face blank.

Despite Wig's high position, he had a brake on his power. Although he was charged with enforcement of the mutant laws, his department had been placed under SocAd by a thoughtful Emperor, who considered that such a move might erase the stigma of persecution. As such, Wig was answerable to Director Korl Smithson. Nor could he certify the existence of the telepathic trait in those taken into custody; that was the psymaster's province. Wig could pursue, trap, arrest, but there his power ended and Hallam Vogel's began. That, Selby knew, was a thorn in the executor's side.

He glanced up as the bronze doors swung open and closed behind Director Korl Smithson, who crossed the golden carpet with a limping gait. Sparse and gray, his deeply lined face gave ample evidence of his years; all but the eyes. A cobalt blue, they held a penetrating quality that fascinated Selby. At times he had the uncomfortable feeling that they looked inside his body, watched the organs at work. Silly, of course, but they were those kind of eyes.

Selby liked the director. Smithson had come up through the Social Administration ranks, for the last twenty years serving as its head -- no small feat in this day of shifting politics, he reflected.

The hushed conversation between Wig and his assistants ceased and Vogel opened his eyes, sitting straighter.

Fitting himself into a well-cushioned chair at the head of the table, Smithson said in a voice reedy with age, "I wish to apologize for calling this

conference in the midst of the holidays, especially" -- he looked at Vogel -- "just as our psymaster was about to enjoy a long-postponed vacation."

"It can wait," Vogel returned placidly.

"It will have to wait," Smithson acceded. He let his gaze rove around the circle of faces before continuing, "A serious situation has arisen, perhaps a dangerous one."

"What is it?" asked Wig sharply.

"We appear to have a boy who can make sticks rise in the air, make dogs float." The director sat back, contemplating them. Selby suppressed a sense of shock. A psychokinetic? Unbelievable. And yet...

"A pk?" Wig's eyes were startled.

"On the evidence we have now, yes." Smithson nodded. Selby saw that Hallam Vogel's expression hadn't changed. It was, he thought, as if the psymaster were listening to a routine report. Then Vogel stirred.

"Seems far-fetched," he observed.

"Far-fetched?" Wig shot back. "Why? How about Henry Fong? Anna LeMay?"

"Telepathy, yes, but I regard the beyond powers largely a product of public hysteria," answered Vogel. He hunched closer, fixing his dark eyes on the executor's face. "A lot of overripe imaginations are at work."

"Fong was a certified pk," snapped Wig.

"After his death, yes, and by a psymaster third in a remote town on a small agricultural planet. Scarcely what you'd call credible evidence."

"You can't deny..."

Vogel waved him to silence and continued, "Henry Fong was never investigated during his short life, never subjected to probing. The rumor started he could lift stones, shake trees, make the earth around him tremble; and he was promptly killed by the superstitious people among whom he lived. You can't cite Fong as a precedent."

"No?" asked Wig coldly. "How about the LeMay girl?"

"What do we actually know?" asked Vogel. "She was reputed to be clairvoyant."

"She predicted her own death!"

"Any suicide can do that." Vogel smiled acidly.

Selby felt a faint surprise. He would have expected the psymaster, if anyone, to appreciate the possibility of powers beyond telepathy, yet he clearly wasn't impressed. And why was Wig so vociferous? He switched his gaze to the director; the cobalt blue eyes held a tolerant, waiting expression.

"Perhaps we'd better hear the evidence," suggested Vogel.

"What is the evidence?" Wig stared at the director.

"The captain of a tramp freighter witnessed the act," Smithson replied. "He was drunk, talking in a public place. The police heard him and took him in for questioning."

"Where?" demanded Wig.

"In Eliksen, a port city on the planet Krall."

"The Canulus system? That puts him under our jurisdiction."

Smithson nodded. "Fortunately the local SocAd director was informed immediately and had him transferred to department custody." He smiled slightly. "I have scant doubt but that you'll hear of it soon enough from your 404 office there."

Wig asked quickly, "Was he put under psychic probe?"

"By our own people," Smithson acceded. "He was telling the truth all right, at least as he saw it."

"Any chance of his having an overactive imagination?" asked Selby.

"I doubt it. Imagination is a relative surface phenomenon, Alek. A deep probe goes beyond that...into the subconscious reality."

"The reality of the subconscious is not necessarily the reality of the actual situation," Vogel interposed. "Probing uncovers what is real to the

mind -- in other words, what the mind accepts as reality; but that isn't necessarily the same as reality."

"I'll grant that," Smithson returned. "At the same time, we're faced with an extremely uncomfortable possibility. I'm certain the High Council won't view it lightly."

As if he hadn't heard, Wig murmured, "A pk." His eyes came up slowly, resting on the director's face. "Where was he spotted?"

"The alleged beyond?" Smithson smiled faintly and said, "On Engo."

"Engo!" In the startled silence that followed the executor's exclamation, Selby noted that Vogel alone betrayed no surprise. The psymaster didn't shake easily, he reflected.

"What was he doing there?" demanded Wig.

"The tramper captain? Illegal trading," answered Smithson.

"It's nothing new," Vogel cut in. "When you put a planet out of bounds, you're inviting illegal trade."

Wig glowered at him. "We should make an example of that man."

"Why?"

"Smuggling?" Wig lifted his eyes.

"If reports are true, none of the exile planets lack for trade," Vogel answered casually. "I can't see that it's so monstrous."

"How do you know they're traders? They can just as easily be members of the mutant underground."

"The man was put under psychic examination," Vogel reminded.

Wig switched his gaze to the director. "What's the captain's name?"

"Gordon Cromwell of the Cosmic Wind," Smithson told him. "It's an old tramper of Capellan registry."

"We should get that man here, wring him out."

"That's my worry," Vogel interposed softly. Jonman, silent until now, asked raspingly, "What about the freak?"

"The boy?" Smithson contemplated him. "We'll have to wait and see."

"Wait?" interjected Wig. "We'd better take action right now."

Irrked by his tone, Selby asked, "Why? What is there to do? If he's on Engo, he's already exiled. What more can you do?"

Wig regarded him poisonously. "Exile's not enough."

"Not enough?"

"Have you ever heard of Mr. Olaf? The mutant underground?" demanded Wig. "What do you think those people would do if they learned of a pk on Engo? They'd snatch him quick, and they could. The smuggler made it in an old tramper. The boy's a danger to the universe, Selby. I know that if you don't."

"One small boy?" asked Selby wonderingly.

"A pk," rasped Wig. "Don't you understand the meaning of that?"

"Do you?" he asked.

"I know he's dangerous -- too dangerous to live."

"You'd kill him?" Selby stared at the executor disbelievingly. The pale, glittering eyes that met his held a mocking expression. He shifted his gaze to Vogel's face, and then to Smithson's. Both were set, inscrutable.

After what seemed endless seconds the director said, "There's an unwritten policy to that effect, Alek."

"Murder?"

He smiled grimly. "It's not called murder. Usually there's an accident or some such arrangement."

"It's still murder."

"Yes, it is," the director assented.

Selby suppressed his shock. "Henry Fong?" he asked quietly.

"An agent stirred the people up," Smithson acceded. "That's highly classified, of course."

"I didn't know that," Vogel said flatly.

"It was a Sector Five problem, Hallam. I really don't know the details." Smithson returned his gaze to Selby. "Power and justice aren't always compatible, Alek. Government -- all governments throughout history -- have had some such means to dispose of elements threatening to them."

"But...a ten-year-old boy?"

"A freak," Jonman interjected harshly.

Wig smiled tightly and said, "You don't have to worry about getting your hands bloody, Selby. Jonman and Conrad will be happy to make the arrangements."

Selby regarded Jonman stony-eyed. The agent's spade-shaped face with its underslung jaw and diagonally slanted eyes suggested ancestry in the Arcturus system. The lips, pulled tightly back, gave him a wolfish appearance. He switched his gaze to Conrad. Lean, dark, and hatchet-faced, Conrad returned the stare with blank, unfathomable eyes.

Selby looked back at Wig. "What do you propose to do?"

"That matter falls under my jurisdiction," the executor replied coldly.

"Without the boy being certified?"

"That's not your problem."

"As principal investigator on the director's staff, I have the right of enquiry," he returned, wondering whether or not he did, or even why he was there. The subject had nothing to do with his own work. Yet Smithson had summoned him. He watched Wig unflinchingly.

"It's a problem for all of us," Smithson broke in quietly. "We know the truth," Wig answered heatedly. "The captain was under psychic probe."

"Do we know the boy's identity?" asked Smithson. He turned his attention to the psymaster. "That's your province, Hallam. Can you recall a boy of around ten or twelve?"

"Did the captain give a physical description?"

"None to speak of. I imagine he was too excited. Even the age was an impression. The therapist couldn't get much, except..." He paused.

"Except what?" asked Wig quickly.

"He had a dog -- the one he raised in the air. Cromwell described it as huge, shaggy, yellow. He remembered it particularly because he'd once had one like it."

"That would be David Gant," the psymaster murmured.

"David Gant?" Wig repeated the name as if memorizing it.

"The dog was a Hurder," Vogel added reminiscently. "They're bred on Hazelrod, in the Trail system. The boy had the puppy when he was apprehended and we let him take it along."

Wig leaned forward intently. "How did he test?"

"David?" Vogel pursed his lips musingly. "Extremely high."

"Telepathically or IQ?"

"Both," the psymaster answered. "We sent him out there with his sister about three years ago."

"Sister?" Wig raised his eyes.

"She revealed herself as a telepath to go with him," Vogel explained. "Her name was Lora...Lora Gant. She'd be around twenty-two or three now."

Wig asked, "Any other possibilities?"

"We sent a boy named Johnny Sloan about four years ago. He'd be about the right age."

"I remember," Smithson mused. "A dark, stocky boy."

"He didn't test very high," Vogel commented.

"Is that all, just two?" Wig cocked his head.

"We don't get many of the younger ones. The trait often is slow in developing." Vogel eyed the executor imperturbably.

"Then you'd say it was the Gant boy?"

"I'm describing who the captain might have seen," Vogel answered. "I'm

not saying he's a beyond."

"But if there is one?" Wig insisted.

"I'd say it would have to be David Gant, yes." Vogel rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "If he's alive. He was quite frail, sickly. He had a crippled leg."

Jonman snickered and said, "We can cure that."

Listening, Selby had the feeling of unreality, that it was all a dream. The director, Vogel, Wig, and his two aides -- all of them calmly discussing the possibility of murdering a ten-year-old boy. His mind revolted at the prospect. He'd never sat in on anything like this before. Was it commonplace? No, it couldn't be. But why had the director summoned him?

Suppressing his emotion, he said tightly, "You don't really know if David is the boy, or if there is a pk." He swung toward Vogel and demanded, "How could there be a pk on Engo? You probe everyone who is sent there."

Vogel regarded him thoughtfully. "I agree," he said finally. "David showed no indication of traits beyond telepathy."

"How about Johnny Sloan?"

"Definitely not Johnny." Vogel shook his head. "Even his telepathy was minimal."

"The talent could have been latent," declared Wig. "How do you know it hasn't developed since? You can't make a flat statement on that."

Selby eyed the executor distastefully, realizing that his persistence was born of scented opportunity. If he could turn up a genuine pk, prove the threat beyond a reasonable doubt and resolve it, his niche would be assured. Such a feat could propel him into the director's job.

Vogel's face remained unchanged. "You're talking theory."

"Theory? My job is to ascertain the truth of these matters," Wig snapped.

"And mine."

Wig jerked his head toward the director. "Does the High Council know of this? Does Ewol Strang? The Imperator?"

"They will...in due time," Smithson answered shortly.

"My guess is that the Imperator would order immediate action," Wig said bluntly.

Smithson's eyes grew cold. "We're taking immediate action. That's the purpose of this meeting. The High Council will be informed when there is something to report."

"May I offer a suggestion?" Vogel asked.

"Certainly." The director looked at him.

"I feel like Alek," Vogel stated. "We can't take action -- the kind of action we might take -- without absolute knowledge of the facts."

"There's no disagreement on that score, Hallam."

"I'd like to suggest that Alek conduct the investigation," Vogel continued quietly.

"Selby?" Wig spat the name like an epithet. "That's a function of my department -- Department 404."

"Not necessarily," Smithson corrected. "As principal investigator on my staff, Alek's jurisdiction extends throughout SocAd."

"He's never investigated mutant activities," Wig exclaimed heatedly. "It's not in his province."

"Exactly," Vogel cut in.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Alek will have no preconceived opinions."

"You're saying that I have?" demanded Wig.

Vogel nodded slightly. "Yes, I believe that's what I've been saying."

Wig sneered. "You won't believe there's a pk."

"I will if Alek says so," Vogel returned calmly.

"I know Alek will do a good job," Smithson interceded firmly. Selby stared at him, and then at the psymaster, not knowing whether to feel elated or depressed. The shock of Vogel's suggestion had left him numb. He understood now why he'd been summoned. The director and the psymaster had discussed the case beforehand, had recognized it as the executor's ladder to power and were determined to keep it out of his hands. But it would throw the burden on him. Yet he had to admit it was a victory in the interest of justice. He glanced at the executor.

Wig had turned, his eyes locked with Jonman's in secret understanding. Conrad had leaned back and was watching the proceedings coldly. Selby had another thought, one that startled him. He would be propelled into the world of mutants, telepaths...The world he feared!

Dimly he heard Wig demand, "Is that decision final?"

"It is, Philip." The director pushed back his chair and rose. "The conference is adjourned, gentlemen."

As Selby rose to leave, Smithson detained him with a gesture. Sinking back into his seat, he caught the quick glance that passed between Smithson and the psymaster -- a glance filled with hidden meaning, he thought -- before the latter moved leisurely from the room.

Wig hesitated by his chair, his eyes filled with undisguised hostility, then wheeled abruptly and stalked out. Jonman and Conrad trailed behind.

When they were alone, Smithson said, "I'm sorry to foist this job on your shoulders, Alek, but I feel it's a good move. So does Hallam. Truthfully, we had a few ideas along that line to begin with. That's why I asked you to sit in."

"I appreciate your confidence," he answered.

"In all honesty, it was Hallam's suggestion, but you have my fullest confidence. I want you to know that."

"I'll do my best."

"I realize the responsibility," continued Smithson. "At the same time, I want to be satisfied that justice is done. I know your investigation will be fair."

"Death, if the boy is a beyond? You call that justice?"

"Council policy, Alek."

"Policy." He enunciated the word bitterly.

"It's seldom been put into practice, and never in this sector," the director answered. "I suppose that's why the humanists haven't raised their voices against it. If they even know of it," he added.

"Ewol Strang..." Selby looked up slowly.

"He's death on mutants, Alek. I tell you that in confidence. He's been sold a bill of goods and in turn he's sold it to the Imperator."

Selby asked, "Who's this Mr. Olaf the executor mentioned?"

"Ah, the mutant underground leader." Smithson smiled. "He exists, all right, but he's scarcely the threat the executor would have him."

"There is an underground?"

The director gazed into the distance. "There's always an underground, Alek. It's the historical weapon of the ostracized, but I suspect most of the rumors are fanned by people intent on keeping the issue alive."

Selby smiled grimly. "I can see the value of that."

"If the truth were known, I'd suspect that most of the so-called underground are traders and smugglers, like our Captain Cromwell. I don't believe they're as interested in the telepaths as the markets the telepaths have to offer. Hallam's right on that score. It's common knowledge -- at least in the upper echelons -- that the prohibition against such commerce is broken repeatedly. We can't police all of space."

"I can't exactly see the harm in it," Selby replied.

"Nor can I."

He eyed the director candidly. "I'll have to be honest and tell you ahead of time that I won't be impartial, at least not in my beliefs. I can't see a boy of ten as deserving death."

"No man is impartial, Alek. We all favor our own viewpoints. Frankly, I feel as you do, but I have to divorce my beliefs from my work."

Selby smiled. "That might be difficult."

"Yes, but I know you can do it."

"I'll do it," he promised.

"I have scant doubt of that, Alek." The director hesitated before continuing, "I don't like this any more than you do, but we're agents of the orders that come to us. Have you ever considered Hallam's burden? He's a gentle man, Alek, yet he has to certify around a hundred people a year for exile, and that includes children. Engo's tantamount to death. Do you believe he doesn't suffer?"

"I know he must," he answered humbly. Put that way, the burden of his own task diminished in his mind.

"Hallam has nightmares, Alek."

"I suspect he would."

"At the same time, we manage to be fair," Smithson pursued.

"Fair?" He raised his eyes.

"Assigning you was an act of fairness," the director rebuked. "I could have allowed Wig to conduct the investigation."

"The psymaster would have to certify his findings before any action could be taken."

"Or would an accident occur first?"

Selby sighed heavily. The director had him on every point. "Wig won't let this drop," he commented.

"I'm aware of that."

"Suppose the Emperor hears of this?" He watched the other expectantly.

"I imagine he will," Smithson replied drily. He didn't say so but his tone implied that Wig would see to that. Instead, he said, "Getting accurate information on Engo won't be easy, Alek. The exiles will be bitter, suspicious, uncooperative, nor can I blame them. In all honesty, they're political scapegoats, and know it. Not that I would say that in public," he added wryly.

"There might be complications," Selby observed.

"Conducting the investigation?" Smithson nodded. "That's another reason I didn't send Wig. If a patrol craft landed, the people would melt into the forest. You can't go as an investigator, Alek."

"Are you suggesting that I try and pass as an exile?"

"In a village of telepaths?" The director shook his head. "Impossible."

"What then?"

"I believe you should go in the Cosmic Wind."

"The Cosmic Wind?" Selby sat straighter.

"Cromwell's tramper," Smithson explained. "I'm certain we could get the captain's cooperation in taking you as a crew member in return for immunity against the charge of illegal commerce."

"Would he go back there?"

"There or to a detention planet," Smithson returned equably. "What would be your choice?"

"He'll go," he assented.

"The scoundrel will make a profit on the trip, Alek." Smithson's eyes twinkled. "Do you believe I'm putting my head into a noose...legalizing smuggling to an exile planet?"

"We both are," he answered. Suddenly he grinned. "Remember, I'm a crewman."

Three

HUNCHED OVER his desk in the privacy of his office, Selby reviewed the data he'd got from the computer file. It wasn't much -- a few names suggested by Vogel, some descriptive matter relating to the village and planetary environment, a collection of facts that weren't pertinent. He was surprised at how little there was. He could find no personal records beyond the dates of exile, nothing to suggest that Engo was, after all, peopled by humans. Hallam Vogel had called it "the forgotten world," and looking at the data, he could believe it. A forgotten world filled with forgotten people. Or were they discards?

He picked up a card. John Sloan, b. in Nadak, p. Laska, s. Polhaut, GY 3171. The city of Nadak on the planet Laska, third from the star Polhaut -- he reached deep into his mind, seeing a neocybernetic culture that once had aspired to greatness, then had subsided into what SocAd termed "the equilibrium of civilization." It was, he knew, jargonese that meant the culture had lost its early momentum, slowed by the more static planetary civilizations with which it had contact. Civilization was a brake -- they'd told him that in school and he'd always found it so. A culture couldn't expand beyond adjacent cultures; each one acted as a drag on the others.

He scanned the card quickly. Johnny's IQ was average, his telepathic sense minimal. In all else he appeared normal, a robust boy who'd had the misfortune to discern his teacher's thoughts, and promptly had come to the attention of the local psymaster. Clinical findings had been transferred to Sector Three SocAd; Hallam Vogel had reviewed them, signing the boy's order of exile. His death warrant, Selby thought.

"Have you ever considered Hallam's burden, Alek?" And, "He's a gentle man." Selby let the card slip to the desk, considering the director's words. Hallam Vogel was gentle; it was there in his eyes and voice, in his reluctance to turn Wig loose on Engo despite the gravity of the situation. Yet he could exile a boy into almost certain death on the basis of minimal telepathy. Did Vogel believe the precaution necessary, or was he forced by revelation of the boy's talent? Did he sleep nights?

Selby smiled grimly and looked at the next card.

David Gant, b. Denport, p. Hazelrod, s. Trail, GY 3171. He noted with interest that David had been detected at age eight, almost three years before, when he'd won the prize as the best "guesser" at a friend's birthday party. A suspicious hostess had reported his "guesses" as "too good to be natural."

The psymaster had described the boy as frail and sickly. Walks with a limp. Telepathic sense maximal. If Cromwell's story were true -- in his own mind he was coming to think of it as true, a bias he knew he shouldn't allow to develop -- then David certainly appeared the logical choice. An accompanying photograph showed a gangling blonde boy with delicate features and alert eyes that appeared enormous in the thin face. Could anyone look at that and call it a criminal face?

He flipped over the next card and stopped short. Lora Gant, b. Denport...He'd forgotten that David's sister also had been exiled. He read the card quickly. The girl would be twenty-two now. Her IQ, like her brother's, was exceptionally high. So was her telepathic sense. The report described her as "embittered." Well, he could understand that; he'd be bitter himself.

A note at the bottom caught his eye. So, the girl hadn't been detected; she'd revealed her telepathy so she could accompany her brother into exile. Vogel had remarked on that at the meeting. Selby leaned back, pondering her courage and loyalty. For all practical purposes, she'd sacrificed her life to guard her brother for the few years he might have to live.

If the boy proved a pk? Selby realized the tremendous burden the director had placed on him. If the boy were a beyond, his report would be tantamount to a death sentence. More, it would be a tremendous blow to the girl, perhaps hasten her own death.

He let the card slip from his fingers, wondering at the trap in which he'd let himself be caught. What was SocAd really? The humanitarian branch of government dedicated to the social and cultural welfare -- that was the claim. In a sense, it was true. SocAd was one of nine major administrations which, together, governed the nearly three hundred planets of Sector Three. The same system prevailed in each of the ten sectors that comprised the Federation. Of course, the High Council of Ten, presided over by the Emperor, actually ruled; but in reality, it more often than not acted on recommendations made by the sector administrators. The Federation was too vast for it to be otherwise.

Broken down the other way, each administration was represented on each planet within its sector by a local office which administered local affairs, hence Smithson sat at the apex of a pyramid consisting of nearly three hundred world directorates. As such, he was responsible for the social and cultural well-being of nearly nine hundred billion people. From among that number, perhaps a hundred or so a year were exiled to Engo. Looked at in that way, the government undoubtedly considered it a small price to pay to soothe the public nerves.

"Justice was the will of the people" -- he remembered the statement from long ago. At the time, the cynicism hadn't struck him, as it did now. Injustice was justice if it served the common cause; might made right. Wasn't that the crux of the present situation? It was, exactly, he decided. In Smithson's eyes, and Vogel's, he was out to perpetrate an injustice in the name of justice. Small wonder the Gant girl had been bitter.

He leaned back, pondering it. No matter what happened, the present course was better than allowing Wig to investigate. In the executor's eyes the boy's doom had been a foregone conclusion; his attitude had made that clear. And Jonman! Jonman was a sadist; so, probably, was the sharkfaced Conrad. The boy wouldn't have had a chance.

Well, he'd do what he had to do, he reflected bitterly. He'd been named judge and executioner. Unless the boy wasn't a beyond. He pondered the possibility and thought it dim. Still, it could have been the old man's imagination, or too much bottle. Strange things happened to spacers. Or was he grasping at a thin straw?

What of himself? He'd been avoiding the question all along, now he let it seep into his mind. The old fear, the old doubt that at times verged on certainty. Contemplating it, he felt a cold knot form in his stomach. Now he was going to the planet of the telepaths! Yet -- and he clung to the hope -- he had passed Hallam Vogel's scrutiny, hadn't he? Then why the fears? Perhaps his mind possessed a bud that had never flowered, manifesting itself only as a hint within his consciousness. Perhaps no outward sign was detectable, even to a telepath. Perhaps and perhaps and perhaps...

Sighing, he pushed the papers aside. Of one thing he was certain: he wasn't going to enjoy the weeks ahead.

Alek Selby looked at Hallam Vogel across an expanse of desk and asked, "Is IQ related to telepathic ability?"

"A tricky question," Vogel admitted. "What do you have in mind?"

"We've all seized on David Gant," he explained, "but there's still Johnny Sloan."

"There's no correlation that we know," Vogel said. "Our tests, for what they're worth, don't indicate a relationship."

"I should think there would be," he said doubtfully.

"It's the logical assumption, Alek. Yet we know that certain forms of

nonhuman life are telepathic -- the giant ants of Kadar, for example. They function solely by instinct. Tests have proved that conclusively."

"Then you don't believe a relationship exists. Correct?"

"I didn't say that. I was merely citing some of the evidence against it." Vogel's eyes twinkled. "It's not popular to consider telepaths as supermen, much less beyonds. We'd rather equate them with ants."

"Then you believe there is a relationship?"

"That's my personal belief, yes."

"Based on what?"

"Call it a hunch."

Selby shook his head. "I don't believe you play hunches," he said.

Vogel smiled. "Trying to pin me?"

"Trying to get information," he countered.

"We're in the realm of the unknown, Alek. We simply haven't the data from which to draw conclusions."

"Yet you've drawn one."

"Yes, I have." Vogel leaned back thoughtfully. His eyes held the reflective look of a man searching inward. Finally he said, "I regard man as an evolutionary product, Alek, and history bears it out. If we accept that assumption, we can draw some inferences about telepaths and beyonds."

"What inferences?"

"Telepathy, as an established fact, is a fairly recent development -- a few thousand years at most. If we place the telepath in the time table, we have to agree that he's a new model, and the beyond is newer yet. That implies increased intelligence."

"Does it? How about the Kadar ants?"

"Nature often is prodigal in her first mutations," Vogel observed. "Many are failures, or actual regressions; a few break through and go ahead. I suspect that human telepathy might be the proving ground for the beyond."

"So we broke through but the ants didn't. Is that what you're saying?"

Vogel laughed. "There was no place for the ants to go. They were limited by physical form and environment. It's possible they developed telepathically in an attempt to break through the limits imposed on them. Who knows, perhaps they did have intelligence once, but were forced by environment into an automated existence. If so, after untold generations the need for intelligence would disappear; genes would transmit automation in the form of instinct. Man didn't have the same limitations, Alek."

"Limitations?"

Vogel nodded. "Once we broke into space we discarded our limitations. If an environment didn't suit, we modified it or found another that did. If we're stagnating now, it's by choice. Or perhaps telepathy is nature's way of trying to break the stagnation."

"Not a very popular view," Selby observed.

"Definitely not. But were we destined to wind up in a blind alley?" He shook his head. "I don't believe so. We've come too far; now nature's prodding us."

"Is that why you eliminated Johnny, because of his intelligence?"

"The dog," Vogel explained. "It was David's dog."

"We don't know that it's a one-man dog," Selby rebutted. "It could have been with Johnny."

"That's possible."

"Yet you're certain that the boy was David, and not Johnny?"

"If a beyond exists," Vogel amended.

"So it does come back to intelligence, doesn't it?"

"If you put it that way, yes."

Selby said pointedly, "The inference I draw is that you believe in a beyond."

Vogel smiled easily. "You're twisting my words."

"Not intentionally."

"As a point in fact, I'm certain such people exist, but they're extremely rare. The probability of such an occurrence at any given time or place is highly remote. I wouldn't expect it to happen more than one or two times per generation, and when you extrapolate that to the billions upon billions of people in the Federation..." He paused and shrugged.

"Yet following that reasoning, it would have to happen somewhere," Selby argued. "What could be a more logical place than Engo?"

"It's possible," Vogel acceded.

"But I hope not." Selby cocked his head. "I note by the records that David has a sister."

"Around nineteen or twenty at the time," Vogel reflected. "She exposed herself to accompany the boy. A courageous act, Alek."

"Very," he murmured.

"It created quite a stir at the time," Vogel pursued. "People with such highly developed telepathy seldom escape detection during childhood."

"How do we know?" he challenged. "We know only those who are detected."

"You have a point," the psymaster conceded.

"How does the director feel about this?"

"The possibility of a pk on Engo? He can't afford the luxury of opinion, Alek. The rumor is sufficient to demand immediate action, regardless of its truth. Look at Wig's reaction. That should tell you something of the political implications."

"I realize them all too well," he admitted wryly.

"He can't afford to have a pk created," Vogel said pointedly.

"I have the feeling one will be created, at least in the public mind," Selby reflected. "Too many people know of the case -- Cromwell, his crew, the police who took him into custody..."

"True enough." Vogel smiled faintly. "But I don't believe Cromwell will open his mouth again, not after the scare he got. He was sweating out the threat of a detention planet when the director offered a reprieve."

"You believe he'll cooperate?"

"I feel certain of it," Vogel declared.

"He must be quite familiar with the planet," he mused.

"Not according to the findings of the probe master," Vogel countered. "His sole contact is Simon, an old man who runs the spaceport and acts as intermediary in the trading."

"After a score or more of trips?" asked Selby disbelievingly.

"They're a secretive people, Alek. Can you blame them? We've denied them, thrust them out of the human race, so to speak. Would you expect a welcoming committee?"

"Not when you put it that way," he admitted.

"It's no secret they were sent there to die," Vogel continued. "That was the original intent, but since then the government has changed somewhat, perhaps because of the humanist outcry. As it stands now, the prohibition against commerce usually is enforced only in cases of flagrant violations. Actually, with the exception of Ewol Strang and one or two others, the High Council is content with things as they are. But that's a high-level secret, Alek. The public wouldn't stand for leniency."

"How do the lower echelons feel?"

"The same, if you're thinking of our sector," Vogel answered. "Other sector directors see things differently. In those cases, the government doesn't interfere with the prosecution."

"Wig should work for them," Selby said bitterly.

"They have their Wigs," Vogel answered caustically. "There's seldom a shortage of that type."

As Selby rose to go, he said, "I'd appreciate any advice you might have to give..."

"Make your own judgments, Alek." Vogel rubbed his hands briskly.

"In view of what you said about Cromwell's experience, I might have trouble making contacts."

"It won't be easy." The psymaster gazed toward the window. "But I feel you'll do all right."

Hallam Vogel punched a button and watched the screen come to life. Korl Smithson's aged face took shape, the blue eyes peering at him from under shaggy brows. Vogel saw the lines of tiredness and felt a quick sympathy. The director hadn't had a moment's rest since the Engo story had broken.

"Are you on private?" Smithson asked.

Vogel glanced at the security button and nodded.

"Ewol Strang has the full story," Smithson pursued grimly.

"Already?" Vogel whistled softly. Strang represented the Third Sector on the High Council, only a step down from the Emperor himself; and with his strong antimutant bias...He sighed and asked, "How did he get it?" He had scant doubt but that Wig had leaked the information.

"He didn't say."

"What did he say?" Smithson's grim expression made him fear the worst.

"He's ordered a sweeping investigation."

"Does he know we have one under way?"

