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BEYOND THE GALACTIC LENS

Gregory Kern

Chapter ONE

To any normal man the laboratory would have been reminiscent of a tomb, a place buried, sealed, inviolate; impossible to enter, almost impossible to leave. A grave and a prison both, analogies which Professor Jamil Makkofaides didn't like to think about.

He sat in a deep chair before a curved panel loaded with instruments; dials, tell-tales which winked with a spectrum of light, columns holding a milky luminescence. A large screen stood in the center of the consol. Below it rested the extensions of remote-control handlers into which his hands were thrust. Flexible metal encased the flesh, tiny relays catching the minute motions of bone and muscle, amplifying them, transmitting them via electronic impulse to where metal arms and fingers reached into the compartment beyond the panel.

A portion of the laboratory which was sealed behind layers of metal, plastic and concrete. A bubble faced with glass fused into a homogenous whole.

A bubble containing death.

Makkofaides looked at it as, enlarged, it showed on the screen. A tiny droplet of purple fluid held on the tip of an adamantine needle. Carefully he moved it towards a plate, arms and fingers aching as he lowered it to where a smear of lambent crimson waited to receive it—a tiny egg taken from the breeding tank where captive jalects lived in sealed isolation.

Gently the needle lowered, touched—too hard. The ruptured egg burst, spilling the results of two days effort in hopeless ruin.

Sucking in his breath Makkofaides lifted the needle, held it in the momentary blast of flame, sent more flame to sterilize the operating slab. Again, concentrating, he manipulated the handlers.

At the third wasted attempt he gave up, fighting the irrational impulse to smash the apparatus, to beat his hands against the instruments, the panel, in a fit of petulant anger. Instead he leaned back in his chair and palmed his eyes, forcing himself to remember that he was a scientist and that failure was a natural component of research.

And yet there had been so many failures—and now this.

He looked at his hands, square, blunt fingered, the backs blotched with mottled patches of brown. A telltale sign of age, and yet who but an old man would have consented to voluntary immolation?

"Jamil?"

The voice gave him the answer. Rocco Patsalibou was not old. He came from the living quarters with a

young man's tread and, not for the first time, Makkofaides wondered why he had volunteered to accompany him in his isolation.

Ambition, perhaps? A facile answer and it could hold truth. If they achieved success then their reputations would be made, honors given, for the young man thirty years of studious effort leapt in a moment. He would be rich, professionally secure, respected. A gamble in which he staked nothing but a few years of his life.

Years? Had it been so long?

Makkofaides blinked, conscious of the vagueness of his mind, a trait which was becoming more pronounced of late. Surely not years. Months perhaps, a year at the most. One year or two?

Here, in this buried laboratory, time ceased to have meaning.

"Here, Jamil." Rocco held out a steaming cup of tisane. "How does it go?"

"Badly." Gratefully Jamil accepted the cup. The vapor rising from the delicate porcelain was fragrant with the tang of herbs. "My hands—" He shook his head. "Three times I failed to inject the egg."

"You're tired, overstrained." Patsalibou was quick with a soothing explanation. "You've been working too hard. Let me try."

He was deft, Makkofaides had to admit that. And clever, that also he had proved on more than one occasion. The fllegrate series—he had been the first to point out the dead end. And the choristath—more months wasted, as he had shown.

Rising from the chair, Makkofaides watched as the young man slipped his hands into the mouths of the remotes. On the screen the extensions moved with a swift dexterity, the egg selected and placed, the needle dipped and hovering. A fraction of pause and then the membrane was ruptured with decisive skill, the virus fed to the waiting culture.

Automatically he hit the button of the timer, waited as the hand swept around its circle.

"Now!"

Again, the deft manipulations of the remotes; the egg lifted, positioned, cut open and spread. Fire bathed the tips of the extensions and then the screen flickered to added magnification, steadied to show a battleground of tremendous warfare; armies engaged in savage, relentless destruction.

Purple against crimson, the warring hosts stained for easier identification.

Death against life—and death was winning.

As death would always win, thought Makkofaides bleakly. But natural death was one thing, the ravages of the virus he sought to defeat was another. He remembered the palls of smoke over pits filled with flame, fires which had consumed the bodies of the dead. Too many dead and too many fires. For weeks the air of Reyud had carried the stench of burning corpses, even the blue-white flare of atomics seeming to leave that smell untouched.

Imagination, of course, nothing could survive the destruction of rended atoms; yet the sunsets had lingered and the dawns had been remarkable. Dawns too few had seen, sunsets enjoyed for the last time by too many.

"Jamil!"

Patsalibou was excited. The hand he lifted to point shook a little with anticipation. Following it, Makkofaides felt a return of the hope which he had thought long dead.

The crimson appeared to be winning!

"Lux!" At his shouted order the lights brightened; cameras, always monitoring, now recording the instruments, the screen. "Experiment 3425," said Makkofaides. "A mutated strain of blethoraisia cultured in a jalect egg for two days; details of mutation on previous record. After three minutes of exposure destruction of virus seems possible."

"Certain!"

"Possible," insisted Makkofaides. Older, he knew better than to yield to premature optimism. "We have been as close before."

As close and even closer, but the result has always been the same. The thing from somewhere among the stars, the virus which had become known as levive, had always conquered in the end.

An alien form of life, so small as to pass through the closest filter, so deadly as to be immediately contagious by touch or by the inhaling of droplets of moisture vented by a cough, a sneeze. Alien because it had come from some unknown region in space, because it seemed to have the power to mutate at will, to change, to devise novel forms of protection, to defy each and every attempt to negate its voracious power.

A thing which recognized no master. A disease which had ravished a world.

Reyud would never be the same again.

The population would grow to fill the empty houses, the vacant farms, the deserted villages and towns, but the scars would always remain.

"We're winning!" Patsalibou was triumphant. "Jamil! We've done it! We've found a cure, a vaccine!"

"No." More cautious, the older man had noticed the stasis, crimson and purple seemingly locked in balance. The initial gains had been held. An instrument gave the answer as it read the color differential. "It's adapting as it has done before. Once again levive wins."

The purple spread as he spoke, extensions of the main body driving like swords through the massed crimson; tiny fragments of life splitting, doubling, destroying, overcoming the opposition. Within seconds, the screen showed nothing but purple.

"Another failure." For a second Patsalibou, despite his youth, looked suddenly old. Then his shoulders straightened. "But we're on the right track, Jamil. A few more experiments and we could have the answer."

The answer and his freedom. Makkofaides glanced at the red button set prominently on the consol, one of others scattered about the laboratory. Once pressed, an atomic flame would sear the inner compartment, destroying all it contained with the cleansing fire. The apparatus, the assembled cultures, the hideous virus itself.

"Jamil! What are you doing?"

Makkofaides looked down at his hand, the young fingers gripping his wrist. His own were very close to the button.

"I—" He broke off, wondering, trying to remember the thought processes which had led to the action. If he had not been stopped all would be over by now. The series of experiments ended in confessed failure.

A subconscious urging? The memory of the stench of burning bodies? The corroding fear that, despite all precautions, the terrible disease could once again spread on a habited planet?

"You're tired," said his assistant. "Worried, and I can't blame you, but we have to go on. If there is a chance to find a vaccine we have to take it. Perhaps—" he paused and then, as if lunging at an unpleasant obstacle ended, "Perhaps you should quit. Resign. No one would blame you."

"No one?"

"You've been here too long, working too hard. You need a break. Even if you don't resign, at least take a vacation."

"No."

"But—"

"No," said Makkofaides again, firmly. "I accepted the responsibility when I took this assignment. Accepted it and what it entails. Neither of us can leave until we find the vaccine or admit total failure. I am not yet ready to do that."

"But your hand! If I hadn't stopped, you would have pressed the destruct-button!"

An accusation Makkofaides could not honestly deny.

He turned, ending the discussion, picking up the cup of tisane which he had set down. It had grown cold, the liquid insipid to the tongue. There would be more in the kitchen and he moved towards the room, emptying his cup and refilling it from the pot.

Sniffing, savoring the aroma, he stood in the open doorway and looked over his domain.

A small place; bedrooms, a kitchen, a room for recreation containing games and puzzles, books and various recordings. The main space was taken up by the laboratory, the consol dominating the open expanse filled with computers and medical equipment, instruments for processing their findings and extrapolating further lines of research.

Below lay the power source, the stores, water and recycling equipment.

Above lay rock pierced only by a single tunnel.

If Reyud should be invaded, he thought dispassionately, the entire surface bathed in destructive energies, this laboratory would survive.

He and Patsalibou and the thing from somewhere in space.

The death man had named "levive."

Patsalibou called from where he sat at the consol.

"I'm continuing the series, Jamil. Repeating the experiment. We need verification and photographic

evidence of a higher magnification. It is barely possible that there is a critical factor at work which we might be able to overcome by the use of a double-antibiotic; two attacking compounds which could be symbiotic on each other. One could take over from the other when the virus mutates."

It was possible, possible too that the remedy could be worse than the disease—a concept Makkofaides immediately discarded. Nothing could be worse than the thing they hoped to defeat.

He sipped, enjoying the tisane, leaning against the jamb of the door as he watched the deft movements of the extensions on the screen, envying the younger man his dexterity.

Another movement caught his eye and he turned, staring in utter disbelief.

Limned against the smooth metal of a wall appeared the shape of a man.

It was like a shadow, a silhouette, thickening as he watched, moving, seeming to step as if through water, one foot lifting high, resting firmly before the other followed.

A man in a space suit, the face invisible behind the opaque face-plate, apparatus clustered at his waist; a wide belt from which metal strips ran to the glinting helmet, others reaching down his legs to boots with wide, thick soles.

The gloved hands were extended before him, the mass of a loaded sack appearing from over one shoulder. On the breast of the suit rested the blazon of a symbol which Makkofaides recognized. The shape of a double helix.

"Rocco!" The cup fell to shatter on the floor as he shouted. "Behind you! Against the wall!"

The shape solidified as the man turned. It seemed to blur, to shimmer, a high-pitched note falling into silence. One hand moved to the belt, returned heavy with the weight of a Dione.

"Do not move!" The voice was thick from inside the helmet-diaphragm.

"Who are you?" Patsalibou rose, his eyes incredulous. Men simply could not walk through solid stone. "What do you want?"

The answer came in the blast of the Dione.

A shaft of energy lanced from the muzzle of the weapon, raw power produced by the disintegration of unstable isotopes within the firing chamber, held and directed by permanent magnetic fields. It reached out and touched Patsalibou's chest, burned through the material of his clothing, the skin and flesh beneath, charring the bones of the ribs, penetrating the heart, the spine.

From the smoking hole came a gush of blood as, already dead, the man swayed, toppled, hands still lifted as if in mute appeal, the heel of one hand slamming hard against the red button as he fell.

Makkofaides froze to the sound of the alarm.

In theory the fire released in the inner compartment would be contained—but those who had designed the mechanism would have had more to worry about than the lives of those in the laboratory. It was possible they had lied about the forces used.

A revelation which came only now, when it was too late.

He turned, knowing that if his suspicions were correct, he had time for little more than a prayer, yet still hoping to survive. A panel opened at his touch, a short passage, another panel, sealed, the center holding

a complex combination lock. As he touched it, hands closed around his throat.

Big hands which squeezed, a puff of acrid vapor which turned into an ebon mist, a cloud which grew larger . . . larger . . . became a bottomless pit into which he fell.

A pit from which he rose gasping, panting, the stench of sharpness in his nostrils.

To stare up at the loveliest woman he had ever seen.

She was tall, long-boned, hips narrowing into a slender waist which rose to spread into rounded shoulders, the delicate column of her throat. She wore an embroidered gown of emerald edged with silver, the fabric clinging to and accentuating the lines of her figure, slit high on one side to show tantalizing glimpses of her perfectly molded thigh. Her breasts were full, high and proud. On the breast of the tunic rode the gemmed insignia of a double helix.

"You are awake," she said. "That is well."

"Where am I?"

"In a safe place." Her voice was low, mellifluous, musical; yet he sensed that it could, at times, hold the chill of ice, the hardness of steel. "You are not to worry—all decisions have been made for you."

"My friend?" He struggled to sit upright, sank back as nausea gripped him. "You killed him," he accused. "You murdered my friend."

"A man who had grown impatient," she reminded. "Who had suggested that you resign. One who was eager to take your place, perhaps. Yet you call him a friend."

"A colleague, then." He blinked, it was hard to think clearly, so much had happened. The sudden appearance of the stranger, the blast of the Dione, the shrill scream of the alarm, the puff of vapor and now this girl. This incredibly lovely girl.

He feasted his eyes on her hair, her face.

A delicate cameo drawn with an artist's skill. The skin drawn over prominent bones, the cheeks concave, the chin elfin. The mouth was full, the lower lip pouting a little, the teeth small, regular and dazzlingly white. The forehead was high, rising to the mass of gleaming ebon hair which was crested above the rounded skull. The eyes were elongated orbs, slanted, abnormally wide, the irises glowing pools of violet.

"Your name," he whispered. "What is your name?"

"I am Zilma Narayan."

"That device you wear, the double helix, the man who killed Rocco Patsalibou wore one like it. Did you send him? Does he work for you?"

"Questions," she said, and smiled. "So many questions. Have patience and all will be answered."

"And how did he get into the laboratory?" The fact troubled him. "A man who walked through stone. It's impossible."

"Yet you saw it done."

A dream, a hallucination as this girl must be, a figment of a youthful past when the demands of the flesh had created an illusion. A woman he had yearned to find but never had. A search which had been

forgotten as the years passed and science became both his mistress and his wife. And now she was here, at his side, comforting him, embracing him with the warm aura of her presence.

In a room which was like the girl—a thing of imagination.

Warm yellow light spilled from suspended lanterns casting patches of brilliance on the thick carpet, catching the bright paintings on the walls, reflected back in winking gleams from crystal and hammered metal, painted ceramics, the pale blooms of silicone flowers. Luxury, beauty, present and together.

He stiffened with a sudden fear.

"No! Dear God, not that!"

"Be calm!" Now her voice was a command. "It is not what you think. I, this room, all you see and feel, is real." Her hand dropped on his own, squeezed, pressing with a calculated regard. "We saved your life," she said in a softly gentle tone. "Saved you from disgrace. Made you safe so that you can continue to live, work and enjoy the years that are left to you. Many years, Jamil. So very, many years. And all in return for just a little information."

Again he stiffened, but now not with fear. That horror had passed. Now it was with resolve.

"No."

"You say that before even knowing what it is I want to know." Again the pressure of her hand, young and firm with youthful heat, a contrast to his own, aged tissues. "But you will tell, Professor. One way or the other, you will tell."

"No!"

"Not just the hour of your birth? Such a little, harmless thing, Jamil. Won't you even tell me that?"

An answer which would lead to others—once the dam had been broken who could gauge the extent of the flood? And he knew what she wanted to know. Somehow, *he knew!*

"A ship," she whispered. "A vessel sent from Reyud with a special cargo bound for—where? That is what you are going to tell me, Professor Jamil Makkofaides. The exact date it left, the programming of the guidance computer, all the things which you know. Details which are locked away in here." Her hand lifted, slender fingers delicately brushed his temple, "Think of the rewards," she urged. "Tell me what I want to know."

A bribe offering what? More illusion? A foretaste of horror? And yet, could such a thing be called horror at all?

He turned on the couch on which he lay, as old man, stubborn, fretful.

"No. I can't."

"You don't mean that," she said softly. "As a scientist you should be more precise with the use of words. You have a tongue and you can remember details. The tongue can relay the information and, so you see, there is no real obstacle. You can tell me and you will."

He turned again to stare at her, to meet her eyes.

"What makes you so certain?"

"That you will talk?" Her smile held something of the bleakness of a feline. "You must. If you don't tell me then you must tell another. And, believe me, he is not as gentle as I am."

Information to be gained, useless perhaps, but it would help to know.

"Who?"

"Doctor Wei Kaifeng!"

Chapter TWO

High and clear in the crisp morning air the note of the trumpet was demanding, imperious. A deep roar echoed it, the gusting exhalation of air from the lungs of a thousand men, a roar repeated from where a pennant fluttered from the brow of a low hill.

A standard of red and gold which streamed in the early breeze.

Men clustered in neat array around it, bright in gilded armor, the scarlet of plumes and cloaks painting the sword with ruby splendor. Armed men, their faces taut, savage with bleak determination, the light of the newly risen sun catching the glimmer of naked blades, winking with reflected splendor from the tips of spears, the rims of shields.

A barbaric assembly which caused Lydia Cheltine to squirm with delighted anticipation in her chair.

"Father, do you think they will win?"

"Hush, child." Manageress Cheltine leaned forward from where she sat and dropped a hand on the girl's shoulder. "You shouldn't display such emotion."

"Why not?" The demand was made with the stringent logic of a ten-year old. "I'm having fun."

And so were all the others assembled on the Plain of Egor. From his chair Manager Ard Cheltine could see them covering the ground, men and women with their children, baskets at their sides, containers filled with food and wine, sustenance for the feast; The ordinary people who had streamed from the city to enjoy this, a novel experience.

As were the members of the Board, solemn men dedicated to prosperity, unused to play and relaxation, certainly not the type now offered.

Not for the first time he felt doubt as to the wisdom of the whole thing.

"Father!" Lydia was almost jumping. "Look! They attack!"

Men flowed over the plain towards the hill bearing the pennant. Their own standard was of green and silver, colors matched by their armor and cloaks, their faces no less hard in bleak determination. Men going willingly, happily to war.

Through a magnifier Ard studied them, lingering on the man in the lead. A tall figure, broad shouldered, lithe, seeming to wear his accoutrements as if born with them. Even from the distance the Manager seemed to feel the aura of his presence, the dominant masculinity which brooked no opposition.

"Husband." Elane's voice was an urgent whisper. "The child is growing over-excited. Perhaps it would be

best to send her home."

"Could you be so cruel?" A glance at the flushed, happy face told him of the disappointment such an order would bring. "She is enjoying it, the others too. Never would I have thought that men facing combat would have looked as they do." His hand gestured towards the field, the opposed forces. "Let us make the best of it. I say the green will win."

"But they attack."

"And Cap is leading them. If there is a way to gain the pennant he will find it." Ard lifted the magnifier, concentrating on Kennedy. If he were younger, had less responsibility, less ties, there was a man that he could follow to the end of space.

Woman-like, Elane was stubborn in her protest.

"It can't be good for the child to watch such sights. Frankly, I'm amazed that you agreed to stage this event. It will stir unhealthy appetites, create problems, give the young a disrespect for their elders. Doayne has always been a peaceful world—now that you are toying with the idea of joining the Terran Sphere odd things are happening. This for one."

Truth, but Ard was of no mind to argue. Despite his previous determination to remain calm he felt excitement stir his blood. An excitement matched by the crowd, standing now, periscopes lifted high, children riding their father's shoulders, all shouting, urging on the color of their choice.

"Hold red! Hold!"

"Attack green! Attack!"

Vicarious pleasure, magnified, augmented, rising to engulf them all in an emotional stimulation.

The air quivered with the roar of voices as the two armies met. Met and splintered into tiny groups, some falling, others shattered, only the hard core around Kennedy maintaining a firm discipline.

He knew it, had expected it, had planned accordingly.

A sword rose before him, fell aside to the swing of his blade, a man falling, mouth open, eyes startled. A spear lanced through the air to be blocked on his shield, another face, another helmet which rang like a bell as he struck, scarlet puddling the ground as its wearer dropped.

The red of a cloak, not that of blood. The swords were blunt, edged with sharpness for a bare fraction of an inch, the points cunning mechanical devices which injected a drug at impact. The spears were tipped with hard rubber, the maces balls of yielding material. Eyes were protected behind transparent shields, vital organs with stubborn metal padded on both sides.

There would be injuries, superficial cuts, bruises, maybe a few broken bones; but no one would die or be maimed or crippled.

Make-believe war with all the noise and fury of the real thing, the clash and excitement, the pitting of individual strength against determined opponents. Men would slump in drugged unconsciousness—to later wake and share in the victory feast.

But there would be no severed limbs, no ruined lives, no grieving widows or orphaned children.

"Cap!" Saratov had refused to be left out of the fun. "They're breaking. With a push we can win the flag!"

A push he was well able to give. Bulking huge in his armor he looked like something from Earth's ancient mythology, a troglodyte, a hero of classical times. Beneath the rim of his helmet his face was broad, wide, the thick neck sloping into massive shoulders, a barrel-like torso. The product of a high-gravity world he was a toughened mass of muscle, bone and sinew. The mace he held looked like a twig in his hand.

Roaring, he lunged forward, men toppling before him, some wiser, getting quickly out of his way. From the defenders rose a frantic voice.

"Hold, damn you! Hold!"

