

Chapter One

The girl moaned again and Channen ran from Control. He halted anxiously at the bedside, looking down, hating what-ever had hurt her. Base had positively stated that the system was uninhabited; Base had been *wrong* - wrong enough for tragedy to have struck twice already. His fingers found the pulse at her wrist, a slow beating. She was still in coma, her cheeks twitching involuntarily now and then. Pallor lay on her features. He heard a noise behind him and glanced round quickly.

Broad and tall in the doorway stood Andri, the taciturn Frenchman with a dire secret. Below close-cropped hair thinned by suffering, his plaintive eyes grew sadder than usual. 'The little one is near death, yes?'

Van Channen nodded, silent. Once more the hatred burned in him and then words came in a bitter flood. 'Only a bloody child, Andri! Just a fortnight in space and she gets *this!*' He tried to force fluid into her mouth; it dribbled from rigid lips, staining her unblemished chin. 'Futile! No food for five days. She can't last much longer.' He wiped the mess from her pretty face as Andri grunted agreement.

'Life is cruel, *mon ami*. As cruel as death, I think.'

Channen scowled. Philosophy was okay in its place. Right now it was wasted and a clue to the source of the problem would be a greater help. He kept his voice steady, crushing the resentment. 'Remember the Company's pre-flight report? No indigenous intelligence, no danger? Well, here's proof to the contrary!' An alarm buzzer cut in and Andri turned. 'That's me.' Warning-tones announced an alert on three distinct levels: low for the Eye, almost ultrasonic for the Ear, medium for the Feeler. Andri was the Feeler. He left the sick-bay and Channen heard him hurry to his post and slip into the tacto-gloves. He didn't shout, so it couldn't be too serious for him to handle alone.

After smoothing the sheets Channen passed on to the other invalid, a youth of eighteen. He'd been out for two days and taken no sustenance. Channen pondered on the two stabs of fierce mental energy that had incapacitated the trainees, knocked them from normality to crumpled heaps in an instant. He'd felt them himself, hostile proddings in his head, straining for a way to shatter consciousness. Every-body else had sensed them too, but their less-susceptible minds hadn't broken at the shock. A slight stumble in mid-stride, a gasp in mid-word, that was all. Then they'd attempted desperately to revive the victims, in vain.

He hoped the situation wouldn't deteriorate but knew with his near-infallible intuition that it would. An intensified blast and the more experienced men and women of the crew might go under - perhaps including him, the toughest and most resilient of them all. His exceptional brain was rare among humans and unique on EG 13, but that didn't make it completely invulnerable.

He dried cold sweat from the girl's brow and spoke grimly to her oblivion. 'Fifteen years old, poor kid! And you'll never live to see sixteen!'

The probe moved rapidly but not noticeably across star-pricked blackness, a fleck in immensity. Its shape was spheri-cal, a dull-grey ball surrounded by distant shinings and the unavoidable cosmic dark. Of its ten external appendages only two were in action, a pair of elongated, triple-jointed slivers of metal obeying commands transmitted through Andri's tacto-gloves. Each arm terminated in some type of device: a welder, a cutting-torch, a rivet-gun. Those in the Feeler's control laboured busily at sealing a tiny meteor-hole reported by one of the myriad perceptor-cells.

In gold lettering blazed the name of the vessel's owners: FAR SEARCH, GANYMEDE. Beneath showed its identity code: EG13, Explorer Globe 13. EG13 - a single probe out of hundreds operated by dozens of companies all over the charted Universe - followed a pre-set, unchangeable trajec-tory around the nine-planet system of a large blue sun appearing as a mere number even on recent maps. Far Search searched far.

Its path had circled the three outer worlds and would push on remorselessly into a further six orbits before curling away from the system altogether. In the event of an appar-ently worthwhile find, a small

scout-ship touched down on the particular planet to verify or deny the accuracy of readings, then lifted-off and caught up with the station at the most convenient point. Later the Company's vast exploitation-ships would thunder in carrying the heavy gear: mining-equipment, huge drills, mobile processing-plants. Another planet the poorer for man's constant quest after natural resources or fresh culture.