"Probably, but he specified that it be conducted under Department 404 -- Executor Wig, to be exact."

"Then it came from Wig," Vogel asserted. He could speak frankly with his old friend.

"It's even worse than that, Hallam." The director paused thoughtfully. "Strang has wangled an order of execution from the Emperor."

"Warrant of execution?" Vogel asked slowly.

"It's in Wig's hands already."

"Without certification?" he demanded.

"If Wig actually views a paranormal act, that's deemed sufficient," the director answered gravely. "The Emperor has waived the necessity for probing."

"That's tantamount to the determination of guilt by accusation, Korl."

"It is."

Vogel looked steadily into the screen. "A warrant has to bear a name. The law requires..."

"It names David Gant," the director explained. "In Wig's mind, he's the boy."

"The Emperor went along with that?"

"Strang sold him on the idea that the mutant underground might attempt to rescue the boy from Engo. I imagine he painted quite a lurid picture."

"The same suggestion Wig made," Vogel commented drily.

"They speak the same language, Hallam."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"Nothing," Smithson stated flatly.

"Do you know how Wig intends to handle it?"

"His usual method -- force," the director said. "He's taking along Jonman and Conrad. We've been ordered to place one of the SocAd patrol ships at his disposal."

"Engo will never be the same, Korl."

"No, it won't. We'll be lucky if this doesn't bring the whole mutant problem back into the limelight. That could be disastrous."

"Does Alek know of the development?"

"Not yet. I just received word."

"What do you intend to do, Korl?"

"Alek was due to leave in the morning," Smithson answered musingly. "I'm going to let him go."

"Instead of Wig?" asked Vogel sharply. Disobeying an order from Ewol Strang was political suicide.

Smithson acknowledged the situation, saying, "There's nothing in Strang's message to prevent a concurrent investigation, Hallam. What could be more sweeping than two investigations? Even Ewol couldn't dispute that."

"You're treading on thin ice," Vogel warned.

"At seventy-eight?" A chuckle came over the communicator. "At my age you live on thin ice."

"I'm not opposing the idea, Korl."

"I didn't believe you would."

"Selby's presence on Engo won't temper Wig's activities," Vogel stated bluntly. "He's committed to finding a pk."

"I'm afraid that's true, Hallam, but an official dissent might help."

"I'm not that optimistic."

"What do you suggest?"

"Nothing, really," Vogel admitted. "I was just thinking the situation through, trying to assess what Selby's presence might mean."

"I'd like the added source of information, Hallam. I believe it necessary."

"So do I, but I'd certainly apprise Alek of the true situation."

"Let him know he might be bucking Ewol Strang, eh?"

"He should know," declared Vogel.

"We agree on that, Hallam. Do you believe we're placing him in an unfair situation?"

"That's an understatement," Vogel asserted, "but I imagine he'll take care of himself. He's tougher than he looks."

"That's how I size him up."

"Does Wig know you plan to send Alek anyway?"

"I haven't mentioned it. I'd rather let Alek get away first."

"A good idea," Vogel agreed. "Wig would certainly try to spike it."

"I realize that." The director's voice changed. "I don't want this to interfere with your plans, Hallam."

"They won't. I'm still going to grab that vacation."

"I envy you," Smithson replied. "Do you know how long since I've had a vacation? Twenty years."

"The moral to that is never be a director."

"I learned too late," Smithson answered.

When the director's image faded from the screen, Vogel sank comfortably back into his chair and stared toward the window. Ewol Strang's order gave Philip Wig an absolutely free hand to push his investigation however he wanted; that was undeniable. And just as undeniably, Wig had but one goal: to turn up a pk and reap his reward. That reward, the psymaster knew, was the director's chair. Korl Smithson knew that too; so did Alek Selby.

More to the point, a ten-year-old boy's life was at stake. And the future of the telepaths. If Wig were successful, a new wave of hysteria and hate would be set into motion, and the Federation as a whole would take another backward step into the slow oblivion into which it had been sinking.

That was intolerable.

Four

ENGO FILLED the starport.

From his position on the bridge of the Cosmic Wind, Selby watched the

planet grow -- a vast, sullen expanse of shifting orange hues which Captain Cromwell had explained as the light of the Giza sun reflecting off the planet's cloud cover. Selby found it an awesome sight.

As they emerged from the time stream, the planet first had appeared as a small orange ball accompanied off to one side by an even more diminutive but equally orange moon. Both seemed unrelated to the sun, which lay like a burnished disk in an almost starless firmament. He had never imagined such an empty sky. Aside from two glowing fragments which formed the Magellanic Clouds, it appeared like a bottomless pit.

He marveled that Cromwell would dare take the ancient tramper into such remote and alien skies. Both on entering and emerging from the time stream, the howling engines and vibrations had given him the sense of impending disaster. Prim, the purser, had noticed his perturbation.

"The old gal's getting old," he said.

Selby forced a grin. "Does she always shake like this?"

"Usually worse," said Prim.

Approaching the planet, Cromwell grew gloomy over their prospects. "The moon's past apogee," he explained. "We're due for violent winds and quakes."

"Can't be much worse than this baby," Snorkel put in. "Feel her shake?"

"He says that every time we're in retrofire," Cromwell grumbled.

"It's true," Snorkel insisted. "We ought to put this baby in for overhaul."

"Money, he allus wants to spend money."

Selby laughed. In the few weeks since boarding the freighter, he had come to have a friendly regard for both the skipper and his three-man crew. At first Cromwell had been aloof and formal, an aging, erect man with bitter eyes, and the others had regarded him as somewhat of an interloper.

Selby didn't mind. He understood exactly how Cromwell and the crew felt. To them, he represented the government -- the police, to be exact -- hence had to be an enemy. The feeling gradually thawed as they discovered he was neither officious nor aloof; and it vanished altogether the day they discovered he liked chess.

"It's what keeps spacers from going crazy," the captain explained, when Selby accepted his invitation to play. Cromwell had just beaten Grimp, the engineer, and was rubbing his hands expectantly.

"Yeah?" asked Snorkel. "What about Prim?"

The purser looked pained.

"At least he can play chess," Cromwell responded. "According to the score, I'm twelve hundred and ten games ahead of you."

"That's for forty years," Snorkel protested. "Why don't you figure it on a percentage basis, like I do. That comes to fifty-two percent. Hardly more than half, as I see it."

"Twelve hundred and ten games ahead," the captain said firmly.

"We're not finished yet."

"Excuses, always excuses, Snorky."

Selby was surprised when Cromwell checkmated him in less than a dozen moves. Although he didn't rate himself as expert, he considered himself a good player, or had until then. After losing four consecutive games, he didn't think Snorkel's record bad -- not with the grizzled captain as adversary.

That had been the start. Since then the friendliness had increased, together with his losses. Although he managed occasionally to beat Grimp and Prim, and less often Snorkel, his victories over Cromwell were few and long between.

"You're getting good," the captain grudgingly acknowledged, following one of Selby's rare victories. He glanced disdainfully at the first mate.

"Better'n some people I know."

"At least he doesn't brag when he wins," Snorkel retorted.

Once when he found himself alone with the captain, Selby took advantage of their new-found rapport to clarify his mission. He spoke in harmless generalities. "The SocAd director wants a more complete report on the boy you saw," he explained.

"I figured that," answered Cromwell sourly. "What's he after?"

"Everyone's skeptical."

"I saw it all right," Cromwell returned indignantly. "The stick and the dog both...floating right there in midair."

"Could it have been a trick?"

"A mutant trick," he replied ominously.

"Do you have any idea who the boy might have been?"

"I've answered that question a thousand times," Cromwell replied edgily. "I don't know -- don't know anyone on the planet except old Simon. He runs the field and does their trading for them."

"Can you recall anything about him, what he looked like?"

Cromwell rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I have the impression that he was rather frail, with a big mop of yellow hair. Wait, I do remember something. He limped. I remember noticing it."

Limped? That would be David Gant, Selby thought. His record had noted the lameness. He looked at Cromwell. "Anything else?"

The captain shook his head. "Nothing except the dog, a shaggy yellow beast. He called it Rok."

The boy was a pk. The knowledge struck Selby with finality. Reading the psychic report on the captain and hearing it from the captain himself were two quite different things. The report had been cold, impersonal, couched in clinical language; it had concerned someone who had existed solely as a name. But no longer. Now he knew Cromwell, had had weeks to size him up, assess his beliefs, attitudes, degree of gullibility. Only there was no gullibility, or very little. Neither was he an overly imaginative man, nor one given to flights of fancy. To the contrary, he was steady and practical, even though he did nip at the bottle too often.

Selby asked slowly, "Have you seen anyone else, anyone at all?"

"Occasional glimpses, not often. It's a spooky place, Selby. I wouldn't go there if it weren't for the market."

"What kind of a fellow is Simon?"

"Old as the hills of Gortmar," declared Cromwell. "He's walking on the edge of the grave, has been for years. At times I wonder why the wind don't blow him away."

"Does he ever talk?"

"About what?" Suspicion clouded the captain's face.

"Other people on Engo. Does he ever mention them?"

"Never has," Cromwell declared. He stroked his chin reflectively. "I've never asked him."

"What do you talk about?"

"Trade, mostly."

"Think he might talk to me?"

"Hard to say." Cromwell shrugged.

"Doesn't it feel odd...never to see anyone?"

"Mutants? Can you blame them for steering clear when we come around? We haven't done very well by them, Selby. You'll have to admit that. Dumping them on that death trap." His voice changed. "Personally, I'm just as glad. I'd feel uncomfortable."

"Because they're telepaths? How about Simon? You don't mind him."

"Simon? He doesn't act like one." Cromwell caught Selby's eyes and asked belligerently, "How come he asks how much I want for some article or other if he can read my mind?"

"Does he pay what you ask, or do you usually settle for something

lower?"

"Well, we haggle, of course. That's what trading's all about."

"Does he drive a hard bargain?"

"He certainly does." Cromwell shook his head admiringly. "He gets me right down to rock bottom."

"Did it ever occur to you that he might know what that rock bottom was before you started haggling?"

"Know? You mean...?" A startled look came into Cromwell's face. "Well I'll be danged. The old pirate."

"Could be," Selby murmured.

Cromwell eyed him hopefully. "Would it help if I wore a hard hat?"

"I don't believe so," he answered gravely. Taking advantage of the captain's garrulousness, he asked, "Ever hear of a Mr. Olaf?"

"Olaf?" The captain stiffened perceptibly and Selby didn't miss the guarded look that came into his eyes.

"I've heard of him in connection with Engo," Selby explained disarmingly. "Thought he might be another trader."

"Never heard the name," Cromwell answered shortly. Selby dropped the subject.

That was the way things stood when Selby watched from the bridge as the planet filled the star window. Here and there through rifts in the cloud cover he saw dark, amorphous splotches which Cromwell identified as belonging to Engo's only major continent.

"And a miserable continent it is," he explained. "Wind, rain, heat, quakes and them big weeping trees; small wonder they all die."

"Don't forget the fever," Snorkel broke in.

"Aye, and the fever that comes in the season of orange heat." Cromwell eyed Selby interestedly. "You must be on somebody's list to get this assignment."

"Could be," he murmured.

Turning away, he stared down into the orange light, pondering what might lie ahead. Finding the boy could prove a considerable problem. What if I can't find him? As Vogel once suggested, the people might simply melt into the forest, leaving no one but Simon behind. Well, he'd have to wait and see.

What if I do find him? That question perturbed him even more. The boy's physical presence wouldn't tell him a thing, nor was he likely to admit being a pk. Not to an outsider. Contemplating it, he realized that it was extremely doubtful that anyone would talk. Then what?

Selby became aware of a sense of guilt. Was he trying to avoid his responsibility? Or was it something deeper, some reluctance to serve a law which palpably was unjust, a law of expedience? What would Korl Smithson do under the circumstances? Or Hallam Vogel? Could an unjust act be termed justice when sanctioned by a statute? They hadn't thought so; but neither had suggested a remedy.

What of his own conscience? If he identified the boy, affirmed the capability, could he live with himself for all the years to come? Would the knowledge that he'd acted as an agent of the law suffice? Or would it shrivel his soul, especially in light of his own secret fears?

What of Philip Wig? The captain's certainty that the boy was a pk meant victory for Wig, the director's chair. The boy's death...Beyond that, it meant a stepped-up drive against the telepaths, added misery for those exiled. It meant a return to the dark ages of reason.

Why had Vogel and Smithson placed the investigation in his hands? To thwart the executor? If so, they had lost. More important, what kind of a report did they expect? Did they expect to stifle the case by having him fail? He hadn't considered that possibility.

The cards were stacked against him, he reflected. He couldn't win, no

matter what he did. Nor could Wig lose -- not with a pk on Engo. But most of all, the Federation itself would lose if Wig won. That was the point Ewol Strang couldn't realize. And people like Mr. Olaf -- for he knew from the captain's reaction there was a Mr. Olaf -- would be pushed farther underground, their voices stilled; the mutants would have no champion at all.

Another thought struck him. He hadn't told Cromwell of the executor's role in the investigation yet, hadn't deemed it wise. It would only serve to weaken his own position. But when he did...

Sighing, he watched the orange planet rush toward him.

Selby felt a sudden sense of weight as the rumbling and vibration transmitted through the bulkheads signaled the onset of retrofire. The shaking grew stronger and he felt a fleeting fear again until he glimpsed Cromwell staring unconcernedly through the starport, his fingers entwining the silver flask. The needles on the console next to him jumped and quivered.

Abruptly the vibration ceased and the thunder died, leaving an eerie silence. Selby had the uncanny sensation of floating, the feeling of free fall to which he'd never accustomed himself.

"Dropping out of orbit," Snorkel called, from behind him. "Sure had the shakes, didn't she?"

"Yeah," he answered weakly.

"Goin' to come apart someday."

"Not this trip, please."

"Can't ever tell, Mr. Selby. Could happen any time."

"I hope you're fooling," he said.

"Fooling?" Snorkel sounded surprised. "No, sir, I'm not fooling. Not a bit."

Cromwell got on the communicator and sent out his coded call letters. Selby was surprised at the suddenness with which the answer came. The wheezy voice told him it must be Simon. He listened as they discussed the ship's trajectory and surface conditions.

Finally Cromwell turned from the console and looked at the first mate. "Plenty of cloud, Snorky. The wind's at standard fifty."

"Rain?" asked Snorkel anxiously.

"She's holding off. Simon's got us on the beam."

"Tracking equipment?" asked Selby. He hadn't expected it on Engo.

Cromwell curled his lips. "Government supplied. Nice of them, wouldn't you say? They need it to land the exile ships."

"Lucky for us," Snorkel cut in. "I'd sure hate to land this baby in the blind."

"Not bad once you get the experience," Cromwell asserted.

"Experience!" Snorkel grunted.

Shortly after retrofire began again, the Cosmic Wind slipped into a blind world of dusky orange clouds that swirled against the starport, threatening to Selby's eye, nor did the increased rumbling and vibrations from the engine contribute to his peace of mind. He caught himself admiring Cromwell and his crew. As Snorkel had said, the ship was little more than a bucket of bolts, yet they had taken it to a hundred star systems. He wondered if the polished crews of the police patrols could do as well.

Cromwell was back on the communicator talking with Simon when they emerged from the cloud cover and Selby got his first close-up glimpse of the planet's face. The first impression was of jagged purple mountains with orange-tinted peaks, vast forests, and small ochre plains. A pinkish sea lay off to one side.

As the land rushed to meet them, he thought it the strangest world he'd ever seen, the most hostile appearing. In size it was much like his home planet, Amador, which served as the administrative center for Sector Three.

But there all similarity ended. In contrast with the neat geometry of glassed-in farms, manicured parks, and stately buildings like those of the city of Mekla, Engo's visible face was that of nature on the rampage.

A sullen river, brooding trees with tops bent and splintered by savage gales -- he shivered. On the plus side, Engo had an oxygen-rich atmosphere and a surface gravity of 0.86 galactic standard; but the extremes of heat and cold broached the limits usually considered as bearable for human life. Cromwell was right, he thought. Engo was a miserable world.

The land wheeled past more slowly as the Cosmic Wind lost forward velocity; at the same time the forests and meadows appeared to grow, their contours sharpening as if springing new from the dark soil.

The rumble of the retrofire grew deafening as the ship bucked and quivered underfoot. He moved closer to the starport, staring down.

"The village," Cromwell said. He pointed a bony finger. Selby saw it then, a huddle of log huts at the edge of the towering agora trees.

"Is that all there is?" he asked. It didn't seem much for a planet that received a hundred or so new arrivals each year.

"Most of the people are scattered around." Cromwell gestured toward the purplish Kavu mountains. "That's where the catmels come from."

Selby eyed the land with a feeling of dismay. If they were scattered among those forbidding peaks, he'd never find them. He voiced the thought.

Cromwell wasn't encouraging. "I wondered about that," he returned.

As the tramper descended Selby saw the small patch of meadow that served as the landing field. At one side was a cabin which sported several antennas and tracking saucers. He thought they appeared odd on the ramshackle station. A gaunt figure appeared in the doorway and stared up at them. Moments later the Cosmic Wind touched down with a grinding bump.

"Pretty danged rough," Cromwell yelled irately.

"Rough?" the first mate snorted. "She came down like a feather."

"That's why she's pounding so hard," the captain snapped testily. "You've got to handle her like a lady."

Selby watched the crew open the cargo doors and lower the landing ramp. Despite its formidable appearance, Engo was a new world and his eyes drank it hungrily. Seen from close up, the village fairly crouched in the shadow of the giant trees, a motley collection of huts lining a muddy lane that served as a street. He saw no movement, no sign of life. For some reason he was reminded of the deserted towns on the mining planet of Kanakar after the ores ran out. This village was like that -- silent and deserted.

His eyes moved up. The trees -- weeping agoras, Cromwell had called them -- towered several hundred feet above the muddy ground, their tops twisted and splintered. Their branches tossed restlessly in the wind, emitting a vast, muted sighing that reminded him of a dirge. The water dripping steadily from the lower branches told him how the trees had gotten their name from Cromwell.

When the captain was ready, he followed him down the ramp. An old man came from the shack and limped to meet them, his white hair and beard tossing in the wind. "Simon," Cromwell murmured needlessly.

Telepath! The word leaped into Selby's consciousness and he felt a quick worry, then resolutely concentrated on filling his mind with surface thoughts. He wasn't certain, but hoped the technique at least would be confusing.

As Simon drew closer, Selby saw the emaciation of his body, the gauntness of age, the wreckage of what might once have been a handsome face. Wrinkles and folds covered the weathered skin and the hands protruding from the ragged jacket appeared like claws. Then he saw the eyes, clear, sparkling blue, infinitely deep. Somehow he was reminded of Korl Smithson.

"Good to see you, Cap'n," Simon said. "You came back in a hurry."

"Picked up a good cargo for trade," Cromwell answered. He fished a flask from his pocket and gave it to the old man. "Plenty of catmel?"

"Finest ever, Cap'n." The blue eyes settled on Selby's face and Cromwell made the introductions.

"My new second mate," he explained.

"Second mate?"

"Business is growing," Cromwell said. "Might add another ship to the line before long."

"Real profit in pelts, eh?"

"No, as a matter of fact, the market's falling off," Cromwell answered quickly. "Might have to adjust the price a bit."

"It's harder to get 'em now," Simon returned. "We have to go deeper into the mountains. Makes 'em more dear, of course."

"The price is governed by the market, what the buyer will pay," Cromwell declared.

"You can't sell 'em if you haven't got 'em," Simon answered shrewdly. The blue eyes came back to Selby's face and settled there. "Welcome to Engo, Mr. Selby. It's good to see a new face."

"Good to see a new world," he answered.

Simon chuckled. "No one ever said that about Engo before."

"It doesn't look that bad."

The old man shook his head. "You wouldn't say that, not if you saw it when the winds howl out of the Kavu mountains and the flood rains come, or in the season of orange heat. You wouldn't like it at all, would he, Cap'n?"

"I suspect he wouldn't," Cromwell replied drily.

"Like it or not, it's good to get on firm ground again," Selby said.

"Firm?" Simon cackled. "Wait'll the quakes hit."

Selby laughed. "Anything you haven't got?"

"Drouth," the old man replied promptly. "Always got plenty of water."

Selby gazed around and said innocently, "My folks used to know a family who had a couple of kids who came out here, a boy and a girl." He suppressed a flush, feeling that Simon's eyes suddenly had bored right through him, but otherwise the old man gave no sign of his thoughts.

"Boy and a girl, eh? Remember their names?"

"Gant was the family name," he explained. "I didn't know the children myself although I seem to recall that the boy was lame."

"That would be Lora and her brother David," Simon answered musingly.

"A crippled boy?" asked Cromwell. "I saw him over at the meadow once. He had a shaggy yellow dog, didn't he?"

"Name of Rok," Simon affirmed. "Davie brought him out as a puppy."

Selby asked casually, "How are they doing?"

"Lora's doing fine, a fine young woman," Simon declared. "She's taking care of young Johnny Sloan."

"Johnny Sloan?" he asked. "How about David?"

"Davie?" The blue eyes grew still and deep and inscrutable. "Young Davie is dead."

"Dead?" Selby felt a slight shock.

"Died in the season of orange heat," the old man said.

Five

ALEK SELBY trudged slowly across the muddy field of bulla grass, his storm jacket wrapped tightly around him to shut out the piercing wind that blew down from the Kavu mountains. Clouds swirled overhead in slow motion, threatening rain, and the muted sigh that arose from the tossing agora trees mingled with the deeper roar of the river.

A world of sound and motion, he thought. It was totally unlike anything he'd ever imagined. Cromwell had told him that Simon welcomed the cloudy

nights because then he didn't have to look up into a starless firmament.

"He feels less lonely," Cromwell said.

Once he paused and looked back. The Cosmic Wind appeared like what it was -- a decrepit tramper huddled on a muddy flat, looking more like a scarred derelict than a freighter which had reached a hundred stars. He found the sight strangely depressing. Cromwell had postponed trading because of the threatened storm, now was closeted with Snorkel over a chess board; and old Simon had returned to his shack.

As Selby moved ahead again, his thoughts were mixed. The boy Cromwell had seen was David Gant; the limp and the hair color proved that. And the dog. Now David was dead. "Died in the season of orange heat," Simon had said. For all practical purposes, his job was finished. Then what drove him toward the village? Why the turmoil in his mind? Lora Gant, he thought. He was curious to see this girl who had sacrificed her freedom in an effort to protect her brother. Too, he recognized an urge to learn more about David, and about the power so feared that it would cause the government of three thousand planets to send an expedition across the galaxy to murder a ten-year-old boy.

Simon had balked when he'd asked where the girl lived.

"Over there somewhere," he said, gesturing toward the purple mountains. Then the old man's eyes had frosted and Selby knew that further questioning was useless. His walk to the village was purely exploratory, yet he sensed an underlying hope.

He returned his thoughts to David.

Were there others like him? It seemed scarcely credible, yet it seemed equally unlikely that nature would take this single fling into the unknown. Hallam Vogel had guessed that there might be one or two per generation, a figure that covered three thousand planets. How about Henry Fong? Anna LeMay? Were they beyonds? Or had their paranormal reputations been conjured in the minds of people like Philip Wig to enhance their own power?

What would Wig do now that David Gant was dead? The question jolted him. Admission of the boy's death would cost the executor the victory he had gained in carrying his case over the director's head to Ewol Strang, for Selby had scant doubt but that Wig had done just that. It would cost him power, prestige, his chance to seize the director's chair. if he admitted David Gant was dead.

Selby pondered that. How would his own statement stand against Wig's denial? He'd need witnesses, he reflected. Lora Gant? How about the other boy, Johnny Sloan? Certainly two ten-year-olds trapped on a world like this would have been fast friends. But would Johnny talk? Would anyone talk? Would anyone believe them if they did talk? That was the real problem, he thought.

He looked up as he came to the first cabin. The log siding was crude, chinked with mud or cement, heavy with wet, green slime that spoke of the torrential rains. He gazed around at the other cabins. No smoke came from the chimneys, nor did he detect any sign of life. Aside from a crude wheelbarrow leaning against one wall, he saw no tools or equipment.

Dead, the village was dead, he thought. But if so, where did the exiles live? There must be several hundred at least, judging from the amount and kind of equipment and supplies Cromwell delivered. Were they all scattered throughout the Kavu mountains? Perhaps he could put that question to old Simon. Even as the thought occurred, he knew he couldn't. The blue eyes had grown too implacable at his last question.

Slogging along the village street, it occurred to him that some of the cabins might be occupied; perhaps his progress was being watched -- his mind read! If so, his disguise as a crew member was a hollow bit of deception. Probably Simon had seen through it already and had alerted the others. That could account for the deserted village. How much information could he get? The question perturbed him.

He came to the end of the village and paused, realizing the roar from the river had grown louder. Now it masked the wind, filling the sky with thunder. Peering ahead, he discerned a meadow lush with bulla grass; the sound came from there. That's where Cromwell had seen the boy, he thought. His eyes swept it. Like the village, it was deserted.

Off to one side he glimpsed a whiteness through the trees and realized it must be the graveyard. Casting a last glance at the meadow, he started toward it. Hallam Vogel had stated that the cemetery served as the basis for the census: the number exiled less the number of grave markers yielded the population figure -- a grim system, to Selby's mind.

He discovered a path through the forest and followed it, noting the mud was barren of footprints, both animal and human. And yet it was a trail; as such, it served a purpose. He drew his jacket closer, wishing he'd worn a hat to ward off the dripping water.

At the edge of the cemetery he halted, eyeing the rows of water-worn boulders used to mark the graves. They gleamed an odd pinkish-white under the sullen sky. He looked slowly around. What an incredibly lonely place. To be buried here, on the single planet of the most remote star in the galaxy...He shivered.

Drawing closer to the graves, he saw that each stone was crudely inscribed with a name and the dates of birth and death, and that was all. A graveyard without flowers, with no hint of care...The dripping trees, the sullen overcast and muddy pools from which the bulla grass grew -- the sight depressed him.

Walking slowly along what seemed to be the newest row, he gazed at the names. Kondar Nord, GY 3138-3180; Alma Goleck, Joel Bromar...Name after name, each with its year of birth and death, each a mute record of a being exiled to a bleak world, dying unheralded save perhaps by his miserable fellow exiles. Torn Ezbar, Marita White...

He came to the end of the row and stopped abruptly, gazing down at a stone. David Gant, GY 3170-3180. So, David Gant was dead. It came to him as a surprise that he'd held doubts, and immediately realized it was because of the timing. Had David lived, the exiles would have come under intense scrutiny and persecution -- Wig would have seen to that.

He paused, thinking his logic faulty. Simon couldn't have known of Wig, at least not before their arrival. Or had David sensed Cromwell's presence in the meadow. If so, the exiles might have expected someone like Wig to appear. No, that logic wasn't too strong either. David had simply died, just as the others here had died. But now...? He wondered what the executor would do.

Wig couldn't admit defeat. At the same time, his warrant of execution named David specifically; the director had told him that. Now the warrant was just so much paper. But would Wig try to create a pk? Vogel had suggested he might. Selby gazed at the stone uneasily. David Gant, wherever you are you're better off, he thought.

The hair at the back of his neck prickled and he stiffened, aware that whatever had alerted him had come from neither eye nor ear. He waited, senses attuned. Somehow, in a way he did not understand, he felt a sense of presence, not danger exactly, but the feeling of being watched. He'd experienced the feeling before, and related it to his telepathic sense, as he'd come to think of it. But he'd never felt it as strongly as now.

Turning slowly, he detected a slight movement out of the corner of his eye -- a figure watching him from the edge of the forest. Somehow he knew it was a young woman or girl, and he knew she was alone. That was the damnable thing: to know without knowing how he knew. Through what sensory cues did the knowledge come? It disturbed him that he didn't know.

It struck him that the other must be a telepath and he tried to mask his mind, at the same time turning slowly to avoid causing alarm. He shifted his

body around farther. It was a girl! She began to retreat.

"Don't go, please," he called.

She hesitated, then turned back, waiting as he approached her. Medium height, slender, with cool brown hair framing an oval face -- his eyes took in the details.

"I'm from the Cosmic Wind, my first visit," he explained. "I was just looking around."

"In the graveyard?" she asked scornfully.

"The white stones attracted my attention and I came to see them." Could she read the evasion? The thought made him uncomfortable.

She said disdainfully, "They are records of the inhumanity of your government."

"I'll grant you that," he answered quietly.

"Does it satisfy you to see all our dead?"

"It grieves me," he replied. "You're not fair. You don't even know me."

"I know you well enough," she said coldly.

"Selby, Alek Selby is the name, and you're still not fair."

"No?" She tossed her head in a way that made her appear very feminine. Her dark eyes flashed. "You represent a government mad with power, mad with fear, driven to destroy everyone and everything it doesn't understand. Unthinking, unfeeling, cowardly." She stomped her foot.

He regarded her gravely. "I understand how you feel."

"Do you?" she demanded.

"I'll grant the injustice, but that doesn't hold for everyone," he said. She looked coolly at him. "I suppose you're an exception?"

"I try to be."

"Next you're going to tell me you're just a crewman?"

"Well, I'm supposed to be." He grinned at her.

"Why are you here?"

He studied her, pushing back the thought that she was lovely, seeking a suitable answer. Evasion was useless. In the end he told her the truth. "I'm with SocAd, checking on the rumor of a boy pk."

Her chin tilted upward. "Department 404?"

"General culture," he corrected, surprised that she should know of SocAd's secret police; the knowledge was restricted to upper levels.

"Are you satisfied?" she asked bitterly.

"I'm extremely sorry." He eyed her soberly. "You're Lora Gant, aren't you?"

"Yes." She returned his stare.

A swirl of rain came and he glanced at the angry clouds before bringing back his gaze. "I'm sorry to be intruding this way but I had no choice. I go where I'm sent."

"And do what they tell you?"

"Yes."

"What if my brother had been alive?"

"I would report the fact."

"And then?"

"I don't know," he replied uncomfortably. "It would be out of my hands."

She said icily, "You don't know? Do you believe they would have sent you here without some diabolical reason? They can't even let us alone on Engo." Her voice rose. "What kind of people are you?"

"I'm trying to be fair," he protested.

"Fair? Here to persecute a ten-year-old boy and you call yourself fair?"

"I wasn't here to persecute him," he replied defensively. "I came to verify whether or not he was a beyond."

"What difference would it make unless you intended doing something about it?" she flared. "Maybe not you personally, but someone, and you know it."

"Perhaps, but it makes no difference now." He stared over the graveyard, wishing there was something he could say, some way of letting her know that he wished the telepaths no ill will, and that he regretted the treatment given them. He wished he could warn her of Philip Wig. My God, when Wig found out that David Gant was dead...