Brod Cheltine, a cousin of the Manager of Doyne, was determined that he would prove the ability of his men to hold what they possessed. A good trait, but wanting wasn't enough. Kennedy advanced, took the lead, Saratov covering his rear. Two men who lanced through the opposition like a hot knife through butter, a cluster of green following the path they opened.

"No!" Brod was before them, his face flushed, his eyes wild behind their protective shield. "Men! To me!"

His example was catching. Scarlet fluttered as men retreated to form a circle about the flagpole, the tips of gilded spears levelled to show a ring of light. Shields met, clashed, held firm, a barrier which had proved its worth in ancient times.

Unless it could be broken the standard was safe.

Kennedy glanced at the sky. The sun was higher than he had expected, time seemingly contracted by the surge of violent action. Action which had taken and was taking its toll.

Men littered the sward, red and green lying in close proximity, others sitting exhausted, some still fighting, exchanging listless blows.

Only the circle about the standard, the men at his back were operational units.

And soon the trumpet would sound to end the combat.

"Penza! Retreat!"

Immediately the giant obeyed, the others who had followed relaxing, their eyes startled at what they thought was surrender. Quickly Kennedy corrected that false impression.

"We've got to move in fast and hard and we'll only have one chance to win. That shield wall can be broken but it takes guts to do it. You! You and you!" He selected men with stabs of a finger, the iron in his voice giving them no opportunity or thought to disobey. "Run in empty handed and grab a spear in each hand. Others will cover you while the rest smash through the gap you'll make. Don't worry about getting hurt. The day a soldier fears a wound is the day he will be beaten. Now, get to it!"

A simple plan, one which could be countered, but Brod didn't know how. He yelled once as Saratov lunged towards him, his sword beaten aside, his shield torn from his arm, his cloak flapping as he was lifted bodily high into the air.

Within seconds the banner was in Kennedy's hands.

Trumpets sounded the victory as he marched at the head of his men towards the dais. For a moment he stood before the Manager and his wife, the assembled members of the Board; then bowing, he placed the scarlet and gold into Lydia Cheltine's eager fingers.

"A nice gesture, Cap," said Ard Cheltine when that evening, they assembled to dine. "She will treasure the memory."

"One she could do without," snapped Elane. "Personally, I found it a disgusting spectacle. Grown men fighting like animals. Where will it all end?"

"In war," said an old man from lower down the table. "In conflict. In hate, anger and pain. If this is a sample of what we can hope to receive from Terra, then I think any affiliation would be a mistake."

Kennedy lifted his goblet and looked at the wine it contained. Green wine filled with drifting motes of silver, the taste that of ice and mint.

He said, quietly, "No planet can live in isolation."

"Meaning?"

"You don't have to join the Terran Sphere, but I think you would be making a mistake if you didn't. Others are eager to incorporate Doyne into their empires. The Chambodians would like to extend their Complex. The Haddrach of Holme, the Sigurian System, the Inchonian Enclave—the choice is wide."

"But need not be made," said the Manager quickly. "We can remain independent."

"True, but for how long?" Kennedy sipped at his wine. "Trade, industrial expansion, the finding of new markets, the reclamation of deserts and waste areas— can you do all that alone?"

Things which Ard Cheltine had thought about for too many years now, knowing what had to be done even when, as a boy sitting quietly at the foot of the Board, he had heard his father mull over possibilities and find endless excuses for postponing action.

An affiliation with Terra offered much, the protection of the MALACAs, the units which hung in space armed and armored, a shield against all potential invaders. A force no planet like Doyne could ever hope to afford, let alone maintain.

And they would do more than protect.

As a member of the Terran Sphere Doyne would have the right to ask for help. The Mobile Aid Laboratories And Construction Authorities were equipped for other things than war. Men and machines could be supplied to extend arable areas, find water, open mines. Open the way for all to enjoy prosperity.

Why couldn't Ginot see that?

The old man glared at him from where he sat, guessing his thoughts, spiteful in his defeat.

Acidly he said, "War. What have we to do with conflict? Why the need for these games? You, sir, surely you can see my point?"

From where he sat at Kennedy's side Professor Jarl Luden said, thinly, "Conflict is an essential part of the pattern to survive. Life itself is a continuous act of violence."

"I disagree!"

Luden shrugged. He wore bright clothing with touches of color giving his slight figure a peculiar flamboyancy. A gaudiness at variance with his seamed face and mass of grayish hair which swept back from a highly domed forehead.

Spearing a fragment of meat on the end of his fork he lifted it, caused it to be the center of attention.

"This came from a beast," he said quietly. "Slain to provide food. The mere fact of eating proves my point. Life cannot exist without struggle. A struggle in which only the strongest deserve to survive."

"Do you negate all else!" Ginot was annoyed, his hoped-for ally had turned into an enemy. "Is there nothing more to life than the need to eat?"

"Basically, no." Luden's tone was curt, he had little patience with fools who refused to see the obvious. "We are talking of survival which means to eat, to grow, to breed. Only when a man has a full belly can he devote his thoughts and time to other pursuits. That's what civilization is all about; the grouping together of artisans so as to provide a surplus to support others to give time to the arts and sciences."

"You admit, then, that the arts are important?" Elane Cheltine thought she had made a point.

Luden disappointed her.

"The pursuit of art is a luxury. First must come the essentials. Food, shelter, protection, the expansion of the mind in the search for truth. The thing we know as science. That, madam, is the most important aspect of any civilization. Without science any culture is no better than a collection of primitives—with it they can reach the stars."

And had done so—a fact she must remember. Yet her nature would not easily allow her to admit defeat.

"And warfare?"

"Is bad. A thing to be despised, rejected, avoided at almost any cost."

She leaped on the word. "Almost?"

"There are times when to refuse to fight is to die. Even this beast," Luden stabbed again at the meat, "had the urge to live. It didn't come willingly to the slaughter. Yet it did not resist as it could because the spirit had been bred from it." He ended, grimly, "And as it is with a beast, so it could be with a man."

But never a man of Earth, of that she was certain. They stemmed from too long a history of blood and pain, hardened by too many wars, steeled by endless conflict and struggle. A race which had earned all they possessed, the near-paradise of their planet, a dream which they would die to protect. And, dying, kill.

She shivered a little as if at the touch of a chill wind, thinking of Lydia, now safely asleep clutching her banner, the honor given to her by their quest. A strange man, apparently a dilettante, yet surely more than that. A ruler of his own small world, who had donned the protective mantle of Terra. Who had an interest in unusual games—the need of which she could now see. If Doyme was to survive, to grow, then Earth would show the way.

As Weyburn intended.

He stared from the screen in the *Mordain*, his heavy face creased, deep lines running from nose to mouth, his beaked nose and hooded eyes giving him the appearance of a brooding eagle. A tired eagle, the rounded shoulders bore the weight of worlds, so that at times the Director of Terran Control felt his age.

Now was one of those times.

"Sorry to have fetched you from the banquet, Cap, but this is urgent. How are things going?"

"As expected, Elias. I've introduced war-games and combat sports. There's some opposition, but it won't last, the Manager will see to that. Ard Cheltine's a pretty shrewd man."

"Fine, Cap, you've done a good job. I'll send out an advisory team and they can take over. A trade mission, too, and I'll have to arrange for a local man to act as our agent. But that can wait." Weyburn dismissed the routine details. "Cap, what do you know about Reyud?"

"A small planet, isolated, independent, low-hostility index, colonized by settlers from Earth way back."

"A semi-religious group which adhered to Buddhist principles as to the sanctity of life," added Weyburn. "They've changed since the early days and their religion is now mostly a matter of a strict code of personal ethics, with an emphasis on individual responsibility and honor."

"A good way to live."

"A perfect way—if the universe was perfect." Weyburn was grim. "But, Cap, we both know it isn't."

An understatement. To the Director the galaxy was a space full of hostility, eager and ambitious races envying Earth its prosperity, itching to move in and take over, to expand at the expense of peaceful worlds.

To such races war was not a game but a matter of death and destruction, atomic missiles raining from the skies, men slaughtered, pressed into servitude, crushed into mindless beasts. And, despite the protection of the MALACAs, Earth was always vulnerable, with its teeming cities and massed industries, its wide parks and recreational areas, the wild-life preserves— all open to sabotage and sneak attack.

And so Terran Control which manipulated men and races by devious means, using agents on a host of scattered worlds, selecting men to be Free Acting Terran Envoys of which Kennedy was the foremost. Secret agents of FATE who sought out trouble and cured it, stamping out the flames of incipient war, bribing, betraying, assassinating should the need arise.

Their own judge, jury and executioner. Dedicated men who had sworn to uphold the peace, the *Pax Terra*, maintaining a precarious balance which must never be upset.

Kennedy said, sharply. "Trouble, Elias?"

"Bad trouble."

"On Reyud?"

"Yes and no." Weyburn noticed Kennedy's expression, his own eyes bleak. Then he added, quickly, "I'm not playing games, Cap. The word came from Reyud but I'm short on details. Something's happened and it worried Cel Evlogozi enough for him to call me. He's a good man, an old friend, and has been since we managed to help him out a while ago. Nothing specific, just putting a barrier around his world. It's long gone now, but it threw us into contact."

"Wait a minute," snapped Kennedy. "You're telling me that an independent world requested Terras Control to put them in quarantine?"

"Yes."

"And was it that? Quarantine?"

"Yes, Cap, it was. The thing was hushed up, no need to create a useless panic, but now the cork could have come out of the bottle. Cel Evlogozi didn't say so in as many words, but he's worried sick and I can guess the reason." Automatically Weyburn's hand rose, a finger touching his nose. An old, familiar gesture which Kennedy understood.

"Something smells, Elias. What?"

For a long moment the Director didn't answer, his eyes veiled, looking at something on his desk, the plaque which carried the seven words displayed on every ship of every MALAGA, engraved on the heart and mind of every Terran defender.

Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.

Then he said, oddly, "You're a long way from home, Cap. Too far for comfort. I guess you understand the way I feel."

Cautious, as always, but the hybeam transmission was scrambled and the likelihood of anyone listening in was astronomically remote. Kennedy felt a chill as he realized the implications, his agile mind working, putting fact to fact, hint coupled with surmise.

Reyud.

Quarantine.

Weyburn's obvious fear.

Plague!

But not a normal disease—that could have been controlled, confined. Something abnormal then, something so horrendous that not a hint or a whisper must reach other ears. Something far more deadly than the threat or potential imminence of war.

He said, "You want me to go to Reyud, right?"

"Cel Evlogozi is expecting you, Cap. He'll put you in the picture, tell you what's happened."

"And?" As Weyburn remained silent Kennedy said, curtly, "You're sending me in blind, Elias. From what I know Reyud is a harmless world habited by people who wouldn't hurt a fly. And I mean that literally. Just what do you expect me to do? Or are you hiring out your staff now?"

"That isn't it, Cap."

"Then what is? How does it affect me or Terra?"

Again the hesitation and Kennedy felt the prickling of skin at the nape of his neck, the old, primitive warning of danger. Weyburn was afraid and, even across parsecs of empty space, some of that fear had been transmitted together with his voice and image.

Shrewdly he said, "There's more, Elias. Something you haven't mentioned. Something I should know. What is it?"

"Maybe nothing, Cap. A distortion, a mistake, but it could have a bearing. A man who must have walked through solid stone. A man who wore a symbol you've seen before. Do I have to mention a name?"

"No," said Kennedy. "You don't have to do that."

"And Reyud, Cap?"

"I'm on my way."

But not at once. Certain details had to be attended to, farewells made, a good impression maintained. It was late when Kennedy returned to the *Mordain*, a parting gift from Manager Cheltine in his hand, a block of lambent crystal which held drifting motes of color, patterns which changed to the touch of a finger.

As he neared the port, a shadow stepped from the hull.

"Cap?"

Chemile was tall, slender, his eyes set like tiny jewels in the smooth ovoid of his face. His ears were pointed and set close to the skull, hugging the bone-like delicate shells. His skin was covered with minute flecks of photosensitive tissue which gave him the ability to adopt the coloration of any background against which he stood. A chameleon-like trait developed on the harsh world which had given him birth; a defense against savage predators who relied on sight, not smell.

As Kennedy halted at the entrance to the port he said, "Ginot's trying to arouse a faction against the proposed affiliation. I don't think he's going to have any success. The games you instigated have woken a combative spirit in the young."

Lurking unseen in the corridors and rooms of the Office he had been able to pick up items of information, gossip and deals between men who had no reason to suspect they were overheard.

"We can forget all that, Veem. We're leaving."

"Action, Cap?" Chemile's voice betrayed his pleasure. "About time. So far Penza's had all the fun. I don't go for battles, myself."

Not the kind at which they had played, but Chemile had never flinched from danger.

"Take the controls, Veem. Set course for Reyud. Top velocity."

For a moment Kennedy lingered, enjoying the night, staring at the wash of stars above, bright points, sheets and curtains of luminescence, the dark patches of clouds of interstellar dust, the fuzz of distant nebulae.

Thinking of a man who could walk through solid rock. A symbol he had seen before.

Knowing that among the brightness, the clean shine of the galaxy, a monster had woken.

Kaifeng!

Chapter THREE

He stood before a chair shaped like a throne, tall, resplendent in robes of maroon edged with gold, more golden braid adorning his chest, his arms. Braid dulled by the gemmed glitter of the double helix prominent on his breast.

Tall, proud, but it was his face which held Jamil Makkofaides' attention. Cold, remote, skin tight over

facial bone, the flesh seeming to be almost transparent. The eyes were large, lambent, crimson flecks in irises of emerald, the brows finely drawn, highly arched. The nose was thin, the upper lip long, the mouth a thin line of incipient cruelty above a rounded jaw.

His voice carried the frigid chill of a northern wind blowing through ice-encrusted trees.

"It appears, Professor, that you have chosen to be uncooperative. For a man of your attainments that is most unwise. I am disappointed. I would have thought that age would have enhanced your wisdom."

"Age brings a lessening of the potential loss of life, Doctor."

"True, but even to the old life is sweet. How much sweeter when you have eyes to see and hands to touch, feet on which to walk, ears with which to hear. Tell me, Jamil Makkofaides, how much do you love your senses?"

As yet no threat had been made, no instrument of torture displayed, yet Makkofaides felt the chill touch of fear. An emotion seemingly out of place here in this chamber, warm with the spilled glow from yellow lanterns, soft rugs beneath his feet, a table on which stood a decanter of wine together with goblets made of finest crystal.

A room which could have belonged to the palace of some barbaric ruler, a princeling, or to a decadent member of a complex civilization. The penchant for soft things, soft lights, bright hangings—all a stage against which his host moved in the ritual of a stylized play.

Oddly the concept gave him courage so that he stood and faced the throne, the man standing before it, thinking he knew the outcome of the interview.

He would remain silent.

He would be offered bribes, rewards, inducements, but he would tell them nothing. And, in the end, they would have to let him go.

"Tsing!" Kaifeng mounted the low dais on which the throne was set, seating himself as a man glided from the shadows. "Wine for our guest."

"Master!"

Makkofaides watched as the man bowed, a little amused at the obeisance, a gesture in character with the room, the man to whom it was given. A servant, obviously, and perhaps more. A bodyguard dedicated to the welfare of his employer.

His feet were silent as he crossed the floor to the table on which the wine stood. A squat man, broad, his face a mask of stone. His hands were large, the fingers spatulate. The dull-colored tunic he wore carried the now-familiar symbol.

"Drink," urged Kaifeng. "Drink deeply, my friend. You will need all the courage you possess and the wine can give."

A veiled threat, no longer implied but actually spoken, yet Makkofaides's hand did not tremble as he lifted the goblet and drained what it contained.

As Tsing quietly removed the empty container Kaifeng said, musingly, "As a student of the life sciences, Professor, has it never occurred to you that the human body is, in some respects, most inefficiently designed? So many nerves, bones, internal organs, and each the potential source of excruciating agony."

A built-in handicap, you might say, for anyone who is foolishly determined to remain stubborn. Did you enjoy the wine?"

"It was to my taste, Doctor."

"I am so pleased." The chill voice now held a feral purr. "It was, of course, poisoned. A compound of my own devising. First it brings agony and then later, death. I have found it most effectual. The first spasm should occur about now!"

The thin hands closed on the arms of the throne.

Makkofaides screamed.

He doubled, falling, not aware that he had thudded his head against the carpet, conscious only of the internal agony which tore at every fiber of his being. A ghastly, sick, nearly-unbearable wash of pain which jarred every nerve and sinew.

He rolled, moaning like an animal, sweat streaming down his face, blood oozing from his bitten lips.

"Help me! For God's sake, help me!"

"You appeal. You beg. That, at least, is a beginning."

"Please!"

"As yet, you can stand the pain." Kaifeng leaned forward, his face intent, his eyes showing a narrow gloating as if he fed on the agony he watched. "Were it too great you would have found relief in unconsciousness, but that level is still far ahead. Odd how the human body can stand such torment. Odd, but most convenient for my purpose."

Makkofaides writhed, barely aware of the purring voice, lost in a red hell of unending pain, hearing a thin high shrieking, and not knowing that it came from his own throat.

Abruptly the pain vanished to leave him gasping, his throat raw, his chest heaving, sweat falling like dew from his face and neck, soaking his garments as if he had plunged into water.

"Doctor! The antidote—"

"Will be given as soon as you have learned respect. Learn now, once and for all time, that I am the Master!"

The man was insane, but he had to be humored.

"Master!" Makkofaides crawled towards the throne. "The antidote—I beg you!"

"Not yet. Pain is a great teacher. Things told with the aid of its use are never forgotten, and there is still a lesson you must learn. For you now, my word is law, my wish your command. When next we speak you will obey! You will always obey!"

His slender hands closed on the arms of the chair.

Again Makkofaides screamed as agony clawed at his body, his brain.

Dulled by the sound, the feet of Zilma Narayan were silent as she entered the chamber and walked forward to stand at the side of the throne. Engrossed, Kaifeng paid her no attention. Only Tsing, ever

watchful, moved like a ghost to stand close.

"Too much and you will kill him," she said dispassionately as she looked at the writhing figure. "He is old."

"Old, but sound."

"Even so, there is a danger of traumatic injury to the brain.. It will not benefit us if his knowledge is buried too deep for access."

For a long moment Kaifeng remained silent and then, he said coldly, "Zilma you are a creature of my making, an extension of my being; into you I have put great knowledge and unusual skills. Yet, at times, I think that you forget who is the master and who the pupil."

"No, Doctor Wei, never."

"It is well that you do not forget. Should you do so then, though you stand close to me, I will break you as if you were nothing."

"Doctor! The man!"

Makkofaides had fallen silent, blessed relief coming in a wave of darkness. Kaifeng lifted his hands and leaned back, his face satiated.

"Revive him, Tsing!" As the man moved to obey he said, casually, "An amusing device, Zilma, don't you agree? Now, convinced that he has absorbed a poison, the pain of which can only be forestayed by the regular taking of an antidote, he will be my creature until the day of his death. For a man assumed to be so intelligent, he is amazingly blind. Not for one moment did he suspect that the pain he suffered was induced by the electronic whips in my chair."

"A natural error, Doctor."

"Made by all except one." Kaifeng's face darkened a little. "Kennedy saw through the pretense—well, one day we may meet again. When we do I shall not again be bested."

Rising, he stepped towards Tsing and the now revived professor. Tormented eyes moved from the tall figure to the girl, back to the implacable face.

"You—two of a kind. And I thought you to be civilized."

"A lesson so swiftly forgotten?" Kaifeng made a small gesture. "Tsing!"

The man stooped, the spatulate fingers gripping, digging, impacting sensitive nerves. As the old man shrieked, twisting, Kaifeng said coldly, "You are my creature. Forget again and I will turn you into a thing of nightmare. You doubt I can do it? Then follow and observe!"

"Doctor?"

"Return to your work, Zilma. I do not need your aid."

A panel opened at the far end of the chamber, the pulse of distant machinery echoing from metal like the beating of a gigantic heart, pumps, engines, or the normal sounds associated with a ship in space.

A connection Makkofaides didn't make as he was led limply into a bleak room filled with assembled apparatus, a bench holding a tank, and a thing which crept, mewed and stared from disfigured eyes.

"God!" Makkofaides turned, retching. "Master! Is that—was that a man?"

"One who failed and who has paid the penalty for failure. His instructions were explicit—to obtain the virus of levive. Instead, the fool caused its destruction and had to fall back on the alternative. In doing so, Professor, he saved your life—but at the cost of his humanity."

Makkofaides averted his eyes. A medical man, a surgeon, a delver into the mysteries of life, he was accustomed to the vagaries which wild mutations could cause, but this thing was a deliberate creation, a horrible travesty of the human form.

A man turned into a freak of the worst kind. A living, crawling monster.

A monster manufactured by one who was even worse. A beast in human form, devoid of compunction, pity, sensitivity, all the things which birth and training had caused him to regard as important.