EG13's chances of escaping an unforeseen collision were slim. It bore minimal means of independent propulsion, just a few modest thrust-motors for emergencies. A major obstacle couldn't be circumnavigated. Communications with Base or other Company globes were unreliable out here. Often contact failed utterly and messages became lost in the void. Then the probe would be on its own totally, beyond help until the next ship arrived with reliefs. EG13's fresh crew was expected in eleven weeks. This was standard.

Andri's metallic extension-arms tucked in against the vessel's surface.

It sped on, sweeping towards the fourth world in the inflexible search-pattern - opportunity number four of making a lucrative discovery in a supposedly uninhabited, supposedly safe system which had proved itself obviously and tragically to be neither.

Andri worked awkwardly, seated, repairing the meteor-hole. He bent low over a screen, studying the progress of the appendages. The tacto-gloves inside his panel buried muscular arms to the elbows. Sensitised cups on the finger-tips translated digital movements into corresponding motions by the slender external structures. A bend of *his* joints, and *theirs* bent also. Fractional foot-pressure on the correct pedal, and they twisted along a second plane, at right-angles, impossible for a human. His thumbs could flash instructions to the two clumsy plating and grappling machines outside.

A red light died and the burst was sealed.

He settled both extensions into rest-position and shrugged off the gloves. Arduously he entered every detail of the incident on to the log-tape and it chattered from sight. Clean paper awaited subsequent data. *'Finis.'* Unseen, the tape flickered into a specially strengthened compartment in the most secure section of the station. The design and construction should ensure its survival though EG13 itself exploded. The repository of information could be collected eventually by a Company ship summoned by automatic beam. People were expendable. Facts weren't.

Channen, coming into Control, tried not to think about Andri's cloudy past. Only he and the Frenchman knew of it since it was a secret best kept close. He watched as the Feeler wandered away. The lined face smiled and he was gone. A door hissed shut behind him.

A below-average Feeler, thought Channen - hardly surprising considering the circumstances under which he'd been drafted into the business. In solitude he contemplated his own official post on the probe: Integrator, the correlator of all reports from Eye, Feeler and Ear - leader of the group, decision-maker with absolute authority. Sometimes angry clashes ensued, but his powerful personality normally quelled conflicts to his satisfaction. He didn't enthuse over the job but it paid well.

The Integrator was always a six-senser like Channen, a man or woman with extraordinary though limited cerebral abilities. Occasionally an emanation from outside eluded the sophisticated instrumentation and impinged solely on a finely tuned brain. Most of his time he spent sitting in deep meditation, *feeling* the system in a manner more subtle than that of any Feeler - keenly examining the vicinity, infrequently catching a/brief glimmer from it, an inexplicable vibration that could bring life instead of destruction.

He sighed. Four or five more trips and he'd surrender his licence. Many of his colleagues had chided him playfully for his lazy, sedentary existence, yet an Integrator's work was *hard*. After a while it drained people and sucked the vitality out of them. He harboured vague dreams of home-steading on a verdant colony-planet: a good woman, a family, tranquillity, fewer worries.

Looking around, he lamented the scant living-space in EG 13. Doors led to an inadequate recreation-room and the stores. Beyond lay a kitchen with a voluminous freezer containing a year's supply of food-concentrates and various drinks. The two sexes slept in separate dormitories, cramped. Keek curled up on the floor anywhere. Isolated, the sick-bay held its two occupants in their gradual decline towards death. Control was located in the centre of the station, and that comprised the total for occupation.

Between the inner and outer skins machinery hummed and clicked in ceaseless toil, scanning, diligently recording the most trivial of phenomena. Alarms called the sensors urgently whenever anything non-routine occurred or appeared.

That's EG13, mused Channen, a steel ball at the mercy of the Universe.

He'd served on scores of other probes, some better, some worse. At least this one was habitable in a spartan fashion. Anyway, he was stuck with it till the reliefs arrived, a prisoner. He wondered if the irony of that had ever struck Andri.

Abruptly he stopped self-sympathising. He'd signed on with his eyes open. Far Search had bought exclusive exploration and extraction rights and he had to go where they sent him. The Companies purchased legality and their employees did as they were told. If young trainees could bear it, so could he. He switched off the train of thought sharply.