"Who is Philip Wig?" Her question came tonelessly, bringing his eyes back with a start. Her face, white in the failing light, was turned up to him, her dark eyes searching his face. "Who is Philip Wig?" she repeated quietly.

"I forgot, you're a telepath."

"Of course."

"Philip Wig is the executor of Department 404," he said.

"And he's coming here?"

"Yes."

"What can he do with David dead?"

He said harshly, "That won't stop Philip Wig."

"He's that dangerous?"

"Yes," he answered simply.

She asked quietly, "When will he arrive?"

"Soon, I believe. I'm not certain."

"Thank you," she said. Turning, she drew her cape more tightly around her and hurried back into the shadow of the trees.

"Wait," he called. She gave no sign that she had heard and he started after her, then stopped, watching until she vanished from sight. She'd read his mind; then she must know how he felt, the conflict inside him over the thing he was doing. The knowledge brought a glow of satisfaction. Now she couldn't condemn him, not entirely. In time she might even be able to understand.

And he'd warned her of Philip Wig, or at least she'd plucked the warning from his mind, which amounted to the same thing. And she knew what kind of a man Philip Wig was. Now all the telepaths would know. He felt a deep sense of satisfaction, thinking that Wig might find his job more difficult than he'd anticipated.

He became conscious that the rain was swirling down, the sky darkening. The tops of the agora trees swayed angrily against the clouds and from the Kavu mountains the howl of the wind grew louder. But he didn't mind. Looking in the direction the girl had gone, he started back toward the ship.

It felt good to walk in the rain.

Selby fretted as hurricane storms confined him to the ship. Driven by savage winds out of the Kavu mountains, the rains flooded the forest, and the sluggish-moving Dimbo river turned into a raging torrent that spilled over the meadows. The field where the Cosmic Wind lay became a lake. Between flurries he caught glimpses of Simon's shack, now knee-deep in water. But of the old man, he saw nothing.

He wondered what Simon did with his long days. Was he a hermit, or did he live in what Hallam Vogel called "the company of minds?" It was quite possible that the old man wasn't really alone, but was in constant communication with the other exiles -- somewhat like a radio network, he thought. But that was a question he couldn't ask.

Abruptly the winds died and the cold came; the water turned to ice on the trees, bending and snapping the branches. The field became a frozen lake. Staring through the star window, he thought it inconceivable that human beings could live on such a planet. He fretted over the girl, although he realized it was foolish. She'd undoubtedly experienced a score of such storms. Still, people did die.

Finally he swung toward Cromwell, who was hunched over a chess game with Snorkel. "How can anyone survive?" he demanded.

Cromwell glanced up, his eyes filled with understanding. "Many of them don't."

"Is it often this bad?"

"Worse," declared Cromwell. "Wait till the moon gets closer to perigee and the quakes come."

"Just like this baby in retrofire," Snorkel commented.

Selby disregarded him. "How long does this usually last?"

"Who knows?" The captain shrugged. "Hours, days, weeks..."

"Weeks," he exclaimed dismally.

Cromwell smiled knowingly. "See the Gant girl?"

"Just before the storm," he answered reluctantly.

"Nice looking, eh?"

Selby flushed. "What makes you ask that?"

Cromwell chuckled. "You've been pacing the cabin like a caged gundal, young fellow. You can't wait to get outside. The same thing happened to Snorky near forty years ago. We'd put down on..."

"I just want to finish the job," he broke in defensively.

"I thought it was finished," Cromwell observed innocently. "The boy's dead. I was planning to lift off as soon as the weather lets up."

"Lift off?" he echoed hollowly. "I still have things to do."

"I thought you'd find something." The chuckle came again and Cromwell looked back at the board.

The storm lasted five days, followed by an intense heat which quickly melted the ice and added to the flooding. The field was a quagmire. Although the mud was ankle-deep, Selby hurriedly left the ship.

Trudging toward the village, he realized it was as lifeless as ever, for no smoke rose from the crude chimneys. The scene held the stillness of death. He went to the graveyard and then to the meadow, finding both deserted.

In desperation, he returned to the field and asked Simon, "Where is everybody?"

The keen blue eyes fixed him. "Can't rightly say."

"But they're all right?"

"They're all right," the old man assured him. The answer told Selby that Simon did, in fact, keep in touch with the others, a point he logged in his mental file.

"Where are they?" he asked.

Simon's eyes softened. "Most of them have spread out, moved into the hills. They're pretty much scattered."

"Then they don't live in the village?"

Simon shook his head. "Mostly they stay here just long enough to drop the pelts they've gathered."

"How about Lora Gant? When will she be back?"

"Can't rightly say."

"Then how can I find her?" he asked.

"You can't." Simon turned away and his voice floated back. "But she might find you."

She might find you. Simon's words rang in his mind as he watched the old man disappear into the shack. But would she want to find him? Or was he just another outsider, an agent of a brutal, tyrannical government which had cast her out? What did she think, now that she had glimpsed his mind? He wished he knew.

But at least he'd made some progress with Simon, he reflected. If the old man still evaded his questions, the answers he did give were more friendly. Because Simon had read his mind? Or had he talked with Lora? In either case, Selby felt that his status had changed. True, he was still the outsider, and yet there was a certain acceptance. He took that as a favorable token.

Returning from another fruitless search, he pondered the strangeness of this world. All other inhabited worlds had a past -- a history, traditions, customs built during long ages; all other worlds had a future -- common goals, aspirations, a knowledge of continuity. But not Engo. It was a world that held no heritage, showered no promises, offered nothing but the bleak nowness -- wind, rain, snow, heat, fever. The giant agora trees wept perpetually, symbolic of its tragedy, and the tragedy of the people exiled there, he thought. He gazed at the sky, wondering when he would see Lora again.

Four days later he found the boy.

An orange quarter moon was rising in a clear sky when Selby reached the meadow at dusk. The wind, dying in the late afternoon, left the air still and moist. It reminded him of the tropic beaches of Amador.

He mopped his brow and removed his jacket, conscious of the dull roar of the river. It had fallen as rapidly as it had risen, now was a sluggish giant creeping through the forest and across open stretches of bulla grass. Here and there he caught glimpses of the dark water. An empty world, he thought, and felt a pang.

He was turning away when his eye caught a figure sitting on a low knoll, scarcely discernible in the dim light. Lora! He caught his breath, watching, then realized it was not a girl at all, but a boy; he didn't know how the knowledge came. For an instant he remained absolutely motionless, staring into the gloom.

"Hello."

Selby was startled by the greeting, for the boy's back was to him. "Hello," he answered, then felt an instant panic. The boy hadn't spoken! It had only seemed that way in his mind. And he hadn't answered, not with his voice. He had only thought the answer, the same as he had received it. The realization staggered him. That was...telepathy! He wanted to shout a denial.

His thoughts raced as he moved forward. The boy must be Johnny Sloan. Had he, perhaps warned by Simon, spoken telepathically as a trap? It seemed scarcely plausible in one so young. And yet...

The boy turned, looking up at him as he reached the knoll. Silently they regarded each other. He knows, Selby thought, and wondered why this time he felt no panic. At the same time he realized he was unable to decipher anything of the boy's thoughts, not even the formless impressions he so often got. But one thing he did know: behind that youthful face was knowledge.

"I didn't expect to find anyone here," Selby said.

"Not many people come," the boy answered gravely.

"You're Johnny Sloan, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Scrutinizing him, Selby was more certain than ever that the boy did know, but how much did he know? Impulsively he asked, "How did you know I was behind you?"

"I felt you coming."

"Felt?"

"You can feel things too," the boy said.

"Not very well, I'm afraid."

"You could, if you wanted."

"How do you know that?"

"It's in your mind."

"Telepathy?" Selby uttered the word slowly, watching the other's face.

"Of course."

Selby sat on the knoll beside him, wondering at the strangeness of the meeting. "I never really thought I was a telepath," he said finally.

"Well, you're more of a transmitter."

"Transmitter?" Selby sat straighter, trying to recall what he knew of

the term.

"Maybe you can't receive so well because you've never learned, but you sure can transmit," Johnny insisted.

Selby asked dubiously, "I can?"

"Sure, loud and clear."

"Can't all telepaths do that?"

"Not like that," he denied. "Most of them have to be close, or know a person real well. A transmitter just puts himself into another person's mind. That's what Mr. Simon says."

"Is that what I do?"

The boy nodded and Selby looked at the river, considering the implications. If Johnny were right, his mind had been an open book to both Simon and Lora, or to any telepath in the area. Perhaps every thought he'd had since coming to Engo was known. He hadn't fooled anyone, not for a minute.

"Perhaps that's not so good," he murmured.

"It's real good," Johnny asserted. "Transmitters can even put their thoughts into people's minds when they don't want them."

"You mean make them believe something they don't want to believe."

"Mr. Simon says good transmitters can."

"And I'm a good transmitter?"

"Real good," the boy answered.

"Most people are afraid to talk about it," he observed.

"Not here, Mr. Selby."

Selby glanced up sharply. "Did that come from my mind, too -- my name?" The boy nodded and he went on, "Then you must know who I am, where I'm from?" He made it a question.

"Yes," Johnny answered simply.

"You're not afraid?"

"You're all right."

"How do you know that?"

"From your mind, Mr. Selby."

"You were David's friend, weren't you?"

"Davie died," Johnny said, "but you know that."

"I'm sorry," Selby said. "Where did he live?"

"Over toward the hills." He gestured vaguely toward a wooded rise beyond the cemetery.

"I hear his sister is taking care of you. Did she mention that she met me?" The boy nodded without answering and Selby felt disappointed. When the silence continued, he asked, "Was it true that David could make sticks float in the air?"

"Sticks, rocks, dogs -- almost anything," Johnny replied.

"Did he do it often?"

Johnny shook his head. "No, only at times. It's a lot of work."

"Work?"

"Concentrating," he explained.

Selby said slowly, "I've never heard of anyone else who could do that. Have you?"

Johnny gazed silently at him. "No," he said finally, "I never have."

"I wouldn't mention it, if anyone asks."

"I won't, Mr. Selby."

"It's dangerous," he said, trying to push the point home.

Johnny nodded gravely. "I know that."

In the silence that followed, Selby felt a doubt nibble at his mind. The boy was Johnny Sloan. Aside from his admission, there was no mistaking the physical description. Yet Hallam Vogel had described Johnny as not overly bright and minimally telepathic. This boy didn't fit that description at all. Could Vogel have been mistaken? It seemed highly doubtful.

He glanced at the boy again. Although he was no judge of telepathic capability, he knew this boy was bright. It was there in his voice, his manner, in the knowledge that lay deep behind those youthful eyes. And in his insight. Something was terribly wrong, but what?

He started to ask another question when the boy suddenly cocked his head in a listening attitude, then leaped to his feet. "I have to go, Mr. Selby."

He darted away before Selby could utter a word, vanishing among the trees. Selby started as a huge form leaped from the deep bulla grass a few yards away and bounded after him.

He wasn't certain, but in the dim light of the quarter moon it appeared like a shaggy yellow dog.

Six

ALEK SELBY was nine years old when an event occurred which was to have a profound effect on all the remaining years of his life. Later, he looked back on it with emotions compounded of fear, excitement, doubt, and wonder; but no word of it escaped his lips for many years to come. The danger was too great.

On the day of the "happening" -- as he came to think of it -- he was at the space terminal in Mekla with two friends, watching the passengers stream aboard a great starliner. Altair Queen -- the name was emblazoned in silver on the dark bow which he knew formed the navigation bridge.

Small orbital ferries buzzed like hopper insects in the background, and freighters plied their trade with monotonous regularity, their hulls crusted and scarred from strange planetary surfaces. But the starliner was the one to watch. Sleek and proud, it looked like what it was -- a ship that girded the galaxy.

"Its first stop's in the Mirach system," Alek said importantly. He knew because his father had told him. Someday he would go to the Mirach system too, he promised himself, and to Algol, Vega, Mizar, Sol, and a hundred other star systems he could name. He'd always come back to Amador, of course. Basking in the yellow-white sun of Altair, it was the most beautiful planet in the Federation, his father assured him.

He added musingly, "But each man thinks his own planet best."

The last passengers were boarding the Altair Queen when Alek's name screamed in his mind.

"Alek! Alek!" His mother's stricken cry came to him with numbing shock and he jerked upright, his heart hammering, cold with the knowledge that some terrible thing had happened. What thing? He felt the cold clutch of fear, then the call came again and jolted him to action.

"Gotta go," he yelled. Before his companions could answer, he turned and sped away, cutting across the broad avenues toward his home. He ran, fighting the fear that numbed his mind. The call! His mother couldn't have called, not over the dozen avenues that lay between his home and the spaceport. But she had, and he'd heard her! And the despair! Driven by a nameless dread, his legs pumped faster as he came within view of the towering apartment where he lived.

His mother looked up from the couch when he entered, her eyes glazed. "Your father's dead," she said dully.

"Dead?" He stared at her, feeling an awful emptiness.

"The Aragon has been destroyed."

"How do you know?" he asked desperately. Despite the certainty behind her words, he felt a touch of wonder. The Aragon, on which his father was chief astrogator, was presently somewhere in the Fomalhaut system, wouldn't be back for weeks.

"I know," she whispered. Then she put her face in her hands and wept.

The news was made public a week later: the Aragon, out of Amador, had

vanished in space shortly after lift-off from Gull, second planet of the white sun Fomalhaut. A single distress call had been received shortly before it was due to enter the time stream; and then silence.

How had his mother known? He was afraid to ask. More fearful, how had he heard her? Thinking of it, he realized there had been other occasions when things "just came to mind," but never so clearly as the last time. Usually they were scarcely more than impressions, quite vaguely defined; but his mother's call had come sharp and clear, even to the tone of her anguish. But how had she heard?

He pondered that often and long during the grief-stricken days that followed, sensing that it was something he shouldn't talk about. Occasionally, as in a nightmare, he thought that it had never happened, that it was just his imagination. Yet he knew it wasn't. In the end, he pushed it from his mind, yet the questions remained, deep in his subconscious: How had she known? How had he heard her?

Later, when his mother had partially recovered from her grief, she called him to her and asked, "Why did you come running home that day?"

"I heard you call." He looked wonderingly at her.

"Heard me?" A frightened look came into her face.

"I was at the space terminal watching the Altair Queen," he explained.

"And you heard me?" she whispered.

"My name -- you called my name," he answered. "I knew something was wrong."

Then she gathered him in, holding him tight. "Don't ever tell anyone that," she said, in a scarcely audible voice. "It's dangerous, dangerous..."

"Like...you knowing?"

"Yes." Her answer came in a hushed voice. "Don't ever tell anyone, Alek."

"I won't," he promised. He felt something of her fear.

They never spoke of it again, but it lay like a dark secret between them for the short time she had to live. At times he awoke in the night, suddenly and without reason, feeling his heart beat and his hands perspiring. He would be standing again at the space terminal watching the Altair Queen while the call, "Alek, Alek," drummed through his mind. Then the question would rush back: How had he heard her? No answer came; he had just heard.

Following his father's death, his mother withdrew from the world, suddenly wan and thin, her cheeks hollowed, and within a few months she died. Alek went to live with his aunt and uncle, who was a minor government official with SocAd. After a while his life was almost normal again. But he never forgot his mother, or the tall, spare man who had vanished with the Aragon, and who no more would tell him of the distant ports of space.

Alek Selby was seventeen when he entered the College of Public Administration on a scholarship earned through his exceptionally high grades. It was a distinct honor, he knew, and one that brought him much envy, for his future career was assured. Graduates automatically went into public service, and almost as automatically climbed through the ranks to positions of prestige and power.

"You form a select group," the professor said, on the first day of class. Alek had taken the tribute as a reference to the high scholarship standards necessary to gain admission to the college, but later learned the words meant something more. Scholarship was but one facet; beyond that were the seemingly innocuous tests which had screened students deemed exceptionally high in leadership, loyalty, and the implicit belief that the great mass of people were to be governed, but that only a select few should govern. Alek didn't believe that, but he answered the questions the way he thought they should be answered.

As time went on, he learned more of his own future. The power structure

into which he would fit was simple. The Emperor, elected every ten years by the High Council from among its own members, was the Federation's undisputed leader. Each council member represented one of the Federation's ten sectors. Governmental areas within each sector were apportioned among nine administrations, each headed by a director. Although a sector government required tens of millions of people, the top positions were reserved for those who came up through the College of Public Administration.

At times Alek felt twinges of guilt. Not that he considered himself less smart than his fellow students, but he often found that he knew answers almost before the questions were asked. Although he never heard words (not like the cry "Alek! Alek!" that had rung so clearly in his mind so many years before), he did receive impressions that guided him through his tests and verbal exchanges. At times they were almost overpowering. He thought of them as "hunches," yet remembered his mother's advice, and never spoke of them.

In Psy One, Alek learned that telepathy was a mutant trait, threatening to the public welfare because it violated the rights of privacy guaranteed each citizen. Accordingly, following enactment of Public Law 2435-T2-M, each sector set aside a planet on which telepaths "could enjoy their liberty and pursuit of life unhampered by others." In the case of his own sector, the planet was Engo, which turned about the Giza sun.

Soon afterward Alek had a frightening experience. Driven by a curiosity to know more about telepathy, he went to the main library and looked up the subject in the file. To his astonishment, there were scores of references in tape, film, and book form.

Jotting down some notes, he started toward the books. He'd scarcely reached them when an elderly man brushed past him. "Stay away from them; get out of here, quick," he murmured.

Alek turned, but the man was already gone, moving down between the stacks. He started to turn back when he glimpsed a second man watching him from the other end of the row. Alek felt a sudden fright and started to tremble, at the same time aware of an alarm sounding loudly in his brain. He started toward the main entrance, walking faster as he drew near it.

"Wait, boy!" The shout came from behind him and he broke into a run, darting through the doorway. In another moment he was swallowed by the crowds.

He never forgot the occasion. Later, he learned that the "searchers," a special branch of police assigned to mutant activities, kept watch on that section of the library as a means of detecting young telepaths; the tapes, film and books, in fact, were kept there for that purpose.

Who was the man who had warned him? He never learned.

Five years later, in Psy Four (restricted to those selected for service with the Social Administration), he learned of the theoretical possibility of the beyond, a form of mutation which manifested itself in clairvoyance, precognition, psychokinesis, teleportation, and other phenomena contrary to the laws of psychic mechanics.

"Alek! Alek!" The memory of the scream in his mind came back as he learned of this new kind of paranormal. Had his mother been clairvoyant? Was he a telepath? No, he denied fiercely. He had never read minds, couldn't. The formless impressions he received simply were intuition. (But it wasn't true; he knew it.)

Following graduation, Alek moved along a predestined course that took him step by step through the maze that constituted SocAd, the Social Administration. Inasmuch as Sector Three's nearly three hundred planets were spread throughout a hundred star systems, he found himself going to many of the worlds of which he once had dreamed.

For several years he was moved from planet to planet in seemingly random fashion until he had the entire operation at his fingertips. His work was good; he knew it. The same sense that had served him in school served him now,

only better. Although his awareness of others increased, at times uncomfortably so, the thing that lay within his own mind baffled him more than ever.

Following a brief tour as regional head for the three planets of the sun Blenda, he was recalled to Amador and appointed principal investigator on the staff of Sector Director Korl Smithson.

Alek had but one bad moment. That was when he found he had to submit to a probe of his psyche and emotional stability as prerequisite to the job.

"Relax, relax..." For months afterward he felt the dread as he lay on the couch under the soft light, listening to Psymaster Hallam Vogel's calming voice as he fell into the oblivion of deep sleep.

His first question on waking had been propelled by a terrible fear: "How did I do?"

"Fine," the psymaster answered, "you're as stable as they come."

Despite the psymaster's assurance, Selby never quite managed to rid himself of the fear. Was he a telepath? He didn't know, never knew until that day over five years later when a boy on a remote planet thought "Hello," and he had answered.

And strangely, when he knew, the terror that had followed him throughout all the years vanished.

Awakened to the sound of shouts and scurrying feet, Selby bolted upright in his bunk and swung his feet to the floor. Reaching for his clothes, he felt his heart beginning to pound.

"Close the hatches!" Cromwell's thin, piping voice came over the speakers, high with excitement. Close the hatches! Selby realized that for whatever reason, the captain was rushing to get the Cosmic Wind into space. Dressing hurriedly, he emerged from his cabin as Grimpy turned into the corridor. Selby caught his arm.

"What's happening?" he demanded.

"Ship coming in." The engineer shook his arm loose. "Gotta get to the engine room." He rushed away before Selby could question him further. That would be Philip Wig, Selby thought grimly. He hadn't had as much time as he'd hoped for. Hurrying down the passageway, he hoped Simon would alert the exiles. Johnny Sloan had to stay out of sight.

Cromwell was shouting orders into the speaker when he reached the bridge. At sight of Selby he swung around grimly. "We're preparing for lift off in fifteen minutes," he announced.

"Why the rush?" Selby kept his voice calm.

"Simon tracked a ship moving into orbit. Must be a patrol."

"That won't affect you."

"No?" The captain's voice betrayed his uncertainty.

"You're here on official business on orders of the director of SocAd," Selby said. "There's nothing to worry over."

"Just the same, I'd feel safer in space."

"You can't lift off," he countered. "Our job's not finished."

Cromwell lifted his eyes. "The boy's dead, isn't he?"

"We need verification."

"Of what?" he demanded skeptically.

"Of the boy's powers," Selby stated. "The director demands positive proof of whether or not he was a beyond. We haven't got that yet."

"I saw him," Cromwell declared. "Aside from that, Simon says he was."

"That's not enough."

The captain thrust out his chin. "How do I know the director cleared this with the patrols? How do I know they won't arrest us all, confiscate the ship? I don't want to wind up on a detention planet. No, sir, not at my age."

"You won't," he promised. "I'll vouch for that."

"I don't know." Cromwell rubbed his hands uncertainly.

Selby said, "You can't lift off. You have to stay until the job's completed. If you don't, I can't guarantee your immunity. That was part of the bargain."

Cromwell stiffened. "Is that a threat, Mr. Selby?"

He shook his head. "Not a bit. I'm just telling you how the director would view it. You don't have to worry about the patrol."

Cromwell gazed through the star window, his jaw muscles working convulsively. "All right," he said finally, "but you'd better be right."

"I am right," Selby declared, with more confidence than he felt. Acting on the direct orders of Ewol Strang, Wig might feel confident enough to override the director. At the very least he could make things extremely unpleasant. "How soon will they land?" he asked.

"Simon didn't say," the captain answered. "He just flashed word of the contact. I'd better ask."

"I'll talk with him," he decided. He started to turn away when the deck lurched under his feet and a low rumble ran through the ship. His first thought was that Grimp had started the engines, but then the vibration died and the rumbling ceased. "What was that," he asked worriedly.

"Land tide," Cromwell explained. "They'll get stronger as the moon approaches perigee."

"I can hardly wait," he answered drily.

He found Simon sitting in his shack, facing the door, and had the disconcerting impression that the old man had been expecting him. Simon's eyes, deep and blue, yet strangely opaque, settled on his face.

"I hear we're going to have visitors," he said.

Simon nodded without changing expression. "I've been talking with 'em, ship designated as SA-456P."

He smiled faintly. "That's a SocAd ship."

"I figured it was."

"When do you believe it might land?"

"Two or three hours," Simon answered reflectively. "They'll orbit once before starting down."

"Did they mention any names?"

"I talked with a Captain Welker. He requested landing information and weather."

Selby studied him and reached a decision. "I believe the name of the man in charge is Philip Wig, of the police arm," he explained.

"I've heard the name," Simon acknowledged.

"Department 404," Selby said. He watched, seeing no change in the old man's expression.

Simon said laconically, "I'm not surprised."

"He's coming to get information on David Gant."

"I know."

"You know?" As soon as he asked, Selby realized that of course the old man knew; he'd just read it in his mind. The thought was disconcerting. How did one talk with a telepath? Simon's inscrutable face didn't make it any easier. He pushed the perturbing thought aside and said, "You won't find him very sympathetic."

"Don't expect to," Simon admitted. His eyes lost some of their depth and Selby fancied they twinkled. He wondered if the old man were laughing at him.

Finally he said desperately, "I've got to talk to Lora Gant. Won't you tell me where she is, how I can reach her?" If Simon were reading his mind, he would know the urgency, he thought. The floor lurched gently underfoot; the old man didn't appear to notice.

Giving no indication that he knew the turmoil in Selby's mind, Simon said drily, "We haven't much in the way of street directories."

"You're a telepath," Selby charged. "You can reach her."

"Probably." Simon nodded agreeably.

"Tell her I'm going to the meadow, will be waiting," he urged. "What I have to tell her is important."

"She probably already knows," Simon suggested.

Selby swallowed desperately. "Tell her anyway," he pleaded.

"Better wear a jacket," Simon counseled. "The wind's coming up something fierce."

She wasn't there.

Selby knew it the moment he reached the meadow and looked out over the whipping tops of the bulla grass toward the sullen river. He felt a sharp disappointment. Had Simon sent the message? He felt certain of it, just as he felt certain that the old man had probed his mind, knew all about Philip Wig. And about himself. He shifted uncomfortably, wondering how the exiles might regard a hidden telepath, particularly one who worked for SocAd and had come to investigate one of their kind?

He shivered and drew his jacket closer, listening to the rising wind. Its bite penetrated to the marrow. Idly he watched the clouds tumble across the sky. Not that he was a telepath, he thought. Not really, but the capability lay there, deep in his mind, waiting only to be developed. "You could, if you wanted," Johnny had said, and he knew it was true. But he'd always hidden it, denied it, believing it a stigma rather than a gift.

Now he wasn't so certain. Since coming to Engo and talking with the exiles, he'd found them much like anyone else. If they were probing his mind, they never let on. Yet he could understand the fear of normals when suddenly deprived of the secrecy of their thoughts. It left a man naked to the world, without a single defense. Excuses, rationalizations, lies, hidden greeds and lust -- all were as transparent as glass.

He thought of the strange boy he'd encountered in the meadow. Vogel had tested him and found him of average IQ, and low on the telepathic scale. But he wasn't that way at all. He'd proved extremely bright, with all his senses attuned to the world. Yet how could the psymaster have been so wrong? The question puzzled him.

More important, what did Johnny think of him? "You're all right," Johnny had said. Had the boy, in that brief encounter, realized his true sympathies? It seemed unlikely, and yet he'd shown no hesitancy in answering questions. That implied trust, Selby decided. Perhaps the boy had probed him more fully than he suspected.

What did Lora Gant think of him? His thoughts went back to their meeting, reviewing each word, each nuance. She'd been hostile at first, but gradually had thawed; and she'd thanked him for his honesty regarding Philip Wig. Had her changed attitude come as a result of reading his mind?

Contemplating it, he became aware of a sense of presence and turned, glimpsing a slender figure moving toward him through the forest. Lora Gant! His heart began to pound and do crazy things as he moved to meet her.

"I'm glad you came," he said, as she drew close. The wind riffled her hair and gave her face a glow. She wore a jacket with her hands plunged deep into the pockets. He thought her lovely.

She paused a few steps away and regarded him gravely. "Simon said it was important."

"A SocAd ship's coming in," he answered. "I'm certain it's the executor, Philip Wig."

She watched him levelly. "What has that to do with me?"

"You have to take Johnny away."

"Why?"

"I told you before. Wig has too much at stake to let the investigation

drop because of your brother's death."

"He'd create a pk?"

"It's possible."

"He must hate us," she whispered fiercely.

"More likely he's thinking of his own future," he answered grimly.

"Is that the way they all think?"

"No." He shook his head.

"But they give him the power to do this sort of thing," she accused.

"He only had to reach one man on the High Council," he countered. "The director of SocAd doesn't feel that way at all. I'm certain of that. Neither does Hallam Vogel, the psymaster."

"Hallam Vogel." She uttered the name with loathing. "He sent us here."

"He was forced by law," he answered defensively.

"The law," she said scornfully. "Has he ever heard of justice?"

"I don't pretend that law and justice are the same," he replied. "And I'm certain Hallam Vogel doesn't either. I've known him a long time. He's not like you think. Neither is the director. The Wigs are few and far between."

"Why are you warning us?"

"I think you know the answer."

"We don't go around reading minds, not even here on Engo."

"Can you honestly say you haven't read mine?" he challenged.

She flushed and said, "Only when we first met. There's such a thing as survival, you know."

"Simon uses me like a public library," he countered.

"It's still survival."

"Do you trust me now?"

Her cool dark eyes met his. "Yes," she answered simply.

"Does Johnny?"

"Yes."

"He thinks I'm a telepath."

"Aren't you?" she asked archly.

"I don't know. At times I've believed so, but I certainly can't communicate like people do here," he explained. "I've never gotten more than formless impressions."

"Never?"

"Once," he admitted. Hesitantly, he told her of the incident that had occurred years before when his father was lost on the Aragon. "Nothing that stark has happened since," he finished. Gazing down at her, he saw she had cocked her head, a look of wonder in her eyes.

"Your mother was clairvoyant." She half-whispered the words, looking away into the distance.

"I've wondered."

"It seems almost certain, Alek."

He smiled at her use of his given name, all at once feeling better. "I thought it must be something like that," he admitted.

Her eyes came back to him. "It's a great gift," she said.

"More like a curse," he answered wryly.

"Only to your worlds, to the people who don't understand," she rebuked. She added bitterly, "To them we're mutants, freaks, some alien form of life. If your mother never revealed herself, it's because she knew that, Alek. That's why she warned you. Is Simon cursed? Is Johnny'? Do you believe I'm cursed?"

"Not at all," he interrupted. "I didn't mean that."

"What did you mean?" She pulled her jacket closer, brushing the hair from her face, a gesture that he thought made her appear very feminine.

"Cursed because of the treatment accorded them," he explained. "Like being exiled here on Engo."

"I'd rather be here, among my kind, than on any of your so-called civilized planets," she answered.

"I'm not fighting you." When she didn't answer, he said, "But that still doesn't change things. You have to take Johnny away, hide him until Wig leaves."

"He can't leave."

"Why not?" he demanded.

"I can't tell you that."

"I thought you trusted me?"

She studied him for a long moment before saying, "We know the danger. Someone's coming to take Johnny away, but he won't be here for several days."

"Take him away?" Caught by something in her tone, he eyed her sharply.

"From Engo," she murmured.

He stared at her with a sudden flash of insight. "Mr. Olaf?" he asked.

"He's helped us a lot, Alek."

"From what Wig says, I imagine he has," he replied drily. "Does he come often?"

"I've never seen him."

"Never?" Her answer surprised him.

"He makes his contacts through Simon," she explained.

"He can't come here," he objected. "Can't he meet Johnny at a safer place?"

"There are things keeping Johnny here," she said.

"What things?"

"Please don't ask, Alek."