"Please, master!" Makkofaides looked at his hands, saw them tremble, knew that his face betrayed his terror that what had been done to the thing in the tank could be done to him. Death would be preferable. Any kind of death.

"You wish to speak?" Kaifeng's smile was the grimace of a tiger. "To tell me the things I wish to know? You are wise."

"The ship. You want to know about the ship?"

"Yes."

"I—" The air was stifling, a rim of darkness edging his vision, age and remembered pain, the sight he had been forced to witness, the dreadful anticipation of what could happen—all hammers striking at the naked surface of his brain. "The antidote! Master, for God's sake! Give me the antidote!"

"There is time enough for that, Professor. You have seen enough? Good. The sight disturbs you? Remember it." One hand reached out, a finger touching a button, pressing it, releasing a flood of destructive energy which washed clean the tank and what it had contained. "You see? I can be merciful. But should you fail me, you also will wake to regret the loss of certain facilities. And now, some more wine. Men of learning and culture should observe the conventions."

Wine which tasted like blood, a goblet which rang with the delicate chiming of a bell as Tsing refilled it a third time, the liquid restoring a measure of his strength.

A small room, intimate in its furnishings, warm and comforting, a place to forget hurtful memories.

A web to snare an old and broken man.

A man who talked and talked with the desperate need to please, trembling, frightened, tamed.

Who finally slept, drugged, lost in a world of tormented dreams.

Zilma Narayan turned as Kaifeng entered the room in which she was working. Behind a transparent panel a man-like creature paced and turned to pace again. A grotesque shape, plates of thickened tissue like jointed armor on its body, the brows massive ridges of prominent bone, the fingers like three sticks sprouting from a gnarled palm, the face blank, the deep-set eyes glazed windows devoid of intelligence.

A failure.

"You began with the wrong basic material, Zilma. I warned you that the araphenid cells were not

suitable."

"Yet they hold a certain potential. Few species can tolerate the hardening of the outer epidermis to the extent where the nerve endings no longer transmit sensation. And I'd hoped the brain would convolute to compensate for the decreased capacity."

Zilma Narayan stared at the thing she had created for what it was, an experiment in genetic engineering. An attempt to produce a new form of life; a man-like thing with the external attributes of a lobster, the internal strength of an elephant, the destructive urge of a savage predator.

A creature which, if it had succeeded, would have formed the basis of armies.

"Did the man talk?"

"Of course, was there ever any doubt that he would?" Kaifeng found the concept amusing. "An interesting experiment, my dear. As I suspected they would, your blandishments failed, yet they served to soften him up, make my own efforts all the more unexpected and therefore more effective. A procedure known of old, of course, but the change in his attitude is remarkable. Now, at a word, he will kneel to your feet."

A trained and ruined animal, broken, once a man of culture and learning, now less than a slave. But she was not concerned with the loss of his pride, the injuring of his spirit.

"For how long?"

"Until we find the ship he sent on its way. I have the initial computer guidance program, yet there could be unanticipated irregularities. A diversion caused by external forces, perhaps. Knowing what he does the professor will be able to extrapolate and compensate. Once we have found the vessel, of course, he can be dispensed with. Raw material for your experiments, perhaps."

He made no answer, standing, his eyes glowing hands lifted, the fingers curved as if he already" the galaxy in his grasp.

Chapter FOUR

Cel Evologozi was a small man with an olive skin, short, grizzled hair and eyes which seemed to swim in pools of ebon oil. His hands were thin, the bones delicate, the fingers tipped with polished nails resembling the claws of a bird. About him hung an impression of weakness, a physical frailty coupled with a lack of moral fiber; a man who could be pushed, who would bend long before he broke.

An impression heightened by the softness of his voice, thin, high, almost womanish.

"Cap! I cannot begin to tell you how relieved I am to see you. Your vessel?"

"On the field."

"Of course. And you came directly here? That was most kind. You will take refreshment? Some wine, some coffee, tisane?"

It was served by a girl liquid with a supple grace, gossamer fabrics doing little to hide the superb lines of her figure, scarlet and gold bright against the olive shefin of velvet skin. Deftly she handed Kennedy a

steaming cup of tisane, bowing, her eyes meeting his own, lingering with frank appraisal.

"My lord, is there more that you need?"

"Thank you, no."

"You honor Reyud by your presence." Her eyes searched his face, noting the hard, firm lines, the directness of the eyes, the mouth, now soft but which she sensed could become abruptly cruel. A face which matched the body, taut and lithe beneath the nacreous white he wore, the softly shimmering fabric adorned with trceries of golden thread. A strange man, one beyond her immediate experience, but one to whom she felt herself respond.

"Meerad, that will be all."

Again the bow, this time to Evlogozi, and like a shadow she drifted across the floor to halt at the door, to turn, smiling. To vanish.

"A charming girl, Cap." Evlogozi lifted his cup and sniffed at the vapors. "The only child of a friend of mine who is no longer with us. He, his wife, his two brothers—" The thin voice broke. "After such grief it is good to see happiness."

Kennedy said nothing, waiting. No stranger to diverse cultures, he knew that he would be told what he had come to learn in the man's own time. First had to come the conventions, the gift of refreshment, the period of sensory testing during which Evlogozi would absorb initial impressions and assess his findings. The girl would have been no accident. The final turn, the smile, all could have had a bearing.

Waiting he sipped the tisane, tasting the acidity of herbs, catching the scent of flowers. The room in which he sat was modestly furnished, a great vase of blooms resting on a low table, their petals a riot of flaming brilliance. Through a window he could see other buildings, all low, peaked roofs ornamented with tiles in blended colors, balconies overhanging the streets, the windows bright as they caught and reflected the light of an azure sun.

A soft and pleasant world in which violence would be unknown, the people gentle and kind, the children happy, abject poverty unknown. An isolated scrap of near-perfection clinging to the edge of the galaxy, a refuge for a way of life often considered but never really tried.

At least, not on the inner worlds.

"You are patient, Cap." Cel Evlogozi lowered his cup. "You have travelled fast and far, coming at a word, a call for help, and curiosity must consume you. Yet you ask nothing, make no demands, pose no questions. Such an attribute is rare."

Words to mask thoughts, to gain time, perhaps in which to assemble facts. Yet Cel Evlogozi was one of the Triumvirate which ruled Reyud. The Head of the Panel, respected, honored, trusted with the destiny of this world.

A contradiction to the outward impression which Kennedy knew to be false—no weakling could have gained or held his position. The outward show was camouflage, or ingrained habit, an excess of politeness, the use of a delicate courtesy.

Abruptly he said, "Cap, what do you know of levive?"

"Nothing."

"I am glad to hear it. The less men know of it the better. But can you guess what it is?"

"A plague," said Kennedy flatly. "A disease."

"A name, Cap, but it will serve. And it is hard to see what else to call it. It grows and spreads, it is communicated and is as contagious as the most virulent of known diseases. A curse which came from the stars, touched Reyud and left a fair world a place of mourning. Did you notice the farms as you descended? The cities? The land?"

Bleak wilderness scarred by charred sores, channels dug and filled with limpid water, shells where houses had stood, ghost towns in which vegetation grew.

"A price we paid, Cap. A price we had to pay. Fifteen million men, women and children died and were burned. Square miles of soil were sterilized. The flames could be seen for miles as they rose from the pyres, the glare of atomic explosions shamed the sun. But we survived—the few who are left."

The pot rattled against the edge of the cup as Evlogozi helped himself to more tisane.

"It was found in space," he continued dully. "A roving vessel venturing far from the regular lanes, a prospector who had a theory that valuable ores could be found deep in inter-galactic space. A madman, perhaps, but his logic was sound. And he found something, a scrap of debris, not large but incredibly rich. It was all in his log. A piece of material a few pounds in weight which he took aboard and tested, grinding a portion to powder for careful analysis. He had a crew of five men. Three were dead when he arrived on Reyud. He and his engineer were delirious—it was only by a miracle they landed at all. The dead were buried, the sick taken to hospital: Where it stood now rests a crater a mile in diameter."

"You destroyed it."

"The building and all it contained. Doctors, nurses, patients, all were sacrificed—but it was too late. The devil, released, spread and continued to spread. We sectioned the planet and banned all movement. Families watched each other knowing that, if one should fall ill, all were doomed. Technicians wearing protective clothing collected the dead, burned their houses, burned the bodies, stood guard at the boundaries. Weyburn, God be thanked, did not hesitate, made no demands, but ships from Terran Control filled space and sealed us tight against any ship venturing close. He knew, as we all knew that, once loose, levive could never be controlled. Few worlds are like Reyud."

Not few—none.

Kennedy sat, thinking, visualizing the event. The calm acceptance of imminent death, the self-sacrifice, the iron resolve which had negated all thought of escape. An entire population which had made an altruistic decision. A culture which had put the common safety above the instinct of self-preservation.

"But you won," he said. "You beat it."

"No, Cap, we did not. We managed to confine it, forced it to burn itself out, but that is all. And we made a very grave mistake." He lifted his cup, his face wreathed with vapor, sipping as if to find in the fragrant liquid a small compensation.

"Levive—we called it that for want of a better name. An association with the captain, perhaps. His name was LiVie, but there was something more. But first let me tell you of the mistake we made. An unpardonable one, but we meant well."

"You kept some of the virus," said Kennedy.

"You know?"

"I guessed. It would be a natural thing to do. The subject of research. Where?"

"In a laboratory buried deep in rock far to the north. It was self-contained, protected by alarms, electronic screens, automatic weapons. It held only two men, volunteers, whose task was to find a vaccine or to destroy the culture. A vaccine because what had happened once could happen again. And there was something else. Not all those contaminated by the plague died. Five, somehow, managed to survive. They were carriers."

"And you killed them?"

"No!" Evlogozi's tone was sharp. "No," he said again, more gently. "We could not. You must understand that our culture is against the taking of life in any form. And they had done no harm. They were not vicious people, but unfortunate victims. They could have been held in isolation on the planet, but there always would have been the risk of accidental contamination. So we made a compromise. We put them into a vessel fitted and equipped for an extended journey, and we took that ship and sent it into the void heading into inter-galactic space."

"And?"

"The man who programmed the guidance computer Cap, the only man who has any idea of where the vessel is now to be found, was one of the two men who volunteered to serve in the laboratory. Professor Jamil Makkofaides—who was abducted by a man who apparently walked through solid stone."

The key to the most frightful weapon which had ever menaced the galaxy.

Kennedy said, sharply, "There is no doubt about this? You are certain?"

"We have photographic records. Jamil activated the cameras and we have monitors also. They, for some reason failed to function, but the cameras continued to operate. The images were instantly transmitted to a receiving station some miles from the laboratory. A precaution in case the atomic charges incorporated into the inner compartment should be detonated."

"As they were?"

"Yes."

"So there is no danger at all now from the virus? Good." Kennedy added, dryly, "I assume that neither of the men realized the full extent of the explosion. Another compromise?"

"One I am not proud of Cap, but yes, it was. We dared not take the slightest risk—either of the men could have become contaminated and the other thrown into panic. If they could have successfully demonstrated a vaccine, then both would have been saved."

A one-way trip which an intelligent man would have guessed, or one less intelligent could have learned when it was too late. Cultural mores could break under stress and initial dedication turn sour.

Kennedy said, thoughtfully, "So the main problem is to find Makkofaides or, if that isn't possible, to reach the coffin-ship before anyone else. It's obvious that he was grabbed for the sake of his knowledge and it may already be too late. If we can find the ship in time it won't matter what he knows or can tell—there will be no ship to find."

"You intend—"

"To do what has to be done," interrupted Kennedy grimly. "The only thing that can be done."

"To kill." Evlogozi shook his head. "Always to kill. Can there ever be an end to the taking of life?"

For answer Kennedy rose and stepped to the window. In a small garden below a child was playing with a toy, a furred animal with peaked ears and round, glassy eyes. A thing almost as big as the boy himself, who clutched it with chubby hands.

"Your child?"

"My grandson." Cel Evlogozi had joined Kennedy at the window. "My daughter's only child."

"A fine lad. Now, if you saw a venomous snake approaching him, what would you do?"

"Summon help. Take the child away."

"And if the snake was very close, about to strike, and you had a gun or stood close with a stick, what then?" For a moment Kennedy waited and then, as no answer came, said softly, "You would kill. One way or another you would kill. By taking action you would destroy the snake and save the child. By taking none you would condemn the boy to a painful death."

"But—"

"By taking no action you think to absolve yourself from guilt? You know it doesn't work that way. You would have stood and watched a person you love killed, and you would have lived with that knowledge for the rest of your life." Kennedy's voice hardened, took on the chill of steel. "We don't live in a paradise, Evlogozi. Always there is a snake in the garden."

"And men to kill it, Cap."

"Men who may not always be around." Kennedy turned from the window, knowing better than to blame the man for what he was, what his culture had made him. "When Makkofaides was working on the guidance programming did he have anyone to help him? An assistant?"

"Bal Punayiotis, but he wouldn't have known the final settings, Cap. Those Jamil did alone."

"But he could have left a clue, a hint, anything. And don't forget that someone had to betray the location of the laboratory."

"Punayiotis?" Evlogozi shook his head. "Impossible! I have known him since he was a boy. He would never do such a thing."

"Maybe not." Kennedy didn't intend to argue the point. "Where is he to be found?"

Stairs which led below, a tunnel which ran beneath the ground. Compartments holding the machines which serviced the houses above, hidden, silent, doing nothing to disturb the air of brooding stillness which hung like a gentle cloud over the rural atmosphere of the town.

In a chamber which held complicated electronic equipment a man stooped over a bench.

He was tall, thin, his face seamed, traced with lines which formed a pattern of bitterness, eyes which moved in small, furtive darlings. Things to which Evlogozi was blind.

"Jamil?" Punayiotis blinked when asked the question. "No. He wouldn't let me near him."

Kennedy snapped, "You were his assistant. Why not?"

"Because he was old, secretive and I guess wanted to share none of the responsibility. I tried to take a more active part. Once I even suggested a complete set of random variables, but he wouldn't even look at my figures. Not then, anyway, but I know he read them later."

"How?"

"I'd marked a page—a hair between two leaves. When I looked it had gone."

"You have a copy of them? Good. Let me have it." As the man turned towards a steel door set flush against a wall Kennedy added quietly, "When were you approached by a man offering money?"

He saw the sudden tensing of the muscles in back and shoulders, the momentary pause, then almost at once it was over. The man was turning the dial of the safe, his head turned to show his profile. "I asked you a question! I want an answer!"

"There was no man."

"No?" Kennedy shrugged. "Then you will have no objection to our making a check. If you have more money than you have earned, for example, that will have to be explained. And your absences, trips off-world, your friends, associates, women." Again the sudden tension, the revealing betrayal. "If you are reluctant to cooperate there are means to obtain the truth. An electronic probe will get the answers."

"Cel?"

"I'm sorry Bal, but we have to know." Evlogozi was apologetic. "Personally I cannot believe you guilty of wrong and surely, you cannot object to an investigation?"

"You don't trust me," said Punayiotis bitterly. "After all these years. And I thought you were a friend."

"Bal, if—"

"The papers," snapped Kennedy. "Get them."

The safe door swung open, one thin hand vanishing within, Punayiotis turning with a blur of speed, his hand reappearing, filled with the bulk of a Dione.

He fired as Kennedy threw his weight against Evlogozi, the small man flung aside to fall sprawling as the searing shaft of flame lanced through the air where he had stood.

A mistake on Punayiotis's part—Kennedy should have been the initial target.

As he tried to correct the error Kennedy's hand slipped beneath his blouse, rose, the sprom pistol he carried lifting as he sprang sideways from the blast of the Dione, firing as flame charred his blouse, crisped the skin of his left arm.

A thread of fire spat from Kennedy's muzzle, reached the contorted face, the tiny missile hitting the space between the eyes, penetrating, venting the energy it carried in a gush of flame, a dull report.

An explosion which tore free the top of the skull, spattering blood, revealing the pulped brain, the ripped membranes, bulging the eyes from their sockets, the tongue from the mouth.

As the small man rose, shaking, Kennedy said, grimly, "There's your snake, Evlogozi. If I had your reluctance to kill we'd both be dead."

Chapter FIVE

Luden pursed his lips as he examined the wound.

"You were lucky, Cap. A little more to the right and you'd have lost the arm. As it is a dressing will take care of it."

Kennedy watched as the transparent film was applied, taking the new blouse Chemile handed him, slipping it on as Saratov busied himself setting up a projector and screen, the heap of films and records Kennedy had carried back to the *Mordain* lying on the desk in the laboratory.

"Ready when you are, Cap."

"Hold it for now, Penza. Veem, get to the controls and put us on course towards the galactic edge. Jarl, you'd better study these figures and see if you can make anything of them. No. Wait. Best to run over the other stuff first. I'll feed these to the computers at Terran Control."

He established the connection as the *Mordain* rose with a soft pulse from the engines, lifting high and heading into space, the nose aimed at the bleak darkness which lay beyond the thin scatter of stars.

The face of the girl which appeared on the screen was smoothly beautiful, a mask behind which lay a keen and agile mind.

"Cap!" The smile was warmly genuine. "It's good to see you again. You want the Director?"

"No, the use of the computers. Top priority."

"Serious, uh?" The smile faded as she tripped unseen switches. "Go ahead, Cap, what do you want to know?"

"A complete check on the area around Reyud with special regard to directions leading into inter-galactic space. Run analogies as to probable courses governed by the need to avoid all worlds, regular shipping lanes, planet aids and charted masses of debris. Also all known vortexes of electro-magnetic and electro-gravitic forces. A ship is out there somewhere and I've got to find it."

"A big job, Cap. Velocity?"

"Unknown."

"Which makes it damned near impossible."

"I've got something which may help." Kennedy relayed the figures he had obtained from Punayiotis.

"These may have been included in some way into the guidance programme. There will most probably be a random selection factor which governs the alteration of velocity and course."

"Nice," she said dryly. "Nothing like keeping things simple. Space is pretty big, Cap, or hadn't you noticed?"

"It has occurred to me." His tone matched her own. "Basically the problem is simple. Just imagine that you wanted to send a vessel from Reyud and that you never, ever, wanted it found. You've got the date of departure, the initial velocity and the determined objective."

"Simple, the man says! Cap, why not look for a needle in a haystack. It's easier."

"I don't want a needle, I want to find that damned ship! Do your best with the computers and, if possible, give me possible locations in order of predicted probability at two-hour intervals starting from now."

"Will do, Cap. When am I going to see you again?"

"When I buy you the best dinner you've ever eaten. Send me the findings as soon as possible, right?"

"Right. Take care, Cap."

Chemile had set the *Mordain* on automatic and had brewed coffee, sipping as he watched the images flickering on the laboratory screen. He glanced up as Kennedy joined the group.

"Just testing, Cap. Coffee?"

"Thanks, Veem. Start from the beginning, Penza. Evlogozi set them in chronological order. Ready, Jarl?"

Luden set down the reports he'd been studying.

"A most interesting study of a particularly violent epidemic, Cap. Levive seems to hold a highly unusual characteristic, but I would like to study the visual records before reaching a conclusion as to exactly what it might be. Commence when you are ready, Penza."

"Better have some coffee, Jarl," warned Chemile. "You too, Penza. This could take a long time."

Hours during which horror entered the snug confines of the *Mordain*. A horror none the less real because it was depicted in glowing color dealing with events now past. The ghastly implications remained.

What had happened on Reyud could happen on any inhabited world. The terror which had come from the stars to kill, to destroy, to tear the heart and guts from an entire race.

To create plague-worlds which would have to be bathed in atomic fire—which would be so bathed by others terrified lest the contamination should spread.

As the filmed records ended Luden said, dispassionately, "From the available evidence, Cap, it seems obvious that the onset of levive is accompanied by a tremendous euphoria which is shortly followed by entrancing hallucinations of a most intense nature. The initial mistake was in thinking that Captain LiVie and his engineer were simply delirious. In fact, they were completely lost in a world of illusion. A natural mistake in the circumstances, but one which had a tragic result."

"You can't blame them, Jarl. They had no way of knowing that the period of incubation was practically non-existent. You noted the contradiction?"

Luden nodded. "The disease appeared to follow the attributes of the sporoza, yet coupled with the characteristics of the myxomycetes. A medical paradox which forces us to the conclusion that the virus is alien and follows a unique life-cycle against which we have no natural or artificial defense. Contamination is by contact and is instantaneous. The virus is extruded to the surface of the skin and from there can pass by touch to any inanimate object. There it lies dormant until picked up by a host. Propagation is incredibly fast and seems to follow the pattern of the mycorrhiza. The main attack is directly on the central nervous system and concentrated on the frontal lobes of the brain. The thalamus is, naturally, one of the first areas to be affected."

"The euphoria."

"Yes, Cap. And, in a sense, the initial state of well-being is the greatest danger."