For relaxation he toyed with ideas from widespread space-lore, the legends and the lies and the gossip of his trade: whispers of mythical creatures out past the boundaries of the charted places, idle talk of anti-matter galaxies and the Wandering Worlds. Imagination or reality? Fact or fiction? He didn't know what to believe.

He thought of the vessel's success-potential on the present mission. A find to make the Company bounce with joy as it counted fabulous sums of money? Or a complete blank, a wasted journey? It would be bad if the teenagers had to die for nothing. It was bad that they should die at all, but no medication had so far alleviated their condition. He couldn't discount the possibility of the attacks increasing in regularity and potency, slashing even the inured veterans into helplessness.

Somewhere in the system lurked vicious aliens who shouldn't be there. EG13 *should* have been alone, but it wasn't. Ganymede Base had erred, perhaps stupidly enough to kill seven people and Keek. Van Channen closed his eyes as though in a profound trance, feeling about for signs of additional anomalies. Suddenly he sensed one, imminent. Something was coming. It came in the form of a disturbing low buzz, an Eye-alert.

Ruthe Ogan frowned at the alarm and struggled to her feet. She glared unveiled distaste at the human and the non-human in the rec-room, then lumbered ponderously across the metal floor and entered Control. Channen grimaced as he looked at Her ugliness: wide, mannish shoulders, big sagging breasts, crinkly grey hair and a face etched hideously by a lifetime of cynicism and spite. Religious fanaticism smouldered in her crazed eyes. Nobody liked her, but he had to admit that she was a reasonably good Eye - superior to EG13's Feeler, though not in the same class as its excellent, beautiful Ear.

Ruthe lowered her tired sixty-three years on to the un-padded, uncomfortable seat. In front of her a large screen revealed space, a black background of infinity with solid scatterings. He sensed-trickles of wild zeal from her mind as she marvelled at God's glorious Creation. As always, her chronic melancholy lifted at the splendour. Channen grinned and thought her a fool, morose and moody except for times such as this. She actually *enjoyed* alarms because they put her in touch with the outer scene, the divine masterpiece. More than once he'd found her staring at the stars even during non-alert periods and blanked the screen on her. She'd aimed vile abomination at him — too horrible for him to miss, probably violent enough for a mere five-senser to be aware of it — and stumped away to brood until the next alarm. He grinned again.

A red bulb shone importunately in the Eye-booth, but he didn't bother to go over. Ogan would call him if necessary. A boy of seventeen hurried in, presumably from the dormitory, and watched her every move: a trainee on his initial flight, learning from an experienced Eye. Channen hoped he wouldn't be polluted by her traits, just learn the job. He wondered how the lad felt, knowing that both his fellow-apprentices were laid on the edge of extinction by mysterious comas. It seemed virtually certain he'd be the third to be similarly affected, which might be for the best. The station couldn't stand losses among the qualified staff. It needed a fully-functional Eye, Ear, Feeler and Integrator, or it would be partially crippled. Channen cursed the shortage of six-sensers. The majority of probes had to manage without a spare young Integrator.

He very nearly wished Ogan would crack. Though a depletion, it would be nice to have her out of the way. He'd tried to veto her inclusion when he'd heard of it — a right which mission-leaders were

occasionally allowed - but Personnel had been adamant. They'd let him select his Ear, his trainees and Keek, then dropped Andri on him as an extra burden. He'd been lucky to get Jocelyn as EG13's Ear. And the apprentices were a decent bunch, until the comas swung in from space. Two down, one to go... 'Van!' Ruthe's voice was a throaty growl, sounding masculine. He knew she detested addressing him by his first name. An instant and he was in her booth. The youth stepped aside deferentially.

'What's wrong?' Channen stared into the screen but saw nothing odd. The system's primary flared as a, bluish brilliance, bottom left. Several planets loomed in the polished plastic. His face contorted and he clamped a hand on Ruthe's arm furiously and suddenly. 'Put it out!' She trod the illicit cigar into the floor. 'You'll clean that up when the alert's over!'

The trainee glanced at the notice above the row of panels: NO SMOKING IN CONTROL, a rule Channen enforced dictatorially. He was a good Integrator but not a good man to cross. Ogan had tried it and failed yet again. She sat stiff with irascibility as he released her arm.

'Trouble?' he asked.