"How can I help you if I don't know what's happening?" he demanded.

She said softly, "You can't help, not in this."

"I can try."

"No, please." She glanced at the sky. "I'd better go."

He laid a restraining hand on her arm. "When will I see you again?"

She turned her face up. "That's up to you."

"Except that I don't know where you live, or how to reach you, and Simon's not very talkative. He doesn't like to give out a girl's address."

"Simon's a dear," she said. A smile touched her lips. "You're a transmitter, remember?"

"Transmitter?" He echoed the word hollowly. "What good does it do to transmit if I can't hear the answers?"

"Transmitters are powerful people, Alek."

"Powerful?"

"It's not just the transmitting, it's the power to get into the minds of other people."

"So Johnny said."

"It's true," she insisted. "After what you told me of your mother..." She broke off, watching him speculatively.

"I'm not clairvoyant," he said grimly. "Don't think that."

"No, but there could be something in your genes." She regarded him gravely. "Simon once knew a transmitter so powerful he could cause a person to act against his own will. It could have been a case of telepathic hypnosis, or..."

"Or what?" he prompted.

"I don't know." She smiled slightly. "There are many things we don't know about ourselves, Alek."

He said soberly. "That power could be dangerous."

"In the wrong hands, yes."

"In anyone's hands," he declared.

"Not if the power were used for good," she denied.

"I'm not interested in that."

"What are you interested in, Alek?"

"Making you hear me." He looked down at her, smiling. "Do you believe I could do that?"

"You can try," she said. She turned before he could answer, hurrying back along the path through the woods. He restrained the impulse to follow, watching until she vanished. Humming happily, he started toward the field.

He could see the virtue in being a transmitter.

Seven

THE SocAd ship remained in orbit while the wind screamed across the planet's surface. Reaching nearly two hundred miles per hour, it tore huge branches from the agora trees and sent them spinning through the air. Shortly after the onset of the storm, the sky opened, hurling down a wall of water that sent the Dimbo raging over its banks and flooding the field.

Captain Cromwell battened all hatches when the storm broke. "It's going to be a real blow," he warned grimly.

Confined to the freighter, Selby fumed apprehensively. Had Lora reached home safely? The question haunted him. The storm had struck with appalling suddenness. He'd scarcely returned from the meadow when it roared out of the Kavu mountains with blasts that flattened the bulla grass and set the whole forest in motion. Debris, slamming against the metal plates, sent thudding jars throughout the ship's hull.

Are you all right? Are you all right? He concentrated on the question, hoping against hope that he really was the transmitter she had believed. But did he have the key? What was the secret? Lora, are you all right? The answering silence mocked him.

Cromwell caught his look of despair. "Might as well take it easy," he counseled. "Nothing you can do."

"At least it keeps the patrol ship in orbit," Snorkel supplied. "I like that."

"They'll come down sometime," Grimp uttered dolefully. He stared at Prim. "I have the unholy feeling I'm about to wind up on a detention planet."

"Don't say that," the purser snapped testily. "I'm a young man."

"You..., young?" Snorkel gave a nasal laugh.

The hours stretched out and still the wind howled. From time to time Selby felt the ship lurch crazily and knew it was from land tides as the orange moon rushed toward perigee. Now he knew why the graveyard grew.

Trying to sleep, he caught himself staring into the darkness, picturing Lora Gant's slender face framed in a cascade of dark brown hair, the soft, luminous eyes he couldn't hope to plumb. Finally sheer exhaustion overtook him and he sank into a stupor that was neither sleep nor wakefulness, but somewhere in the strange world between in which reality became mixed with hallucinated voices and sounds. His mind seemed to drift as if freed from his body.

"I'm all right, Alek." The words penetrated his consciousness with such clarity that he bolted upright in his bunk, listening, all his senses attuned to the inner world of his mind. He heard nothing but the storm. Yet the words had come, as plainly as he'd heard his mother's call on that long ago day when she'd witnessed his father's death. The message had been that clear.

Slowly he lay back again, staring into the darkness. She was safe! He knew that beyond the shadow of a doubt. Somehow she had heard his call, had answered. And he'd heard her! Listening to the wind shriek past the hull, his eyes grew heavy.

I'm a telepath, he thought; and then he slept.

The wind abated next morning and the sun rose in a cloudless sky. It was

one of those sudden transformations in weather which Selby was becoming to expect of the planet. Cromwell informed him that the SocAd ship would be forced to remain in orbit for another day while the water drained from the field.

"I don't mind the delay one bit," the captain said drily.

On the following morning Selby waited alongside the freighter as the SocAd ship came down. Unlike the Cosmic Wind, it was smooth and sleek, with an arrogant bow that bore the administration's insignia -- two hands clasped in friendship.

Descending gracefully under the power of null grays rather than reaction cones like those employed by the freighter, it settled to the field as gently as a feather.

A trim figure appeared in the hatch opening and came briskly down the ramp. His uniform designated him as the ship's captain. A tall, lanky lieutenant followed close behind. As Selby walked to meet them, he noted that neither was armed and took it as a good omen.

"I'm Alek Selby, of the director's staff," he greeted.

"Hirod Welker," the man in the captain's uniform acknowledged. He extended a hand, then introduced the tall officer behind him. "Lieutenant Stagg, my aide."

"Welcome to Engo," Selby said.

The captain gazed around critically. "Must have been quite a blow," he observed.

Selby grinned. "They tell me it gets worse."

Welker let his eyes rove over the log communication shack and village before finally settling on the ancient freighter, which he appraised critically.

"The Cosmic Wind, under Captain Cromwell," Selby explained.

"I've heard of him," Welker observed wryly. His tone indicated that the captain's activities were not entirely unknown to the patrol.

Selby's smile broadened. "He's legal this trip."

"I've received orders to that effect from the office of the director," Welker acknowledged.

"I'm certainly happy to hear that." Selby exhaled slowly, feeling a burden lifted from his shoulders. The captain started to add something and abruptly paused. Glancing up, Selby saw Philip Wig framed in the hatch opening. It didn't escape him that Welker's expression had turned to one of distaste, and that the lieutenant's eyes, formerly sharp and clear, had become closed wells in the granite face.

Wig proceeded slowly down the ramp, followed by Jonman and Conrad. Pausing midway, he studied the village and Simon's shack before turning his gaze to the Cosmic Wind. The orange light of the morning sun gave his narrow face a disdainful expression that was heightened by the curl of his tight lips. Glancing back, Wig fixed his eyes on Selby and proceeded to the bottom of the ramp, with Jonman and Conrad trailing.

Selby was surprised to see a squad of Department 404 agents emerge from the ship. Their natty black uniforms with silver sunburst insignias were in sharp contrast with the light blue of the space patrol. He counted them -- ten in all. The agents glanced around curiously as they aligned themselves behind the executor and his aides. Suddenly a huge black beast tugging furiously at a restraining leash appeared in the hatchway and started down the ramp, followed by a lean scar-faced agent named Sergeant Trukel. A goat hound! Selby stared at the animal, fascinated. The huge dogs, from the Algol system, were the most feared manhunters known. He looked at the black muscled body, the powerful jaws and fanged teeth, feeling a touch of dread. Panting, the goat's jaws dripped saliva.

Selby pulled himself together as the executor said insolently, "The

investigation has been placed in my hands by Councilor Ewol Strang."

"I'm aware of that," he answered calmly.

"I also have a warrant for the execution of one, David Gant."

"I was informed of that."

Wig's voice rose. "Where is the boy?"

"Dead," Selby answered flatly.

"Dead?" The executor got a startled look. "Who told you that?"

"Simon." Selby gestured toward the communication shack. "He operates the tracker and communicator."

Wig found his voice. "I don't believe it," he asserted. "I'd expect them to say that. More likely they're hiding him."

"I've seen his grave," Selby answered stonily.

"No doubt empty," the executor snapped. "You don't know these people, Selby. They're tricky, evasive. You can't trust them."

"Freaks," Jonman spat.

"I haven't found that," Selby answered.

"I have scant doubt of that," Wig stated. "Did it ever occur to you how easy it would be to change a grave marker?"

"Let's dig it up, see who's in the box," Jonman said.

"Perhaps we will." Glancing around, Wig caught sight of Simon standing in the doorway of the shack. "Come here," he ordered imperiously.

Simon limped forward, appearing old and fragile even beyond his years. With the wind stilled, his long white hair hung in scraggly locks over his shoulders.

Be careful, be careful, Selby thought, hoping the old man would pick it up. The fear that Wig might trick the old man into revealing the whereabouts of Lora and Johnny frightened him. If Simon detected his warning, his face gave no indication. Halting a few feet away, he regarded the executor incuriously.

"What's your name?" demanded Wig.

"Simon."

"Simon what?"

"Just Simon."

"What's wrong? Have you been here so long you can't recall your full name?"

"Been here a mighty long time," Simon acknowledged.

"Sounds like the village halfwit," sneered Jonman.

"Eh, what's that?" Simon cupped his hand to his ear.

"Halfwit," Jonman spat.

"No siree," Simon declared indignantly. "That was my brother. He's dead now."

Conrad looked at Jonman and snickered. "I hope the rest of them are smarter than that."

During the exchange, Selby caught Captain Welker's eyes and saw a glimmering of understanding. Lieutenant Stagg's face, rough-hewn, showed nothing.

Wig stared at the aged caretaker. "Where's the boy?" he snapped.

"Boy?" Simon cupped his ear again.

"The Gant boy."

"Oh, Davie." Simon turned and pointed a bony finger. "He's over that way."

A quick eagerness leaped into Wig's voice. "One of the cabins?" he asked.

"No," Simon answered, "he's in the graveyard. He's dead."

"Dead in the last few months? I don't believe in those coincidences," Wig rasped. He looked at Selby. "How about the other one -- the Sloan boy?"

Selby felt a sudden stillness inside him. "I believe he's somewhere in

the Kavu mountains," he answered.

"We'll get him," Jonman cut in. "The goat'll take care of that." Selby looked at the fierce animal and suppressed a shudder.

Wig returned his gaze to Simon. "I want every child in the area brought to this field immediately. Tell the people that."

Simon drew his frail body up. "Tell them yourself," he snapped. Before Wig could answer he stalked off.

Philip Wig gazed coldly at Alek Selby and Captain Cromwell across the small lounge in the SocAd ship and said, "I've been placed in complete charge of this investigation by Councilor Strang, and I intend to complete it to his complete satisfaction."

Selby watched him without comment. Wig had been on Engo for three days, and had gotten exactly nowhere. The knowledge gave him a secret satisfaction.

"Jonman and Conrad have scoured the entire area with patrols," Wig continued. "They found no sign of life, none at all, nothing to indicate that anyone has lived around here for many months. That village hasn't been occupied in a long time. I demand to know where these people are hiding." He directed his gaze to Selby.

"I have no idea," he answered.

Wig smiled venomously. "What have you been doing with your time?"

"The same thing you have."

"I won't accept that," the executor replied testily. He switched his gaze to the freighter captain. "You've been trading with these people. Where are they? You must know something."

"I've traded only with Simon," Cromwell countered cautiously.

"Simon and who else?"

"No one else."

"Do you mean to tell me that the old man lugs the furs to the field and handles all the articles you bring for trade? Do you expect me to believe that?" he demanded.

"The exiles stock the furs in one of the cabins," Cromwell asserted.

"They're there when we arrive. The articles we trade are left on the field. I don't know how they're handled after we're gone."

"A likely story," sneered Wig.

Cromwell flushed and said, "It's the truth."

Wig leaned forward. "You're a smuggler, Cromwell. You've been operating outside the law for years. Lie to me and you'll wind up on a detention planet."

"He's here on the director's orders," Selby cut in heatedly.

"Councilor Strang will be interested in learning the degree to which the director cooperates with smugglers," Wig shot back. "I'm certain of that."

"I've been given immunity," Cromwell declared.

"Not by Strang," the executor rebuked. His gaze traveled to Selby. "I don't intend to return with a negative report, not after the evidence gained from Cromwell."

Selby said calmly, "You can't conjure up a pk."

"You might be satisfied with the statements of a crazy man and the evidence of a tombstone, Selby, but I'm not." Wig's eyes narrowed. "My report on your attitude will be laid before the High Council, I can promise you that."

"That's your privilege," he answered. "I'll make my own report."

"You won't get very far." The executor returned his attention to Cromwell. "As of now, you and your crew are confined to your ship. I won't have you fraternizing with these people."

"What people?" asked Cromwell innocently.

Wig scowled. "Don't play me for a fool," he threatened. "We know the

number exiled, and I intend to drive them out of hiding. They'll talk before I'm through. I'll stake my reputation on that." He paused as Lieutenant Stagg appeared in the doorway.

"The search party has returned from the Kavu foothills," the lieutenant reported.

"And?" The executor eyed him enquiringly.

"Didn't find a thing," Stagg answered. "We located two or three cabins but they were empty. There were no signs of recent occupation."

Wig scowled. "I refuse to believe these people can disappear into thin air. They have to be somewhere." His voice rose. "I want detector beams placed across every trail, every clearing, and I want them connected with a warning system here in the ship."

"Is that an order?" Stagg asked steadily.

"As of right now," the executor replied shortly. "Inform Captain Welker that I expect his complete cooperation."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant answered stiffly.

When he withdrew, Wig looked back at Selby. "That will be all," he said coldly.

"Looks like the director might be getting cut down," Cromwell said, when they were outside. His voice held a worried note. "I hope his guaranty of immunity holds good."

"It will," Selby responded with a confidence he didn't feel. In the give and take of politics, today's guaranty was tomorrow's scrap of paper. No one was more aware of that than he. The director was strong, but Ewol Strang was stronger, or at least operated from a position of greater power. And Philip Wig had Strang's complete confidence. Selby well could understand the captain's perturbation.

He paused outside the freighter and gazed toward the weeping agora trees, wondering how the exiles could escape Wig's detection net. Once it was spread, they couldn't move without revealing their presence. He had to warn them. The thought came with a slight shock at realization of how far he had come in favoring them. Or was it in the interests of justice? He couldn't stand idly by and watch the executor conjure up a park where none existed, he reflected.

How could he warn them? He couldn't risk a test of strength with the executor, that was certain. And if he were seen talking with Simon, Wig might order him confined to the freighter along with Cromwell. That would be fatal.

He looked toward the communication shack. The door was closed and Simon was nowhere to be seen. Danger, detector beams. Danger, detector beams...He let the thought run through his mind, concentrating on the aged caretaker. Danger, detector beams...Could Simon hear him? Could anyone?

Gazing back toward the forest, he repeated the message again and again, trying to send it first to Lora and then to Johnny. Between times he paused, hoping to hear some answering signal in his mind; but none came. Finally he went moodily back into the ship.

Several hours after nightfall Selby slipped quietly from the Cosmic Wind. Looking around carefully, he could see no sign of movement on the field. With the moon still down, the SocAd ship resembled a giant slug. Voices came from a rectangle of light where a hatch opened onto the field. Simon's shack was dark. He suppressed the urge to see if the old man were in, realizing that Wig must have him under constant watch.

Lora! Lora! Selby tried broadcasting the girl's name telepathically as he skirted the village to avoid possible detection beams, for he knew that Lieutenant Stagg already had started erecting a portable system. When he rounded the end of the last cabin he paused, searching the night. He was gazing in the direction of the graveyard when he glimpsed a blue light bobbing and weaving through the woods. He stiffened, thinking it must be Wig's agents

searching the area.

The light blinked out, and when it came on again, he saw that it had moved toward the meadow. It struck him that they were not Wig's men at all, but villagers. Perhaps Lora and Johnny were with them.

He moved ahead hurriedly, halting near the path where they would pass. Waiting, the realization came that they were telepaths, and he retreated deeper into the trees, at the same time trying to keep his mind blank.

The light blinked out again and when it reappeared, he caught the impression of several people moving toward him in a single file. As they drew closer, he saw that one of them carried a child.

Abruptly the column halted and Selby grew tense, scarcely daring to breathe. Who were they? Had they detected him? He waited, his eyes strained into the night.

"Someone's around." A man's low whisper reached his ears.

"We'd better hurry," a feminine voice said worriedly. After a few seconds the column began moving again. When it was safely past, Selby gave a sigh of relief.

Why were they going toward the meadow? Looking in the direction in which they had vanished, the question puzzled him. Five adults and a child -- why would they come here from the direction of the Kavu range, deliberately risking detection? Where were they going?

He was contemplating following them when a small alarm jangled in his brain and he stood straighter, wondering what had set it off.

"Alek! Alek!"

He jerked his head to a listening attitude, for a second thinking it was Lora's voice before he realized no sound had reached his ear; the call had come from within his mind! "Alek!" It came again, this time borne on a note of urgency. He peered frantically in the direction of the meadow, then realized it hadn't come from the people he'd seen but from somewhere behind him.

He turned back, peering toward the village. "Lora, where are you?" He sent the thought experimentally, wondering if the voice within his mind had been a figment of his imagination. No, it had been too strong, too clear, like his mother's call so many years before. "Where are you? Where are you?" he asked desperately

When no answer came, he started toward the village, his mind a jumble of thoughts. What made him think the cry had come from there? He didn't know. It was the same kind of vague impression he'd experienced so often in the past. And it had held urgency! That knowledge drove him faster.

"Alek, be careful!" He'd almost reached the edge of the village when the warning came, startling in its clarity. This time he knew with certainty that Lora was in trouble and plunged recklessly forward. The yellow beam of a handlight cut the night, catching and holding him.

"Selby!" Lieutenant Stagg's voice cut the night, heavy with surprise.

"You're blinding me," he answered, struggling to keep his thoughts under control. What was Stagg doing here? The line moved down, shining on the ground at his feet.

"The night's full of surprises," Stagg said. "We rigged a detector beam at the edge of the village and caught a girl." He moved the light and Selby saw that Stagg was gripping Lora's arm. Her face was suffused with fear.

"She's a friend of mine," Selby said, stepping closer.

"Friend?" Stagg eyed him suspiciously.

Selby dropped his voice confidently. "You know how these things are. I was coming to meet her."

"Oh," Stagg answered knowingly. He released her arm and stepped back, a grin on his rugged face.

"Lora, this is Lieutenant Stagg," Selby said. "I hope he didn't frighten you?"

"Some, I'm afraid." She laughed nervously.

"I'm sorry," Stagg apologized. "I didn't realize..." He paused speculatively.

"It's getting harder all the time to find privacy," Selby said. He stepped forward and caught Lora's hand possessively.

Stagg grinned, but there was a warning in his voice as he said, "It's going to get harder yet."

"Don't I know it." Selby forced a laugh and said, "I wouldn't mention this to Wig. I don't believe he's very romantic."

"About as romantic as that goat," Stagg answered. "You'd better watch the detectors. Next time it might be one of the 404 men."

"We'll watch it," he promised.

Stagg brought his eyes back to Lora. "I'm sorry, Miss." Before she could answer, he turned the light along the path and moved away. They waited silently until his footfalls became lost in the distance.

"Is he all right?" she asked, anxiously.

He said tonelessly, "I trust him." He gazed down at her. "Didn't you read his mind?"

"Yes," she said faintly, and he could almost feel her flush.

Whispering her name, he drew her to him, looking down into her face before he kissed her. She didn't resist. Finally he released her and said contritely, "I'm sorry. You have trouble enough."

She smiled and brushed her hair back from her face. "Sorry?"

"Not that sorry," he laughed. He looked down at her. "Where were you going when Stagg caught you?"

"I heard your call."

"I was trying to warn you about the detector net," he explained.

"And I stumbled right into it," she exclaimed ruefully. She searched his face. "Did you..."

"Hear your warning? Yes."

"You see, Alek, you are a telepath."

"Not much of a one," he denied. "It only seems to work during some kind of emergency."

"It's that way with many telepaths," she explained. "People have the idea that we can read minds at will, talk with one another just as we do vocally, but it simply isn't true. Some telepaths can only converse with people to whom they are emotionally close."

"Does that hold for you?"

"No," she answered hesitantly.

"It certainly doesn't hold for Simon," he declared. "I have the feeling he reads me like a book."

"Probably," she admitted, "he's very sensitive."

"How about Johnny?"

"He's extremely perceptive, Alek."

"I've felt that," he acknowledged, "but his tests didn't indicate it."

"Tests?"

"The ones made by the psymaster."

She paused before answering. "He wasn't very sensitive at first," she explained. "Some telepaths grow into it. Like you," she added.

"At times I wonder."

"You're an extremely powerful transmitter, Alek."

"So Johnny said."

"He likes you," she declared.

"I'm glad for that." He eyed her gravely. "You have to get to a safe place, both of you. Wig's brought a goat hound."

"Goat hound?" The words dropped from her lips like a sentence of death.

"A deadly animal," he explained. "You can't take a chance."

She looked tremulously at him. "Would Wig...?"

"He'd do anything," he broke in harshly. "Why do you think he brought the goat? Do you know that he has a warrant of execution? Signed by the Emperor, no less."

"Warrant of execution?" she asked fearfully.

"For your brother," he explained. "Now it's just a scrap of paper. Not that he'd admit David's death."

"He has to admit that," she said sharply.

"Does he?" He laughed mirthlessly. When she didn't answer, he told her of the figures he'd seen going toward the meadow. "Five adults and a child," he said.

Her face went blank. "I suppose they were villagers," she answered tonelessly.

"You know who they were," he accused.

"Please, Alek." He saw her struggle with her thoughts before she continued, "They were escaping, Alek."

"Escaping?" He couldn't conceal his astonishment. "To where?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Does it involve Mr. Olaf?"

"No, this is different."

"If they can escape, why can't you and Johnny?"

"Please, Alek, not now."

"All right," he replied heavily. Her answer left him baffled.

She said contritely, "It's not my secret to tell."

"I'm not pressing you," he answered stiffly.

"I know you're not, Alek, but I want you to know that Johnny can't escape, not in the same way. That's why Mr. Olaf's coming, to get him before Philip Wig finds him."

"Then you'd better keep Johnny away from here," he warned.

"I would if I could, Alek."

"Why can't you?"

She looked away. "It all goes back to the question I can't answer."

He asked quizzically, "Johnny's a strange boy, isn't he?"

"Why do you ask that?" She raised her head quickly and he caught the sudden fear in her voice.

"Mr. Olaf...coming all the way to Engo to rescue him?"

She said pleadingly, "There's a reason, Alek. You'll know in time."

"I can wait," he answered wearily. "Just keep yourself safe."

"I will," she promised. She looked up at him, her face a blur in the darkness. "Now kiss me, Alek. I have to go."

Eight

AN ORANGE MOON, speeding toward its half-phase, was rising over the night-locked Kavu mountains when Selby slipped from the freighter and hurried toward the forest off to one side of the village.

It had been a perturbing day.

Two squads of 404 agents, led by Sergeant Trukel with the goat, had left early to scour the entire area lying between the field and the purplish mountains, where Wig suspected the exiles were hiding. In addition, Lieutenant Stagg's men had extended the detector system to cover every known trail and clearing in the same area. But it did not yet extend into the small meadow adjacent to the village. Stagg made a point of mentioning that.

"Can't see that anyone would go there, aside from occasional lovers," he told Selby.

Selby grinned. "Could be," he assented, grateful for the tip. He liked

the big lieutenant, and knew that Stagg had no sympathy for Wig's attempt to trap the exiles. Not that he'd said anything, but it was there in his eyes and voice, a cold contempt whenever the executor or his men were mentioned. Selby knew that Captain Welker felt the same. He ran a taut ship, carried out his orders, but was never seen in the presence of the Department 404 men unless summoned.

The net was one thing. But worse, Simon was missing. Cromwell had brought him the news late in the afternoon. "He hasn't been around all day," the freighter captain confided worriedly.

"Perhaps he's staying in his shack," Selby suggested hopefully.

Cromwell shook his head. "He always suns himself on clear days. Says it's good for the bones."

"Could he have gone to join the others?"

"How could he, with the detector net Wig's throwing up?"

A good question, Selby thought. He considered it. "He could avoid the paths and open areas, move through the woods."

"Not those woods," declared Cromwell. "They're loaded with poisonous snakes and quagmires. A man could sink over his head before you could snap your fingers. I've heard plenty about that."

"He still might," Selby persisted.

"I doubt it."

"I'll check the shack."

"Is that safe?" asked Cromwell. "Wig won't like it."

Selby considered it. "I'm running an independent investigation," he decided finally. "I don't know what he can do about it."

"Plenty," asserted Cromwell. "He's just plain vicious. So are those rat-faced aides of his."

"Jonman and Conrad? Yes, they're vicious," he assented, thinking that he worried more over Sergeant Trukel and the goat. The beast was the unpredictable, in his thinking.

Selby found the communication shack deserted. He intuitively knew it would be even before he swung open the creaking door. His eyes roved the unmade bunk, Simon's rough-hewn easy chair covered with soft catmel pelts -- the gleaming communication and tracking equipment so out of place on this primitive world. Odds and ends of personal articles were strewn about, but of the old man, there was no sign.

Closing the door behind him as he left, Selby glanced at the SocAd ship. A few troopers lounged outside, paying scant heed as he crossed the clearing. Where was Wig? Jonman? He hadn't seen them all day. The thought bothered him, but Simon's disappearance perturbed him more. Despite his earlier optimism, it didn't seem likely that the old man would vanish of his own volition. As caretaker of the station, he represented Engo's sole link with the outer universe; and with Mr. Olaf, he reflected.

But assuming Simon didn't vanish of his own volition, what then? He searched his mind, finding no answer. He'd have to get the information to Lora, he thought. Or did she know?

Now, crossing the field, he wondered if he were on a fool's errand. If he contacted her telepathically, he might succeed only in drawing her into the detector net. The thought brought a slight panic. Yet, if she sensed something wrong, and was waiting...The possibility spurred him to greater speed.

He skirted the area where he knew Wig's detector beams were placed and plunged into the forest, uncomfortably aware of what Cromwell had said about poisonous snakes and quagmires. Occasionally he paused to cock his head and listen. The forest was alive with sounds that came even above the murmur of the river -- slithering, rustling noises that made him edgy. Several times he caught the glow of small eyes and thought they probably belonged to catmels, the bushy-tailed animals the exiles trapped for trade.

Although progress was difficult, he eventually reached the forested strip that lay between the village and the meadow. Pausing, he peered around, his senses attuned. There was only the river, the muted sigh of the wind in the agora branches.

"Lora! Lora!" He called the name telepathically, closing all his other senses as he attempted to listen with his mind. Nothing, nothing at all, not even the vague impressions he so often got at odd times. It was as if his mind were a blank slate, scrubbed clean of all stimuli from the outer world. "Lora!" He repeated the call, and the answering silence was a thunder in his brain.

The realization that the girl was beyond his reach was a torment. Last night he'd reached out, touched her mind and she'd answered; now she was gone. There was only the lonely forest, the dark sky, the racing orange moon which from time to time caused the ground to tremble under him as it sped toward perigee; but there was nothing of humanness.

He waited for a while longer, testing the night with his call, then struck out toward the meadow. When he came to the edge of the forest he stopped, reaching out with perceptors he but dimly understood and over which he had scant control. Instantly he knew someone was there. The realization had scarcely struck him when he heard a growl and a huge shape lunged upward from the ground. As he raised his arm to ward off the attack, Johnny's voice cut through the night.

"Down, Rok!" Instantly the huge dog subsided back into the tall grass. Peering ahead, Selby saw the whitish blur of Johnny's face turned toward him from the low knoll.

"Hello, Mr. Selby," Johnny called softly.

"Is it safe to come over?" he asked edgily.

"He won't hurt you."

"Quite a guardian," he commented, thinking of the dog's menacing lunge. He sat on the grass beside the boy.

"He's always been that way," Johnny explained. "Mr. Simon calls him a one-man dog."

"Oh?" Selby felt a faint surprise. Rok had been David's dog. He asked casually, "Had him long?"

"Ever since he was a puppy," Johnny told him.

Selby felt a sudden stillness inside him. David had brought the dog to Engo from the distant planet of his birth, yet Johnny claimed having him since he was a puppy. He had the sharp memory of Lora's sudden fear when he'd remarked, "Johnny's a strange boy, isn't he?" And she'd said that Johnny was extremely perceptive, which he'd already discovered. But Hallam Vogel's records didn't show that at all. He had found Johnny quite ordinary; David had been the perceptive one.

Selby had the wild thought that the boy next to him wasn't Johnny Sloan at all, but was David Gant. If Johnny had died and David had taken his name...No, that was impossible. David Gant had been tall for his age, blonde, light-skinned. And crippled. The record had been explicit. But the boy next to him was dark, stocky, short -- an exact picture of Johnny Sloan's record. All but the IQ. Johnny was anything but ordinary.

He brought his jumbled thoughts into order. David Gant had been the pk. There was scant doubt of that. And David was dead. He knew that from Simon, Lora, and Johnny, and he'd seen the grave. Everything was too pat, he reflected. Something was terribly wrong, but what? He wanted to ask Johnny bluntly, but refrained, fearing that the boy would withdraw. He couldn't afford to alarm him. He decided on another tactic.

Glancing sideways at the boy, he said, "Last time you said you weren't afraid of me?" He made it a question.

"I'm not, Mr. Selby."

"How can you be so certain?"

"You asked me that, too," Johnny countered.

"I know," he agreed. "You said that you could see in my mind that I was all right, but I'm wondering if there might not be another reason."

Johnny said slowly, "I was told."

"By whom?"

"Mr. Simon."

"Simon?" Selby felt a distinct shock. He had expected the boy to name Lora.

"He says you're not like the others," Johnny explained. "He thinks you're more like Captain Cromwell."

"I take that as a compliment, Johnny."

The boy looked at him. "Why did you ask how I felt?"

"Because I want you to trust in me, believe in me."

"I do, Mr. Selby."

"Did Simon tell you anything about Philip Wig?"

"He's an evil man," Johnny replied.

"And dangerous," he cautioned.

"Mr. Simon told me that."

"You know about the detector beams, I suppose?"

The boy nodded. "I go around them."

Startled, Selby asked, "You know where they are?"

"Mr. Simon told us."

"How would he know?" Selby looked sharply at him and took a wild guess. "From Lieutenant Stagg's mind?"

"Mostly," Johnny acknowledged. "He couldn't get them all but he got the main ones."

"Simon must be extremely sensitive," Selby reflected.

"He knows just about everything," Johnny asserted. "He told us about the goat."

"He did? You have to be very careful," he cautioned.

"Naw, I can sense it," he replied disdainfully. "So can Rok."

Selby eyed him thoughtfully. "Do you know where Simon is?"

"Not right now. I haven't been listening."

"I haven't seen him around lately," he said casually.

"Mr. Simon?" Johnny looked at him, then closed his eyes and turned away. For a long moment he was silent, then looked back again, his face puzzled. "I can't hear him, Mr. Selby."