"I don't get that, Jarl," protested Chemile. "A man catches something, he feels good, so what?"

"The initial euphoria is so intense as to approach actual hysteria," explained Luden patiently. "I can best liken it to a quasi-religious fanatic who is convinced he has had a mystical revelation. He is so convinced that he has the answer to all problems, feels so confident and good, that he is driven to convert others. Such a man will think nothing of accosting strangers."

"Like a drunk," rumbled Saratov. "A man has a few and feels so good that he wants to go around slapping backs, shaking hands, kissing all the girls. But would a disease do that, Jarl?"

"Not a normal one, Penza, but levice is not normal. I think the reaction is the result of a survival-drive incorporated into the virus. It cannot breed without a host, therefore the greater number of hosts the faster it will spread. The following hallucinations are another survival attribute. A host, lost in illusion, makes a willing victim. You saw how those patients reacted. At first the initial bonhomie, then a dazed wandering, then sitting in apparent meditation. Finally, when their brains had become completely dominated by the virus and all physical coordination lost, they died."

But not all of them. A few had, somehow, managed to adapt to the alien infection, to become carriers, constant sources of the virus. Five out of fifteen million. Five too many.

The report had come from Terran Control, sheaves of papers transmitted by hybeam over the radio-copier, and Kennedy studied them, frowning at what he saw.

There were too many possible courses the ship could have taken, too many variables. The two-hour predictions were so close in order of probability that they almost cancelled each other out.

Space, as the girl had said, was big.

Big and, beyond the edge of the galaxy, empty. A vast, endless void into which a ship had plunged on an unknown course and an unknown velocity. A ship which had to be found.

In the control room Kennedy studied the stellar charts, points winking into life as he operated switches, stars, worlds, vortexes each depicted in its own color.

"The initial course is the one the ship from Reyud had to take," he said to Luden. "From the point of dispatch to here between Faldarha and Erne. The shortest route and one which would avoid regular shipping. Then out towards the edge going under or over the Lemmarge Vortex. Which?"

Luden studied the screen. "Assuming it would then progress in a direct line, Cap, under. If over it would eventually reach nebula MM3725. A remote possibility, I admit, but Makkofaides would have refused to take the smallest chance."

"I agree." The chart blurred, took on a new form as Kennedy made adjustments. "The probability of the ship having passed through that point is in the region of 93.85 percent. Good enough. Veem, head for point 347903—695215. Top velocity."

The soft pulse of the engines rose, the metal of the hull and bulkheads quivering with sympathetic vibration, a sussurating whisper augmented by the impact of interstellar atoms, the Siren Effect which had been known to drive lonely spacefarers insane.

On the screens the stars blurred, flickered, steadied as they passed plus-C velocity, hurtling onwards at a speed which made that of light a mere crawl.

Kennedy checked the figures taken from Punayiotis.

"Makkofaides read these, Jarl, though he didn't admit it. He was an old man faced with a difficult problem and he would have needed all the help he could get. He had to work alone in order to keep the final guidance programming a secret, but it's logical to assume that, even if subconsciously, he would have incorporated some of this data."

"And certain figures would have held a special importance for him, Cap," agreed Luden. "We are all unconscious victims of our conditioning. Give a man a set of figures and ask him to select one and it is highly probable that it will have some connection with a personal interest. His birth-date, financial resources, lucky number, age—" He broke off, musing, his eyes thoughtful. "We'll need a complete report on Makkofaides from the moment of his birth."

"Cel Evlogozi can supply it, Jarl. Get it and isolate all relevant factors, correlate them with Punayiotis' data, eliminate what seems inconsistent and convert the rest into coordinates. A thin chance but we have to take it. Terran Control can help."

Kennedy passed on into the engine room as Luden busied himself at the communicator. Saratov was at his engines, listening to the soft hum of the drive, his big hands deft as he made delicate adjustments, maintaining the near-perfect match of the balanced coils.

"They aren't as finely tuned as they could be, Cap," he grumbled. "Six nines of similarity might do for the fleet, we've got seven, but I want to get eight."

"You want perfection, Penza."

"Why not, Cap? Nothing less is good enough for the *Mordain*."

Saratov straightened, the light gleaming on the rounded ball of his shaven skull. "Veem's pushing us hard," he commented. "Do you think we've got a chance?"

"Of getting there first?" Kennedy shrugged. "First we have to know where to look. We'll have to set up an external scanner—wide coverage with narrow selection. We can couple it to the Larvic-Shaw on a feed-back circuit. Noise will be a problem but we may be able to filter most of it out and negate what we can't. The one advantage we have is that we'll be heading into inter-galactic space so interference will be low. We might even be able to spot Kaifeng's vessel."

"Kaifeng!" The giant's big hands clenched into fists. "I thought we'd taken care of him."

"We didn't," said Kennedy bleakly. "The last film proves it."

He watched it again as the *Mordain* lanced through space, the two men, the shadow which appeared against the wall, the figure which had walked through stone.

"A development of the trans-dimensional apparatus he used on Epidoris, Cap," said Luden. "A means to alter the vibratory rate of what is contained in the field and so allow it to pass through solid matter. Solid to us, naturally. To the man wearing the device, it would have seemed to be something like a heavy mist."

"Could you duplicate it, Penza?"

"No, Cap." The giant was positive. "U've tried. I can adjust the vibration to pulverise whatever is in the

field, but I can't make an alloy which will remain stable during transition from one vibratory phase to another."

"I believe the secret must lie in the metal of that building we destroyed, Cap," said Luden. "The nexus which could only have been constructed by the Zhelryana. Kaifeng would have been able to examine it, refabricate it, perhaps. He had plenty of opportunity."

His voice held regret, a touch of envy, more than a touch of bitterness. An emotion which Kennedy could understand, could even share. The building which he had destroyed could have given clues to the secret of that enigmatic race which had flowered to spread throughout the galaxy. The unknown beings which had vanished leaving behind only scraps and fragments of their presence, taking with them the tremendous scientific knowledge they must have possessed.

As the film ended Luden reached towards the projector, rewound it, recommenced its run.

"One man," he mused thoughtfully. "I think it logical to assume, Cap, that Kaifeng would have only one device. Its use must entail great danger, unless there is perfect synchronisation the chance of materialising within a solid object is high. The result would, of course, be devastating."

Saratov frowned. "Why only one, Jarl?"

"The available evidence leads to that conclusion, Penza." Luden was thinly precise. "Review the situation as we know it. A sealed laboratory in which is known to be two men. One attacker, hampered by his equipment, would be at a disadvantage. The men could be in different compartments and each held a destruct-button. It would take only a moment for one to warn the other and the obvious target, that of the virus itself, destroyed. As it happened the killing of Patsalibou caused exactly that to happen. If Makkofaides hadn't panicked, had destroyed himself or at least have taken delaying action, we would not now be faced with our present problem. If Kaifeng had more than one trans-dimensional device it is logical to assume that he would have used them to ensure success."

"He must have bundled Makkofaides in a sack," said the giant thoughtfully. "Connected him up in some way to engulf him in the field. I'll bet he was sweating every step of the way."

A chime from the communicator signalled the arrival of the requested data from Terran Control. Luden took it, studied it, supplying the one thing no computer could possess. The intuition which would always make a man the master of a machine.

"As we suspected, Cap, there are correlations. I will have to cross-check and eliminate and then, I'm afraid, it will be a matter of luck. A pity Makkofaides never married. If he had there would have been extra associated figures to work on."

The toss of a coin to determine the fate of worlds— but it was the best they could do.

As Luden crouched over the computer in the laboratory, his fingers dancing over the keys, Kennedy entered the control room. From the big chair Chemile gestured at the screens, now unusually dark, touched only by the light of a few scattered stars, the glow of distant nebulae, other galaxies separated from their own by millions of light years.

"It gets you, Cap, doesn't it. Will we ever be able to make the crossing?"

"Perhaps, Veem."

Ships and men, new engines which could eliminate distance as their own hydride had made a mockery of the old, Einsteinian limitations which had held that nothing could travel faster than light. A secret held by

the Zheltyana, perhaps, the answer to where they could have gone. Where men, one day, would follow.

A dream which had no place at this time. Kennedy looked ahead towards the point from which the vessel from Reyud must have headed into the empty dark. A tiny mote of metal, a miniature, man-made world, a sealed environment containing five living persons. A prison. A hell from which the four men and the single woman could never escape.

A woman named Audrey Cahalin, locked with the others in a coffin which was intended to drift off and on until the end of time.

Kennedy brooded on the warped kindness which had made such a thing possible, the self-indulgent compromise of those who refused to accept the necessity of killing.

Better for them to have given the mercy shown to a maimed and crippled beast; the touch of poison or the blast of a Dione. A quick, clean and immediate end rather than years of dragging agony. He would not be so unkind.

Chapter SIX

Audrey Cahalin was dead and, for Enri Kommenide, the world had ended.

He stood looking down at the pitifully shrunken figure, the face with the open mouth and staring eyes, a face once so attractively beautiful and full of vivacious life, now an empty, grimacing mask. The hands—he could not look at his hands, but once, they had touched him and run their fingers through his hair, their touch softly gentle, turning savage during those times when passion had ruled. The brief interludes which had been so sweet and now were ended.

"Why?" His whisper was a baffled demand. "Why, Audrey? Why did you do it?"

The answer lay around him in bleak metal and scant comforts, the bales of supplies still unpacked, the crates of furnishings still unopened. Even the room in which she lay bore traces of carelessly applied paint, stark metal and swollen welds, a trace of oily dirt, a scatter of discarded fragments, all clear in the cold glow of the Kell.

The globe which would shine on and on, powered by the radioactive isotope within the translucent ball coated on its inner surface with a fluorescent compound.

It could be covered but never extinguished. Broken but never switched off. A string ran from the side of the couch to a fabric contraption which closed as he pulled the cord. The darkness was more terrifying than the sight of the body and he jerked the cover open again.

The woman stared at him with her sightless eyes.

As once, his mother had stared, his sister, his wife, his young child. The friends he had known, the men he had worked with, all the inhabitants of the small town where he had been born and had grown.

Then, also, a world had ended—killed by the alien touch of levive, leaving him alone to wander, wondering why he too had not been taken, why he alone had been spared. A bad time and one he didn't like to remember.

Instead he looked around the compartment in which he had, at times, been happy. A block of

transparent plastic stood on a small table beside the couch, a single bloom trapped in frozen beauty at its center. Should he take it as a memento? Or should he take the scrap of embroidery she had worked on, one of her rings, a bangle, a lock of her hair?

For a moment he hesitated and then shook his head. The dead were dead—mementoes could do nothing but accentuate the misery of the living. Best to let her lie with her things around her. To lay supine on the couch staring with her empty, dead eyes at the ceiling, the smeared paint, the glowing Kell.

Leave her—and try not to envy her. The path she had taken was not for him.

Nor for Lell Dulouart who sat as he seemed now to be always sitting, cross-legged on the bare metal of the floor, his eyes distant, his face a smoothness devoid of emotion. A man who had retreated into the deepest recesses of the mind finding, in meditation, a world in which he could remain sane.

Kommenide halted before him.

"Audrey is dead," he said flatly. "Suicide."

A flicker of something touched the distant eyes, a trace of emotion on the smooth features, turning them momentarily into something warm and human.

"Pay attention, Lell. Audrey is dead."

"I know. I sensed the departure of her spirit." The voice was low, the rustle of dry leaves beneath a gusting wind. "Now leave me. You disturb my meditation."

Once he had been active, a person full of life, an extrovert, a sportsman, reveling in the trained perfection of his body. Kommenide stood, brooding, fighting his anger, the pain of recent loss. A pain he wanted to share, to make others feel.

He dropped to his knees, his right hand lifted, the fingers extended, the palm flat. The smooth face rocked a little beneath the blow, ugly welts marring the cheek with the impact of fingers. Again he struck, a third time and then, as the calm placidity of the face remained unbroken, felt a sudden shame.

"Lell! I'm sorry! Forgive me!" His anger returned with the lack of an answer, his voice rising, turning ugly. "Forgive me, damn you! Forgive me!"

"Enri!" Ryeo Renvoise had entered the compartment, his bare feet making slapping noises as he ran across the floor. "Enri! What the hell are you doing?"

"Lell! He—"

"Leave him!" Ryco was a strong man, his hands like grapnels as he lifted Kommenide to his feet. "If you've got all that much energy to spare then you can come and help me."

"Ryco! Audrey—she's dead!"

"So that's it." Renvoise became gentle. "For a moment there I was afraid you'd blown your top. One crazy man in this place is enough. How did she die?"

"I'm not sure, but her hands—" Kommenide broke off, swallowing. "Burned," he said. "Seared."

"Chemicals?" Renvoise didn't wait for an answer. "Let's go and see."

The compartment was the same as he had left it, the vague, foolish hope that he had been mistaken or

had suffered a nightmarish hallucination ending as he watched Ryco make his examination. Kommenide leaned against the edge of the door, not looking at the dead face with its staring eyes, watching instead the deft movements of Renvoise's hands. Once the man had been a skilled engineer, an expert in electronics.

"Burned," he said, straightening. "She'd run wires from the main power-source and boosted the voltage with a home-made transformer. "Didn't you ever notice what she was up to?"

"No. Did you?"

"When we were together I had other things on my mind," said Renvoise dryly. "And she didn't encourage me to linger. But this doesn't surprise me. She's never got over Ede's death."

Ede who had been the first in her regard, the favorite. Kommenide fought to restrain a pang of jealousy. Audrey didn't deserve his condemnation, she never had, and now he regretted the hurtful remarks he had sometimes made, the ugly thoughts he had known.

For her it could not have been easy. Polyandry was not a part of Reyudian culture; there the custom was for a woman to have only one husband, and even the special ceremony performed just prior to their leaving had done little to help.

He said, dully, "What shall we do with her?"

"What can we do?" Renvoise shrugged. "Leave her in her room as we did with Ede. I'll fix up something to bar the door."

"But—"

"You don't like it? You didn't argue about Ede."

That had, somehow, been different. The man had died a normal death and lay now on his couch in a room at the end of the passage. Kommenide remembered, with guilt, his feeling of satisfaction—with Ede dead then, surely, he would take the foremost place in her affection.

A wish he had thought materialized—shown to be false by the action which had ended her life.

"Snap out of it, man!" Renvoise was harsh. "She's dead and there's nothing you can do about it. Quit mooning and give me a hand."

Small tasks deliberately invented. The eyes to be closed, a thing done for no logical reason, but old customs die hard. The dress rearranged, the burned hands placed at her sides, the crude instruments she had made disconnected and placed outside.

Kommenide glanced at them, remembering that she had once taught electronics and would have known how they should be made. How much power had passed through her body? What had she thought as she had grasped the electrodes?

Metal grated as Renvoise slammed the door. The latch was a simple bar of soft metal. He wedged it with a scrap of plastic, using the heel of his palm to hammer it fast.

"That should hold it," he said. "I guess we should have wrapped her tight in plastic, but what the hell? I guess we can live with the smell."

An odor Lell wouldn't notice, one they could ignore and one which wouldn't last.

"Two gone," said Renvoise grimly. "Three of us left and one is useless. Well, let's get back to the job."

"Why? What's the purpose?"

"It's something to do."

For Renvoise that was explanation enough, but Kommenide had long ago given up any hope.

He said, bleakly, "It's a waste of time. We have no suits and so we can't penetrate the hull. We have no fuel so we can't operate the engines—and for all we know the engines were destroyed after we were sent on our way. We have no heavy equipment, no real tools, not a single lastorch—nothing."

"We've got guts," snapped Renvoise.

"Audrey—"

"Is dead. Gone. Finished." Renvoise was deliberately cruel. "No more long, pleasant hours, Enri. No more soft femininity to help pass the time. You can't tear yourself apart with jealousy now and spend hours thinking of how to become the sole husband. Oh, yes, I know what was in your mind. Take the woman for yourself and cut us out. Never mind the law and the ceremony which made us equal. Well, if you can fight for that then you can fight for something else."

"I'll miss her. I loved her."

"Yes," admitted Renvoise. "You will and I know you did. Get something from the cabinet if you want. You know where to find me."

The medics on Reyud had been generous—salving their conscience with lavish supplies of all the medications they could think of. Kommenide stared at the cabinet, the arrays of jars and bottles, the ampoules of drugs, the phials and vials and plethora of tablets and pills. An entire dispensary—and all of it useless.

Ede had died because someone had overlooked the fact that a carrier of levive could still fall victim to a pneumococic infection.

The antibiotic which might have saved him had not been included. Not that it would have done any good. Even the black pills of euthanasia didn't work. Twice he had taken them, the first time he had felt a little sick, the next nothing at all.

Bleakly he wondered at the metabolic change which must have taken place within him and the others. The alien virus had, somehow, altered the very structure of the protoplasm so that things which should have killed did nothing. Yet Ede had died.

There was a clue in that, somewhere. The pneumococcus must have been a special strain, a wild mutation, perhaps, something which the alien had been unable to defeat. Yet none of the others had contracted it. The clue could lie in a personal eccentricity—but Ede was dead and, with no radio, the news and the potential discovery would die with them.

Impulsively Kommenide swallowed a dozen tranquilizers, then injected a strong sedative into the flesh of his arm with the blast of air from a hypogun. A combination which he hoped would dull his grief and sense of loss.

Renvoise looked up as he joined him.

"Feel better, Ene?"

"I'll make out. How is it going?"

"Slow." Renvoise gestured at the bulkhead he'd been working on. The hard metal bore a shining rectangle, a shallow groove scored in the surface. A fine powder of abraded metal lay on the floor beneath it. Two strips of metal, their ends worn to a fine polish, lay to one side.

"Beyond this bulkhead lies the guidance computer." Renvoise returned to work, the fragment of metal in his hands running up and down one of the grooves. "If we can get through and reach it—"

"What?" Kommenide shrugged. "We've been through all this, Ryco. "Even if we reach the computer it will do us no good. And, in any case, we can't land anywhere."

"I don't want to land." The metal in his hand made a harsh rasping as Renvoise rammed it hard against the bulkhead. "I just want to know where we're going. For all we can tell we're heading directly into a sun."

"Makkofaides told us—"

"He could have lied!" A thin stream of powdered filings fell from the groove, lost from the metal held against it, some from the bulkhead itself. "Anyway, what else is there to do but mourn?"

A good point. Kommenide picked up another crude tool and set to work. If they could get through the bulkhead then they could get through the hull, given time. And they had plenty of time. A literal lifetime.

They could scratch and scrape and maybe remove a section of the outer plate. They would die but, dying, catch one last look at the stars.

"Damn!" Renvoise swore as the tool he was using snapped. "No tough steel," he snarled. "Nothing that will hold a decent edge. Locked like stinking rats in a barrel and heading to God knows where. God and Makkofaides." His hand began to beat against the bulkhead, the skin splitting, the flesh bruising, blood smeared on the metal.

"Damn him! Damn Makkofaides! Damn him all to hell!"

Chapter SEVEN

Janul Makkofaides was already condemned. He sat sweating, staring with wild disbelief at the figures set before him.

"I can't understand it! Are you certain that the ship hasn't yet been found?"

"It is hardly a matter for joking, Professor." Zilma Narayan was cold. "We have been patient as I think you will admit. You have been shown every consideration and given every aid. Yet you have failed. I should not have to remind you of the penalty of failure."

Torment and things unspeakable done to the human frame—Makkofaides knew only too well.

He sat in the small compartment they had given him, barely aware of the activity beyond the transparent partition, the smoothly efficient workings of the vessel in which he rode. A strange vessel, that he had already gathered, one built on a different plan from others he had known. And, if the figures he had been

given were valid, a ship which traveled faster than he had thought possible.

"Is it possible that you have made a mistake?" The girl, despite her beauty, the soft garments she wore, the subtle perfume which enveloped her like a scented cloud, was as much to be feared as Kaifeng himself. And, for the Master, Makkofaides felt a corrosive terror.

"I've checked," he said desperately. "Three times. I remember the programming well. The data—believe me there can be no mistake."

"Yet the ship has not been found."

"Yet it must be close." His hands trembled as he sifted the papers, sheets covered with careful notations. "The velocity was low—a drift only fast enough for it to escape the gravity drag of the galactic lens. Interior reconstruction limited both the fuel and drive capacity," he explained. "The initial impetus was given by external boosters which were removed by the escort vessels at point—"

"I know the point."

"Yes, well—" Makkofaides swallowed, his face haggard, his eyes tormented. "From there it was sent on the first leg of its journey. Full power for two hours, a change, continued power for nine, another change, the first of the random variables, and a further three hours and maximum drive."

"Which was approximately no greater than twenty-eight percent of a normal gamma class vessel."

"Slow," he admitted, "but I explained the necessity. In any case there was no hurry and no need to send it too fast too soon. Given time it would have drifted so far into intra-galactic space that discovery would have been impossible."