'I'm - not sure.' The uncommon confession crawled from her mouth reluctantly. She was invariably as dogmatic with observation-comments as she was about religion. 'The natural hiatus between mechanical and visual sighting, and then - well, I glimpsed something moving. Couldn't say what, but peculiar.'

'Quickly or slowly?'

'Slowish.'

He continued to look for it. 'Artificial or otherwise?'

'Couldn't say.' She jerked massive shoulders. 'Could have been either.'

'Obviously!' he said harshly, still searching, still not finding. 'And where the hell is it now?'

A smile lived ephemerally on the flesh-grooves of her face. 'Behind that planet.' She tapped its image.

'Went as I shouted for you. And if it's manufactured and can tell we've spotted it, I assume it'll stay there!' The sting in her voice upset him, a defiant incitement to argue.

He didn't. He juggled facts, half-facts and guesses. An alien vessel? Why not? Strangers existed in the system and they must have ships. Had Ogan spied one of them? If so, she was right; it would remain hidden provided its crew had some idea they'd been seen. If not, they might emerge. If there was *one*, there could well be more. How many? And where exactly?

Decision came. 'Keep a weather-eye on the planet in case anything sneaks out. I think we'll take it for granted it's got friends in the area. That's fine!' He turned and left the booth while she scribbled on the log-tape. Data slithered into the banks.

'What do we do, Van?' the trainee inquired diffidently.

'We gamble on the presence of other aliens, some of them perhaps not so cleverly concealed. Gamble that they're in this system or not far away. And we *find* them!' He strolled to the Integrator's couch in the middle of Control, apparently unperturbed. Seating himself he studied each sensor-panel, checking.

Finally he seemed satisfied and his body tensed. 'An all-out search! We're going to cover every centi-metre accessible to instruments or our brains! We're not going to miss a trick!' He looked up at the youth, tone level, orders unequivocal. 'I want everybody capable of it in here -and fast!'

Chapter Two

To Jocelyn the rec-room was identical to everywhere else, an environment of invisibility. Acrid cigar-smoke lingered, a reminder of Ruthe Ogan; Jocelyn sighed, glad of the old woman's departure. Sweet and ambient, Keek's pleasant body-smell vied with tobacco-fumes. Keek himself rested across her feet, his weight negligible. His perpetual but not obsequious devotion enveloped her mind. Comfort snapped off as he rolled away on to the bare floor and physical contact ceased. A bleak emptiness hit her and she fumbled for him, groping. 'Keek? Keek? Where-?'

'Here, Jocelyn, here.' He scuttled back swiftly and tenderly laid a slim, three-fingered hand on her ankle. His thoughts tumbled into her brain again consolingly.

'Thanks. It always staggers me when you break-touch without warning. Touch goes and your mind goes and - '

'I realise, Jocelyn; I'm sorry.' Careful to maintain contact he stood up, a slender biped one metre tall. Anguish marred his flat, noseless face as he gazed sympathetically at her open eyes, blank for two decades. Life had allowed her four years of infancy, seeing, then had savagely taken away the fathom-less blue of summer skies, the polychrome wonder of sunset. On to her vision had fallen irremediable blindness, a night with no hope of a dawn.

It didn't seem fair to Keek, yet she accepted it uncomplainingly. Sheer altruism and self-sacrifice had brought her into the Company, where she could perform a worthwhile function using the sharpest of her remaining faculties. His thin lips shaped quiet gratitude to alien gods for enabling him to have been assigned the same station as Jocelyn for the last half-dozen trips: her permanent guide, adviser and confidant. With typical wry humour, he added a request that Ruthe Ogan wouldn't be on his next globe. Then he flipped through a quick series of jumps and gymnastics. Mostly his agility and gaiety amused the crew in tedious moments, but suddenly he realised Jocelyn couldn't see him; also she'd gasped at the break-touch. He returned to her hurriedly and thoughts flew between them. She murmured relief. His eyes dampened at her dependence, not total but dreadfully close to it. He supposed she'd only partly adjusted to a Universe which had vanished; his meeting her must have filled a gap.