"Can you usually contact him?" Selby asked sharply.

"Well, not always."

Selby saw the worry in the boy's face and let the subject drop. For a while they sat silent again. The river, the wind in the agora trees, the orange half-moon now high in the east -- everything combined to paint a picture in Selby's mind of a planet which no longer was so alien. Not when he considered people like Simon, Lora Gant, the boy next to him whom Hallam Vogel had certainly underrated. Johnny Sloan was as sharp as they came. The latter thought gave him a twinge of unease.

Finally he said, "I hear Mr. Olaf is coming to take you away."

"In a few days," Johnny replied.

"He must be a good friend."

"He is, Mr. Selby."

"Does he come here often?"

"I've never seen him," the boy admitted, "but I knew he sends us lots of things."

"Never seen him?"

"No, just Mr. Simon."

"Then he's been to Engo before?"

"Yes," the boy answered simply.

Selby suppressed the urge to question him, afraid of going too far. He wanted to ask of the people he'd seen going toward the meadow, and of Lora's remark that they were escaping, but sensed it wasn't the time. Something warned him that the boy, so talkative now, suddenly could become mute. He didn't want that to happen.

Instead, he asked, "Why do you come here alone...at this time of night?"

Johnny brought his eyes around, searching Selby's face. "I was talking with someone," he said finally.

"With Mr. Olaf?"

"No."

"Who?" he persisted.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" he asked wonderingly.

"I've never seen him," Johnny explained.

"Oh, then you talk telepathically?" As Johnny nodded, he asked, "What do you talk about?"

"Our bridge."

"Bridge?" Selby stared at the dark river, trying to grasp the boy's meaning.

Johnny caught his glance and said, "No, not there -- not over the river."

"A bridge to where?"

Johnny glanced away without answering and Selby asked, "What bridge, Johnny? I don't understand. Who is the man? Where does he talk to you from?"

"From there," Johnny said. He flung a hand upward, pointing toward the twin galaxies that formed the Magellanic Clouds.

"He talks to me from there."

"He talks to me from there." Selby stared disbelievingly at the sky, Johnny's words ringing in his ears. Was the boy mad? Deluded? Making a fool of him? No man could communicate across so vast a gulf, not even with the best equipment ever conceived. No ship could cross it. Even with the miracle of travel through the time stream, the great Federation ships were restricted to their own galaxy. In time, scientists intoned, and they spoke in terms of many thousands of years. And yet...

Selby began shaking suddenly, violently, filled with the knowledge that the boy was neither deluded nor making a fool of him. The awareness came in a burst of prescience. Talking across that gulf...For an instant he felt a stark fear. With it came the realization of why the government of nearly three thousand planets would send an expedition to the very rim of the galaxy to murder a ten-year-old boy. The power was monstrous. Gradually his terror passed, replaced by an overwhelming sense of humility and awe.

All at once Selby realized he had to know. Could Johnny raise sticks, make the great shaggy brute he called "Rok" float in the air? What other things incomprehensible to the human mind could he do? He swung around to ask but Johnny was gone, nor was there any sign of the dog. He was alone on the knoll. Shivering uncontrollably, he looked upward.

The Magellanic Clouds were scarcely more than white shadows in the black sky.

Philip Wig's pale face wore a smug look -- a look of anticipation, Selby thought -- and his narrowed eyes were mocking. Ignoring Jonman and Conrad who sat off to one side in the SocAd ship's small lounge, he kept his eyes riveted on the executor, waiting to hear what he had to say. He knew it wouldn't be good.

Wig pressed a button to record the conversation. "Earlier you stated David Gant was dead?" He made it a question.

Selby concealed a slight shock. "That is my belief, yes."

"The caretaker Simon told you?"

"Yes, and I checked the grave marker."

"You also stated you were satisfied the boy was a beyond, a pk to be exact."

"I was told that, yes." Selby watched him tautly, seeking some clue to the direction in which the executor was moving. The arrogance, the curled lips, told him nothing other than that the executor had set a trap into which he was expected to fall. The thought was disconcerting.

Wig said disarmingly, "Although you believe David Gant to be dead, the fact that he probably was a pk gives full justification for this investigation. Do you agree?"

He hesitated, noting the qualification on the boy's death, yet realizing there was but one answer. "That is Council policy in the case of a beyond," he replied.

"Exactly" -- Wig smiled poisonously -- "even though Hallam Vogel and the director tried to smother the investigation."

"I deny that," he answered calmly. "The director ordered me here to make the recommendation, and at Hallam Vogel's suggestion. I wouldn't call that smothering it."

"You can't deny Vogel tried to refute the possibility of a pk," Wig shot back.

"He didn't deny it; he merely cited the odds against it."

"Cited the odds against it," Wig sneered. "He tried to block a proper investigation, Selby. That's why he urged it be taken out of Department 404, my department, and placed in your hands. And the director went along with the idea."

"He wanted an unbiased investigation," Selby retorted.

"Unbiased? Is that why he sent a man with absolutely no training in this type of investigation?"

Selby flushed and said, "That's your opinion."

Wig's eyes came up slowly and a smirk crossed his face. "Yes, that's my opinion," he assented, "and I believe it will be Councilor Strang's opinion, too, when he finds how you've botched this case."

"Botched it?" Selby leaned forward, watching him.

"David Gant is alive," Wig stated. "He's alive and he's a beyond; those facts are indisputable."

"I can't believe it." Selby stared at him, trying to conceal his shock. David Gant alive? It seemed impossible, yet somehow he wasn't surprised -- not since the instant Johnny Sloan had pointed toward the Magellanic Clouds, saying, "He talks to me from there." In that instant Selby knew all the rules of reason and logic had been tossed aside. Anything was possible. But what had that to do with David Gant?

"You might believe it when we open the grave," said Wig derisively.

"Aside from that, these people are conspiring with Olaf, leader of the mutant underground. Vogel and the director scoffed at that, but what do we find? Olaf rushing here to snatch the Gant boy to safety. Does that surprise you, Selby?"

"Can you prove that?" he challenged. Wig's statement that Olaf was rushing to rescue David indicated that Wig somehow had confused the Gant boy with Johnny. Or had he? And how had he learned of Olaf's trip? The questions piled up in his mind. Why was Olaf taking such a risk to protect Johnny? That was the biggest question of all, he thought. If he knew that, he would know the answers to most of his questions. He kept his face set, masking his confusion.

"We can prove that, and more," Wig assured him. "We also know -- and we're going to prove -- that Cromwell is part of Olaf's organization. I wonder how Councilor Strang will view that in light of the director's confidence in

the man?"

"I'd be interested in seeing the proof," Selby answered.

"You'll see it soon enough."

"Why are you telling me this, without proof?"

Wig's lips curled again. "I want your statements on record, Selby. Now we have them, including your readiness to close the investigation despite the fact that David Gant is alive; and despite the fact that the mutant underground headed by Olaf is centered right here on Engo. It wouldn't surprise me if the administration would be needing a new principal investigator as well as a new director."

"It's possible," he conceded.

"Very probable, I'd say." Wig's eyes centered on his face. "We also know about the Gant girl."

Selby suppressed a quick alarm. "What about her?"

"She's aiding Olaf," Wig stated. "Does that surprise you?"

"Prove it," he answered stiffly. Rising, he looked down at the executor. "Is that all?"

"For the time being," Wig acceded. Jonman laughed raspily.

"I want to be there when you open the grave," Selby said.

Wig smiled cruelly. "When you see the empty box, Selby, you'll know how these people have fooled you."

"Perhaps," he answered woodenly. He left the lounge without a backward glance.

Outside he slowed his step, digesting the accusations made by the executor. Wig wouldn't dare open David Gant's grave in front of witnesses unless he were absolutely certain the boy was alive. The knowledge was disconcerting. He shivered at thought of the desecration, and how it might affect Lora. How had Wig learned of Olaf's impending rescue attempt? On what basis did he accuse Cromwell of complicity with Olaf? And what did all this have to do with Simon's disappearance?

He shook his head, baffled. The executor's demeanor had told him he wasn't guessing; his statements came from certainty, at least in his own mind. Had he gotten it from Simon? It seemed highly improbable.

He glanced at the morning sun, stifling his impatience. He'd have to warn Lora, yet realized he'd have to wait for the cover of night. He had small doubt but that his own movements were being watched; Wig was too thoroughly the agent to miss that.

What could Lora do if he told her? Or Johnny? Wig had thrown a net; now he was slowly but certainly gathering it in. When he finally did, what would it hold? Johnny? Mr. Olaf? Cromwell? David Gant? No, the last was impossible. And yet, he thought, the word should be banished from the lexicon. Nothing was impossible on a world in which a ten-year-old boy talked with beings in the Magellanic Clouds.

Or was it all a crazy dream?

Nine

STANDING SILENTLY beside Captain Cromwell in the forward hatch of the Cosmic Wind, Selby watched Lieutenant Stagg assemble his graveyard detail on the plain. The lieutenant barked his orders in low, clipped tones. Clearly the job was below the dignity of the Department 404 agents, for they stood off to one side, eyeing the proceedings and making occasional remarks. Stagg appeared not to hear. Standing stiffly under the orange sun, his tough face was set and expressionless.

Selby pondered the scene curiously. Eight men with shovels to open one grave? He wondered at that, at the same time conscious of a slight unease. Wig

was moving with too much assurance, he thought. How much did he know?

"Ghouls," Cromwell snapped suddenly.

"You can't blame the lieutenant or Captain Welker," he replied.

"I'm not," Cromwell replied drily. "I've no cause for complaint where the patrol's concerned. They've never bothered me yet." He chuckled as if it were a private joke. Selby didn't answer, absorbed in what was happening below.

When the detail was ready, Philip Wig came down the ramp, pausing midway to scrutinize the Cosmic Wind. He gave no indication that he saw Selby or the freighter captain standing in the open hatch. His aides followed him to the plain. Conrad made a remark and Jonman laughed nastily. The executor merely smiled.

Suddenly the goat hound appeared in the hatchway, straining at the leash, and sniffed his way to the plain, followed by Sergeant Trukel. He drew the beast up, waiting at the rear of the work detail.

The executor turned to the lieutenant and said mockingly, "You may proceed." Stagg didn't answer. Staring stiffly ahead, he barked an order and the file moved forward. Wig and his aides followed more leisurely.

Despite his distaste for the work ahead, Selby joined the column as it swung past the freighter. The executor didn't appear to notice. Selby kept his eyes riveted ahead, trying to fathom Wig's reasoning. If the executor were intent on proving that David Gant was alive, Selby was determined to witness the proof.

But why such a large detail? And why the goat? The questions puzzled him. He thought again that he was floundering in a situation that he but dimly perceived. There were too many unknowns, too many possibilities. Yet the executor moved with certainty. Why? The question baffled him.

As they passed silently through the village, Selby knew absolutely that it was deserted, as was the entire area. The fact was undeniable in his mind. "You can feel things, too," Johnny had told him; now he realized more fully what the boy had meant. The presence of people, although not detectable by eye or ear, somehow signaled itself as a knowledge borne through some sense organ at which he could only guess. He felt the presence of people, as he was coming to think of it.

But here he felt nothing. The silence in his mind was absolute. Stagg, stalking ahead with his troopers, left no mental impingement; neither did Wig, trailing at the rear with his aides. Because he could see them, knew they were there? Did the sense of presence function only in the absence of other sensory clues?

Pondering the questions, Selby suddenly struck upon a truth: in the present instance he wasn't sensing the presence of people, but their absence. Yet wasn't that the same thing? As the white markers came into view beyond the village, he lumped the questions with the other imponderables which had gathered in his mind.

Entering the graveyard, Jonman quickened his step and led the way to David's burial place, an act that told Selby he already had checked the markers.

Jonman gestured toward the mound and said imperiously, "Open this one first."

First? Selby stared at him, trying to discern his meaning. Puzzled, he glanced at the executor. Wig's eyes held a sardonic gleam.

Stagg barked an order, stepping back as two of his men moved forward and began opening the grave. Watching, Selby wondered again at Jonman's words, and the reason for the eight-man detail, but resisted the temptation to ask.

As the work proceeded, his gaze moved from Jonman to Wig, and finally to Conrad. All three were watching the diggers intently and, he thought, expectantly. It was as if they knew exactly what they would find, now were

opening the grave to verify it in the presence of witnesses. Had the grave already been opened and the body removed? He rejected the thought, realizing the mound had been undisturbed.

He glanced at the lieutenant and his troopers. Their faces were frozen masks. Standing like statues, they seemed scarcely to breathe as they listened to the soft shuff of the shovels biting into the dark, moist ground. It was, he thought, an eerie scene -- fourteen men in all gathered under an orange sun at the very edge of the galaxy to watch the exhumation of the body of a young boy. Fourteen men and a goat! Eerie? No, it was macabre.

He shivered and returned his attention to the work. One of the men paused to wipe his forehead, staring stonily at the executor as he did so. Wig's lips curled in silent amusement. Moments later one of the shovels struck wood with a dull thud. The men hurriedly scraped off the last of the mud and threw it from the hole, then one of them looped a line around the edge of the crude log lid and both scrambled from the pit.

"Open it!" Wig barked. He stepped closer, looking down at the coffin. Jonman and Conrad crowded by his side. The men pulled the line and the lid swung ponderously upward.

For a moment there was absolute silence before a voice exclaimed, "It's a boy!"

Selby stepped forward and gazed down into the crude coffin, suppressing a wave of nausea. A brief glance at the blonde hair and delicate facial structure told him it was Lora's brother. That was unmistakable.

Fumbling in his pocket, he fished out the photograph that had appeared in David's record book and held it out for Stagg's inspection. The lieutenant glanced from the photograph into the grave.

"The same boy," he said tonelessly. Selby displayed the picture to the other troopers, getting a nod from each before passing it on. When the last of Stagg's men had studied it, he held it out for Wig's inspection.

"The body is that of David Gant," he said coldly.

Wig scarcely glanced at the picture. His face held a frustrated, baffled look that gradually dissolved into an expression of puzzlement. He knitted his brows into a frown. Raising his head, he caught Jonman's eyes and a sharp glance passed between them.

"Trukel!" He gestured toward the sergeant.

Trukel stepped forward and the goat hound leaped eagerly ahead, straining at the leash.

"There! There!" Trukel snapped, pointing into the grave. The goat lowered its body, sniffing, its ears pinned flat against its ugly head.

Selby felt a surge of anger. "What's that for?" he demanded.

Wig didn't move his eyes from the scene. "For tracking David Gant," he rasped tightly. Suddenly he stepped back and gestured to the lieutenant. "Cover it," he snapped.

Stagg barked an order and the men released the line; the lid fell shut with a dull thump. As the men hurriedly began filling the grave, Wig drew Jonman and Conrad to one side, speaking in low tones. Occasionally he glanced over his shoulder to make certain he wasn't being overheard.

Selby watched them uneasily, his thoughts in turmoil. Wig's certainty that David Gant still lived had been gruesomely exploded, even though the executor showed no intention of admitting it. Was his linking of Captain Cromwell with Olaf just as far-fetched? Yet Olaf was rushing to Engo! How had the executor learned that? Guesswork? He was brooding about it when Wig swung around, his black eyes glittering.

"Open the next four graves," he rasped. He indicated the mounds next to David's with an angry gesture.

"Four?" The lieutenant appraised him coolly.

"Do as you're ordered," Wig snapped. Selby started to intervene, then

desisted, knowing there was little he could say. Wig held the power. Stagg realized it too, for he turned away, giving the order to his men in a tight voice.

As the men broke into pairs and began digging, Selby couldn't help but say, "At least we know David Gant is dead. There are plenty of witnesses to that."

"Is he?" asked Wig coldly. "We have yet to determine that fact." He turned away, watching the diggers broodingly.

What was Wig after? Selby eyed him, feeling the perturbation nibble at his mind. David Gant undeniably was dead; the lieutenant and his eight men were witness to that. Yet Wig appeared willing to refute it. Why was he opening the other graves? What did he know? Or what did he think he knew? He pushed the questions from his mind, conscious of the stillness that pervaded the graveyard.

Finally one of the shovels thunked against wood and the men hurriedly cleared the last of the ground away before attaching a line to the lid and scrambling hurriedly from the hole.

"Open it," Wig snapped tensely. Selby watched the line tighten, the lid swing open.

"Empty!" a voice exclaimed in awe. Selby stepped forward and looked down. The box was empty. He felt a sense of shock and glanced around wonderingly. Stagg's brows were knitted into a question, but not so the executor's. His face held a satisfied smirk. So did the faces of Jonman and Conrad. It's what they expected, Selby thought. But what did it mean?

Wig looked at the other diggers, who had stopped work to peer into the empty coffin. "Finish your jobs," he ordered acidly.

The diggers resumed work with an ill grace they didn't bother to conceal. They disliked the executor's attitude, and showed it openly. After a while the wind died and an air of calm pervaded the cemetery. Despite the executor's impatience, the men paused to strip to the waist and their bodies, under the orange sun, gleamed with perspiration.

Once Selby glanced around. The lieutenant stood as if transfixed, his eyes unmoving as he watched the holes deepen. Wig and his aides appeared more relaxed, conversing in low tones off to one side. Sergeant Trukel and the goat waited attentively. He returned his attention to the diggers. The black soil hurled from the graves landed with dull thuds at his feet.

Wig straightened abruptly as one of the shovels struck wood, then came over and peered down into the hole, waiting while the troopers scraped the coffin lid clean and scrambled out.

Selby wasn't surprised when it proved empty; so did the third and fourth graves. Finally he looked around. The executor was watching him sardonically.

"The graveyard's a sham, a false front," he rasped. "I suspected that." Selby eyed him woodenly.

Wig gestured with a sweeping motion and continued, "If you dug up all these graves you'd find much the same thing. Do you know why? Because these people aren't dying, Selby. They'd have us believe they were. Do you know what's actually happening? Olaf's returning them to the Federation as quickly as we bring them out here, and I wouldn't be surprised to find he's using the Cosmic Wind to carry them. Your freighter captain is carrying more than freight, Selby. Wait until the Councilor learns that."

Selby stifled his anger. "Those are unproved accusations," he answered steadily. "The only thing we know for certain is that David Gant is dead. He's the one we came to investigate and that is what we found."

"Dead?" Wig's eyes mocked him.

"You've opened the grave. What more proof do you need?"

"Oh, there's a body in there, all right, and superficially it might resemble David Gant, but it's not." Wig flung a hand toward the grave, his

voice rising. "If David Gant was the beyond, then he's not dead. I don't know what kind of trickery this is, but I intend to find out."

"Trickery?"

"Trickery," the executor repeated. "There's a beyond alive right now, alive and plotting. My guess is that they've hidden him by giving him the name of someone who has died, perhaps the Sloan boy."

"There's not the slightest resemblance," Selby broke in heatedly. He spoke quickly, propelled by fear. "David was tall for his age, blonde, frail and crippled. Johnny Sloan is short, stocky, dark. David couldn't possibly pass for Johnny. I have David's picture and I can tell you he's there, in the coffin." Watching the executor, his thoughts were a jumble. Sure, David was beyond Wig's reach, but Johnny wasn't. Wig intended to invest Johnny with David's power, or claim that Johnny was David; that was clear. Wig had to have a beyond who was alive. Alive? Staring at the executor, the thought was a thunder in his brain. Johnny talked with beings in the Magellanic Clouds!

Wig smiled coldly. "We shall see who's right, Selby." Gesturing to his aides, he left the graveyard.

Selby gazed at Gordon Cromwell across the littered desk in the latter's cabin. The lamp at one side emphasized the creases and ridges in the captain's leathery skin, making him appear far older than his seventy odd years; or was ageless the word? Like Simon, he appeared to have passed into that autumn of life in which age carried no numbers; he was simply old. Selby noted, too, a wariness lurking in the ancient eyes as he said, "You have to trust me, Captain. The executor's out to hang you. I have to know the truth."

"I trust you," Cromwell answered simply. He slumped back resignedly. "What is it you want to know?"

"Wig claims -- says he knows with certainty -- that you are part of Mr. Olaf's mutant underground."

"Nonsense," Cromwell spat. He sat straighter.

"Have you had any dealings with him at all?"

The captain hesitated. "Occasionally I've carried some cargo for him," he admitted reluctantly.

"What kind of cargo?"

"Medical supplies, clothes, tools -- the kind of thing people need to survive on a world like this."

"Does he sell them?"

"No, siree," the captain stated. "Gives 'em. I figure he's one of these do-gooders who can't stand the sight of misery."

Selby smiled, thinking the captain was somewhat of a do-gooder himself. He could have held out for exorbitant prices, but hadn't. "Have you ever carried people?" he asked. "I'm referring to exiles."

"Never," declared Cromwell. Looking into the deep eyes, Selby knew he was speaking the truth, and felt relieved. If Wig could have proved the Cosmic Wind was used to remove exiles from Engo, no power in the Federation could have saved the captain from living out his days on a detention planet. Nor his crew. Worse, the resulting storm most certainly would have seen the dismissal of Korl Smithson and Hallam Vogel, and the equal certainty that Wig would emerge as the director of SocAd.

"Who is Mr. Olaf?" he asked.

"I can't tell you that. I don't know."

"What does he look like?"

"I've never seen him."

"Never?" Selby lifted his eyes, surprised. "How do you get your cargo from him?"

"By message. He tells me where it is, when to pick it up."

"He seems to keep good track of you," Selby remarked. "When did he

contact you the first time?"

Cromwell stared away reflectively. "Right after my second or third trip," he said finally.

"Didn't it frighten you, someone asking you to make a trip that you knew was illegal?"

"Caused me some worry," Cromwell admitted. "You might say it was a case of blackmail. With him knowing, I had to go along with it."

"Did he put it that bluntly?"

"No, but the idea was there."

"Subtle, eh?"

"Very," Cromwell agreed.

"Do you know if other ships have commerce with Engo?"

"No," Cromwell replied stiffly.

"But you've heard rumors?"

"There are always rumors," he acceded.

"Has Simon ever mentioned other ships?"

"No, and he wouldn't," he answered bluntly. Selby understood his attitude. Smugglers, even when not operating together, were a clannish lot. He supposed it was a camaraderie born of a shared dislike of the law.

"Wig states the underground is centered here on Engo."

"I don't believe that," Cromwell declared flatly.

"I doubt if it exists, at least not on the scale that Wig sees," he admitted. He studied the other. The captain of the Cosmic Wind was wily and shrewd, he knew, but he also was honest. And he had dealt fairly with the people of Engo. Lora had attested that. If there was anyone he could trust, the freighter captain was the one.

He said, "According to Wig, Mr. Olaf is on his way to Engo now."

Cromwell tilted his head. "How would he know?"

"How would he know there were empty graves in the cemetery?" Selby shot back.

"He got fooled on the Gant boy," Cromwell observed shrewdly.

"Perhaps," he answered slowly, "but I believe he had an excellent reason for believing David was alive. You should have seen the baffled look on his face when they exhumed the grave."

"What about those empty graves?" Cromwell asked uneasily.

"Those are the people Wig claims are being shipped back to the Federation," he answered. He pondered the point. "Wig has a good argument there, and it's one that will have to be answered. There's scant doubt but that the graveyard was created to fool SocAd."

"But where are the people going? There's no place to hide on this planet," Cromwell asserted. "The only habitable part is the section between here and the Kavu mountains."

"They're going somewhere," he reflected, remembering the small party of exiles he'd seen headed toward the meadow. Where had they gone? Escaping, Lora had said. But to where?

"I don't know what he's getting at." Cromwell pulled thoughtfully at his chin. "None of this makes much sense to me."

"It would if you were Wig," Selby answered.

Cromwell looked at him. "All right, pretend I'm Wig."

"You'd need a beyond to convince the High Council that the mutant underground is real, and dangerous, and incidentally that the director bungled the job by assigning me. Wig is after power, real power," he explained. "He wants to head SocAd."

"But the Gant boy is dead," Cromwell protested.

"If Wig says otherwise?"

Cromwell eyed him helplessly. "How can he?"

"I don't know," he answered slowly. "He seems certain that David is

alive, even after opening the coffin. He says that the corpse is a trickery, that Johnny Sloan is really David Gant, and that he is a beyond."

"Far-fetched," Cromwell cut in.

"He says he'll prove it."

"How?"

Selby smiled grimly. "By producing a live beyond."

"The Sloan boy?"

"That's the way I see it."

"But tests would prove differently," Cromwell argued. "They couldn't fool the SocAd psymaster. Believe me, I know." He smiled ruefully.

Selby's face sobered. "I don't believe Johnny would live that long."

"He'd kill him?" Cromwell exclaimed.

"It would be an accident," he explained.

"The boy ought to hide."

"Where?" asked Selby bitterly. "The detector net covers every trail and clearing from here to the Kavu mountains. It wouldn't take long to search him out."

"But they haven't."

"They will now," he said grimly. "Wig won't rest a minute."

"I dunno..." Cromwell rubbed his face thoughtfully.

"Wig says that's why Olaf's coming -- to rescue the boy."

Cromwell's eyes clouded. "How could Olaf know what was happening here?"

"From Simon, perhaps."

"Simon?" Cromwell looked startled. "But where is Simon?"

"That's my question," he answered. "Where is Simon?"

Back in the small cabin that had been turned over to his use, Selby reviewed the events of the day with misgivings. The revelation of the empty graves had come as a shock. Wig had staged the entire affair to prove one point: the exiles weren't dying; they were being whisked away. And it had been effective, too. The troopers would spread the word. Within a short time after the SocAd ship returned, the rumor would run like wildfire throughout the Federation. Wig would capitalize on that, he reflected grimly.

But Wig had had his setback, too. He had also staged the affair to prove that David Gant was alive, intending to use Selby's earlier testimony to brand him as a beyond. Had the grave been empty, Selby had scant doubt but that he'd be left dangling from the end of a long rope. It was the sort of thing that shuffled empires. As it was now, David Gant was dead. That rumor would spread, too, despite everything Wig could do to counter it. The gruesome story would race from one end of the empire to the other. If Wig failed to produce a beyond, he was dead politically, and he knew it.

But what if David Gant were alive? Startled, he wondered at his own doubt. He had seen the open coffin, hadn't he? Yet why had Wig been so certain? Or did he actually believe David Gant was alive, perhaps masquerading as Johnny. Could Wig actually believe that?

Selby found the thought perturbing. Hallam Vogel had found Johnny of average intelligence, low in telepathic ability; yet -- if the boy's assertions were true -- he was the greatest paranormal of them all. A boy talking to a being in the Magellanic Clouds -- Vogel and Smithson would believe him crazy if he reported that. Yet there was evidence that Johnny was no ordinary telepath. Would the leader of the mutant underground risk the rescue attempt if the boy were as Hallam Vogel had portrayed him? He doubted it. And Lora had said, "He's extremely perceptive." Did that make him a beyond? He wished he knew. But one thing was certain.

Time was running out.

Fretting, he went outside. The orange sun had begun its long slide toward the horizon but the day still had hours to live. He looked toward the communication shack. The door was still closed and it appeared deserted. If he

could only contact Simon. The thought brought up his head. He was a transmitter, wasn't he?

"Simon! Simon." He closed his eyes, excluding the world, and blanked his mind to everything but the aged caretaker. "Simon, this is Alek Selby. Can you hear me? Can you hear me?" He repeated the question over and over, between times pausing to listen with his mind. Nothing. The silence that came back was the silence of the forest when the wind died, so deep a silence that he thought even a whisper would come as a shout. But there was no shout.

No one shouted in his mind.

Perhaps Simon had heard. Perhaps there was nothing wrong with his transmission, but only with his reception. Simon might be answering, trying to reach him. The thought gave him a quiet desperation. But if he couldn't hear Simon, Lora could. Concentrating, he tried again.

"Simon, warn Lora that Wig is after Johnny. Do you hear me, Simon? Warn Lora..." He repeated the call over and over, pausing now and then to listen. "Warn Lora..."

"Alek!" The name rang in his brain like a faraway echo, and then there was nothing.

Only silence.

Ten

AS HE DREW near the meadow, he knew she was there. He'd gotten the feeling of presence as he'd slipped through the dark forest beyond the perimeter of the village. The first inkling that he wasn't alone had brought him to an abrupt halt, all his senses strained. Johnny? Someone from the SocAd ship? He moved his head slowly, listening. The mute sigh of the wind in the trees mingled with the dull roar of the river.

He moved forward cautiously, all his senses attuned to the night. It was then that he became aware of a change; in some way he couldn't define, the presence had become identity.

"Lora! Lora!" He called the name soundlessly as he pushed ahead more rapidly.

"Alek, here! The meadow..." The answer came like a silent whisper in his mind, yet filled with urgency.

"Coming!" He hurried faster, heedless of the low-hanging branches and muddy pools. As he burst from the trees, she rose like a shadow before him. "Are you all right?" he asked worriedly.

"I'm all right, Alek, but Johnny's in great danger. So is Mr. Olaf." She came toward him, dropping her voice. "Wig knows all about them."

"I know. I tried to warn you through Simon." He caught her hands, feeling the tremble in them.

"He heard you."

"You've been in contact with him?"

"Wig has him under psychic probe," she said faintly.

He recoiled, startled, and searched her face. Suddenly everything was clear. "So that's how he learned about Olaf...the empty graves."

She nodded. "They've used drugs, hypnosis, lie detectors."

"Then how did he hear me? How did you contact him?"

"Between sessions when they let him sleep," she explained. "The drugs wore off enough."

"Where is he now?" he asked harshly.

"They still have him. Wig has no intention of releasing him." She lifted her face worriedly. "They're working on him right now, Alek. He called when he heard them coming."

"How much has he told them?"

"Probably everything, he doesn't know." She laughed bitterly. "Not much escapes during a probe like that."

"Probably not." He tried to conceal his worry. "Where's Johnny?"

"Hiding...until Mr. Olaf comes."

"Where? Is he safe?"

"I hope he's safe, Alek, but I can't tell you where he's at." She saw him stiffen and explained, "They could do to you what they're doing to Simon. Wig's desperate. He might do almost anything."

"But you trust me?"

"You know that I do."

"Perhaps it's just as well that I don't know," he assented. He searched her face. "What does this mean, now that Wig knows about Olaf? Can't we warn him?"

"He knows."

"From Simon?" he asked sharply.

She shook her head. "He knew Wig's mission beforehand. That's why he's coming."

"How could he know?" he demanded. "The underground?"

"I suppose."

"And he's still coming, knowing Wig's here?" He shook his head incredulously. "They'll track him down from orbit, no matter where he lands."

"I've thought of that," she admitted. "He'd have to land and take off almost immediately."

"Do you know when he's due?"

"Tomorrow or the next night, unless it's stormy." She wet her lips dubiously. "That's the bad part. Simon was our contact."