She said, coldly, "We have searched an area of half a parsec in diameter at the point where you assured us the ship was to be found. We have not found it. I have been instructed to stimulate your memory. It can be done in more ways than one, Professor. I think you had best come with me."

"No! Please!"

"Then let me tell you what will happen unless you prove to be more efficient than you have up to now." Her voice took on the softly feral note of a tiger. "A portion of your skull will be removed and a thin wire inserted into the pain center of your brain. A few micro-volts and you will experience such agony that you will beg to be granted the release of death. That release will be withheld. For some time now I have thought of the possibilities of actually removing certain sensory organs from their natural setting and extend the nerve-connections so as to achieve somewhat interesting results. The eyes, for example, removed, extended, set so that you will be able to actually stare at the naked surface of your own brain. You are ill, Professor?"

More than ill. Makkofaides touched his forehead and felt it damp with perspiration, more sweat wetting his body, his arms.

With an effort he managed to control himself. The girl meant exactly what she said. The experiences he had already undergone, the pain he had known, had left him in no doubt as to that.

And yet something within him, the thing which had forced his ancestors to rise upright from the mud and to stare with speculative eyes at the stars, gave him a reserve of pride.

"You can kill me, Zilma Narayan," he admitted. "You can do all the things you have threatened to do—but you can't turn a fact into a fantasy. The ship should be where I said that it would be. If it isn't

then there has to be a reason."

Her smile was radiant. "You are beginning to think, Professor. Continue."

"Something external." Fear spurred his mind, clarified it. For a moment he was what he had once been, a shrewd intelligence seeking the answer to a problem. "A half a parsec, you say?"

"From the position you gave us. Yes."

"Relatively a small distance," he pointed out. "Not even a volume of four light years, A small error at the commencement of the journey, a wrongly applied thrust, for example, would account for it."

"One of the captains of the escort taking matters into his own hands? Negating all your careful programming? I think not, Professor."

"But the possibility remains. We are in uncharted space. There could be debris, rogue planetoids." Desperation made his voice brittle. "You must check, find out if anything of great size or condensed mass had passed close to the ship. A close proximity would have altered the direction."

She said, decisively, "Allowing for all possible error in the power of the drive while operating, how much further ahead could the vessel be?"

His answer was immediate. "Not more than a quarter light year."

"So much?"

"You said all possible error," he reminded. "That must include maximum optimum potential of the drive. We were careful as to the figures. My own opinion is that we must be ahead of the ship. If diverted by some unexpected external factor it must be to our rear but far to one side."

"How far?" Her voice hardened as he hesitated. "A matter of basic ballistics, Professor. If we are beyond the point of maximum extension, then the actual position of the vessel must lie at a point on a cone of which we occupy the central axis."

"True, but we don't know the angle. That would depend on when the actual diversion, took place." He brooded over the papers, eyes frantic in their search for clues. "This." He touched a notation. "A spacial disturbance registered on the Larvic-Shaw. The time?" His voice dropped to a mutter. "Intensity? Maybe it was the cause." His head rose, his eyes meeting the lambent pools of violet. "I'll need the use of a computer. There are too many variables and to isolate them with the unaided use of Gulain mathematics will take too long. Have I your permission?"

"Of course, Professor." Her hand reached out to rest on his own, slender fingers against the brown splotches, a gesture not of intimacy but of warning. "But make no more mistakes, my friend. Find that ship and find it soon."

The *Mordain* found it first.

"Cap!" Chemile's voice was high, brittle with excitement. "Cap! We've found it!"

He waved at the screens as Kennedy came into the control room, pointing at the tiny red fleck which showed against the almost solid wall of darkness. A small thing which wavered, seemed to vanish, to reappear with transient clarity.

"Jarl?"

"There is certainly an object out there, Cap." Luden's voice came through the speakers from where he crouched over the instruments in the laboratory. The delicate instruments connected to the web-like scanner mounted on the hull of the *Mordain*, a mesh which caught and relayed the very impact of atoms. "The Larvic-Shaw shows a definite spacial disturbance."

Kennedy turned to the instrument, noting the pattern of the lines on the screen of the detector, the way they flowed towards a common center.

Alone it meant little, the instrument could register the turmoil of invisible forces as well as the presence of solid matter, but coupled with the scanner, set to ignore any but pronounced signals, it was a definite sign. As was the visual register.

"Cap?"

"Full drive, Veem."

Kennedy stretched as Chemile obeyed, conscious of the fatigue which gripped him, the result of seemingly endless double-watches as they had driven deeper and deeper into the emptiness of inter-galactic space. A time of ceaseless checking, probing, listening to the sounds of space itself transmitted by the scanner and converted by electronic magic into audibility. A long time. Perhaps too long. Only time would tell.

"Do you think we got here first, Cap?" Chemile voiced the question in Kennedy's mind. "Kaifeng had a start. He could have beaten us to it."

"Maybe, Veem, but we had luck."

More than they had the right to expect. A mass of rock heavy with metals which had swept on its path into the area of the scanners. A false hope which had given them a vital clue. A chance which they had taken and which now appeared to have been successful. If what they saw on the screen was the vessel from Reyud.

"It fits the pattern, Cap," reported Luden as they drew closer, space eaten by the pulse of the engines. "A ship of the Pheelan Line. A converted freighter of the Beta Class. The mass checks out."

Chemile said, quietly, "How do we handle it, Cap? Torpedoes?"

"We'll decide later, Veem. Get us close and drift."

Chemile concentrated on the instruments, knowing the hesitation had nothing to do with Kennedy's reluctance to take innocent life. It was a thing he had to face, to accept from harsh necessity. The carriers posed a continual danger and it was not in Kennedy's nature to indulge himself in compromise. From the first he had known what had to be done and he was ready to do it. But first he had to make sure.

As the image, now clear, flickered to steady the *Mordain* dropped from plus-C velocity. He said, "Stand by for checking. Hold her steady, Veem. Penza, prepare a suit. Jarl, keep watch."

"One suit, Cap?" The giant's roar was a protest. "Fm coming with you."

"One suit, Penza. I can do what has to be done."

To check, to search every inch of the hull, to make certain that the people it had enclosed were still inside. And there were reasons for him to do it alone.

Luden guessed them. As Kennedy began to don the suit he said, quietly, "Cap, you're thinking of Kaifeng."

"He could be close, Jarl," Kennedy admitted. "If he hasn't already come and gone, then he could be on his way. We could be the first. If he'd taken the carriers he would have destroyed the ship. But he could have rigged up something, a bomb triggered with a proximity fuse. That's why I want you to take the *Mordain* away from the immediate area."

"Cap—"

"Do it, Jarl." Kennedy's tone precluded all argument. He had given a command—it would be obeyed. Sealing the helmet he said, "Checking. All receiving? Good. Maintain battle-alert."

The outer door of the vestibule closed behind him and, abruptly, he was alone in space. Alone in a sense he had never felt before.

Always there had been stars, a field of brightness, space filled with glowing light. Now there was nothing, just a pale gleam from the galaxies ahead, a skim of luminescence from the lenticular shape of the one they had left.

Dark, near-invisible, the bulk of the coffin-ship loomed before him as he jetted through space with the aid of a reaction pistol.

As he touched it, boots taking the impact, knees flexing like springs, the *Mordain* vanished. A fraction of a second of plus-C velocity and it was far beyond sight, drifting powerless and apparently dead in the void. Only Luden's voice over the helmet radio provided a touch of familiar warmth.

"Maneuver completed as ordered, Cap. Any sign of egress?"

"None as yet. Maintain watch, Jarl, and best to keep radio-silence. Use emergency-channel in case of need."

Kennedy glanced once at the awesome vista of dark emptiness, then concentrated on his task.

The vessel was big, the ports covered by plates welded to the hull, the entire structure converted into a solid mass. Inside would be water, stores, a mass of supplies. The inner bulkheads had been removed aside from those sealing the guidance computer and engines, and he wondered if the construction had been dictated by subconscious intent. If a meteor should rupture the hull, then the death the builders had been reluctant to give would come just the same.

A horrible, gasping, savage end. Capillaries broken, lungs rupturing, blood boiling from lack of external pressure. One of the ugly hazards of space.

Kennedy moved on. A circle of brilliance shone before him, light thrown from the lantern in his helmet, the patch showing a host of symbols, that of the skull and crossbones prominent among them. Warnings to any who might approach, the signs of death and terror culled from a dozen races, splotted in paint over the hull.

A hull, which, as far as he could see, was unbroken. He rechecked, jumping from the vessel to glide along its length, orbiting it at a distance of a hundred yards, returning to test the welded plates, to check the seams of the ports. Finding everything intact. A long, tedious examination but one which had to be done.

"Jarl, it's tight. Come and get me."

"Will do, Cap." Luden's voice changed, relief turning to anxiety. "Cap! Something's registering. A ship, I think, heading towards us."

Kaifeng!

Kennedy rapped, "Stay dead. Drift. No power, no radio, nothing."

Scanners would be alert, sensitive electronic equipment able to pick up the very flow of current, the eddies generated by communication, the use of the drive. Movement would be spotted. With luck the silent mass would pass unnoticed, the *Mordain* taken for a scrap of debris, even a swirl of natural energy.

Bleakly Luden stared at his instruments. Kaifeng would soon be close, his ship a sitting target for the armament carried aboard, the slim shapes of the atomic torpedoes, the large calibre srom cannon mounted in the turret, the heavy-duty Dione.

Weapons which could penetrate a defensive screen, could crush and penetrate a hull, sear the interior with exploding destruction, twist space itself with the released energy of bursting atoms.

But Kennedy was outside—the first to die if battle was joined.

Chapter EIGHT

It came with a ghostly shimmer of blue, a glinting veil of lambent radiance which flashed, to vanish, to reveal the mirror-finish of a ship of space.

Crouched against the mottled hull of the coffin-ship Kennedy watched it as it drew near, to slow, to hang suspended a few hundred yards from the drifting hulk.

A thing of odd plains and contours, vanes set in curves of eye-twisting irregularity, the swell of turrets set among the bulge of launchers, spines, which winked with a cold green luminosity. The vessel of Kaifeng.

Kennedy studied it with narrowed eyes, mentally cursing himself for having made a mistake, for not having taken an elementary precaution. He should have come with atomic bombs, charges which could have been detonated to destroy the ship, the carriers, Kaifeng himself. But he carried only the reaction pistol and a Dione. Pins with which to prick an elephant.

"Thok." The voice was familiar as it came from the speaker of the suit-radio. Kaifeng was using the normal communication channel unaware that he was being overheard. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, Master."

"Then proceed as ordered. Waste no time but make no error. Go!"

A port opened in a cubic extrusion of the vessel and a suited figure carrying a large bundle glided across the gap, the wink of a reaction pistol caught and reflected by the mirror-finish of the hull behind. Kennedy moved, cautiously easing around the curve of the hull against which he pressed as the figure came close, landed with a force which sent small vibrations through the metal.

For a moment the man stood poised and Kennedy could see the apparatus set around the waist, the metal strips which ran to helmet and boots. The radio carried the sound of breathing, a harsh inhalation, a

sighing exhalation and then a thin note which rose to dissolve in a high-pitched whine, rising to pass beyond the range of audibility.

As if he were made of smoke the man sank into the metal on which he stood, his feet, his legs, the waist and torso, the helmet, all vanishing as if a man of water had been poured on the surface of a sponge.

"Entry effected, Master." A report to which Kaifeng made no answer.

Thoughtfully Kennedy looked at the hovering vessel. With luck a torpedo from the *Mordain* could reach it, destroy the menace of its master once and for all time, but the spines still held the green luminosity. Scanners would be alert, screens established, evasive action taken at the first sign of movement.

The torpedoes were fast, but electronic-flows were faster. If the first shot missed or failed to destroy, then retaliatory action would be taken. A chance Kennedy would have taken had he been aboard, but while operational, the *Mordain* was at a disadvantage. With all equipment dead, even the drive still, precious seconds would be needed to establish full fighting efficiency. Seconds which could bring annihilation. A gamble with the odds too high against him. One Kennedy decided not to take.

"Master, I have established contact with those within. Two are dead. Of the remainder one is insane. Your orders?"

"Will the insane one move of his own volition?"

"No, master. He sits in the lotus position and his mind has left his body."

"Kill him," said Kaifeng coldly. "But not immediately. First pass over the other two, then do what needs to be done."

Again came the high-pitched whine from the radio, a shrilling which set Kennedy's teeth on edge. A humped bulk rose from the unbroken surface of the hull within feet of where he crouched. The man with the apparatus and a second figure, held close, wearing a standard space suit.

"What's happening?" Ryco Renvoise was startled. "Where are you taking me?"

"Do not be afraid, all will be well." Thok turned, gripped the other figure, threw it with a powerful sweep to where other suited figures hung before the open port of the cubical extrusion.

As he vanished again within the hull they caught the wheeling shape with skillfully thrown ropes, held it, passed it through the port.

Again the thin whine and this time Enri Kommenide was flung across space. As he was passed through the port the guards released the ropes and, moving to a point further down the hull, vanished into the vessel.

When next Thok appeared Kennedy was ready. He inched forward over the curve of the hull, watching the silhouette of the man as he stood against the mirror-finish of Kaifeng's vessel. A shadowed darkness which suddenly puffed into a ball. Air, released from within the suit, had expanded a thin, transparent membrane he had worn as an outer covering. A precaution against contamination by the extruded virus which lay within the coffin-ship.

As Kennedy moved closer it ripped open and gusted away, driven by the trapped air it had contained. As Thok turned to face the vessel, his knees flexing as he prepared to spring, Kennedy attacked.

He rose, an invisible shape against the blackness of inter-galactic space, gliding forward, the Dione lifted,

slamming down in a crushing blow to the spine, driving deep into a point just above the waist, the only vulnerable spot which would both kill and kill immediately.

Thok groaned, a dying exhalation which brought an immediate response.

"What is wrong?" Kaifeng's voice rang from the radio. "Thok, is all well?"

"Yes, master." Kennedy aped the dead man's voice.

"You groaned."

"No, master. It was the gusting of air from the released membrane."

A barely possible explanation. Transmitted vibration could have produced a similar sound, and one which apparently satisfied Kaifeng.

As the radio remained silent Kennedy gripped the dead man, moved him around the swell of the hull, and tore at the belt and metallic strips. They were held by an inner, adhesive coating and he set them into position on his own suit after adjusting the apparatus around his waist.

"Thok, you delay!"

"Coming, master."

A kick and Kennedy was drifting towards the enigmatic vessel. The port through which the men from the hulk had passed was now closed, but he had no wish to join them. There would be barriers, guards, and even their dead flesh would hold the lethal virus. The others had used a port along the hull and that too was sealed. Kennedy frowned. As Thok he would be expected to know what to do. A special entry, perhaps? He had been exposed to contamination and, even with the protection of the discarded membrane, he would still be a potential danger. The apparatus he wore must be valuable. If not Kaifeng would have left him; an expendable piece of flesh and blood machinery which could easily be replaced.

And it was simple to guess why the trans-dimensional apparatus had been used. To open the hull by conventional means would have meant constructing a bubble containing an air-lock. The hull would have had to be cut open. Air would have carried the danger of contamination to all the equipment, the men involved.

As it was, Kaifeng could leave the area and leave no sign of what he had done. Kaifeng who now possessed the most frightful weapon ever to have menaced the galaxy—one he would use without compunction to suit his ends. And Kennedy knew what those ends would be. The complete and utter domination of the universe.

The ship was close now and Kennedy studied it, setting design against function, using his trained knowledge to place the engine room, the power supply, the control center. With any normal ship he would have known exactly where everything was, but this vessel followed no known pattern. And yet some things must be familiar. There would have to be a drive and a source of power to operate it, controls to guide it, quarters in which to live, areas in which to work.

The reaction pistol kicked in his hand, the vessel seeming to move as he changed direction, ignoring the red lamp which now winked at a point on the hull, the entry signal of the port he was supposed to use. A third of the way from the rear, he decided. Below the mid-section line and just behind one of the turrets. A guess, but a shrewd one. About that point should lie the engine room.

He glanced down at the belt. A single switch stood from a smooth panel, thrown now to the right. One

switch which logic dictated had to be thrown to the left in order to establish the trans-dimensional field. As the shimmering hull came close Kennedy grasped it, watching the reflection in the mirror-finish, an oddly distorted shape pale in the reflected glow from the emerald-tipped spines.

A chance, but one which had to be taken. The only way he could hope to cripple the vessel. He threw the switch to the left.

Threw it—and bit his lips as a thin, rising note filled the helmet, his ears, thrusting red-hot irons of agony into his brain as it mounted, shrilling in ultrasonic, jarring his teeth, his bones.

Passing mercifully into a range beyond his hearing, vibrations which altered the dimensional phase of his being and turned every atom within the field it generated into a new kind of matter. One which could slip through the interstices of normal material.

The hull was close, was about to touch—and Kennedy passed through it as if it had been made of mist. For a brief second he felt a strange compression, an overall contraction, and then it had passed and he was drifting in a brilliantly-lit area in which men stood by the humped bulk of unfamiliar machines.

One saw him and lifted his face, his eyes wide in the blank visage. A human robot, his brain adjusted by Kaifeng, incapable of doing more than obey, knowing no other emotion than that of dedicated loyalty to his master.

Kennedy fired as he opened his mouth to shout a warning, the Dione levelled, aimed, the shaft of searing destruction a bolt of man-made lightning. A blast which should have crisped the hair, penetrated the skull, turned flesh and bone and brain into smoking ash.

But which did nothing of the kind. The Dione, now, was no more destructive than an ordinary flashlight. Its atoms had changed, the very energy it released that of a different order. Only the light was visible; the heat, the searing impact, all had no effect.

But, if Kennedy couldn't kill, he was equally invulnerable. A bar of metal slashed at his head, passed through the helmet and skull, the unimpeded force of the blow causing the man who had delivered it to spin and fall. Another, more shrewd or more careful, stabbed at Kennedy's chest with a glittering tool. It sank deep, harmless. Kennedy's own, instinctive return having no more effect, the heavy weight of the Dione passing through the shoulder instead of smashing the collar bone.

A trained reaction, but one he didn't repeat. As the men attacked he ignored them, throwing himself towards the deck and passing through the metal into a lower compartment. A workshop, partly assembled apparatus on benches, more men, more machines, but not the ones he wanted.

A door, locked, stood at the rear and he passed through it into a chamber lit by Kells, a wall covered with instruments, men who checked their readings, who turned as they saw him.

As he saw the bulk of a familiar engine. A hydride, one with adaptations, but there was no time to examine them. Kennedy moved towards it, passed through the outer casing, saw by means of an eerie light the massed wires and circuits of the interior. The light came from the components themselves, radioactivity or residual energy which had been transmuted by the drive itself into this other plane.

A waste product which lowered the efficiency—but Kennedy had no time to ponder the problem now. He moved on, drifting, seeing the carefully balanced equipment, the monitors which maintained optimum conditions, the feeds, the registers, finally spotting the very heart of the machine itself.

The thick vacuum chamber in which were held the triple coils. Coils which had to be kept at almost

perfect similarity. Three helixes, each set at right angles to the others, which held the power to break through time and space. Matched, fed with energy, they distorted the very fabric of the normal continuum, creating a paradox which could only be resolved by an extension into a hyper-region. Creating the hydride which had given men the stars.

Kennedy reached out and saw his hand pass through the sealing wall. If he could touch the coils, tear at them, distort their settings and ruin them: similarity, then the drive would be useless and the vessel immobilized. Turned into a sitting duck which the *Mordain* could attack with every weapon it possessed, turning the hull, the crew, the dreadful cargo it carried, Kaifeng himself into an incandescent cloud.

But his hand touched nothing, passing through the coil as if it were made of vacuum. And again came the strange, eerie compression. A result of penetrating solid matter or was the trans-dimensional field becoming unstable?

Kennedy had felt nothing when passing through the deck and bulkheads, nothing when first penetrating the machine. Only when passing through the hull and again now. Residual force, perhaps, affecting the delicate balance? If so his life hung on a thread. A move, an approach to the wrong point, and the field could collapse with a result he knew too well.

Kennedy turned, reaching for the reaction pistol he had thrust beneath the belt, withdrawing it and thrusting it into the vacuum chamber. It rested halfway within the metal shield and he left it there as, carefully, he backed from the machine.

He could only guess how far the field extended or how matter affected by it would remain stable once it had been withdrawn. A gamble, but one he had to take. There was no other way.

A potential bomb placed in the heart of the drive. Once it reverted to normal matter the coils would be wrecked. If he could get word to the *Mordain* the danger would be over, the threat to the galaxy removed.

Two words. *Jar!! Attack!*

The first for identification, the second a command.

A few feet more and it could be done. First he would have to collapse the field. If the Dione hadn't worked, then it was doubtful if the radio would, a chance he couldn't afford to take. The message had to get through. He would die—but he would take Kaifeng with him.

Light shone brightly before his helmet as he left the machine. Men stood around, watchful, helpless to touch him, to stop him. One step, another and his hand hit the switch.

"Jar—"

The shock wave of the explosion hit him like a club.

Chapter NINE

The place was a shambles. Kaifeng looked at the ruined engine, the gory smears on the walls, the pulped flesh of those who had stood too close, the broken bodies of those who lay like ragged dolls.

"Thok, the fool!" His voice was a cold abrasion. "He was warned! I warned him myself! For this he shall

pay with a thousand deaths!"

"If he is still alive, Doctor."

Like Kaifeng, Tsing, the others who had accompanied them, Zilma Narayan wore a thin, transparent membrane, a portion stiffened to act as a diaphragm, air fed from a small tank attached to her belt. A precaution. Thok had entered the hulk and, even though protected, had been exposed to the risk of contamination.

Kneeling, she gripped a shoulder of the lax figure and with unsuspected strength rolled it over onto its back.

Kaifeng turned at her sudden inhalation. "Is he dead?"

"I don't know—but this isn't Thok."

"Kennedy!" Kaifeng stared down at the unconscious figure, his face distorted into a mask of rage. Then the anger passed and his eyes narrowed with speculation. "Thok must be dead. "Tsing! Send men to check. Destroy the body if found."

"Master!" The squat man bowed and turned to relay the order.

"Kennedy," said Kaifeng again. "He took the trans-dimensional apparatus and used it to wreck the drive. His presence means that his vessel must be close." His voice rose a little as he rapped orders. "Full-alert on all sensors. Check at maximum ranges of detectors. I want every inch of space tested for electro-magnetic disturbance!"

The girl said, "If the ship is drifting it will be , almost impossible to find. The time-element is against us. If they choose to attack we are at a disadvantage now that the drive has been ruined." Without change of tone she added, "It was cleverly done, Doctor. Captain Kennedy has placed us in a trap."

"Perhaps, Zilma, but we have an advantage. Kennedy is in our hands." A thin, cruel smile curved the thin lips. "Take him from his suit, tend him. I think in this game we are playing the captain has given us the winning card."

She was quick to understand. "A hostage?"

"The best." Kaifeng turned, giving orders. "Clear this place. Flame-burn every inch. Remove the damaged portion of the engine *and* affect repairs. Speed is of prime necessity. Fit and use time-accelerator fields. Move!"

As men hurried to obey he said to the girl, "Isolate him until tests determine his condition. I think it is time to tell Kennedy's friends exactly what the position now is."

Chemile was at the controls when the call came. He called, sharply, "Jar! Penza! Someone is trying to make contact!"

With the *Mordain* drifting, electronically 'dead', only the screens remained operative. The incoming signal registered as a blink of red light on the communicator, the screen remaining dark.

As Chemile reached for the controls Luden said, quickly, "Reception only, Veem."

A touch and the screen became a wavering mass of color which cleared to reveal a hatefully familiar face.

"Kaifeng!" Saratov's rumble echoed through the compartment. "Is this some trick?"

"We shall soon find out," snapped Luden. "Now listen!"

Kaifeng had been speaking. Now he paused as if ending what he had said, his face, for a moment, immobile on the screen. Then he began again.

"I am calling the *Mordain*. If you receive me please respond. I have news of the greatest urgency. I am calling the *Mordain*. The matter is urgent. Please reply."

"Jarl?"

"We remain silent, Veem. Kaifeng cannot be sure we are in the vicinity. If we reply he will be certain."

"He could get a fix," said the giant. "He's trying to lead us into a trap."

"I am calling the *Mordain*," said Kaifeng again, evenly. "I am aware that the ship must be in the vicinity. Can you hear me, Professor Luden? You, Veem Chemile? Perhaps you, Penza Saratov, will have the courtesy to reply. No? Why do you hesitate? Have you no longer any interest in your companion?"

The image wavered, steadied to reveal, not Kaifeng, but Kennedy. He lay on a smooth floor, stripped, his body showing the trace of blood and bruises, his head lax, his eyes closed.

"Jarl! That devil's got Cap!" Saratov glared at the screen. "Is he dead?"

"Wait!" Kaifeng was speaking again. "Let us hear what he has to say."

"So you choose not to reply," he said. "Such childish behaviour, but it does not matter. I know that you must be receiving me. Professor Luden, I assume that when Captain Kennedy is not aboard you are in command. I will address you as such. I give you an ultimatum. As you can see I have Kennedy in my possession. At the moment he is alive though unconscious. However, unless you surrender your vessel to me I cannot guarantee his continued well-being. I am sure that you understand what I mean."

The cold voice paused as if waiting for an answer.

"Still no response? Perhaps you require time in which to think. I will give you time. Also let me add this, Professor. Surrender your vessel to me and I guarantee that you will all be set down alive and uninjured on a civilized world. You know the alternative."

The screen blinked, steadied to the visage of Kaifeng's face, the speakers transmitting familiar words.

"I am calling the *Mordain*. If you receive me please—"

Luden cut the connection. "A recording," he said. "It will tell us nothing new."

"It's told us enough!" Saratov looked down at his hands. They were clenched, trembling. "Cap's a prisoner and we know what Kaifeng is capable of! Jarl, we've got to rescue him!"

Quietly Luden said, "How?"

"We go in, tear the guts out of that ship, get—"

"Yes, Penza," said Luden as the giant fell silent. "Get Cap killed by the very weapons we use to rescue him. A straightforward frontal attack is out of the question and, to be frank, I can see no way at this time to effect his release. But we have other things to consider. What if Kaifeng has managed to obtain the carriers?" A question to which they all knew the answer.

"He's got to be stopped," said Chemile bleakly. "Stopped no matter what the cost."

"I can get out there," said the giant. "Use one of the torpedoes with an adjusted hydrive. I can weld holding rings to the body and rig up some kind of external controls. There's a chance I won't be spotted."

"No, Penza."

"We can't just sit here, Jarl. Cap's in trouble and needs us. Let me try it. I can get close, cut the drive and coast. The torp could be used as a diversion and I could, maybe, get up close while they're dealing with it. I'll take a lastorch and burn a way through the hull. Once inside—" He broke off, his hands signalling his intention, his face his determination. Again Luden shook his head.

"It wouldn't work, Penza," he said gently. "They'd spot the drive as soon as it was activated. Within seconds they would have plotted the course, backtracked and loosed a flood of hydrive missiles. We won't help Cap by getting ourselves destroyed. Kaifeng could have been trying to spur us into just that kind of action. We shall disappoint him."

"But we have to do something!"

"True, but action without purpose is wasted effort." Luden reached out and touched the communicator control. The screen again showed Kennedy's limp figure, the face masked with blood. "Concussion," he mused. "Cap shows the classic external symptoms of a man who has been subjected to the impact of a violent force. A form of explosion, perhaps. It must have happened with extreme suddenness or he would have contacted us on the special channel."

"Talk," snapped Chemile as the screen died. "Talk when we should be acting. Jarl, is there nothing we can do?"

Luden frowned, thinking, his coldly analytical mind assessing the situation. Rescue was out of the question; Kennedy was held in a sealed vessel, ringed with guards and detectors, weapons which would prevent any close contact. To bargain for his life would mean to let Kaifeng change his prisoner for the *Mordain*— and Luden had no illusion that the man would keep his word. Plans then had to be based on the necessity of ensuring that Kaifeng must not escape.

The *Mordain* drifted between the hulk and the galactic lens, lying on the route which Kaifeng would naturally take if he headed directly towards the clustered stars, the habitated worlds which were his prey. A fact which gave them an advantage.

A screen of fragmented torpedoes could be sown in a pattern covering a wide area of space, a mass of jagged debris into which the other ship would run. Their defenses would be occupied, the screens loaded to a point which strained their capacity, and any normal attack made at such a time would have a good chance of succeeding.

A normal attack, but Luden needed certainty, not merely a high probability of success. Complete and total elimination of the threat which Kaifeng presented.

An object which could be achieved by an attack backed by the *Mordain* itself; using the vessel as a guided missile, its mass too great to be diverted by the enemy screens, its energy too vast to be dissipated.

Both ships to dissolve in mutual destruction. To spread their volatized mass in a glowing cloud of lambent fury, a scintillating brilliance which, in later times, might even be seen by an astronomer on Earth. A fitting pyre for Kennedy's end.

"Jarl?" Saratov had seen the tensing of the lined features, the firm thinning of the lips. "Something on your mind?"

"A Viking funeral, Penza. You wouldn't understand." The giant surprised him.

"The warrior on his bier," he said softly. "A dog at his feet. Faithful followers at his side. A ship which is fired to sail, burning, towards the setting sun. To sink beneath the waves on its final journey. Yes, Jarl, I understand."

"We have the ship," said Chemile quietly. "Kaifeng will be the dog. Do you think it will come to that, Jarl?"

If it did there would be no hesitation. Men who would willingly tread on molten steel in order to save Kennedy's life would not flinch from following him into death.

"We have to prepare for any emergency," said Luden with his usual, thin precision. "Anticipate any eventuality. But there could be factors of which we are as yet unaware. For example I am puzzled about why Kaifeng, if he has obtained the carriers, has not already left the area. There seems to be no logical reason why he should linger. Perhaps Cap is responsible; from the available evidence we know that he is within Kaifeng's vessel and he may have managed to perform some act of sabotage."

"Wrecked the drive maybe," said Chemile excitedly. "Turned Kaifeng into a sitting duck. That could be why he called. To stop us from launching an attack."

"It is a possibility which has not escaped my attention," said Luden. "In which case we can do little harm by waiting as long as we remain fully alert. Penza, fit the armament into an attack-defense programming. Full automatic control. If Kaifeng's vessel should make the slightest movement, the *Mordain* is to become fully operational. I'll set up the computer."

"We don't need that, Jarl." Chemile, confident of his prowess, gestured at the screens, the tiny images they carried. "I can handle things."

"You have eyes, Veem," snapped Luden. "You blink. In that fraction of a second of time action might need to be taken. Check and report on the exact apparent size of Kaifeng's vessel together with its precise position in relation to the *Mordain*."

Lines appeared on the screen as Chemile obeyed, thin strands of color which closed to embrace the tiny image, figures appearing on the bottom of the screen. Luden copied them, fed them into the computer, checking with other data obtained from the external scanner. A third check verified the first two and then, satisfied, he set up the computer program.

If Kaifeng's vessel should move, change apparent size, the *Mordain* would immediately become battle-alert, engaging full drive and heading towards the target, launching frag-torps, following them with others bearing atomic warheads, self-propelled missiles, the Dione blasting a storm of destructive fury as the ship swept on a suicidal collision course.

A program which could be negated at a word. A word which might never be given, but Luden never set into motion machinery he couldn't control, and a sonic trigger could be activated from any position in the vessel.

He tested it three times and then there was nothing more to do. Nothing but wait. Wait and hope that, somehow, Kennedy would manage to survive.

Chapter Ten

There was pain and a whispering voice, the stench of something acrid, the lifting of ebon clouds.

"You will obey, Cap. You will obey!"

A soft voice which seemed to come from the far end of a long tunnel. A persuasive command repeated until it became a drone, the impact of a soft hammer against the naked surface of his brain.

"You will obey! You want to obey!"

Kennedy stirred, feeling the grate of bone in his chest, the stab of knives into his lungs. His head throbbed and his mouth held a foul taste. Bright flashes danced across his vision, retinal images of red and green and lancing silver.

"You will obey! You want to obey!"

The voice, nearer now, closely intimate, accompanied by another wave of the pungent stench, an acidity which caught at the delicate membranes of his nostrils, but lifted the clouds from his brain.

Cautiously he opened his eyes. They parted a mere fraction, the pupils constricting to the impact of brilliance, light which showed a glinting ceiling of green plastic, inset panels glowing with a cold luminescence, a silhouette of a head and shoulders, a face he recognized.

"You will obey!" said Zilma Narayan again. "You want to obey!"

Hypnotic conditioning augmented by drugs which must have been fired into his bloodstream, a command which, repeated often enough, would normally be followed.

But not by him. Kennedy closed his eyes, knowing that his awareness had not been observed. The conditioning he was receiving would have no impression against the earlier, far more intensive treatment he had been given long ago. Mental training and deep-rooted barriers which made him proof against all questioning and conditioning.

No Free Acting Terran Envoy could be made to tell—unless he consciously agreed to cooperate. None could be turned into a willing slave.

Kennedy heard the sharp intake of breath signalling impatience, the touch of fingers on his throat, a thumb which lifted the lid of an eye. He rolled it upwards, revealing only the white, but the girl, medically trained, was not deluded.

"You are conscious," she said. "Continue to pretend and you will regret it."

She wore a tunic of emerald touched with scarlet bright with the gemmed insignia of a double helix. It fell low over her hips, slit at the sides to reveal pants of matching color, their tops thrust into high boots of gleaming ebon. The mass of her hair was lifted into an ornate crest which rose high above her rounded skull. The light caught her face, accentuating the concavity of her cheeks, the limpid elongation of her eyes.

He said, "Zilma Narayan. So we meet again."

"Thanks to fate, Cap." She stressed the word. "For the second time."

The third—but she didn't know that. Couldn't know that he had seen her when first she had woken in the casket in which she had grown. A creature bred from selected genes by Kaifeng's warped genius; her development speeded by the time-acceleration fields he had developed. A lovely woman springing fully grown from the artificial amniotic womb, her mind no more developed than that of a newly born baby.

Her eyes had been dull then, blank windows in an empty house. Kennedy's face had been the first sight she had seen, the sound of his name the first word she had known. Facts which gave him an advantage in their relationship. One he had no compunction about using.

"Zilma," he said softly. "Zilma."

He saw the frown, the sudden shifting of the eyes, an expression covered by a question.

"How do you feel?"

"Terrible."

"That is to be expected. You suffered a concussion together with three broken ribs and extensive bruising of the limbs and stomach. The lungs, however, are undamaged aside from minor tears in the protective membrane. There was also minor superficial hemorrhaging. Here." The pungent stench assailed his nostrils as she held out a vial. "Inhale. It will help to ease your discomfort."

Obediently he inhaled, feeling the pounding in his temples diminish a little. Casually she said, "Cap, tell me, where is your ship?"

"The *Mordain!* His eyes were innocent of guile as they met hers. "I don't know."

"But it is close?"

"Yes," he admitted. "It is close."

Harmless answers to questions of which she must know the answer—it was obvious that the *Mordain* must be somewhere in the vicinity. But if he could persuade her that the attempt to instill a desire to obey had succeeded, then another advantage would have been gained. A thin hope, but the bond between them, one she failed to realize, dulled the acuteness of her suspicions as far as he was concerned.

A biological syndrome which caused a new-born animal to regard the first living thing it saw as its natural protector. And Kennedy had been the first living thing she had consciously seen.

He sat upright, fighting a sudden wave of nausea, lowering his head until the sickness passed. He was lying on a couch covered in green plastic, the surface indented a little beneath his weight. Aside from shorts he was totally nude.

His chest, his thighs and arms, the rigid muscles of his stomach were purple with bruises.

"Be careful," she warned as he swung his legs over the edge of the couch. "It takes time for the sealing compound I injected to take effect. Any sudden exertion will cause the broken ribs to part and, perhaps, lacerate your lungs."

"Thank you for the warning, Doctor. Your concern is gratifying."

"A matter of expediency," she said coldly. "Alive and fit you can be of use."

The room spun as he stood upright and he staggered, catching her as he almost fell, his hands closing on her shoulders, feeling the liteness of her figure, the soft yielding of her flesh. For a moment their faces

were only inches apart. With a slight motion he could have kissed her and, almost, it seemed as if she were waiting for him to do just that. Then, with an abrupt movement, she had stepped back away from his arms.

"You touched me," she said. "Never do that again."

"An accident—"

"One which must not be repeated." She stood facing him, her breasts rising beneath the tunic, falling to the pattern of her breathing. "I haven't forgotten the last time you touched me. You knocked me out. I could have died in the barrage which followed for all you cared."

"That was on Epidoris." He was deliberately casual, not wanting her to recall the incident, to remember that a previous attempt at hypnotizing him had failed. "I had other things to think about. My life for one."

"Your life!" She turned, took two steps, turned again to stand with her back against the wall. The door, he noted, was beside her, a narrow panel in the wall. "Why waste it, Cap? Why don't you agree to work with Kaifeng? With him you could climb high, become the ruler of a system, a cluster of worlds. An entire sector of space would acknowledge you as a superior being. And think of what you could accomplish. Men to do your bidding, to delve into nature's secrets. A thousand men, a million, set to solve any problem you wished. That is power, Cap. Real power."

"One law," he said flatly. "One order. One man to dictate. And that man to be Kaifeng."

"Why not if he is the strongest?"

The simple creed of those who believed that might equated with right. That the victor had proved his superiority by vanquishing all opposition. There were many to support such an attitude—men who would be willing to bow before Kaifeng and share his power and glory in his reign.

If they were the ones to decide and administer the law. The ones to decide the order. To live high while others starved. Earth had been cursed by such men for too long.

Other worlds were still cursed with them. They were the bane of Terran Control. Men who had to be contained, eliminated if the need arose, destroyed like the savage predators they were.

Kennedy said, "You make it sound an attractive proposition."

"It is." She took one step towards him, her eyes calculating as they searched his face, his body. "You are strong and the strong should rule. It is their right, their destiny. Why be hampered by the stupid morality of the weak? Kaifeng will win in the end. Why not join him now and share in his triumph. To stand beside him, beside me."

"A partnership. And the price?"

"To obey." Her voice hardened a little. "And, one way or another, Cap, you will obey."

"A threat?"

"Not of death—a brave man does not fear to die. But all men fear the distortion of their flesh. And, I assure you, I am a highly competent surgeon. You will not die, Cap, but you will never again want to look in a mirror."

She meant it and, looking at her, Kennedy felt a sudden anger, the instinctive reaction to a threat against

his survival. A quick move and she would be dead, her neck broken by the impact of his hand, vital organs crushed by the stabbing impact of his fingers. He could do it, would do it if the need was imperative, despite his reluctance to destroy beauty of any kind.

He controlled his rage. The girl was not wholly to blame. Any person could be conditioned and Kaifeng was a master of the art. He had taken her, moulded her, warped her feminine inclinations. Taught her that to be gentle was to be weak. To show consideration was to betray a lack of will. That to disobey was to die.

To kill her would serve no good purpose, but had Kaifeng stood where she stood now he would have died. Even though Kennedy died with him. Died to end the menace he presented.

Kennedy turned, leaned against the edge of the couch, his head lowered, his breathing harsh.

"What is wrong?"

"Nothing. A giddiness—" He broke off, shaking his head as if to clear it. "I'll be all right in a moment."

A move to gain time, to think and plan. In this room with the girl he was helpless. He needed information as to the lay-out of the vessel, the stationing of the guards. Details which could help to formulate a plan of escape, or, at least, to summon the *Mordain* to come in for the kill.

"Here!" He smelt the pungent stench again, the vapor which filled his nostrils. "Do not breathe too deeply. I warned you about your ribs." Fingers touched his throat, his skin. "No fever, but that was to be expected. You rose too fast—some nausea is inevitable."

With head lowered he examined the room. It was bare but for the couch and he must have been carried here after receiving treatment. There would be guards within call, probably watching.

He sagged a little then straightened, breathing in shallow gasps, no mean act this. The torn membranes filled his chest with fire.

"Sorry," he said. "I guess that I'm weaker than I thought."

"You were lucky not to have died in the explosion. Only your suit saved you."

"How long—"

"That need not concern you." Her interruption was curt. "Your only need is to obey."

"Obey?" His frown was puzzled as if something was troubling him. "Of course," he murmured. "I want to obey."

"Then call your ship."

"Ship?"

"The *Mordain*. I will take you to a communicator and you will order your crew to surrender the vessel. I need not tell you what will happen if you refuse. And a warning, Cap. Guards will attend us. If you try anything foolish they will act."

They stood outside the door in a narrow passage, two blank-faced men, their dull tunics adorned with the insignia of the double helix in yellow. Each carried a short tube tipped with the glint of a lens. Electronic whips which could project invisible forces capable of searing nerve and muscle with agony and cramp.

Suitable weapons for the interior of a ship where the blast of a Dione could do more damage than intended.

They fell into step behind Kennedy as the girl led the way. The passage was flanked with doors, sealed, the entrance to cabins, he guessed. A larger compartment held kitchen equipment. A corridor opened on an area thronged with suited men.

Kennedy slowed, watching, noting the cabinets in which the suits were held, the vestibule of the air-lock which closed on a group of figures, lights flashing as it went through its cycle. Men passing outside to work on what?