"Suppose he can't reach Simon?"

"He'll come, I know he will."

"Wishful thinking?" he asked gently.

"No." She denied it with a toss of her head.

"Do you know where he'll land?" he persisted.

"Simon never had a chance to find out."

"It would have to be close by," he conjectured. "That would be dangerous."

She asked wistfully, "Isn't everything dangerous?"

"On this planet, yes," he answered soberly.

"We haven't much choice, Alek."

"I suppose not." He glanced around, feeling helpless. A plan had been put into motion, now was rolling toward its inevitable end, whatever end that might be. It could be juggled by circumstances, of course, but that was all; and circumstances were not foreseeable.

He became conscious that the orange half-moon had risen from behind the Kavu mountains, casting a reddish-yellow sheen over the meadow. With it the wind had risen, tossing the branches of the agora trees restlessly against the sky and the tops of the bulla grass moved in slow motion, giving the impression of a host of ghosts marching across the clearing.

The ground quivered underfoot but she didn't appear to notice. He thought it perfectly fitting that this world should be chosen for the drama being enacted -- a world where graves were empty, where people talked without voices, where a small boy could stand on a lonely knoll and talk with beings in another galaxy. Yet he didn't feel a bit strange at being here, nor did Engo feel alien. Not any longer. A short time ago he would have branded such a world as utterly fantastic, a contradiction of the basic laws that governed the universe. He wondered at the quickness with which the human mind accepted the impossible. Impossible? Nothing was or ever had been impossible, he reflected. That was the truth that Engo had brought home to him. Everything was just a matter of knowing, of accepting...

He looked back at her, dreading what he had to say. Her slender face, a blur in the night, made him think she'd discerned something of the tumult within him. Finally he said, "Wig had the graves opened today."

"I know." She swayed slightly. "I was watching."

"That was dangerous," he objected.

"I caught their thoughts, a tumult of them, and had to see. I was careful." A tremor crept into her voice. "Someone kept thinking that David was alive, that his grave would be empty, like the others. A hateful, vicious mind," she ended vehemently.

"Wig," he conjectured.

"That man they call Jonman is the cruelest and most vicious of them all."

"Why would Wig believe David was alive?"

"I don't know," she whispered.

"You do know," he answered. "He would have to have gotten it from Simon. But why would Simon think David were alive if he weren't?"

"You were at the grave," she said, almost inaudibly.

"That doesn't answer the question."

"Alek" -- she turned her face beseechingly toward him -- "there are some things you can't know yet, not while Philip Wig and those horrible men are here. It's too dangerous."

"For you and Johnny, or for me?"

"For all of us."

"Some things I have to know if I'm to help you," he persisted. When she didn't reply, he asked, "Did you know Philip Wig suspects David might be masquerading as someone else?"

Her head jerked up and she looked startled. "Even after opening the grave?"

"That's when he made the statement -- afterward."

She asked faintly, "Did he say who?"

"Johnny."

"Oh," she gasped.

"He's certain there's a beyond here on Engo, the probable reason why he believes David is alive." Watching her, he realized she hadn't denied the existence of a beyond, and almost certainly it had to be Johnny. David a beyond, and now Johnny? The mathematical odds against two such occurrences so close together were staggering. Or were there two? She hadn't stated categorically that David was dead, nor had she denied Wig's supposition that David might be masquerading as Johnny. Yet that was impossible. One had been blonde, tall, the other dark, stocky. And he'd seen the open grave; there was no doubt of the identity of the body. And yet, he thought, there was some part missing, something he couldn't discern.

He shook the thought aside impatiently and said, "The empty graves give Wig a powerful weapon."

"I realize that." She looked as if she had regained her composure.

"You said once people were escaping..." He paused, holding her eyes.

She nodded slowly. "Most of the people used to die, Alek, but not now. The graves were used to conceal the knowledge that we've found a way to escape."

"From Engo?" She moved her head slightly and he continued, "Wig says the underground is taking them back to the Federation?" He made it a question.

"No." She scarcely breathed the word.

"Not the underground or not back to the Federation?"

"Neither," she answered.

"But they're leaving the planet?"

"Yes."

"Is that why it's so empty? I thought it strange."

"Only a few of us are left, Alek."

He laughed grimly. "Small wonder Wig can't locate anyone, not even with the goat. He thinks they're hiding in the Kavu mountains."

She shuddered. "No one can live there. Not for long."

"Is it that bad?" he asked wonderingly.

"Worse."

"But you can't tell me where they're going?"

"Not yet, Alek."

"All right," he answered ruefully, "but why don't you and Johnny leave?"

"He can't," she whispered.

"Is that why you stay?"

"I have to take care of him, Alek."

"Why can't he go?" he demanded.

"He has to help the others."

"To escape?"

"Yes, but someday..." She paused, gazing wistfully into the distance.

"When there's another beyond, someone who can do what he's doing?" A flash of insight gripped him, so bizarre and fleeting that it vanished before he could grasp it fully. The fragmentary revelation left him numb with wonder.

"Listen!" she commanded. She lifted her head, peering toward the trees. He stood straighter, all his senses attuned, wondering what had alerted her. The wind, the river... "Listen," she repeated fiercely.

"Simon?"

"No!" Her voice held a touch of terror. "Open your mind, concentrate."

Concentrate! He closed his eyes, his ears, trying to shut out the questions crowding his mind; but there was nothing. How could he open his mind to the unknown when all of his life he'd been trying to keep it closed? What mental valve did he turn? How could he open circuits that had been fused shut by repeated denial of the power she now said he had? How? How? The ground trembled underfoot, followed by a low rumble that receded into the distance.

"Quake," he whispered.

"No." She leaned closer, murmuring almost inaudibly, "Someone's coming."

"Who?" He strained, seeking a sense of presence, baffled that he felt nothing.

"More than one," she corrected. "The thoughts are mixed."

"People from Engo?" he asked, remembering the figures on the meadow.

"No, they're from the ship...moving this way. There's a sense of viciousness."

"Wig?"

"They've split up. They're going in different directions."

"Who?" he urged.

She grasped his arm, gesturing for silence, then looked at him, her eyes frightened. "Jonman's coming this way. He has that animal."

"The goat?"

"I believe so, yes." She shivered apprehensively. "I'd better go before they get too close."

"I'll go with you," he said impulsively.

"It's too dangerous to stay together." Raising her face, she kissed him and darted away before he had a chance to detain her.

"Here...tomorrow night," he called softly into the darkness. She gave no sign that she heard and he started to repeat the message, then clamped his lips, aware of the danger. Jonman coming with the goat...He strained his senses into the night, and then it came, the faint inkling of presence. It seemed to grow stronger in his mind.

"A sense of viciousness," she had said. He sensed that, too, as if some intangible menace lurked in the shadows of his subconscious. He sat on the damp ground and shielded himself with the bulla grass, waiting. The feeling of

presence began to fade again and gradually vanished altogether.

Staring into the night, his thoughts were in a whirl. David was dead and not dead; Johnny was a beyond, although she hadn't stated it in so many words. But he talked with beings in the Magellanic Clouds, helped exiles to escape from Engo. How? And they didn't go back to the Federation; they went to a strange planet. What planet? Where was the star with habitable worlds not yet known? Not in this galaxy, he reflected. Not in this galaxy? The words rushed back, staggering him. But no, that was impossible. The gulf was too vast.

Gazing into the blackness of the forest, he felt the ground lurch underfoot again, settling into a prolonged vibration that gradually died away. The orange moon, hanging menacingly in the sky, cast a sheen against which the agora branches waved and tossed, filling the night with a vast sigh.

As he watched, the moon vanished, obscured in a tumble of orange-edged clouds that raced in from the Kavuu mountains, bringing a spatter of rain. Again he closed his eyes, listening with his mind; the silence was almost terrifying.

Drawing his jacket closer, he resisted the temptation to return to the ship. What were Wig's men doing out tonight? Did they suspect he was out prowling? Or were they hoping to find someone else? He looked around uneasily. Between great rifts in the clouds he saw the orange half-moon again.

Slowly he sank back into the grass, returning his thoughts to Johnny. Nothing was impossible. At least nothing was impossible on a world like Engo, he reflected. Perhaps Johnny did talk with beings in the Magellanic Clouds. Was that any more fantastic than a boy who was dead and yet not dead? Was it any more fantastic than an entire colony of exiles escaping to a planet that didn't exist? Or was it all a mad, mad dream?

He stiffened, suddenly alerted. Jonman? Moving his head slowly, he scanned the darkness, wondering what had jarred his consciousness. A sound? Or was it something more, something that had come from within his mind? Listening, he heard only the dull roar of the river.

He was about to conclude he was mistaken when his eyes caught movement and he turned his head quickly, seeing a figure emerge from the forest. Jonman! He knew it without quite knowing how. At the same instant he saw the goat.

As he caught his breath, sinking deeper into the grass, the goat struggled forward against the leash and the agent took another step onto the meadow. Selby saw them clearly in a moment of moonlight -- the huge animal moving its head, sniffing, Jonman scanning the clearing.

Selby studied them, conscious of the slow, dull beat of his heart. In his ears it sounded like a drum. Something in the agent's movements alerted him and he realized Jonman was stalking someone. Lora? No, it couldn't be. She'd vanished in a different direction.

He was struggling with his thoughts when he saw Jonman suddenly step back into the shadows, pulling the goat from sight. At the same time he became aware that someone else had entered the meadow from a point more distant. Another agent? He shot a glance toward Jonman before returning his gaze. As the second figure drew closer, he saw the slightness of the body and realized it was Johnny. At the same instant he heard a curse and whirled, seeing that the goat had broken free and was racing toward the boy.

"Johnny!" Selby screamed the name, leaping to his feet. A light beam shot out from where the agent was standing, pinning him against the meadow before moving to the goat, following it as it bounded in great leaps across the bulla grass. "Johnny, the goat," he screamed again.

Johnny turned and saw the goat, then whirled and raced for the shelter of the trees. Sickeningly, Selby knew he wouldn't make it. The goat was too close. At the last instant he saw another form shoot from the grass, springing toward the goat with a snarl.

Jonman's light moved, fixing the scene, and Selby saw the goat and the shaggy yellow dog called Rok locked in furious combat. For a moment the light revealed two huge masses of fur rolling and twisting amid angry spitting snarls. Selby felt a touch of horror. The shaggy dog was no match for the ugly brute.

Cursing horribly, Jonman raced forward, brandishing a weapon. As Selby started to intervene, he saw Johnny halt and turn. His eye couldn't follow what happened next, but suddenly he realized the goat was alone. The agent's beam moved wildly and he finally saw Rok suspended in midair, a good dozen feet above the goat.

Jonman skidded to a halt, his eyes riveted on the scene. The goat suddenly became aware of the yellow dog overhead and looked up. For an instant it held the posture, then turned and slunk from the meadow with a whine of terror.

The light blinked out and Selby heard the crashing sound of Jonman racing panic-stricken toward the woods.

When Selby looked back again, Johnny and the yellow dog were gone.

The executor's narrow face was cold and hostile. Sitting in the lounge in the SocAd ship, his black eyes fixed Selby angrily as he demanded, "Where is that boy?"

Selby regarded him calmly. "I don't know." Jonman, sitting off to one side, laughed nastily. Selby didn't bother to look at him.

"Don't know? You were there, Selby. Jonman saw you."

"Then why not ask Jonman?"

"Don't be insolent," snapped Wig.

"I'm not."

"Do you still deny he's a pk?"

"I won't swear that he is," Selby returned.

"He raised the dog, Selby. You and Jonman both saw it."

"I saw the dog in the air, yes, but I don't know who raised it."

Jonman snickered and said, "Maybe the dog's a teleport."

"Could be," he said.

"You'll have some questions to answer before the High Council, I'll warrant you that," Wig threatened. "What were you doing on the meadow?"

"Is there any rule against it?" he asked.

"I demand an answer," Wig replied harshly.

"My reasons are my own."

"Your own?" Wig arched his eyes. "This investigation was placed in my hands by Councilor Strang, Selby. I'm certain you're aware of that."

"Your end of the investigation," he corrected. "I'm conducting one too, for Director Smithson."

"Smithson!" Wig spat the name. "I'm here representing higher authority."

"My investigation is still independent," he returned.

The executor's face contorted and Selby saw his jaw muscles work spasmodically before he stated, "I could have you placed in custody."

"You might have trouble explaining that when you got back," Selby replied evenly.

"You believe so?" Wig smiled coldly. "I'm certain I could explain it very well."

"On what grounds?" he asked. "I'm not interfering with you or with the conduct of your investigation -- not even when you seize a man and place him under psychic probe. That is illegal," he finished.

Wig looked startled. "Who gave you that information?"

"I'm an investigator," he answered, "and I investigate."

The executor flushed. "Simon is a common criminal," he said succinctly.

"The act is still illegal." Selby dropped his voice. "I could demand that Captain Welker place you in custody for violation of a basic SocAd law --

the prohibition of probing by anyone other than a rated psymaster." He paused, weighing the other, realizing he had a very real point. As principal investigator on the director's staff, he could very well request such action of the patrol captain. Whether or not Welker would accede to such a demand was something else again. But would Wig take the chance? He had gambled that he wouldn't.

The executor's eyes closed to pinpoints as he glared across the few feet between them. Finally he rasped tightly, "You wouldn't dare."

"Try me."

"You're going too far, Selby. I warn you."

"Am I? You're talking about placing me in custody for no reason I can discern." It wasn't quite true, he knew, but Wig couldn't know that. He heard the howl of the wind and felt the ship tremble underfoot. The quakes were growing stronger, more prolonged.

Wig found his voice again. "I have reason to believe you're shielding these people," he accused.

"Prove that," Selby demanded.

The executor contemplated him, his eyes blank and stony, and yet Selby sensed a certain wariness creeping into the narrow face.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," Wig said finally. His conciliatory tone put Selby on guard, even though he sensed that the executor was not yet prepared for an all-out test of strength.

He said tentatively, "No, it isn't."

"I've asked you a question that has a direct bearing on my investigation," Wig continued. "That gives me the right to expect an answer."

"It has a direct bearing on mine, too," he replied. "That gives me the right to silence."

Wig pursed his lips and leaned forward. "What do you hope to gain?"

"Perhaps nothing."

"You said once you considered your investigation closed."

Selby smiled slightly. "You've reopened it," he replied.

Wig's head stopped moving and his eyes seemed to come into a new focus as he said, "David Gant's alive, Selby, and I believe you know it."

"I've seen his body," he returned calmly. "So have Lieutenant Stagg and eight of his men."

"He's not dead, Selby. I know that with absolute certainty."

"What's your proof?"

The executor smiled slightly. "That's what this meeting is all about -- pinning down the proof. But I know this: David Gant is the boy who calls himself Johnny Sloan, the boy you saw in the meadow -- saw raise a dog. That's David Gant, the pk."

"David's in his grave," he countered.

Wig continued, "I also know the Gant girl is with him."

"How do you know that?" Selby asked the question almost involuntarily, shocked by the extent of the executor's knowledge.

Wig inclined his head. "Tell him, Derek."

Jonman thrust himself forward in his seat, eyeing Selby balefully. "We've spotted her several times. The boy, too. They hang around that meadow. That's why I went out with the goat; I was waiting for them."

Selby said maliciously, "You didn't wait long."

"Long enough," snarled Jonman.

"Tell him the rest," Wig interceded testily.

"Those people know exactly where the detectors are," Jonman stated. "How could they know, unless they were in touch with someone on the field?"

"I couldn't answer that," Selby returned.

"Couldn't or won't?" demanded Wig.

Selby said wearily, "Take it either way."

"What were those people doing out there?"

"Probably trying to discover what happened to Simon," he retorted.

"You're evasive, Selby."

"Am I?" He moved his eyes and stared distastefully at Jonman. "If you just caught a glimpse of the boy, as you state, why are you so certain it was Johnny Sloan? Or should I say David Gant?"

Jonman pulled his lips tight against his teeth. "That dog -- that big yellow shaggy dog."

"Yellow?" Selby raised his eyes. "You could determine the color in the darkness?"

"I caught him in the beam, just like I caught you," the agent snapped. "In case you forget, that was the Gant boy's dog."

"What does that prove?"

Jonman snarled, "We know what's going on, even if you don't."

Wig smiled, a narrow, caustic smile. "You seem to have discovered remarkably little for the time you've been here," he observed.

"Perhaps because I'm not trying to create a situation," Selby shot back.

"And I am?" The executor frowned. "We've seen proof that the boy you call Johnny Sloan is a pk. But I know that he's David Gant. Do you know how I know? Simon told me."

"Simon said Johnny was David?" he asked incredulously.

Wig hesitated briefly. "He stated David hadn't died. Isn't that the same thing? But the goat confirmed it, Selby. Whatever it was that it sniffed at the grave was the same thing that caused it to go berserk when it saw the boy in the meadow. You can't fool a goat."

Selby said mildly, "I'd be interested in hearing the goat testify."

"You'll be there when the testimony's given," Wig promised bleakly. He leaned forward. "I also can prove that the boy is involved in the escape of the exiles, that right at this moment he's waiting to rendezvous with Olaf, head of the mutant underground. And his sister -- he's David Gant, all right -- is in league with him. Those are criminal activities, Selby, and I don't intend to overlook them, even if you do. I'm certain that Councilor Strang will see my point of view."

"I have scant doubt of that," he returned wryly.

Wig lifted his head. "From here on out, stay away from the village. The meadow, also. That's an order."

"And if I don't choose to obey it?"

"Then I can't take the responsibility for your safety."

"Is that a threat?" Selby asked stonily.

"I've ordered the apprehension of anyone found outside between dusk and dawn," Wig stated. "In event they try to flee, the orders are to shoot to kill."

"Without even knowing who it might be?" Selby stared at him, suppressing the fear he felt for Lora and Johnny.

"We're dealing with a criminal conspiracy, Selby." Wig's eyes mocked him.

"Your warrant is for one person, and that's David Gant," he replied edgily. "And David's dead."

"I intend to prove otherwise," Wig replied. He started to add something when a lieutenant came in, standing stiffly until the executor recognized him with a nod.

"Captain Welker wishes to report that a ship has entered into orbit," he said in a clipped voice.

"Ahhhh..." The executor drew the word out, a satisfied look crossing his face. "Any indication of its size?"

"It appears to be a small spacer, probably a private craft."

Wig cocked his head. "Does it look as if it's preparing to land?"

"There's no way of telling until it starts down."

"Could it land at night on a strange field?"

"There's a wild storm coming up," the lieutenant replied dubiously. "The prediction is for high winds and rains."

"I asked if he could land," Wig rebuked.

The lieutenant straightened. "I couldn't say, sir."

"Ask Captain Welker," Wig instructed. "Tell him that I want an immediate answer."

"Yes, sir." The lieutenant wheeled stiffly and departed.

Wig's eyes moved to Selby, dwelling musingly on him before he said smugly, "The pieces are falling into place, Selby. Our Mr. Olaf is making his appearance, right on schedule."

"I thought Selby didn't believe in the mutant underground?" Jonman sneered.

Conrad laughed jarringly. "He doesn't believe that a dead boy can talk, either."

"He can talk, all right," Wig assented.

"Are you through?" Selby asked. He fought to keep his temper, knowing that Jonman and Conrad were deliberately trying to antagonize him. He wasn't about to give them the satisfaction of seeing him flare up.

Wig scrutinized him, a secret smile touching his lips. "For the time being, yes."

Selby rose and left the lounge, feeling his emotions simmer as he passed through the short corridor toward the ramp. He wanted to smash Philip Wig's sneering face, smash Jonman and Conrad. He forced his anger down, knowing that in the hours to come he would need a cool head. He had to warn Lora and Johnny, somehow get word to Olaf that Wig knew all the details of the proposed rescue.

The latter thought brought him up short, giving him sober reflection. If Johnny were a beyond -- and he was! -- Wig was entirely within the law in his attempts to apprehend the boy. Conversely, he himself was breaking the law in shielding the boy -- doubly breaking it if he warned Olaf. Yet he wasn't there to enforce the law, but merely to investigate. In that sense, Wig also was acting beyond his capacity, and certainly had in placing Simon under psychic probing. He smiled grimly. Councilor Strang wouldn't exactly see it in that light.

Law and justice aren't always the same thing -- Hallam Vogel had contended that during a discussion of his mission; and both Vogel and the director had spoken in favor of justice as opposed to law. Or was he trying to rationalize his own behavior? And why? Because of Lora? Or because he, himself, was a telepath? He mulled that last thoughtfully.

He was one of them. His lips framed the words wonderingly, nor did he sense the quick denial that always had accompanied the thought. For all the years since his youth the knowledge had lain within him, buried, refuted, rationalized as hunches. Now he no longer could refute it, nor did he want to. Not that he was much of a telepath, he reflected wryly. He couldn't read minds at will, converse with other telepaths, do much more than receive vague impressions and occasional words. But he could transmit! Simon had heard him coming out of his drugged sleep; and Lora had heard him. Perhaps, as Johnny suggested, he had the power to implant his thoughts in others -- implant them in their minds -- to a far greater degree than he suspected. But how could he know that when no answers came back?

Alek Selby, telepath...What would Hallam Vogel think of that? Or the director? It would certainly be a shocker for Philip Wig. Wig? He halted in midstride. Simon had heard him! Suppose the old man revealed that under probing? That would give Wig the weapon he needed to smash him, smash Vogel and Korl Smithson. If Ewol Strang learned that the director's principal

investigator was a telepath...He shuddered at the thought. That, alone, was enough to make Philip Wig director.

He came to the hatch and paused, seeing Lieutenant Stagg framed in the opening, his face tilted upward toward the tumbling cloud masses. Turning slowly, he gave Selby the distinct impression he had been waiting for him.

Stagg gestured toward the sky. "Going to be rugged out tonight," he said cheerfully.

Selby gazed at the tossing branches in the distance. "A good night not to be out," he suggested.

"My thoughts exactly, but I've caught the duty."

"Tonight?" Selby lifted his eyes.

"Somebody has the bright idea that suspicious exiles are running around loose," Stagg explained.

He said carefully, "I don't see why they stick you with the job. I'd think they'd use the 404 men."

"Oh, they'll be out too," Stagg answered. He looked back at the gathering storm, his expression closing the subject.

"Might as well beat the rain," Selby observed. He pulled his jacket closer and started down the ramp.

"Take care of yourself," Stagg said.

Eleven

GAZING THROUGH the freighter's star window, Selby moodily watched the flurry of activity around the base of the SocAd ship. Despite the growing storm, Lieutenant Stagg had led a patrol toward the village a short time earlier. Now, in the fast-fading light, the Department 404 men were gathering. Draped in heavy rain gear, they carried an assortment of weapons and equipment, including portable trackers and powerful field lights.

Wig knows something, he reflected uneasily. He was deploying too many men for a routine guard or patrol. Did he hope to trap Johnny or his sister on a night like this? Or was Olaf coming down? He thought the latter more likely. Olaf might view the storm as a shield rather than a hindrance.

He glanced at the tumbling cloud masses, fretting at his own helplessness. From time to time he'd tried to warn Lora telepathically, alternating with calls to Simon on the off chance the old man might hear. But he'd received only silence, the feeling of having screamed into a void. Could he transmit only at times? The possibility made him uneasy.

Cromwell came in and stood silently beside him, peering toward the plain. His creased face was dour and grim.

Sergeant Trukel came down the ramp with the goat on a leash and barked a command. The 404 men formed into two squads, struggling with their equipment to gain some semblance of order. Moments later Jonman appeared in the hatchway, gazing at the sky before starting down. The sergeant snapped the men to order.

Cromwell stood straighter. "He's an evil man," he growled. "You can feel it from here."

Selby didn't reply, knowing exactly what Cromwell meant. Some men were ruthlessly ambitious, some callous, but Jonman was a sadist, pure and simple. With him, the infliction of punishment was an end in itself, rather than what might be gained through it. Philip Wig would stop at nothing to gain an objective; Jonman didn't need one. Remembering the agent's panicky flight at sight of the shaggy dog floating in mid-air, he felt a vindictive satisfaction. The agent was a coward.

"That goat's a killer," Cromwell said bitterly.

"They all are." He fell silent as the agent descended to the plain.

Talking briefly with the sergeant, he made sweeping gestures toward the village and adjacent areas before disappearing back into the ship.

When he had gone, Trukel barked a command and one of the squads started toward the village, the men trudging slowly under the weight of their equipment. The second squad, led by Sergeant Trukel with the goat, cut diagonally across the field in the direction of the river.

As they vanished into the forest, Selby felt the ship lurch under him in a quake more violent and sustained than any he'd yet experienced. As if it were a signal, the wind rose, shredding limbs from the agora trees and sending them spinning across the field. They struck the Cosmic Wind with dull, thudding sounds. Rain splashed against the star window, leaving it a solid blur impenetrable to the eye.

"Could a ship land in a storm like this?" Selby asked wonderingly. The wind had become a shriek.

"Tonight?" Cromwell turned, questioningly.

"Olaf's in orbit," he admitted.

"Mr. Olaf?" The captain's eyes widened. "Does Wig know?"

"They're tracking him."

Cromwell looked at the water streaming across the star window and shook his head. "Mighty dangerous. He'd have to use landing beams."

"But is it possible?"

"Possible, yes, if a man wants to play with death."

"Where could he land?"

"The meadow beyond the village, perhaps," Cromwell shrugged. "There must be quite a few small clearings."

Selby said musingly, "I have the feeling he's coming down."

"I wondered what Wig was up to."

"He's out to bag anyone he can get," he answered bitterly. "Olaf, Lora, Johnny..."

"Johnny wouldn't venture out tonight," Cromwell asserted. "Neither would the girl."

"If they knew Olaf was coming down?"

"To get them?" Cromwell countered sharply.

"Johnny, at least," he admitted.

Cromwell frowned. "How could they know he was coming down?"

"Simon."

"Simon?" The captain's eyes grew speculative. "You've heard from him?"

"Lora has," he explained. "Wig has him under psychic probing. That's where he's getting all his information."

Cromwell looked startled, then shook his head. "That could be bad."

"Very bad." Selby smiled bleakly. "I have the feeling that tonight's going to be the night."

"If I can do anything..." The captain's voice held a note of resignation.

"Thanks," he answered. He remained on the bridge after the captain's departure, listening as the rain beat in waves against the hull. Lora and Johnny undoubtedly were safe, tucked away in a cabin somewhere, he reflected. Or were they? Could the goat sniff them out on a night like this? What if Olaf did come down?

He mulled the questions, trying to discern what might be happening. Yet what could he do? If he ventured out, he'd probably wind up in the executor's net, or get shot. Worse, if he located Lora, Wig's agents might follow him to her. But no matter what, he couldn't just wait.

After a while the wind lessened and the rain slackened off, as if they were passing into the eye of the storm, but the quakes became more frequent and violent, sending a rumbling through the ship that reminded him of the roar of the river. He was contemplating it when he heard his name called and

started to turn.

"Selby! Selby!" It came again, and this time he realized with a start that he'd heard it with his mind. Simon, he thought instantly. Lora always called him Alek.

"Simon, I hear you." He closed his eyes, concentrating on the message. "Simon, I hear you. I hear you..." He tried to close out the physical world, listening only with his mind, baffled at the sea of silence he found there. Had he imagined the call? No, it had come too clearly. He tried again and again. "Simon, I hear you."

"Selby!" He was despairing when the answer came like a whispery echo from within some dim cavern, reverberating as it grew fainter in his mind.

"Simon!" He wanted to shout the name aloud. "I hear you, Simon."

"Olaf...Lora..."

The names came like a distant sigh, dying so that the silence rushed back more intense than ever. Olaf must be coming down in the blackness somewhere beyond the village, he thought. Simon wanted him to tell Lora. That had to be it. He thought of the goat and shivered, then hurried to his cabin for his gear.

The night was going to be rough, he reflected.

Crouched at the base of a giant agora tree, Selby peered through the forest toward the meadow. With the moon lost behind a mass of swirling clouds, the night was so black that meadow and forest were as one, a blackness without form or substance. But it was a blackness filled with sound -- the roar of the river, the wind in the trees; and closer around him, the drip-drip-drip of water falling from the rooflike branches.

As his eyes became more dark-adapted, he gradually perceived vague outlines, more like shadows eerily afloat in the blackness than things of concrete reality. Bit by bit the shadows took form and became trees, rocks, bushes; the meadow beyond unfolded as a flat plain broken by a low knoll.

He started to move ahead, then stifled the impulse. Had his eye detected something? His ear? He became conscious of a vague, persistent warning that plucked at his mind. Don't move, don't move, it seemed to say. Straining to see and hear, he felt the warning grow stronger.

"Dax..." A voice crackled through the darkness from somewhere immediately ahead of him and he recoiled instinctively, crouching closer against the tree.

"Daxon, squad one..."

"Hammer, squad two..." The voice held a metallic quality that told Selby it was being received over a small wrist radio of the type used by Department 404. "Where ya at, Dax?"

"Skirting the meadow near the village."

"Sarge says to keep your eyes peeled on the sky. There's a ship coming down."

"On a night like this?"

"That's what he says."

"Nobody's that crazy, Ham."

"Tell it to Sarge."

"Where's he at?"

"Wandering around with the goat."

"That damned animal gives me the shakes. Did he say where it might land?"

"The ship? They don't know. Give a yell if you see it."

"Will do."

"Keep sharp, Dak. Sarge says Jonman might be nosing around."

"I'll watch it, Ham. We're goin' tu drift up the line. See yu." The radio gave a burp and the silence rushed back. Selby heard a hushed

conversation, followed by movement up ahead. Peering around the tree, he saw several dim silhouettes. He sank back, waiting, filled with the knowledge that Olaf was coming down. This was the night!

He reconstructed a map of the area in his mind, appalled at how little he knew of it. Landing field, village, graveyard, meadow -- that about summed it up. The only certainty was that Olaf wouldn't land on the field, nor was he likely to land in the meadow with Wig so close at hand. That left only the small clearings that lay scattered here and there in the direction of the mountains.

Sudden movement came from ahead again and dissolved into half a dozen indistinct figures plodding along the edge of the clearing. He saw with relief they were going toward the far end of the meadow. As they moved farther away, he rose, feeling the tension drain from his body.

"Alek!" The name came softly and he whirled as Lora came out of the shadows, moving swiftly toward him.

"Shhhh!" He raised a warning finger.

"I heard them," she whispered.

He leaned closer. "It's dangerous here."

"We have to hurry and get Johnny. There's not much time with Mr. Olaf coming..."

"You heard?" he interrupted.

"Simon? Yes."

"Do you know where he'll land?"

She shook her head. "I'll have to try and contact him."

"Where's Johnny?"

"In the Cosmic Wind."

"Cosmic Wind!" He recoiled a step.

"He ran there to hide from the goat," she explained. "Simon told us once we could trust Mr. Cromwell."

"But I just came from there," he expostulated.

"He's hiding him in the cargo hold."

"Does Cromwell know he's a beyond?" he asked grimly, thinking that the captain's shock at seeing a pk had been the start of all the trouble.

"No." She shook her head worriedly.

"Just as well." He looked at her. "Can't you contact him telepathically, tell him to come here?"

"With so many men around the field, and the goat? I'm afraid, Alek."

"I'll get him," he offered quickly. She caught his arm warningly, listening intently. "What is it?" he whispered.

She didn't answer, staring silently into the night, her lips parted apprehensively. Closing her eyes, she swayed slightly.

He caught her hand to steady her. "What is it?"

"Simon, they're trying to force him to call Olaf, say the field is clear."

"He can't..."

"He won't," she broke in. "Oh, oh..." She put her face in her hands.

"What?" he asked worriedly.

"Wig...He plans to capture Johnny, hide him, keep him under."

"He couldn't get away with that," he declared.

"If he had control of a beyond?" She looked fearfully at him. "He's power-mad, Alek. He thinks he can use Johnny to control the Federation."

"Take it over?" he exclaimed. "He is mad."

"Not mad in that way."

"What way?" he demanded.

"He could...could do that through Johnny."

"Take over the Federation?"

"Yes, if he could control Johnny's power, and he could if he kept him

under probing." She shuddered.

"Does Olaf know about Johnny?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Johnny could solve all this," he said savagely. "If he can raise dogs he could raise Wig and his men -- lift them a thousand feet and let them drop."

"No," she remonstrated. "Johnny's gentle. He couldn't hurt anyone or anything."

"Not even to save his own life?"

"Not even for that," she answered. Her eyes moved to the meadow. "We have to hurry."

He shook his head. "Better leave him where he is until the last moment. It's safer."

"We can't wait," she persisted.

"Why not? Olaf can't arrive that soon."

She brought up her eyes slowly, searching his face.

"What is it?" he urged.

"It's the others..."

"People waiting to escape?"

"The last of them, Alek." Her eyes moved back to the meadow. "They're there now, hiding at the far side. Johnny can't leave until, until..."

"Until he builds a bridge?" he asked gravely.

Her gaze came back. "You know?"

"I've surmised, but tell me anyway."

"It is a bridge, a mental bridge," she explained. "The people up there" -- she glanced toward the sky -- "contacted Johnny telepathically. He's the only one who has the power."

"He sends them by psychokinesis?" he asked incredulously.

She shook her head. "It's more like reverse teleportation. They really build the bridge, but Johnny is necessary to anchor it," she explained. "It's like the end of a live wire; the power won't come through without a contact."

He regarded her quizzically, his mind assailed by wonder and doubt. "How would those people up there know about us? If they have that much power, why wouldn't they contact our populous worlds? How did they chance on such an isolated world as this?"

"Because of the concentration of telepathic power that was here," she explained. "They sensed it, knew that somehow this world was different."

"How about the other exile planets?" he demanded.

"Perhaps there are other contacts, I don't know. Or perhaps it's because we're at the very edge of the galaxy, stand alone."

He asked dubiously, "Why would they welcome us? We're probably an alien form of life to them."

"They're a very ancient race." Her voice was humble. "Incredibly ancient. Once they thought they'd achieved immortality and stopped breeding to stabilize the population. But it didn't turn out that way," she added wistfully.

"They're dying out?" he asked quietly.

"Slowly, yes, and one day they'll all be gone." Her eyes held his. "But they want their knowledge and lore to live, Alek. That's why they started searching the universe."

"Are they all telepaths?"

"Telepaths and far more," she asserted. "We can scarcely conceive of it. That's why they searched us out. They've scanned the universe, but only we have the germ of the same greatness."

"How do you know all this?" he asked quietly. "How do you know what happens to the people who leave?"

"Johnny's talked with them, Alek. The bridge is like a transmission

wire. There's a planet there -- Zamar, we call it -- that's been given over to them." She studied him. "Can't you believe it?"

He looked away without answering, trying to absorb what she had told him. Dimly he became aware that the wind had died, leaving in its wake a stillness broken only by the roar of the river. He glanced up through the trees toward the sky. The clouds had broken and between the rapidly shifting gulfs he glimpsed the orange half-moon. He watched as the tumbling cloud masses obscured its face, then opened great rifts to expose it again.

"It seems incredible," he murmured finally.

"To our minds, yes, but we've only lived in one small niche of the universe, Alek. There are countless civilizations at distances incalculable to us. We fit our concept of life into what we know -- our particular galactic environment."

"A limited perspective," he admitted ruefully.

"Very limited."

"Yet how else can we think of it?"

"As a phenomenon of infinity and eternity," she answered quietly. "If space is infinite, then the distribution of life within it must be infinite, and must have been so for all time. Can you imagine how many civilizations must have risen and fallen? It's incomprehensible."

"It is," he said in a subdued voice. "Does Olaf know of Zamar?"

"Yes." She nodded.

"And that Johnny's the key?"

"That's why he's so desperate to save him, Alek."

"He's learned all this from Simon?"

"Yes, of course." She looked quizzically at him. "Simon says you're an extremely strong transmitter, much stronger than I'd suspected. He believes you're as strong as Johnny."

"Definitely not." He shook his head.

"We'll see," she murmured.

He scarcely heard her, struck by the appalling thought he'd had earlier. "If Simon knows, won't Wig know?"

"About Zamar, or you?"

"Both."

"You don't volunteer information under psychic probing, Alek. You only answer questions."

"I don't quite follow you," he admitted.

"Wig wouldn't think to ask those kinds of questions, nor would he believe the answers if he did. He hasn't that kind of a mind. He'd think Simon was crazy."

"Fortunately," he answered drily.

Her hand tightened on his arm and she glanced up quickly, her face alert. She dug her fingers into his flesh to silence him. He looked around slowly, listening, conscious of her fright. The moon was out again, casting its eerie light on the meadow. He moved his eyes slowly over it, at the same time alert for sounds.

He jerked his head around as the shadows at the edge of the grass moved and the goat stepped into the clearing, straining at his leash. An instant later Sergeant Trukel followed, pausing to look around. The goat lifted its head, sniffing. Selby watched, fascinated. In the dim light the animal appeared monstrous. It tugged at the leash, attempting to move into the meadow.

"Easy, easy." Trukel's voice came softly in the still air. He pulled back on the leash, scrutinizing the night, his head pivoting slowly. Watching him, Selby had the impression of a human bloodhound. There was something deadly about him, almost terrifying.

Trukel's head stopped moving and he stared intently into the meadow. The

groat's ears came up, followed by a low growl.

"They see something," Selby whispered uneasily.

She looked up, her face frightened. "The people waiting for Johnny are out there."

"In the open meadow?"

"By the river."

He didn't answer, watching the goat, afraid that any move would alert it. Sniffing audibly in the still air, the goat's nose moved like a tracking scan, always settling back on the same point. The tableau was broken as the sergeant's wrist radio crackled to life.

"Daxon, squad one, now at cemetery."

Trukel lifted his wrist to his mouth. "Hold that position, Dax."

"Holding..."

Other voices broke in.

"Hammer, squad two. We're at clearing north of cemetery. No action."

"Stagg, with patrol unit. No action on trails leading toward Kay us."

"Hold your positions," the sergeant ordered.

"Trukel?" It took Selby an instant to recognize the new voice, high and querulous, as belonging to the executor.

"Yes, sir?"

"Have Stagg move his patrol back toward the meadow. We're more interested in the clearings tonight."

"Yes, sir."

"Keep a steady sky watch."

"Yes, sir, they know."

"And you'd better return to the ship."

"Yes, sir," Trukel echoed, "coming right in." He dropped his arm, scanning the sea of grass for a long moment before tugging on the leash and retreating toward the trees. He didn't trudge like the others but walked with a quick, quiet stealth that caused Selby to shudder. The agent was as much a man-hunter as the goat.

When Selby glanced back, Lora was holding her face in her palms and he caught a suppressed sob. She swayed and would have fallen had he not caught her. "What's wrong?" he demanded anxiously.

"Simon..." She gave a strangled sob.

"What about him?" He felt a quick unease, a premonition of disaster.

"He's dead, dead..." She wrung her hands.

"Dead?" he exclaimed.

"He called to me, and then I felt his mind slipping away. He's gone, gone, Alek."

"How did it happen?" he asked huskily.

"Jonman..." She looked bitterly at him. "Jonman strangled him."

Cromwell glanced up from a book as Selby entered the lounge. The captain's eyes, tired and drawn, rested speculatively on him.

"I've come for Johnny," Selby said.

"I suspected it was about time." Cromwell pushed the book aside and rose. "Is Olaf..."

"Coming down, that's all we know," he cut in impatiently. Cromwell gestured wordlessly and led him down a ladder toward the forward cargo hold. His nostrils caught the pungent odor of catmel pelts. As they entered the hold, he was surprised to see a light, more surprised to see Johnny and the first mate under it, huddled over a chess board. Prim and the engineer Grimp, watching from the sidelines, scarcely bothered to glance around.

"Hello, Mr. Selby," Johnny said. Snorkel twisted his head around owlshly.

"Teaching Johnny to play chess?" asked Selby. He spoke lightly, not

wanting to cause any alarm.

"Teaching him?" Grimp chortled. "You might call it that. Snorky's lost the first eight games."

"Better call it off," Cromwell broke in quietly. "Mr. Selby has some important business to discuss with Johnny."

Snorkel rose, staring at the board. "Just as I about had him," he complained.

Johnny glanced at the board and moved a piece. "Checkmate," he said.

"Checkmate?" Snorkel got a startled look. "I'll be danged."

"Nine down," Grimp intoned.

When they were alone, Selby said, "I've come to take you to the meadow, Johnny."

"I know." The boy regarded him gravely. "It's going to be dangerous, isn't it, Mr. Selby?"

"For everyone," he responded quietly. "Are you afraid?"

"I don't think so. I'll do what you tell me."

"I'm afraid I won't be of much help." Selby smiled mirthlessly. In a battle involving telepaths, beyonds, mutant leaders, groats, and the power of Philip Wig, his own role struck him as ridiculously ineffectual. He'd be scarcely more than a bystander. At the same time, he had the uneasy feeling that if Lora and Johnny were to be saved, it would be up to him. How? His mind reeled under the possibilities.

As if sensing his thoughts, Johnny said, "You're a real good transmitter, Mr. Selby."

"You told me that before." His disparaging laugh was cut short as he glimpsed the boy's eyes. For an instant they no longer were young and blue, but were deep wells of knowledge, reflecting strange wisdom. They were like the eyes of Simon and -- yes! -- the director. As he watched, the eyes changed, becoming those of youth again. "How does that help me?" he finished.

"You can put things in people's minds, Mr. Selby."

"I suppose." He sighed, thinking the gift was not very great. He'd performed minor feats of telepathy since arriving on Engo, but Johnny -- and Lora, too -- attributed too much to him. Worse, he never really knew his messages were received; there was simply no feedback, or very little.

"I guess we'd better go," Johnny suggested.

"Yes..." He paused, detaining him with a gesture. "I know about the bridge, what you have to do."

Johnny cocked his head. "I told you that."

"I never really understood, couldn't believe it," he admitted. He eyed the boy sharply. "Can you build a bridge?"

"Not like that." Johnny shook his head. "They have to build it from up there."

"I wasn't talking about a bridge that long, Johnny. Not to another galaxy."

"Well, I'm learning."

"To build your own bridge? Is that what you do on the meadow, practice?"

Johnny looked suddenly shy. "They're teaching me, Mr. Selby. I've built bridges across the river, and sometimes to the moon."

"The moon?" he echoed.

"I've put sticks and rocks up there," Johnny explained.

"How do you do that?"

"I really don't know, Mr. Selby."

"Don't know?" He felt puzzled.

"I never know," Johnny explained. "I can only do it when..." He paused, seeking a word.

"When you're in a trance?" he ventured.

"Something like that," the boy admitted.

"Is that true when you send people to Zamar?"

"It's always true, Mr. Selby."

Selby had the bitter thought that the boy could solve all their problems, if he would. He could lift, smash, hurtle objects through space -- perhaps even bury people, if he wanted. But he wouldn't. He couldn't hurt anyone or anything -- Lora's words came back and he realized the truth of them; Johnny was gentle. Perhaps it was better, he reflected. If Johnny were brutal, or vindictive...He shuddered at the thought.

"We'd better go," he said abruptly. When he reached the hatch leading to the ladder, he turned, the question that had lain deep in his mind coming to the fore. Johnny halted, waiting.

"You're David Gant, aren't you?" asked Selby.

The answer seemed a long time in coming, and the truth was revealed in Johnny's eyes before he said, "Yes, Mr. Selby."

Selby turned, stumbling into the dim passageway toward the ladder, his mind groping with the knowledge of something that reason and knowledge denied; the impossible had become possible! Yet he'd seen David, seen him in his grave! The picture reeled through his mind. David was Johnny! Or was Johnny David? In a flash of insight he knew what must have happened.

There was no other way.

Somehow he reached the hatch, where Cromwell was waiting. "There's someone on the field," the captain murmured.

Selby peered out. The wind had remained down and through the scattered clouds he saw the orange moon almost overhead. It gave a visibility to the field that bothered him. He glanced toward the SocAd ship. A rectangle of light showed through the hatch that opened onto the ramp. A vague warning prickled at his mind, insistently refusing to go away.

Johnny leaned toward him. "Three men," he whispered.

"Where?"

"Near the front of the ship."

Selby peered closer. All at once he detected movement near the base of the ship, and as suddenly it ceased. He calculated their path to the forest, realizing they'd have to chance it. Leaning toward Johnny, he whispered, "Let's go."

The boy followed him down the ramp. As they reached the field and started toward the trees, a black shadow moved out of the grass and came toward them. Selby glimpsed it and skidded to a halt, starting to hiss a warning.

"It's Rok," Johnny whispered. Selby gave a sigh of relief as the big shaggy dog took form, running to the boy's side. He plunged ahead, all at once anxious to reach the shelter of the forest.

He was but a score of yards from the nearest trees when a dazzling beam of light shot out from the base of the SocAd ship. Sweeping the field, it caught them in its glare and stopped, pinning them against the night.

A voice shattered the darkness: "It's Selby! He's with the boy and that dog!"

"Don't shoot the boy!" someone shouted.

"Get Selby!"

"Run!" Selby shouted. Crouching, he waited for Johnny to pass him before racing in his wake, momentarily expecting to feel the rip of gunfire. Shouts and confusion arose from behind him.

"Get Selby!" The cry came again.

Two bolts of flame sizzled past his head and exploded with blinding flashes against the trees. He heard the branches rip and shred.

As Johnny and the dog vanished into the forest, he plunged in their wake, conscious of his labored breath. Reaching the trees, he cast a backward glance and froze. Between him and the ship lay a long silver corridor of

light.

And down the beam in great galloping leaps, its ears pinned flat against its hideous head, came the goat.

Twelve

"THE GROAT!" The warning escaped from Selby's lips with a strangled croak. He stood, petrified, watching it bear down on him before he whirled and burst into the shelter of the trees. "Run! Run!" he shouted.

He raised an arm to ward off the branches lashing his face as he scrambled frantically after the slight figure of Johnny and the shaggy yellow dog. Behind him he fancied he heard the thud of the goat's paws, its whistling breath as he fought to push the terror from his mind and keep pace with the fleeing boy. Johnny and the dog slipped through the forest with an ease he couldn't match, drawing farther ahead.

Then he heard it -- the snapping of small branches as the goat plunged through the forest. A hideous growling bay broke the night, bringing his terror anew. He pushed ahead more desperately, hearing shouts in the distance.

The scrambling behind him grew louder and all at once he realized the goat was almost at his heels. He had quick visions of being ripped to shreds within seconds before the goat thundered on, catching the boy.

"Johnny!" he screamed, "the trees! The trees! Climb a tree!" Even as he shouted he realized Johnny couldn't hear him; he was too far ahead -- a distance the goat could cover within scant moments.

"The goat, Johnny! Climb a tree!" This time he shouted with his mind. "Climb a tree! Climb a tree!"

An angry snarl broke the night and twigs snapped from the swift passage of a body through the forest. Fear clutched his heart as he heard the great paws thundering behind him. Whirling, he saw the goat's baleful yellow eyes as it leaped for him, its fangs bared in a snarl.

"The tree!" Selby screamed the words in his mind and threw up his arms to ward off the attack, at the same time propelling his body to one side.

It was the last thing he remembered.

Consciousness came as through a fog. His first sensation was of swaying, of precarious balance, and he groped blindly, finding a limb and clinging to it. He shook his head to clear it, his mind in a haze. The goat! He snapped his eyes open at the recollection, at the same time aware of a small arm supporting him.

"Careful, Mr. Selby." The voice was Johnny's.

Selby's first impression was of height; it took him an instant to realize he was sitting on a branch high in an agora tree. The big shaggy dog floated in mid-air a few feet away.

"Don't be scared, Rok." Johnny reached out carefully and hauled him in, stroking the animal's head. The dog whimpered, nuzzling closer.

Selby cautiously leaned forward and gazed down at a splotch of moonlight on the forest floor; it seemed far away. "What happened?" he asked shakily.

"I don't know, Mr. Selby."

"You teleported!" He twisted on the branch, looking at him. "You teleported and took Rok and me with you."

"I couldn't do that." The boy shook his head.

"But you did."

"No, you did."

"Me?" Selby laughed weakly. "Never, Johnny."

"You got into my mind," the boy blurted. He stopped, looking puzzled. "That's what must have happened, Mr. Selby. I heard you shouting, and all of a sudden you were shouting inside my head; then we were up here."

"Then you did it," he said firmly.

"How could I?" asked Johnny. "I can't teleport."

"Shhhh." He gestured a warning and peered down. The goat came into view, sniffing as it ran back and forth, trying to pick up a trail. Selby contemplated his narrow escape and shivered. If Johnny hadn't...Johnny? He had gotten into Johnny's mind -- the boy's words drove home. No, that couldn't be. Yet how had they gotten into the tree?

His thoughts were broken as he heard shouts in the distance and moments later saw a light bobbing through the trees. It came closer, flicking around randomly and finally settled on the goat.

"Ah, there you are." The voice was sergeant Trukel's. Selby peered down, conscious of the thump of his heart. Other lights were moving through the forest. The sergeant reached the goat and slipped the leash back on, then spoke into his wrist mike: "Trukel...ye got the goat."

"Keep that beast leashed." The executor's voice came with a crackle. "We want that boy alive."

"They don't act like it," Johnny whispered.

"Shhhh."

"Do your men understand the orders?" the executor demanded. "We want the boy alive."

"Yes, sir."

"We're tracking the spacer. It looks very much like it's headed for one of the clearings just beyond the village. He probably won't use his landing beams until the last possible moment. Have the men keep a sharp eye."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant repeated.

"He's talking about Mr. Olaf," Selby whispered.

"I know." Johnny cocked his head, listening.

"I don't suppose there's any way to warn him?" He eyed the boy speculatively.

Johnny looked up at him. "We could only get him through Mr. Simon."

"Mr. Simon's dead," he answered gently.

"I know." Johnny stared into the distance and a tremble came into his voice. "[tried to reach him and couldn't."

"Is Lora safe?"

"She's across the meadow."

"With the people waiting to escape?"

The boy nodded. "There are five of them. One of the women has a little girl."

"They'd better remain right where they are," he answered grimly.

"They won't come until it's safe," Johnny said.

"Why the meadow? Can't you send them from a safer place?"

"No, I don't know why, but I can't. They tell me to use the same spot."

"They?"

"The people up there," Johnny explained.

"How do you know you can contact them? Suppose you get to the meadow and no one's waiting...on the other end?" He eyed the boy quizzically.

Johnny said with assurance, "Somebody'll be there."

"Shhhh." Selby cautioned him to silence again as Trukel's voice crackled in the night.

"Come in, Daxon."

"Daxon, squad one."

"What's your position?"

"Still at the cemetery, Sarge."

"Move toward the first clearing to your north and watch for landing beams. The spacer's coming in."

"Glad to, Sarge. This place gives me the shakes."

Trukel's voice changed. "Hammer?"

"Hammer, squad two."

"Were you following that?"

"Sure thing."

"Cover the clearing next to the one where Dax is headed."

"We're in that area now."

"Good, keep a sky watch." Trukel's voice altered again.

"Lieutenant Stagg?"

"Stagg...moving toward the meadow," the lieutenant answered laconically.

"Move to one of the clearings north of the village instead," Trukel instructed.

"Acknowledged..."

Listening, Selby felt a surge of hope. If the executor concentrated his manpower north of the village...He was contemplating it when the radio crackled to life again.

"Trukel?" Wig's voice came with a snap.

"Yes, sir?"

"Stay in the vicinity of the meadow with the goat. We'll be out shortly."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant responded. The radio died away and the silence came back, broken only by the goat's deep whine. Selby cursed softly. The order dashed his hopes the meadow might be left deserted. Trukel moved away, the goat pulling and sniffing at the end of the leash.

"We'll have to wait," he whispered. Balanced on the branch, he considered possible ways by which he might thwart the executor. If Johnny could lift the goat and Trukel, leave them suspended high in the air while he sent the exiles to Zamar...He voiced the thought.

Johnny shook his head, explaining why he couldn't. He'd have to break the concentration that held them suspended to establish contact with Zamar; and when he'd broken it, they'd come tumbling down.

"You can only concentrate on one thing at a time," he explained.

Selby pondered that. No use asking Johnny to simply let them fall; he'd been through that phase of the boy's character. "How about building a bridge, shooting them across the river?" he asked.

"They'd have to be right next to me," Johnny answered.

"How about when you sent sticks and stones to the moon?"

"I put them in front of me, and if Mr. Wig got that close..."

"I can see the problem," he admitted. He stewed about it, conscious of the passage of time, then got another idea. "Suppose you shot Rok to one of the other clearings? They might see him and pass the alarm, draw everyone from the meadow."

Johnny said in a small voice, "He might get shot, Mr. Selby."

"Yes, he might." He looked away, realizing the boy was going to be very little help.

"Hadn't we better go?" asked Johnny.

"Probably." He hesitated, glancing at the moon-splotched floor of the forest. "Can't you shoot us down below?"

"I could send you and Rok."

"But not yourself? You got yourself up here."

"No, I didn't," Johnny replied. "You did that."

Selby sighed. "All right, we'll climb down. Then you can get Rok."

Johnny leaned forward, looking below them. "Gee," he said wistfully, "I wish I could teleport."

"Look!" Johnny pointed toward the sky and Selby jerked his head upward, glimpsing a swath of silver between the moving silhouettes cast by the trees. A landing beam! The spacer was coming down!

"Olaf," he murmured. Following the ribbon of light, he tried to estimate

the craft's altitude and speed before it passed from view. The ship was low, moving toward the clearings to the north where the sergeant's men had gone. The lack of sound told him it was dropping on anti-gravs.

"We'd better hurry," Johnny urged. He darted ahead without waiting for an answer, the shaggy dog a shadow at his side.

Trying to keep pace, Selby's mind was filled with chaotic thoughts. The boy moved as if Trukel or the goat didn't exist. But they did; they were somewhere ahead. Wig and his aides were coming to the meadow; so were Lora and the exiles. And if Olaf landed where the 404 men were waiting...He wanted to laugh, wondering how everything had gotten so fouled up.

Johnny was waiting for him at the edge of the meadow. He gestured a warning and whispered, "Sis is coming."

"With the others?" he asked nervously. His eyes swept the dimly lit clearing ahead. The orange moon gave the grass a phosphorescent glimmer that was filled with ghostly movement as the wind ruffled its tops.

"They're following," Johnny explained.

"Where's Trukel?"

"There...with the goat." His hand swept out and Selby detected the sergeant's lean form at the edge of the forest, scarcely a hundred yards away. Holding the goat at bay with the leash, he was scanning the meadow.

Selby swallowed heavily. "Won't he sense Lora?"

"The goat? She knows where it is," Johnny explained. He gestured toward the sergeant again. "He was telling someone on the radio about Mr. Olaf coming down."

Selby started to reply when the sergeant's radio crackled to life.

"Trukel?" The executor's voice cut through the air.

"Yes, sir."

"Daxon thinks he knows about where it landed. He's moving in."

"Yes, sir."

"Olaf will try to contact the boy, or his sister."

"The meadow's clear."

"Keep in close touch with Daxon and Hammer. We'll be right out."

"Yes, sir." The radio sputtered and died and the silence returned.

Trukel moved deeper into the meadow and Selby saw him more clearly -- a gaunt form limned against the moonglow, holding the huge goat in check.

Selby lowered his head. "She can't come while he's there," he whispered.

Johnny looked up. "I'm trying to make him move, Mr. Selby."

"Move?"

"Trying to get into his mind," he explained. His eyes widened. "You're a transmitter, Mr. Selby. Why don't you try?"

Selby said urgently, "Where are you trying to make him go?"

"To the far end of the meadow."

"Why not send him to join Daxon?"

Johnny shook his head. "He wouldn't, Mr. Selby. Mr. Wig told him to stay in the meadow."

"All right," he answered hurriedly. "I'll tell him you're at the northern end." He closed his eyes, thinking it was crazy, then pushed the thought aside and concentrated on Trukel.

The boy's at the northern edge of the meadow, the northern edge...He let the thought run through his mind, over and over, at the same time striving to throw it into the sergeant's mind. How had he made the connection before? The northern edge of the meadow...

Once he opened his eyes, seeing that Trukel hadn't moved, then went back to his concentration. The thought was becoming a refrain in his mind. The boy's at the northern edge...He felt the boy tugging at his arm and jerked back his thoughts.

"He's moving," Johnny whispered. Selby peered into the night, straining

for several seconds before he picked up the forms of Trukel and the goat; they were moving away from them. He looked at the boy wonderingly.

"You did it," Johnny said.

"Might be a chance move," he answered doubtfully.

Johnny shook his head. "I couldn't do that, Mr. Selby. You're a better transmitter than I am."

"Perhaps it was both of us working together."

"Maybe," he answered dubiously.

"Where's Lora?"

"Coming now. She knows the goat's gone."

"Are the others with her?"

"They're following," Johnny explained. "Sis is in touch with them."

He asked urgently, "How long before they get here?"

"It'll be a while yet."

"And then?"

"I have to be ready before they get here, Mr. Selby."

"You'll be out of touch?" he asked sharply.

"When I contact Zamar, yes."

"I don't like that trance business, Johnny."

"There's no other way, Mr. Selby."

"Can't you hear a thing?"

"I don't know." Johnny looked puzzled. "No one ever tried to talk to me while I'm in contact. Sis thinks it might be dangerous."

Selby shook his head. "It could be dangerous not to hear me, Johnny."

"I guess so," he assented.

Selby cocked an ear as the distant radio crackled to life. "Listen," he ordered.

"Daxon, squad one..." The voice came ghostly in the wind. He didn't catch the sergeant's reply, but when Daxon spoke again, his voice was stronger. "...will take some time to locate, Sarge. The guy will probably be gone by then."

"Trukel?" Wig's voice broke in imperiously.

"Yes, sir?"

"Instruct Daxon and Hammer to forget the ship. We're reasonably certain the boy's somewhere in your area. Let Olaf come to him."

"Yes, sir," Trukel repeated uncertainly.

"Have them spread out and close in, and keep your eyes sharp."

"Yes, sir," Trukel said again. "Dax?"

"Daxon..."

"You heard the orders. Have your men fan out and move toward the meadow. Hammer?"

"Moving in, Sarge."

"Keep in touch."

"Will do."

"Sarge?" Daxon's voice came through the air with a brittle, urgent sound.

"Go ahead," Trukel said.

"Burl caught a glimpse of someone..."

"Man or boy?" Trukel broke in.

"Can't say. He just caught a glimpse of someone running."

"Where?" the sergeant snapped.

"He was headed for the trees. Burl says..."

"Which direction?"

"Toward the village or meadow."

"Hammer?" Trukel barked.

"I'm following you."

"Cut in toward the village on the double."

"Moving out."

"Dax?"

"Go ahead."

"Keep moving. Use the portable scanners to cover the space between men."

"That will slow us up."

"Trukel?" the executor barked.

"Yes, sir."

"Someone went through the detector net northwest of the village. We just got the alarm."

"Hammer's moving in that direction. Shall I go with the goat?"

A brief hesitancy ensued before Wig instructed, "Stay where you are. He might run right into you."

"Yes, sir, I'm at the northern end..."

"We want the boy alive," Wig cut in.

"Yes, sir, the men have their orders."

"We'll be right out."

As the radio burped and died, Selby looked at Johnny with dismay. "What now?" he asked tightly. "This meadow won't be big enough to hold them all."

"That was Mr. Olaf they saw," Johnny said. "Sis picked him up."

"Telepathically?"

He nodded. "She's going out to get him."

"Does she know about the 404 men?" he asked, alarmed.

"She knows." He stared solemnly into Selby's face. "Can't you hear her?"

"With my mind? No."

"You could if you tried, Mr. Selby."

He shook his head. "I've tried, Johnny. It comes and goes. Occasionally I can pick up a word or two but that's about all. I'm afraid I'm not much of a receptor."

"You're sure a good transmitter."

"A one-way line," he returned sourly. He glanced at the sky, marveling at the swiftness with which the storm had passed. The orange moon, riding high, cast an uncomfortably bright light over the meadow. Probing his mind, he wondered how much of the boy's confidence in his ability was true. Had it been by chance that Trukel had walked toward the northern end of the meadow when he'd suggested it. Suggested? He contemplated the word, thinking that it lacked action. What if he'd directed Trukel? Or would Trukel realize that someone was tampering with his mind? Could a man separate his own thoughts from those implanted in him?

He laughed wryly. For his entire life before coming to Engo he'd denied his heritage. Now that he desperately needed the capability, he felt woefully inadequate. Yet Lora and Johnny insisted he had the power. But did he have? He'd certainly like to see some sign of it.

He glanced toward the sergeant, realizing that Trukel had turned back and was coming closer. His silhouette and that of the goat were clearly discernible in the moonlight. Go back, he thought. Go back to the northern end. He repeated the message a number of times. Go back, go back...

Watching, he saw that Trukel was still coming toward them. He moved slowly, holding the goat on the leash as he scanned the grass. The goat's head pivoted from side to side, pausing as he sniffed the air.

"Try harder," Johnny whispered.

Selby shot a startled glance at him, realizing the boy had followed his attempt to turn the sergeant back. Did anything escape him? He looked back at Trukel. Go back. Go back to the northern end. The boy is at the northern end.