The guards came close, one thrusting with the short tube, the impact sending a wave of pain through bruised flesh. A pain Kennedy accentuated as he staggered, gasping.

"Be careful!" Zilma Narayan turned, her eyes bleak. Then, to Kennedy she said, "Do not linger. The guards have their orders."

"Those men leaving the ship?"

"Have their orders also."

A blank answer giving no information, but other things could be learned. Kennedy saw a door, guarded, a film of blue luminescence flickering over the metal of the bulkhead. The visible sign of a time-accelerator field. Behind it men would be working at a speeded tempo doing ten hours work in one, aging as fast by reason of Kaifeng's electronic wizardry.

The field must enclose the engine room and they would be repairing the drive he had ruined. Another fact to be noted and stored with the rest.

"Here!" The girl halted before a panel. As it opened Kennedy could see the gleam of massed apparatus, the blank sheen of a communicator screen. "Now you will order the *Mordain* to surrender."

"We can use the ship. With it we can penetrate any defenses. It is known and you are trusted. Your crew will come to no harm."

A lie. As soon as the *Mordain* was spotted it would be blasted from space — Kaifeng would take no chances on a last-second suicidal attack.

As the guards ushered Kennedy towards the screen the girl operated the controls to activate the instrument.

"Now!"

Kennedy halted, his mind racing. It could be a trap to test his assimilation of the hypnotic conditioning, or a means to record his face and words. Unless the *Mordain* responded he would have no way of knowing if the transmission was genuine.

He could order an attack—and immediately betray his true intentions. A betrayal which would mean his death, a fact he was willing to accept if he could only be certain the message had gotten through. Or he could pretend to cooperate in which case a later message, doctored as to content, would be sent.

"Why do you hesitate?" The girl was impatient. "Call your ship and order its crew to surrender. Guards!"

Kennedy sagged. His head lowered, his breath a ragged gasping, his knees folding to send him crashing

to the deck. And, lying, he willed himself to take on the appearance of a man in extremis.

His heart slowed, his breathing became shallow, his skin took on a waxy tint, a clammy tautness. His eyes became glazed, then hidden behind his closing lids. The natural result of a man who had suffered shock and physical damage, who had risen too soon, and had tried to do too much.

A pretence made possible by his mastery of the Clume Discipline which gave him control over involuntary functions. The fakirs of old had shown the way, they and the devotees of yoga who had gained the power to halt their heart-beat at will, to control the flow of blood, to close wounds, to be buried alive for incredible periods of time. To sit naked in a blizzard and suffer no hurt. To walk on fire. To convince medical practitioners that they had actually died. To demonstrate the depth and power of their art.

Mental control incorporated into the Clume Discipline which Kennedy had learned over arduous years of rigorous training.

As if from a far distance he heard the girl's exclamation, sensed rather than felt her kneel at his side, her fingers touching, probing. Her voice as she rose was tense with urgency.

"Quickly! Take him to the infirmary!"

Hands gripped and lifted, the pad of running feet a dull sussuration accented by the stabs of agony from the broken ribs, agony which Kennedy absorbed, diffused, diminished into a barely perceptible ache.

He felt the touch of something cold beneath his body as he was placed on a couch, the impact of instruments, the touch of a hypogun as it blasted drugs into his bloodstream. He increased his concentration, feeling a growing detachment as he called on the Ghengach System of Disorientation to divorce his senses from immediate reality.

His heart slowed even more, long pauses between beats, his respiration halted. When the girl lifted his eyelids, he was blind.

Blind and deaf, not feeling the sting of the slender probe she thrust under his nails into the quick. Not hearing her sharp inhalation. Not seeing her tense expression, the anxiety in her eyes, the final acceptance of defeat.

Chapter ELEVEN

On a wall an instrument clicked, an audible warning that something had been spotted and registered somewhere in the void. Kaifeng glanced at it, checked the finding on a second scanner, spoke sharply to the man seated at the consol.

"That is the third time we have picked up that nexus of forces. Adjust your panel to be more selective."

"Yes, master."

A touch and it was done, but the immediate obedience did little to soothe Kaifeng's impatience. Again he set up figures on the computer, his agile mind questing, guessing, thoughts flashing as he isolated relevant factors.

The *Mordain* had to be somewhere in the vicinity. It had delivered Kennedy to the coffin-ship and had

left when his own vessel approached. It would not have gone far, but far enough to be visually undetectable. Only the sensors could spot it and they had to be aimed in exactly the right direction. But which was that?

If it lay on a point within a thousand miles distance it could be anywhere in four billion cubic miles of space. And it would be further out than that, a million miles at least, or the sensors would have spotted it.

If they had answered his call the electronic emission would have betrayed them, but as it was, drifting dead, perhaps against the background 'noise' of the galactic lens, the ship was invisible. And he was a clearly defined target.

A mistake, but one now impossible to rectify, and who would have guessed that Kennedy would have reached the hulk first? Makkofaides had been to blame for that and had paid with his life for his error.

"Any luck, Doctor?" Zilma Narayan had entered the compartment. She looked drawn, overtense. "Have you spotted them yet?"

"No." Kaifeng stared at the screens filled with the empty darkness of inter-galactic space, one bright with the spiral shape of the lens. "An invidious position," he murmured. "Until we repair the drive we cannot move and, when we do, the *Mordain* will attack. It is a logical development and I do not underestimate its destructive power. Neither do I underestimate the intelligence of its crew. The only thing which has saved us so far is our possession of Kennedy. While we hold him they will cling to the hope that he may be rescued."

She said, dully, "We should have bargained for a trade. Kennedy in return for freedom to depart."

"With the carriers?" Kaifeng shook his head. "They would never have agreed."

"We could have left them. Given them together with Kennedy."

"And missed such an opportunity? You are thinking strangely, Zilma. I hold the key to galactic rule and you talk of throwing it away."

"No," she corrected. "We could have given them the carriers but we could have retained control of levive. Some of the crew could have been infected."

Kaifeng said, coldly, "What has happened to your intelligence, Zilma? The incubation period of the disease is short and we have a long voyage ahead of us. Some of the crew could be spared, that is true, and their corpses could have been frozen. We could even with the right equipment manage to produce a culture of the virus, but the risks would be too great. It is better to leave the carriers where they are in complete isolation."

"But—"

"You dare to argue!" Kaifeng's thin tones became harsh. "Have you not yet learned that, in all things, I must be obeyed?"

"I have learned, Doctor Wei." Her own voice was equally harsh. "Learned in ways I prefer not to remember. But your teaching did not diminish my intelligence. We had a way out and you did not take it. My position at your side entitles me to ask why."

"Your position entitles you to nothing! You are what I have made you, Zilma, and as I made you so I can break you!"

"Yes, Doctor."

"You humble yourself, that is wise. I will brook no opposition to my will." Kaifeng glanced at the wall where an instrument had clicked. "Report?"

"An electro-gravitic eddy, master. One of a high potential. You wish me to adjust the panel?"

"No." The loss of too large a margin of sensitivity would defeat the object of the search. "Note and incorporate into the filter."

"Yes, master."

"You ask why I insist on retaining the carriers," said Kaifeng to the girl. He spoke with his usual, cold detachment. "Think and you will have the answer. They are self-operating units which are able to move at will towards specified targets. They can be used again and again. They are able to prevent accidental contamination by the use of membranes and barrier-creams which you will devise. They provide only a minimum hazard and they are obedient." Pausing he added, "And they are willing to cooperate. You doubt that? Then look, listen and learn."

A screen glowed to life to reveal the images of two men. Ryco Renvoise was drinking wine. Lifting his glass he said, thickly, "Here's to a long and happy life."

"Happy?" Enri Kommenide's wasn't so sure. "You believe everything Kaifeng says?"

"I don't have to believe it. I just go on the facts. He took us from that coffin, didn't he? He gave us food and wine and some decent clothing. And he took care of Makkofaides." His voice hardened, became ugly. "That swine set us adrift, remember? Locked us in a hulk without even a port to show the stars. Left us to sweat. Well, now he's had it. Long live Kaifeng!"

He was more than a little drunk.

Kommenide said, "Slow down on the drinking, Ryco. We should keep clear heads."

"For what? We aren't going anywhere."

"No." Kommenide looked at the confines of their new home. Bleak metal walls devoid of any decoration. A bare floor. Two cots. A communicator. A pile of canned foods containing built-in heating elements. Wine—gallons of wine.

A port through which they had been passed and which was now firmly sealed. The entire compartment was smaller than the rooms they had used for sleeping. The room in which Audrey had died.

"You're thinking of the girl," said Renvoise. "Poor Audrey Cahalin. Had she waited she would be here with us, but she didn't wait. Maybe it's just as well."

"That's enough!"

"You don't like me talking about her? Fair enough, we'll forget her. There'll be other girls, lots of them. Once we hit a decent planet I'm going to have some fun. I've earned it, by God, and I'm going to get it." Renvoise helped himself to more wine. "You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to cut a swathe through high society, that's what, a binge that will be remembered. Drink, food, girls, you name it and I'm going to get it."

"You'll be remembered," said Kommenide grimly. "Once levive starts to show."

"So what?" Renvoise tilted the bottle, swore when he found it empty. "Pass me more wine, friend. Let's have a party. Let's drink a toast to Kaifeng—the master!"

"Take it easy."

"Shut your mouth!" For a moment they glared at each other and then, shrugging, Renvoise said, "You're weak, Enri. Audrey took all your spine. What the hell do you care if we spread levice? Those people you're worried about, did they give a damn what happened to us? Shut us up and fired us into space like a bunch of mangy dogs. Condemned without a trial, sentenced to a living hell, and for what? For having the luck to stay alive. We did no wrong."

"You volunteered."

"Sure I did," agreed Renvoise. "If you can call it that. A Dione in the guts and behave or be dead. I figured that if I stayed alive there'd be a chance. They could have found a vaccine or something, cured us in some way so that we could rejoin the human race. But you know where we were headed. Right into the empty dark. They didn't want us back. They had no intention of finding a cure. All they wanted was to protect themselves."

"You've changed," said Kommenide. "You didn't talk like this back on the ship."

"I've changed," agreed Renvoise. "But it's been a long time coming. When Audrey let me know what she thought of me—the damned, stuck-up bitch! And what's with you, Enri? Still want to play the hero? Listen, only one man's tried to help us, Kaifeng. For my money he's the tops. What he says, I'll do. And you?"

Kommenide looked at the glass in his hand, the wine which filled it. Wine containing insidious drugs to rot his moral convictions, but he didn't know that. "Hell, yes," he said. "Why not?"

"Animals!" Zilma Narayan reached out and switched off the screen. "Mindless beasts. But I agree, Doctor, they are amiable."

"As you hoped Kennedy would be. Did your plan succeed?"

She said, flatly, "He's dead."

"Dead?" A muscle twitched high on Kaifeng's cheek. "What happened?"

"He agreed to cooperate. I revived him and we spoke for awhile and then I led him to the communications room. He must have been weaker than I thought. Before he could order the *Mordain* to surrender he collapsed."

"Without cause?"

"He'd staggered a couple of times but seemed to recover. One of the guards pushed him—it may have had some effect."

"And?"

"I had him taken to the infirmary. He did not respond to drugs and was obviously in a terminal condition. When I could detect no heartbeat I left."

"A most unusual man," said Kaifeng. "One I would have liked to win to my side. A pity that you failed, Zilma, but I had little hope that you would succeed. Simple hypnotism would never have worked with

Kennedy as the past should have taught you."

"He agreed to cooperate."

"In which case he probably intended to delude you."

"His collapse and symptoms were genuine. I swear to it."

Her voice betrayed her. Kaifeng said, sharply, "You feel a sense of regret? Of loss? A bond which has dissolved?"

"No, Doctor." She drew a deep breath. "But, as you said, he was a most unusual man. A perfect specimen of male humanity. You knew him well?"

"We had something in common, a planet we both visited, a test we both passed. And Kennedy was the only man I have ever met who could not be broken by the application of pain. He must have had a remarkable control over his nervous system." Kaifeng paused then asked, coldly, "Are you certain that he is dead?"

"I—"

"You listened to his heart, but did you mutilate the body? No? What made you so careless? Was it that you had a reluctance to disfigure a body you found attractive? Zilma, if you have—"

Kaifeng broke off as an instrument clicked. At the consol the man said, "Master, a strong register. It is possible the object of search has been found. We have located the *Mordain!*"

Chapter TWELVE

Kennedy stirred, moving slowly, conscious of the pulse of blood, the returning awareness of his body. The pain of broken ribs was a mounting ache, an ache which turned into little spears of agony. He ignored it, opening his eyes, seeing a room of pastel green, the shine of instruments, a cabinet which held drugs and medications.

From somewhere came little sounds, the pad of feet, a click as of metal touching glass, a soft rustle of clothing.

Something passed by at the edge of his vision to halt at a bench. A man wearing a green hospital robe. An orderly who was tidying up and who had no reason to fear the man on the operating table whom he thought to be dead.

Kennedy waited, listening. The orderly was alone. If guards were near they would be in the passage outside. The orderly, then, and he must be silenced immediately.

Cautiously Kennedy moved a little, freezing as the man turned to cross the room, waiting until the pad of feet came near again, rising to strike as the orderly came into view.

A hard blow, delivered with the full force of back and shoulder, the stiffened edge of his palm striking like a blunted axe at the junction of neck and shoulder.

A hard blow—but not hard enough.

It had landed in the wrong place, breaking the collar bone, but leaving the man still conscious. He staggered, turning, his eyes wide as Kennedy swung from the table to strike again. He felt pain sear his chest as the spine snapped beneath his stiffened hand. As the orderly fell Kennedy coughed. The effort, the awkward angle of the initial attack, had completed the separation of the broken ribs.

The robe was of fine fabric and Kennedy ripped it into strips, crude bandages which he wound around his torso to hold the shattered ribs in place. He tightened them, his teeth bared, a snarl which fought the pain. A cabinet held a second robe and he donned it. Casually he opened the door.

The guard outside stood with his back against the opposite wall, at a point a little to the right of the opened door. The movement caught his attention and he stared, watchful, catching a glimpse of a familiar robe, a hand which beckoned. "What is it?"

"Here!" Kennedy slurred his voice, remembering Thok, the way he had spoken. "Come quickly! The master calls!"

"My station—"

"A moment. Defy the master if you dare!" Obedience to Kaifeng, once ingrained, could never be denied. And the adjustment which had been done to the man's mind left him little self-volition. An order had been given—and none would dare to impersonate the master.

Kennedy struck as the guard entered the compartment, closing the door and stooping over the dead man to remove his clothing. The uniform was a little tight, but the material stretched and would serve. The short tube had a sliding button set close to the grip which could be operated with a thumb. Kennedy tested it, seeing a ruby glow illuminate the lens. The range would be short, a matter of feet, but failing anything else it would have to do.

Outside he turned left down the passage, retracing the path along which he had been carried. He moved purposefully, his face blank, the tube held loosely in his hand.

The vestibule area was still busy with men passing through the lock, bulky in their suits. A pair of guards stood before the cabinets, one turning to look at Kennedy with a dull stare.

He passed on, his mind busy. If he could get a suit and leave the vessel it would be an escape of a kind but one without purpose. He would still have to reach the *Mordain* and nothing would have been accomplished. If he could find the trans-dimensional belt and use it again, perhaps he could reach the power source. Once destroyed the ship would be helpless.

But, whatever he decided, would have to be done quickly. His luck couldn't last for long.

He tensed as the lights flared red. Three times the ruby wash of color replaced the cold whiteness and the sound of running feet echoed loud from the metal deck and bulkheads.

An alarm, and Kennedy could guess what it meant. Either the ship was about to be attacked or something had been located in space and was about to be a target.

The Mordain?

Kennedy paused as he reached a narrow door. It was open, a man about to climb into a chair, screens and controls making a familiar pattern. The place was a gun turret, soon to be sealed. As the door began to close he lunged forward, the tube lifted, the lens glowing as his thumb thrust the slide as far as it would go.

Off balance, about to sit, the man writhed, seeming to double in mid-air, screaming as he jerked in savage convulsions, his head slamming against the side of the turret.

Kennedy thrust the unconscious figure aside and wedged himself into the seat. On the screens a fleck showed, a ringed sight centered on a point to one side. As he touched the controls it moved.

"Attention!" The voice came from a speaker. "One missile from turret 3. Ranging fuse. Metallic proximity. Load!"

Kennedy glanced at the figure painted above the screens. The instructions were for him or for the gunner he had replaced.

"Turret 3. Report!"

"Missile set and loaded," lied Kennedy.

He checked the instruments, found familiar controls, adjusted them to null-fuse and null-proximity.

"Fire!"

Kennedy pressed the release. From a launcher the missile leapt into space, winking immediately out of sight under the thrust of its hydride, aimed at a point well to one side of the fleck. It would continue to infinity, the warhead harmless, the proximity fuse non-operational. If by some chance Kaifeng had spotted the *Mordain* it would have a little more grace.

And there had to be a doubt. Natural forces could have registered, the fleck on the screen was a visual simulation, not an actual relayed image. If the missile did not detonate then the logical conclusion would be that it had neither hit nor approached anything solidly metallic.

But why had Kaifeng ordered his ship to open fire? Kennedy frowned as he thought about it. Logically it made little sense. An attack would invite immediate retaliation. A gamble, he decided. With himself a hostage the *Mordain* might wait just that fraction of a second too long. If the single missile had hit, damage would have been caused and the fighting potential lessened.

Unless the point of aim had been deliberately wrong. A feint to lull the *Mordain* into a false sense of security. If Kaifeng thought that then he was a fool— and Kennedy knew he wasn't that.

A mystery to add to the other; the reason the men had left the vessel, were still leaving it. A working party, obviously, but doing what?

The gunner groaned, stirred a little, fell back with a sigh. Kennedy eased himself from the chair and pulled the lax figure into it. The door opened and he left the turret heading now for the communications room. Too much time had been lost and a new element added. At all costs the *Mordain* must be warned and ordered to attack.

The door was closed. Kennedy knocked, waited, knocked again. As he heard the click of the latch he pushed, slamming the panel back into the face of the man who had opened it, seeing him fall back, half-stunned, blood gushing from his broken nose.

A second man fell beneath the electronic whip, his shrieks a horrible cacophony. The third man was already in the air.

He had lunged forward, head first, quicker or more determined than the others. The whip caught him, knotted his muscles, filled the air with his screams—but did nothing to halt his flight.

Like a living missile he crashed into Kennedy, throwing him back to hit the jamb of the door, one shoulder gouging into his chest, smashing back the broken ribs.

Fighting a tide of pain Kennedy threw up his knee and drove it into the man's face as he fell, the heel slamming down on the exposed temple. A stride and the other two fell silent.

He headed towards the communicator, activating the instrument, swallowing to clear his throat.

And, as he watched, the screen died. Cut off from a master panel somewhere. A guard, alerted by the screams, taking action. A monitor who would have already given the alarm.

Kennedy lurched from the room, staggering, hitting the side of the passage, his vision edged with darkness. Grimly he shook his head, fighting for mastery. His hand was wet with blood and he wiped it in order to obtain a better grip on the tube. Somewhere there had to be other weapons, sprong pistols, Diones. If he was to die then he'd go out fighting.

A moment he gave himself and then walked on. Back into familiar regions, down the passage which led to the guarded door, the blue shimmer of radiance which was the product of Kaifeng's genius. To the time-accelerator field behind which men worked on the drive. The machine he intended to destroy.

To a figure which suddenly appeared before him, to halt and stare with startled, violet eyes.

"Cap! You! But how—"

Zilma Narayan and a chance which Kennedy took. He lunged forward, reaching, his hands closing on her arms, his arms wrapping around her body, holding her fast. The end of the lensed tube dug into the soft flesh of her side.

"Call off your dogs," he snapped. "Do it or I'll teach you the meaning of pain!"

"There are no guards." A fact he hadn't noticed.

"How is it that you are alive?" she demanded. "You were dead, I swore to it and—"

"Kaifeng believed you?"

"At first, yes. Then when he learned that I hadn't—" She broke off, then said, "You are hurt. There is blood on your mouth, your hands. Unless you receive medical aid quickly the results could be most serious. It is obvious that at least one lung has been punctured."

"What aid? The kind that, once received, will never be forgotten?"

"Not if you agree to cooperate." Glancing down at the tube she added, "Whatever you intend you can't hope to get away with it. Surely you realize that?"

"That's my worry. Why are you here?" The tube dug deeper. "Answer!"

"We spotted something and fired a ranging missile. The results were negative. Then I thought about— well, I wanted to return to the infirmary. I wanted— does it matter?"

"It matters," he said grimly. "Everything does, but it touches me to know that you wanted to hold a wake."