He concentrated on the thought, concentrated on driving it into the sergeant's mind. Go back, go back... Still Trukel moved forward, walking with the silent stealth of a hunter. The black goat became gigantic in the night. Go back, go back. The thought screamed in his mind. Back, back, back, back,

back...

A low rumble came from Rok's throat and Johnny knelt swiftly, patting the dog's head and shushing him to silence. Selby felt a brief moment of panic, then resolutely shut his eyes and tried again.

Sergeant Trukel, go to the northern end of the meadow. This time he made it a direct order, a command, saying it as he thought the executor would say it. Sergeant Trukel...He felt the boy's hand touch his arm.

"He's stopping," Johnny whispered.

Selby blinked and straightened, peering into the night. Trukel had paused, hauling back on the leash as he scanned the meadow in the direction from which he had come. Selby closed his eyes again and shouted into his mind: Sergeant Trukel, go to the northern end of the meadow immediately!

He repeated the order several times, screaming it into his mind while Johnny's fingers dug at his arm. Sergeant Trukel, go...

"You did it," Johnny whispered excitedly.

He opened his eyes, seeing the sergeant's figure receding in the moonlight. A sense of exultation shook him and he grinned. Not bad for a spanking new telepath! His jubilation was cut short as Trukel's radio blared to life and Daxon's voice broke the night.

"We caught a glimpse of the guy again, Sarge. He's moving in your general direction."

"One man?" asked Trukel sharply.

"That's all we saw."

"Where are you at now?"

"The clearing to your north."

"Keep coming. You're driving him this way. Hammer?"

"We're moving in, Sarge."

"Look sharp. The executor's' on his way out."

"Gotcha!"

The radio died and Selby watched Trukel and the goat recede into the distance. A huge cloud obliterated the moon and for a while the night hung dark and heavy; then it passed, leaving the bulla grass as nacreous as ever.

"They're getting closer," Johnny whispered.

"The exiles? How long before they get here?"

"They're near the middle of the meadow," he explained. "They won't come to the knoll until Sis tells them."

"Where is she?"

"Close to Mr. Olaf." Johnny stared toward the distant woods. "She hears men moving around."

"Daxon?" he asked anxiously.

"Or that other one, the man they call Hammer."

"Tell her to be careful," he urged.

Johnny looked back at him. "She knows every inch of the woods, Mr. Selby. There are lots of hollow trees and places to hide."

"She still has to return to the meadow," he answered grimly.

"We'll be careful."

"How?" he insisted. "We can't even hide in the grass with the goat around."

"Maybe they won't bring it back," Johnny answered dubiously.

"Shhhh..." He gestured for silence, staring in the direction of the village. What had alerted him? Rok growled.

"Quiet," Johnny hissed. He moved close to Selby's ear. "It's Mr. Wig. Two men are with him."

"Jonman and Conrad," he murmured.

"They know about the others."

"The people waiting to escape?" As Johnny bobbed his head, he asked sharply. "Do they know about Zamar?"

"No, they think Mr. Olaf's come to take them away."

"Shhhh..." Selby's scalp tingled and he gripped the boy's arm warningly. Listening, he heard nothing but the murmur of the river, the soft sigh of the wind in the trees. He peered toward the trail that led to the village. An eternity seemed to pass before his eyes caught movement; an instant later the executor emerged onto the edge of the plain, followed by Jonman and Conrad. For a moment they stood searching the grass before Wig raised his wrist mike.

"Trukel?"

"Yes, sir," the sergeant replied immediately.

"Where are you at?"

"The north edge of the meadow."

"See or hear anything?"

"I have a hunch they're up this way."

Wig said sharply, "I asked if you saw or heard anything?"

"No, sir, but Daxon caught a glimpse of someone moving this way."

"Watch for Selby. I want him as much as I want the boy."

"Yes, sir. Do the same orders apply?"

"Catching him alive? No, he's a traitor, Trukel. But I want Olaf alive. He has some questions to answer."

"Yes, sir. I'll pass the word. Dax? Hammer? Selby dead, Olaf alive. Did you get that?" The acknowledgments came and the radio died, leaving the night cloaked in silence.

Johnny whispered, "You'd better go to Zamar, Mr. Selby."

"They haven't got me yet," he answered grimly. "Where's Lora?"

"Awfully close to Mr. Olaf."

"How about Trukel's men?"

"They're out there, too," Johnny answered. He moved his lips closer. "Why can't you tell Mr. Wig to go to the far end of the meadow?"

"I couldn't very well order him, Johnny."

"You might give him the idea."

"I can try," he assented. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the suggestion that Johnny was in the area where Trukel was watching with the goat. At the same time, he tried to direct the thought to Wig. From time to time he paused, staring toward the executor and his aides. They failed to move.

"I'm not getting through," he said finally.

"Keep trying," Johnny urged. He tried again, closing his eyes and ears to all stimuli while he sent the single message: The boy is at the far end of the meadow.

After what seemed an interminable time Johnny touched his arm and he looked up. One of the figures -- he thought it was Wig -- was gesturing toward the north end of the meadow.

Johnny tugged his arm again. "Sis has contacted Mr. Olaf," he whispered. "They're coming."

Selby felt a quick alarm. "Won't they run into Trukel?"

"She can dodge 'em easily," he returned scornfully.

"How about the goat?"

"She'll be careful." Johnny gazed at the knoll. "I'd better get ready."

"I don't like it," he declared.

"It'll be all right."

He sighed heavily. "Suppose they start back?"

"You can get into my mind," Johnny suggested.

"I thought that was dangerous?"

"I don't know." Johnny looked away again. "I really don't, Mr. Selby." As he started toward the knoll, the dog emerged from the tall grass and trotted at his side. Selby followed more slowly, pausing from time to time to study Wig.

He felt the worry nag at his mind. What would happen when the squads under Daxon and Hammer converged on the meadow and discovered their net was empty? Would they fan out and search the meadow? Or would they attempt to search out Olaf's ship?

He paused as Johnny ascended the knoll, conscious that the boy's silhouette might be visible in the moonlight.

"Alek!" His name rang faintly in his mind and it took him a second to grasp that it had come telepathically.

"Lora," he answered silently.

"Alek..." The name came again.

"Johnny's on the knoll... on the knoll."

"Coming."

The sense of communication died, leaving an abrupt silence that Selby realized was of the mind. There was still the murmur of the river, the wind in the trees, but inwardly he sensed only a deep stillness.

Moving to one side of the knoll, he searched the meadow ahead of him. Once or twice he thought he glimpsed movement. The wind in the grass? A trick of the mind? Glancing around, he saw with dismay that Wig and his aides had turned back. Beyond them he saw the figures of Trukel and the goat and, farther still, a squad of 404 men emerging onto the meadow.

He swung his gaze back to where he thought he'd seen movement, and this time dimly discerned several figures moving toward him.

"Lora!" He shouted the name in his mind. "Wig is in the meadow. Wig is coming." To his alarm, the figures became more distinct and he knew it was the column of exiles. "Look out for Wig, look out for Wig..." He sent the thought out frantically. "Danger, danger, danger..."

"Daxon?" The executor's voice broke his thoughts.

"Yes, sir?"

"Sweep the meadow."

"Yes, sir."

"Trukel?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Bring the goat."

"Coming..."

Selby heard the words numbly. Sweep the meadow? With a jolt of dismay he remembered the powerful field lights the 404 men had carried from the ship. And the goat! Had Lora heard? Glancing hurriedly around, he saw the shadowy figures of the exiles and moved quickly to within a few paces of the boy.

"Johnny," he hissed. When the boy failed to respond, he realized he was already in rapport with the distant world of the nebula -- out of touch with the reality of this world. He felt a wild despair. Catching a sound, he whirled and recognized Lora's slender form as it emerged from the night. She quickened her step, running the last half a dozen paces.

"Is Johnny ready?" she asked in a frightened voice.

"Wig's here," he shot back. "We have to..."

"I know," she interrupted. She took a step toward Johnny, looking at him. "We have to hurry."

"We have to get out of here," he snapped grimly. "Can you awaken him?"

"No, no..." She glanced back, clasping her hands. "I've brought Mr. Olaf."

She stepped aside and Selby's eyes fastened on the figure behind her. He stared stupidly, trying to fit the figure into the context of his memory.

"Hello, Alek."

The voice, that voice. The newcomer took another step forward and something clicked in Selby's mind. He suppressed the wild desire to laugh.

Mr. Olaf was Hallam Vogel.

Thirteen

"DAXON...the lights!" Wig's voice cut through the night with a snap.

"Yes, sir." Selby froze as a beam shot from the end of the meadow and cut a silver swath across the grass. He swung toward Lora, shouting a silent warning. Urging the exiles onward, she gave no sign that she heard. He looked back at the distant 404 agents with dismay. Seemingly only seconds had passed since he'd first discerned the exiles moving toward him through the night -- since Hallam Vogel had made his surprising appearance. Now everything was collapsing in on him.

"Sweep the field," Wig ordered curtly. A second beam flicked on and both swung slowly over the clearing. Selby watched, his mind grappling with this new turn of events as Lora exhorted the exiles to greater speed.

"Hurry," she pleaded. He saw five figures hastening through the night, one carrying a child in arms. As they started up the low slope of the knoll a light beam swept over them, then jerked back, pinning them in its glare.

"There they are!" a voice shouted. The second beam swung around and flooded the knoll, outlining Johnny's small figure in a circle of light. "It's the boy!"

Selby stared blindly into the light, hearing the distant shouts. Jerking his eyes away, he looked toward Johnny. Great silver spheres floated in front of him as he fought to regain his vision. Dimly he sensed bodies rushing past him.

"Halt where you are!" the executor shouted.

"Hurry! Hurry!" Lora urged. As Selby's vision began to clear, he saw the first figure stride past Johnny...and vanish.

"Halt!" Wig demanded imperiously. The sound of rushing feet filled Selby's ears as another figure -- that of a woman carrying a child -- scurried past him and disappeared.

"Halt or I'll shoot," Jonman screamed in a high voice.

"Don't hit the boy," Wig shouted. Before Jonman could take action, the last of the exiles brushed past Johnny and vanished into thin air.

Selby swung back to face the executor. In the distance he saw Trukel racing toward him with the goat. Rok sensed them too, for a low rumble broke from his throat.

"Down!" Lora commanded. As the dog subsided back into the grass, Selby threw a quick glance around and saw there was no hope for escape. Hallam Vogel evidently figured the same, for he stepped to Lora's side, calmly contemplating the approaching figures.

Selby shot a fast glance at Johnny. The boy sat as if totally unaware of the commotion around him, his face turned toward the sky. He jerked his eyes back toward the executor. Lieutenant Stagg, he thought desperately. Stagg's presence would put a brake on Wig, prevent wholesale murder.

"Lieutenant Stagg! Lieutenant Stagg!" He sent the call thundering through his mind. "Come to the meadow bordering the village immediately. Hurry. Hurry!"

Could a transmitter put thoughts into the mind of a nontelepath? Yes, he'd influenced Trukel. He shouted the message several times, hoping against hope the lieutenant would get it.

"Hurry, lieutenant, please!"

The words tinkled in his mind and it took him an instant to realize Lora had read his message and was trying to reinforce it with her own plea. "Keep it up while I try to stall them," he urged.

She nodded imperceptibly as Wig came to a halt a few paces from them, flanked by Jonman and Conrad. The latter, holding a wicked-appearing heat rifle, moved to one side to enable him to cover the entire group. Smiling

balefully, Jonman thrust a small hand weapon at Selby's middle. As Wig started to speak, his eyes fell on the psymaster and an incredulous look spread over his face.

"Vogel!" He exclaimed the name wonderingly.

"It's the psymaster," Jonman blurted.

"Well, well..." Wig's face changed, taking on a triumphant expression.

"This is far better than I'd hoped for," he said finally.

"It's a strange world," Vogel returned calmly.

Wig brandished a hand weapon and demanded, "Where did those people go?"

"Where you can't get them," answered Vogel.

Listening, Selby realized what he had to do, wondering why he hadn't thought of it sooner. Taking a quick step to one side, he caught Lora and whirled her toward Johnny.

"No, Alek, no," she screamed.

"Stop," roared Wig. With a quick shove, Selby pushed her past Johnny and she disappeared.

"Where did she go?" Jonman shouted, a touch of terror in his voice.

"Where you can't reach her," he answered steadily.

"Where is she?" Wig gritted. Enraged, he jabbed his weapon toward Selby's midriff. "Where did she go?"

Instead of answering, he closed his eyes. "Johnny! Johnny!" He screamed the name in his mind. "Johnny, can you hear me?" He repeated the call wildly.

"Yes, Mr. Selby." The answer came like a whisper, giving him a flash of jubilance; he had broken through Johnny's trance.

"Johnny you have to..." Before he could complete the thought, he was hurled violently to one side and fell sprawling in the grass. As he rolled to regain his feet, Jonman smashed the barrel of his handgun against his head, knocking him flat.

"Where did those people go?" the agent shrilled. Selby sensed the hysteria behind the voice and realized Jonman was capable of anything.

"Johnny! Johnny!"

"Where did they go? Where did they go?" Jonman's voice rose in a high scream. Selby let himself go limp and closed his eyes as if unconscious. Jonman kicked him savagely, repeating the demand.

"Johnny! Johnny!" Selby screamed the name telepathically. Without waiting for an acknowledgment, he told the boy exactly what he had to do -- told him and then ordered him. He repeated the thought several times, dimly aware that Jonman was kicking him again and again.

"It's an illusion." The executor's voice cut through his consciousness and the kicks stopped as Jonman turned, panting heavily. "They're hiding in the grass, all of them," Wig snapped.

"I saw them vanish into thin air," Jonman quavered. "It's that freak."

"Nonsense," Wig barked. "They're in the grass. Get them out."

"Conrad, rout them out," Jonman shouted desperately.

"Use the goat," Wig cut in. "Trukel?"

"Yes, sir?"

"We have a job for the goat."

"Coming..."

"Johnny! Johnny! Did you hear me?" Selby shouted the message in his mind while vainly trying to shut out the confusion around him. He repeated his instructions again, trying to give them a note of calmness, at the same time aware that the sergeant had arrived with the goat.

"Shall I let the goat go?" Trukel's question came as through a fog, jolting him back to reality.

"No, it would tear the boy apart," Wig snapped.

Selby pushed himself to a sitting position and shook his head groggily, blinking his eyes to bring them into focus. His body was a mass of aches and

pains. As his vision cleared, he saw Trukel a few feet away pulling savagely on the leash as the goat snarled, attempting to lunge toward Johnny. Jonman saw Selby move and smashed the weapon savagely against his cheek, knocking him backward.

Dazed, he pulled himself back to a sitting position and struggled to his feet. "Johnny! Johnny! Do what I told you." Swaying weakly, he saw Trukel fighting to pull the goat in a half-circle around the boy. Hallam Vogel, standing to one side, wore a strange air of introspection, as if suddenly he had become a bystander to the whole affair.

Trukel knelt and jabbed a finger toward the grass beyond the knoll.

"There, boy, there," he hissed. The goat thrust its nose forward, its ears pinned flat against its hideous head as it sniffed the breeze.

"Hurry," Wig snapped edgily.

"There." Trukel jabbed toward the meadow again. Suddenly the goat lunged forward, pulling the sergeant after him. Selby watched, scarcely daring to breathe. As if plucked from Engo by an invisible hand the beast, and then the sergeant, vanished into nothingness.

Jonman gave a terrified scream.

Wig recoiled, visibly shaken, and shouted into his mike, "Daxon, get some men here."

"Yes, sir. Right away."

"They vanished into nowhere," Jonman babbled.

"Shut up," snarled Wig. He swung toward Conrad. "It's a trick. They're hiding in the grass somewhere. Blast them out."

"No trouble," Conrad replied tightly. He brought the heat gun to his shoulder and an instant later a thunderous roar rocked the meadow as a huge fireball soared skyward, lighting the grass with a greenish flame. Dying, it revealed a charred pit a scant twenty yards beyond the boy.

"Clear the whole area," Wig rasped tightly.

Conrad took another step forward and fired again, recoiling at the blast and flame that shook and seared the ground ahead of him. As the reverberations died away he took several rapid steps forward to fire again...and vanished.

"It's that freak!" Jonman shouted wildly. "I'll kill him."

"No, wait!" Wig threw up a warning hand, a glimmer of understanding crossing his face. "Nothing happens unless we cross the top of the knoll."

"He's a freak!"

"Quiet," the executor snarled.

"Johnny! Johnny! Wake up," Selby thought desperately. The trick wouldn't work again. The boy had to be ready to flee. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hallam Vogel edging protectively toward Johnny. Wig saw him at the same instant.

"Stand back," he snapped. He brandished his weapon in the psymaster's direction. Vogel hesitated, then held his new position, watching the executor calmly. Selby took a second to admire his courage before returning his attention to the boy.

"Johnny! Wake up! Wake up!"

"Kill him," Jonman urged frantically.

"No!" Wig spoke into his wrist mike. "Daxon, Hammer -- get here as fast as you can."

"Coming..."

Selby saw Johnny stir and knew if there was any hope of saving him, it would have to be before Wig's men arrived. "Lieutenant Stagg, we need your help. Hurry!"

"The freak's moving!" Jonman's terrified exclamation jerked Selby back to reality. He swung his head toward Johnny and saw him shaking his head, as if coming from a sound sleep.

"We'll make him talk," Wig snarled.

"Kill him," Jonman screamed.

Selby stepped forward and said grimly, "If you want to live, you'd better return to the ship."

"No," Wig croaked hoarsely. He raised his weapon. "Take another step and you're dead."

Selby said steadily, "You wanted a beyond and now you've got one."

"A freak," Jonman shouted wildly.

"A freak who'll kill you if you try to harm him," Selby threatened. "Lieutenant Stagg, hurry!" He shouted the command telepathically without moving his eyes from the executor.

Wig took a step backward. "You're as bad as he is," he snarled.

"Perhaps."

"You're going to die, Selby."

"I won't be alone."

"No?"

"Try it and you're dead," Selby answered. "Get out while you can."

Wig lifted his mike. "Daxon?"

"Coming... Stagg's men are with us."

"Stagg!" Wig's face contorted furiously. "Who ordered him to come. Order him back."

"Keep coming, Stagg," Selby shouted in his mind.

"Stagg?" Wig's voice rose peremptorily. "Go back and try to locate Olaf's ship immediately."

"Don't do it! Don't do it!" Selby concentrated frantically, trying to override the executor's orders.

"Watch out for the freak!" Jonman screamed. Selby whirled and saw that Johnny had risen and was gazing at them.

Wig took a quick step toward the boy. "Where did those people go?" he demanded roughly.

"Which ones?" Johnny lifted his eyes questioningly.

"My men," rasped Wig. "Speak up."

"There," answered Johnny, "they went there." He pointed upward at the orange moon.

Wig smiled dangerously. "You expect me to believe that?"

"But that's where I was told to send them."

"Told?" Wig's head bobbed up. "Who told you?"

Johnny cast a quick glance at Selby and answered, "I don't know, Mr. Wig. The thought just came to my mind."

"You're lying."

"I'm not, Mr. Wig."

"I suppose that's where you sent those other people?" Wig shot back sarcastically.

"No," Johnny said, "I sent them there." He pointed toward the Magellanic Clouds.

"I'll get the truth soon enough," Wig gritted.

"Mr. Selby, can you hear me?" Selby concealed his surprise as the boy's question came into his mind. Without waiting for an answer, Johnny rushed on, "He's decided to keep Mr. Daxon away and have Mr. Jon man kill everyone but me. He's going to take me away."

"Teleport, Johnny, teleport."

"I can't, Mr. Selby."

"You can, you did."

"No, you did that."

Selby saw the executor's hand move and stiffened. Wig lifted his wrist mike. "Daxon?"

"Almost there, sir."

"Stop right where you are."

"Stop?"

"Wait until you hear from me."

"Yes, sir. How about Lieutenant Stagg?"

"Tell him to wait right where he is. That's an order."

"Yes, sir."

"Johnny!" Selby shouted the name in his mind. "Get ready to run when I rush them."

"It would be easier to get into his mind, Mr. Selby."

"Try to make him return to the ship?"

"You could shut off his senses, Mr. Selby. You're very powerful."

"Shut off his senses?"

"So he can't see or hear for a while."

"How? How can I do that?" Selby felt impatient at his helplessness, at the same time filled with the knowledge that the executor had decided on a definite course.

"You can get into that part of the mind that controls his body."

"Don't guess, Johnny." There was no time for guessing, yet he had to do something, and fast.

"Mr. Simon said it could be done."

"Simon?" he asked, startled.

"When he was here. He thought I could do it."

Selby asked urgently, "Did you ever try?"

"I wasn't a strong enough transmitter, Mr. Selby."

"And I am?" He wanted to laugh harshly.

"Try, Mr. Selby."

"Jonman!" Wig's voice broke Selby's thoughts and he switched his attention to the executor.

"What is it?" Jonman asked worriedly.

"Wait! Wait!" Selby shouted in his mind. "Wait, Wig." The executor started to speak, then paused, cocking his head curiously. "If you give Jonman an order to kill us, you die," he cried silently.

A puzzled look crossed the executor's face.

"What is it?" Jonman repeated.

"Quiet," Wig hissed, listening.

Selby felt a surge of power, realizing he'd gotten through to him. But blinding and deafening Wig wouldn't be enough. He had to dispose of him, get to Jonman. "Wig, listen, you're dying, you're dying. You can't breathe."

"Jonman!" Wig gasped the name.

"What is it?" The agent hefted his weapon, glancing toward the boy nervously.

"You can't breathe, can't breathe." Selby concentrated on Wig's face, striving to reach the mind behind it. "You're dying, Wig. You can't breathe, can't breathe, can't breathe..."

"Jonman!" Wig gasped the name again, throwing up his head and gulping at the sky.

"It's that freak!" the agent yelled. "I'll kill him."

"Get Daxon!" The executor forced the words.

"You can't breathe, Wig!" The executor's face loomed in Selby's mind, growing larger until it became a single gigantic eye. He felt a burst of unprecedented power and sped through it, along the optic nerve to the greasy coils and crevices of his brain. "You can't breathe, can't breathe, can't breathe..."

"Jonman!" The executor uttered the name with a strangled scream. "Kill! Kill!"

Selby tried to intervene and found to his horror he couldn't. His mind, locked to Wig's, left his body powerless. He saw Wig gasp and fall to his knees, clutching at his chest. "Die, die, die," he screamed silently,

struggling to pull his mind free.

As if in a dream he heard the blast of gunfire while he fought to regain control of his senses. As the reverberations died away he heard a snarling growl and a black shape rushed past him. For one dreadful second he thought the goat had returned, then heard Jonman scream, scream horribly.

Swaying, he opened his eyes, fighting to bring them into focus. His first impression was that of the big shaggy dog tearing at Jonman's throat. Then he remembered the gunfire and whirled, seeing Vogel bent over the boy.

The psymaster looked up at him, his face sorrowful. "He's dying," he said.

"Dying? No!" The denial leaped from Selby's lips, the shock of the words pulling him back to the grim reality of the scene. He saw the executor writhing on the ground, strangling sobs coming from his throat.

"Johnny! Johnny!" He called the name telepathically, desperately trying to reach the boy. "Can you hear me, Johnny? Can you hear me?"

"It's...it's all right, Mr. Selby."

Selby swayed groggily, his mind frantically trying to piece together the secret he had so vaguely discerned before -- how David had become Johnny. David, Johnny, David, Johnny, David, Johnny...The names reeled through his mind like a weird kaleidoscope in sound. Then he had it.

He looked at Wig's contorted figure. "You're dying, dying, dying. Do you hear me, Wig? You're dying."

"He's going fast," Vogel said, unaware of the tumult in Selby's mind. He reached down, stroking the boy's face gently.

"Johnny!" Selby knelt by his side. "Johnny, listen. Wig's dying. Don't let him die. Don't let him die. Keep him alive, like you kept Johnny alive when you were David. Johnny, do you hear me? Keep Wig alive. Make him live."

Selby felt the blackness come and reeled, fighting to keep conscious. "Johnny, make Wig live." He murmured the words with his mind, then aloud, slumping forward as all awareness ceased.

Dimly he felt someone shaking his shoulder.

Wig, Johnny...The names crossed his mind as he seemed struggling through an endless night. The shaking became stronger and he tried to answer.

"Alek!" His name penetrated his consciousness and he opened his eyes, aware of an indistinct figure crouched over him. "Alek!" The name came again.

Hallam, he thought. Hallam Vogel. Johnny! Oh God! The stark memory rushed back and he fought to sit erect.

"Take it easy," Vogel murmured.

"Johnny?" He shook his head, staring wildly around.

"Johnny's dead," Vogel answered sadly.

"Dead?"

"Jonman shot him."

"Jonman, I remember."

"The dog tore out his throat," the psymaster said savagely.

"Wig? What about Wig?"

"Dead." Vogel got a strange look.

"Dead? No! No!" He screamed the denial, twisting around, staring toward the executor. At first he saw only the shaggy dog. "Hallam, look!" He pointed, afraid to trust his eyes.

Vogel whirled and they both stared.

The big shaggy dog, whimpering, was licking the executor's face.

"So that's about it," Hallam Vogel said, gazing across the room at Director Smithson. "David Gant was a beyond -- probably as powerful as any imaginable. When he and Johnny were dying of fever -- that was in the season of orange heat -- he got into Johnny's mind, trying to keep him alive."

"A selfless act," the director murmured.

"Extremely so." Vogel nodded. "Then when Johnny died -- or his soul left his body, if that's what death is -- David was left trapped."

"In Johnny's body?"

"As I see it," Vogel assented. "His own body died while his mind was in Johnny's body. But the thing that was Johnny -- let's call it his soul -- had fled, so David remained where he was."

"And became Johnny, eh?" The director gazed across the room during a long moment of silence. "That's immortality," he observed finally.

"Yes, it's immortality."

"So when Johnny and Wig were dying..."

"The same thing happened," the psymaster interposed. "Only this time Alek urged Johnny -- I suppose I should call him Johnny -- to save Wig."

The director smiled faintly. "Not that he didn't know what he was doing."

"He knew all right." Vogel nodded briskly. "He'd already figured out how David had become Johnny. Getting Johnny to inhabit Wig's body was a logical step."

"After he caused Wig's death, eh?"

"Caused it?" Vogel weighed the assertion. "In a sense you might say that, but he was acting in self-defense, and trying to save Johnny."

"Alek...a beyond," the director murmured.

Vogel eyed the director, surprised again at the man's capacity for understanding; and capacity for believing the unbelievable, he thought.

He said, "I'm really not surprised. He showed definite telepathic traits during his therapy."

"But a beyond?" The director raised his eyes.

Vogel hesitated. "He had a secret locked deep, so deep I could scarcely touch it -- something to do with clairvoyance."

"So that's why you were so insistent he go to Engo, eh?"

"I'll have to admit it," Vogel returned blandly.

Smithson leaned forward. "Did anyone suspect you were Olaf?"

"The 404 men?" Vogel leaned back thoughtfully. "When Daxon and Lieutenant Stagg arrived, I took charge as senior member of your department. I stated merely that Wig had mistaken my arrival for that of Olaf. And of course, when Wig revived, he confirmed it."

Smithson smiled faintly. "Do you think they really believed that, Hallam?"

"The 404 men, yes. They really didn't get in on the action." Vogel rubbed his chin reflectively. "Lieutenant Stagg knew something was awry, but I'm positive he's trustworthy."

"It's been quite a story," the director said. He leaned back comfortably and gazed toward the ceiling. "I'm going to miss Alek."

"Johnny sent him to Zamar at his own request. It's best, Korl."

"The girl, eh? Yes, I suppose so." A bell tinkled melodiously and the director flipped a switch on his desk intercom. He listened briefly, then said, "Send him in."

Vogel looked up as the figure of the executor entered, accompanied by a shaggy yellow dog.

Smithson said, "Getting used to your new quarters, Philip?" He gestured toward a chair and leaned back.

"Yes, sir."

Vogel saw that the executor's formerly saturnine countenance had been replaced by a strangely boyish look. He mentioned it. "Don't smile so easily, not for a while," he cautioned.

"Perhaps I should have remained on Engo," the new Wig said.

"No, Johnny..."

"Philip," the director reprimanded.

"Philip," Vogel corrected. "You've got a more important job cut out for you here."

"If I can do it." The answer was almost humble.

"You can do it," the director assured him. "As executor, you'll have all the power you need, and with your -- ah! -- special talent, you'll be able to locate others like yourself. That's important."

"Is the Federation ready?" the younger man asked.

"No, not yet, but it's important that we find people who can keep our contact with Zamar alive," the director answered. "That will be your job, Philip. Search the entire Third Sector, and if you don't find anyone, search the entire Federation."

"The Federation?" Vogel raised his eyes questioningly.

The director smiled. "I'm certain Ewol Strang would prevail on the Emperor to give Philip full power when he learns there are beyonds loose in the Federation. Especially when Philip tells him himself."

"With a scowl," Vogel cautioned. He chuckled. "I believe you're right."

"Ewol Strang has great faith in Philip Wig," the director said.

When the others had withdrawn, the director went to the window and gazed out. The yellow-white sun of Altair had set, leaving the stately buildings of Mekla bathed in their man-made lights. He'd always known Hallam was Mr. Olaf, of course. The psymaster's humble confession had come as no surprise. But then Hallam had felt reasonably certain of his own response. He'd never made any secret of his sympathy for the telepaths, at least where Hallam was concerned. He mused on it, smilingly.

And he'd always had an inkling about Alek, too. Hallam didn't know that, of course. Couldn't have known. But Alek's work had been too good, his answers too surprisingly accurate on too many occasions for him not to have been telepathic. But a beyond? The galaxy was filled with surprises, he reflected. Perhaps if it hadn't been for the Engo affair, Alek might never have realized his full potential. He wondered about that.

Returning to his chair, he slumped back. Hallam Vogel was a man of vision, he thought. He realized that the day of the telepath was coming; and when it did, the Federation would be all the better for it.

But did Hallam know how close that day was? Did he realize the real inroads made by telepaths -- and, yes, beyonds -- in Federation affairs? Probably not, but he would soon enough; Hallam wasn't a man you could fool for long.

As for himself? He was seventy-eight, he reflected, and he hadn't many years left. But perhaps he would live long enough to see the fulfillment of his dream -- the day when all men would be equal.

Glancing at his security system to make certain he was alone, he placed his private papers in his safe and locked it. Another step along the road, he thought.

Then he teleported to the privacy of his home.

The Authors

JEAN AND JEFF SUTTON are a man-and-wife writing team who make their home in San Diego, California. Although this is the first Putnam novel on which they have collaborated, Jefferson Sutton is the author of *Apollo at Go* and *Beyond Apollo*, both science fiction. Mr. Sutton has also written many nonfiction books.