Kennedy glanced to either side. As yet the corridor was empty, but guards could arrive at any moment. A door stood ajar close by, giving on a small room fitted with a desk, a chair, files filled with papers. A

minor office for the compilation of stores and supplies, he guessed. That or for keeping the records of personnel.

It was deserted and he ushered the girl inside, kicking shut the door. "If anyone knocks tell them that you are alone and are not to be disturbed," he ordered. "If you try to act the heroine I'll use this." Again he pressed against her with the tube. "You know what it can do. Cooperate if you don't want to know the meaning of pain."

"I know the meaning of pain," she said bleakly. "I had an expert to teach me."

Kaifeng who used pain as another man would use a verbal goad. Kennedy wondered what her early days had been like, locked in an acceleration field, perhaps. Her brain filled with a flood of information, facts and skills impressed on the virgin surface.

And there would have been pain to drive those lessons home. More pain to act as a spur. Yet more to provide a warning.

Kennedy said, "Where are the carriers?"

"In a cubical extension attached by electro-magnetic force to the ship." She moved a little in his arms, her voice calm, musical. "You want to know about them? How willing they are to spread levice? How much they hate those who condemned them? The one who set the course of the hulk is dead. Shall I tell you how Makkofaides died?"

She was talking too much, volunteering unwanted information and Kennedy could guess why. It would be only a matter of time before he collapsed and, when he did, there would be no deception. He fought the desire to cough, swallowed instead, tasting his own blood.

"The trans-dimensional apparatus—where is it?"

"In the engine room together with the suit you wore. But if you intend to use it I must warn you that the risk is great. The essential component is decaying by molecular disruption caused by the actual generation of the field." Again she moved in his arms, softly warm, strongly feminine. As he winced she said, quickly, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. Cap, why don't you let—"

She broke off as a knock came from the door. Before she could speak it opened to reveal a man with a gun.

Chapter THIRTEEN

He was a guard, the weapon he held a small-caliber srom pistol—both fell as Kennedy aimed the tube and rammed his thumb hard on the slide. The pistol made a small clatter, the sound lost in the scream of agony torn from the man's lungs. A scream which died as Kennedy stepped forward, the toe of his boot bringing merciful oblivion.

The room spun as he straightened from picking up the weapon. The girl ignored him, staring at the guard, her eyes blazing with anger.

"The fool! He—"

"Come on," said Kennedy. "It's time we moved."

Incredibly the passage was empty. He had expected guards, men to be cowed by the threat of injury to the girl, but there was nothing. Even the door limned with blue luminescence was deserted, a fact which troubled Kennedy with the sense that there was something wrong. The door had been guarded, should be guarded—why wasn't it?

"Cap?"

He was leaning on the girl, using her as a crutch, conscious of his own, growing weakness. There was no time to waste on speculation, nothing he could do now but press on.

"We go through the door," he said. "Open it." He stood close as she operated the wheel-lock, stepping forward as the panel swung inwards, the tube in one hand, the sprong pistol in the other. Inside Kells threw a shadowless brilliance over the humped bulk of the drive, the cluster of men who stood about it. Technicians who stared as Kennedy slammed shut the door.

"Move!" He gestured with the electronic whip. "Over to that side. Hurry!"

He thumbed the button. The range was long, but they felt the sting and moved quickly to obey.

"Lie face down. Put your hands over your heads. Zilma, where is the suit and belt?" He followed her pointing hand, saw the bulk and gleam of the equipment. "Good. Now join the others."

"Cap!"

"Do as I say!" He lifted the sprong pistol, fighting the weakness which threatened to overwhelm him. "Do it, damn you!"

He was at the suit before she had settled, putting aside the weapons as he struggled into the metal and fabric. The helmet closed, air whispering from the tanks. The belt locked around his waist and, tucking the tube and pistol behind it, Kennedy rested his hand on the switch.

The drive or power source? The drive was nearest and it would serve. He would generate the field, enter into the body of the machine and then throw the switch. The reaction pistol had created havoc. The mass of his body materializing within the drive would cause an explosion which would shatter the vessel and send Kaifeng and his minions screaming into hell.

"Cap!" The girl had turned, was rising from the floor, her face strained, her eyes wide. "Cap! Don't—"

Kennedy threw the switch.

For a moment he wondered if the apparatus would work, then he heard the thin, familiar note, the rising, high-pitched scream which jarred his bones and vibrated his teeth. He began to sink, his feet buried in the metal of the floor, and he kicked in an effort to gain motion and direction. Slowly he rose and drifted towards the bulk of the drive. Slowly ... slowly....

And then, suddenly, it had vanished and he was in space. The transition had been so abrupt that it took a moment for impressions to register. The constriction, a blur of images, the shrilling, falling whine which denoted the collapse of the field.

The whine and the hatefully familiar voice which came from the suit-radio. Kaifeng!

"A neat plan and a worthy revenge, Captain, as I'm sure you will agree. There is no need for you to answer. Your transmitter is not operating. And I am using a special channel which cannot be overheard. I will give you a moment to appreciate the situation."

The unguarded door, the meek obedience, the suit and apparatus so conveniently to hand. The cooperation of the girl, young, lithe and healthy she could have fought more than she had.

Over the tang of blood Kennedy tasted the bitterness of defeat. He had walked into a trap and now it had snapped shut behind him.

He turned, twisting, ignoring the savage pain which tore at his lungs, pain which filled his vision with a tide of red. Kaifeng's vessel was a hundred yards distant, the screens dying as he watched, green shimmers fading, the mirror-finish showing now only the scant light of inter-galactic space. Ghost images which wavered as he watched.

He hadn't moved but the ship had. Jerking away from him, sending his dematerialized body into the void, the field collapsing to leave him drifting, helpless, alone.

"You could have been killed at any time, Captain, but I preferred not to risk injury to the girl. And this solution appealed to me." Kaifeng was coldly amused. "To allow you to think that you were about to defeat me. You defeat *Me!* Perhaps you think there is still a chance. That the *Mordain* will avenge you. If so you are unduly optimistic. I am aware that the vessel must now be operating on automatic-control programming, and it is most probable that the trigger is set to operate if and when my vessel leaves this area. But sensors can be confused and deluded—and no machine can hope to match the resources of an intelligent mind. And so, Captain, I leave you to spend what is left of your life appreciating my solution to an awkward problem."

The twist Kennedy had given himself had caused him to spin as he drifted in space so that the bulk of Kaifeng's vessel and the bulk of the coffin-ship passed across his vision. One after the other, the fading dimness of the mirrored hull followed by the bleak hulk with its painted symbols. Symbols which were occluded in places by the hump of assembled apparatus. And then, oddly, both vessels appeared alike. But not identical.

Kaifeng's vessel was barely visible as it moved into the empty dark while, behind it, the similar image glowed with shimmering luminescence. An illusion created by the apparatus he had seen, the equipment set up by the working party. A decoy created to delude the *Mordain*.

The sensors would concentrate on the greatest area of electronic radiation and Kennedy knew that Kaifeng would have set the illusion to emit at his own, previous level. And, while the *Mordain* waited, confident that he had not moved, Kaifeng would be making good his escape.

Driving deep into inter-galactic space with the carriers and the threat they presented to the galaxy. The vile death which he would take to peaceful worlds.

Kennedy tore the electronic whip from beneath the belt and threw it with calculated deliberation. The reaction sent him drifting slowly towards the disguised hulk, the bubble of illusion reaching up to engulf him, to close above in a shimmering curtain as he landed on the hull.

The apparatus set up by the working party had been welded to the plates, thick strands of insulated metal weaving a complex pattern, the glinting alloy clear beneath its transparent covering. Kennedy checked, finding the strands firmly fastened, impossible to move with unaided hands. The power-source was buried behind a strong casing, the access hatch held with a weld.

And there were other things. Packages which had no apparent purpose, shapes of metal which he recognized as housed torpedoes, others which would spray a hail of self-propelled missiles.

The hulk had been turned into something more than an illusion—it was a death-trap for any vessel which

ventured close, the explosives fitted with proximity fuses which would blow at the approach of a heavy mass of metal.

If the *Mordain* should come in to investigate it would run into a hail of destruction. Kaifeng's insurance against the astronomically small possibility of Kennedy being rescued.

He coughed, listening to the whisper of air, guessing that the tank had been depleted. He could wait helplessly to die of internal bleeding or asphyxiation. He could attempt in some way to signal to the *Mordain*—hopeless without a radio, but in the remote possibility that he could wreck the illusion-making device it might come to investigate.

On all counts it seemed that Kaifeng had won. But Kennedy had two things, the trans-dimensional apparatus and the srom pistol. The one had been tampered with, the other was an unanticipated bonus from the guard who had made a mistake. A fact clear now from the girl's anger at his appearance.

Two things, and a third which outweighed them both. The mind and determination which Kennedy possessed. The brain with the trained skills, the iron resolve never to surrender.

He sat, leaning back against the bulk of the power-source, his hands shaking a little as he removed the belt. The light was bad, the shimmering screen causing deluding reflections, and the gloves didn't help, but finally he managed to open the cased apparatus. Inside lay a mass of circuitry and a thin, fragile scrap of metal. The essential component which made the device possible.

Lifting it close to his face-plate Kennedy studied it. The switch had been fitted with a radio-controlled throw-out. He removed the delicate installation, pausing often to regain his strength, the control of his hands, conscious of the sweat which now drenched his body, the fever which burned his skin.

A normal fever caused by the shock of the initial explosion, the internal damage, the strain of pretending to be dead, the more recent exertions. Fever which stung his eyes with perspiration, added to the discomfort, the pain of his lacerated lung.

And time was running out. Kaifeng's ship, though moving slowly, would soon be completely lost in the vast emptiness.

Kennedy checked the belt, holding open a contact as he tested the switch, trying to guess how long the field would last. Not long, he decided. The fragment of essential metal was wafer thin, corroded in points and showing holes. Closing the case he belted it around his waist and checked the srom pistol.

It held ten charges, small caliber, but each missile held compacted energy. Energy which would vent itself in explosive flame at impact. Rising he moved down the hull to where a humped mass held the proximity fuses.

They were protected, sealed behind a locked panel, held in delicate electronic balance. A balance which he could distort by careless manipulation. But, before he could reach them, he had first to open the panel.

Grouching he studied the lock. It was a simple ward and he picked it with a length of twisted wire, material he had taken from the discarded radio-control. Then, as he straightened, the whisper of air in his helmet ceased.

Kennedy bent his knees, gauged his position and kicked, turning as he rose from the hulk, one hand on the switch at his belt, the other lifting with the srom pistol. He fired, seeing the first shots miss, correcting his aim, sending the rest of the load into the open panel, bright flashes searing the fuse-settings, ripping, destroying the safety-checks, triggering the massed destruction.

He closed the switch just in time. Hell-fire blossomed from the hulk, gouts of flame blasting into space, the illusion-screen vanishing, fragments of metal driving towards him, through him, solid matter and radiated energy alike unable to harm his dematerialized body.

Only the brightness remained, a vivid coruscation of writhing color, red and green and lambent yellow blended into the savage, blue-white glare which expanded to fill the entire region, to beat through the helmet, his closed eyelids, the fabric of the suit itself.

And then it was over. Kennedy spinning as he hurtled through space, driven by the very impact of the light itself. The light which had died as if it had been the flame of a snuffed out candle.

His hand dropped, felt for the switch, touched heat, metal which burned through the fabric of the glove. Quickly he tore the belt from around his waist as the field collapsed, hurling it from him as it fused, glowed, began to burn with ten times the brilliance of incandescent magnesium.

A light which attracted the *Mordain*.

Chapter FOURTEEN

Saratov was the one who rescued him, cradling the suited figure in his thick arms as he carried it through the port, watching anxiously as Luden made a quick examination.

"Jarl, will he live?"

Kennedy stirred, conscious of the others, the missing suit, the touch of gentle hands.

"Kaifeng!" He tried to rise, blinking, seeing blurred shapes. "Jarl? Penza?"

"Here, Cap." The giant's voice was a low rumble. "We're both here. Veem's at the controls."

"Heading where?" Kennedy sat upright, fighting the desire to retch. "Kaifeng's out there somewhere. We've got to find him. Jarl—"

"You're badly hurt, Cap. Those broken ribs have caused serious internal damage. You need intensive treatment."

The truth, but it would have to wait. "Shoot me full of XX321, Jarl," Kennedy ordered. The blanket antibiotics and pain killers would have to hold him for awhile. "Penza, get to the engines. We need every erg of power you can supply. Full sensor-coverage at maximum intensity. Aim at a direct line from the galaxy through the hulk and engage top velocity."

The hulk or the point where the hulk had been. Now there was nothing aside from a diminishing pattern of energy, but Kaifeng had headed away from it and he would have wanted to retain his cover for as long as possible.

Drugged, his torso wrapped with bandages, Kennedy examined the instruments with sore eyes. The lids were blistered. The savage explosion of radiant energy had ebbed into the trans-dimensional field which had been on the point of collapse.

"Kaifeng's ship is fast, Cap," said Chemile dubiously. "We've tried to chase it before and always lost out."

"That was when he had a fully functional drive, Veem. He hasn't got it now. It takes time to set up a tuning pattern for the coils. My guess is that he's operating on only about sixty percent of efficiency."

A hope, but more than that. Knowledge based on inescapable facts. Even now Kaifeng's technicians would be working to regain optimum working, but even with the aid of time-acceleration fields it wouldn't be either easy or fast.

"Cap!" Kennedy shook his head as he heard the voice which seemed to come from a vast distance.

"Cap," said Chemile again. "You look terrible. For God's sake get some treatment before it's too late."

"Kaifeng—"

"We'll catch him if he can be caught," said Chemile grimly. "Go and rest, Cap, or I'll have Penza carry you into the infirmary."

A threat he would have carried out, one against which Kennedy was in no condition to argue. With the detectors set on automatic Luden attended to his patient, his seamed face anxious as he checked his findings.

"You've lost a lot of blood, Cap. I can replace it, but it's like pouring water into a sieve until we can repair those internal injuries. That means surgery."

"Later, Jarl."

"It can't wait too long," warned Luden. "Those injuries are extensive and you're only human."

Human and weak with the inherent limitations of flesh, soft internal organs beneath the toughened muscle and sinew developed by rigorous training. Human—but as stubborn as any member of his race.

"Kaifeng has the carriers," reminded Kennedy. "This is the only chance we'll have of getting him before he puts them to work. We've got to take it. We've got to keep looking."

"For how long?"

"For as long as it takes." Kennedy met Luden's eyes. "No matter what happens we keep looking. That's an order."

One Saratov didn't like. "It could take days, Jarl, weeks. We could never find Kaifeng and what's going to happen to Cap?" His big hands clenched as he thought about it. "He'll die," he said bitterly. "Damn Kaifeng! If I could only get my hands on that devil he'd never trouble anyone again!"

"A determination we all share, Penza," said Luden thinly. His tone was brittle, betraying his anxiety. "Yet I agree with Cap. The menace of the carriers must be ended if at all possible. Ended no matter what the cost. We could be fortunate and find the ship before very long."

"And if we don't?"

"Then we must prepare for the worst. I'll assemble a life-support apparatus. You had better prepare a cryogenic cabinet. Together they should be able to maintain Cap's life until we can reach other aid."

"Why don't you operate, Jarl?"

"Because I only have knowledge, Penza, not experienced skill. If all else fails I will, naturally, do my best, but it would be better to freeze Cap and let others tackle the job."

Saratov frowned, unconvinced.

"A surgeon is very much like a mechanic, Penza," said Luden quietly. "Would you let me dismantle and reassemble the engines? No, of course you wouldn't. Now you know why I'd rather not have to operate on Cap. One slip, one error—and the damage is extensive."

And the guilt unending if he were to fail. Saratov understood and shared the other's concern. If men were made of steel and metal circuitry, delicate instruments and cunning fabrications, he might be able to help. As it was there was little he could do.

"How is he now, Jarl?"

"Sleeping, I hope. I gave him a strong sedative. If nothing else it should give him mental ease."

Should, but didn't. Kennedy drifted in an uneasy doze, a region tormented by dreams and vagrant images; the face of Kaifeng, the lips wreathed in a cold smile, the shocked expression of dying guards, the concern of the girl who had stood so close.

A beautiful face with eyes glinting with unshed tears, a voice which echoed down the hollow tunnel of memory.

"Cap! Don't—"

A warning? A change of heart as she had seen him prepare to go to what she thought would be certain death? Could any creature fashioned by Kaifeng know the meaning of mercy, of regret?

More images, a blur of scenes, alien environments, a montage of incidents, a voice speaking without emotion.

"... originally a native of Phuket with an extremely high intelligence. A genius, but one warped by his overwhelming ambition. A determination so intense that it has become an aberration. He will not, cannot, rest until he is acknowledged to be the superior of every living thing. Inevitably he will always be at war with established authority and any regime which does not accept him as the total and absolute master. An ego-drive which, coupled with his undoubted ability, makes him the most dangerous man in the entire galaxy and ..."

Luden's voice, repeating things said long ago, a trick of the mind which had cojoined separate sections of time. Time?

Kennedy stirred, rising from sleep, jerking awake as another voice echoed over the blare of the alarms.

"We've found him! We've spotted Kaifeng!"

Chemile who gestured at the screens as Kennedy entered the control room. "There! See?"

A tiny fleck which grew even as he watched. Mass registered by the sensors and translated into visual terms.

Luden said, sharply, "Cap, return to the infirmary."

"Later."

"Now!" Luden was insistent. "What do you hope to do? Man the controls? The guns? You could collapse at any time and what then?" If engaged in combat, the ruin of the *Mordain* and the death of all it contained.

Kennedy said, "You're right, Jarl. I'll take over the life-support and damage control. You'd best take over the guns. Watch for missiles and frag-torps, Veem. Kaifeng will send us a welcome."

The *Mordain* jerked as he headed towards the lower compartment, a gush of radiance passing close, the vaporized bulk of a missile which had been too large to be diverted by the screens, the ship taking automatic evasive action.

It jerked again as Kennedy took up Luden's normal station and, in the monitor screens, he could see space alive with darting energy.

"Ready the torpedoes, Jarl. Frags set for wide dispersal. Lay down a barrage-curtain. Fire on five. Mark!"

Five seconds in which to align the *Mordain*, to hold, to dart away as the slender shapes lanced from their tubes. To swing and approach from another direction, to sting and away again. A wasp intent on destruction.

Explosions flowered around the distant vessel, the blue-white glare of atomics, the crimson smears of frag-torps sowing their lethal rain, a shimmer of blazing radiance around the vessel itself as the screens labored to divert and absorb missiles and energy.

The answering fire bathed the *Mordain* in flame. The hull rang like a bell as something smashed against it, the very air crackling with electronic energy as the screens blazed. On the consol before Kennedy meters kicked and tell-tales flashed their warning.

"Compartment 17 holed and sealed. Screen weakening. Feedback from external forces." His voice was a painful rasp as he made the report. "Power drain from burned conduit in section 3."

"Compensated," boomed Saratov. "Get him, Veem!"

"Hold!" Kennedy stared at the monitors. At a point on the enemy vessel a green ball of fire shone as it swelled. "Veem! Evade!"

The screens blurred as Chemile obeyed, the space where they would have been roiling with a mass of green luminosity. The bolt which had been shot from Kaifeng's vessel seeming to warp the very fabric of space itself. Another followed it. A third.

The *Mordain* spun, caught in a vortex of incredible power, turning end over end, the hull creaking, lights dimming, air gusting from a ruptured compartment.

"Damage?"

Luden's voice, but Kennedy couldn't answer. He sat slumped in his chair, his eyes closed.

"Penza, see to Cap." Luden's voice was sharp as Chemile regained control. "Veem, Kaifeng is getting away."

"Not for long. Get ready with the guns, Jarl. This time we'll get him." A puzzled note replaced the former confidence. "Jarl! What's happening? Their ship is splitting into two!"

A natural error, on the screens a single fleck had become a pair, two dots which rapidly separated. Luden frowned as he studied them.

"Jarl!" Saratov's voice was strained. "Cap's in a bad way. Unconscious." He added, grimly, "That

damned shaking must have torn him open inside."

"Take him to the infirmary, Penza. Veem, continue the attack."

"Against which target?" Chemile was baffled. "What the hell is Kaifeng playing at?"

A game which had come from a savage land. To throw a slave to predators which came too close. To provide a distraction in order to gain time to escape. Kaifeng had abandoned the carriers.

"Check mass and aim for the smaller." Luden tensed at the guns. "I'll fire when close."

Atomic fury which would blast the container and all it contained from the universe. To end the menace of the invisible invaders which had come from the unknown regions of the empty dark.

As the blue-white glare dissipated Chemile said, "And Kaifeng, Jarl? Do we still chase him?"

For a moment Luden hesitated, then made his decision.

"No, Veem. Head for the galaxy. For the nearest civilized world."

Kennedy needed help—Kaifeng could wait.