Jocelyn's almost incredible hearing - which had made her the most wanted Ear in the entire Company, the one for whom all the Intergrators clamoured - perceived whispers of sound from Control: a chair-creak as Ruthe Ogan shifted, nervous shufflings from the trainee watching her, Channen's relaxed breathing. Horror wafted over her as she considered the two youngsters in their own singular state of unseeing, a predicament more awful than hers since she'd developed a keen auditory ability to offset the eye-death of twenty years ago. They could neither see nor hear nor utilise any of their senses; they just lay immobile with death hovering in shadows, impatient to finish what the comas had begun. Recalling the attacks, she worried. How long before another victim went down? How long before the whole crew did? Was EG13 doomed to become a spatial charnel-house, a shell floating in infinity, carrying its grisly complement of skeletons and eventually dust?

'Stop it, Jocelyn!' Keek exhorted aloud. Affection accompanied the words. 'We'll make it, never fear!' But *his* fear coursed into her as he spoke, an alien apprehension undefinable in human terms.

A shout echoed: '*Van!*' - Ruthe Ogan, from Control. Keek rattled a scaly tongue on pointed teeth, a dick-clacking rhythm signifying agitation. Conversation followed and he tried not to listen, tried, to blot out the ominous ring in the Eye's voice by crowding his mind with the harmless, everyday objects of the rec-room: a chess-board, books, personal ornaments smuggled in past the luggage-restrictions, a note-pad covered in Channen's amateurish attempts at writing verse to combat the monotony. On a routine journey time hung heavy and the sensors resorted to reading fiction or poetry, discussing metaphysics — if Ogan wasn't there — or simply laughing at Keek's antics.

Neither size nor comfort weighed in the leisure-quarters' favour, but he felt reassured despite the conditions; they were worse outside.

Jocelyn judged the trend of the talk in Control and started to rise cautiously, afraid of accidental break-touch. Keek held on. He worshipped her after his own foreign manner, not at all jealous of her evident but seldom-mentioned love for Andri the Feeler. In her acute ears rippled undulations of noise no one else could have caught. Motors whirred beyond the inner layer of metal, the curved ceiling; fans recirculated air; sheets of paper lapped in the current.

She was on her feet just as the youth entered.

'Comprehensive search ordered, something vital! Van wants everybody in Control at once!'

Keek leaned his ovoid head back rather than stare at the lad's thigh. 'Even me?' He thought of his menial duties on EG13, cooking and cleaning, responsible for the probe's general tidiness and its staff's welfare.

'Official maid, un-official jester? Not much *I* can do!'

'Maybe not, but when Channen says *everybody* —'

'Yes, I'd better come. He doesn't utter a deal he doesn't mean. No nonsense about our Integrator!' Keek

spoke with-out resentment, in fact with pride. Channen's notorious hard-line approach to problems irritated some people, but Keek admired him for it.

The trainee rushed into Dorm-A, to fetch Andri.

'Ready, Jocelyn?' A non-human hand slid up her leg, a movement quite empty of sexual undertones, a continuous contact for her sake. Her fingers gripped tightly on his and he led her solicitously through into Control.

'Every last corner we can reach!' said Channen firmly. Determination ridged his forehead and squared his jaw. The audience listened attentively; this was Van Channen at his sternest and most uncompromising. 'Somewhere in the locality there's aliens. One at least, occulted by planet-four in our pattern.' He realised they'd soon be behind it themselves; EG13's trajectory would ensure it. Would the strangers still be around? And if so, what would happen? He pulled his mind away from speculation. 'Assuming other aliens, we look for them. And looking, we find!'

Keek asked innocently: 'Suppose we've found them; sup-pose they're near enough for us to see who's been hitting us. What then?'

Channen gazed curiously at him. Keek had the disquieting knack of coming up with the obvious question hours before anybody else thought of it. 'Good point. We'll face it when it arrives.' He hoped it didn't sound like evasion because it wasn't, just acknowledgement of Keek's perspicacity and the bald statement that plans couldn't be formulated to tackle the unknown. He reflected on the creature's contact-telepathy. Frequently Channen gathered his garbled mind-murmurs without touch, the privilege and blessing - often the curse - of a six-senser. Now, Keek radiated a confusing mental medley: fright, an endearing resolution to protect Jocelyn, excitement, spots of inexplicable emotion.

The sensors were at their posts, preparing. Andri moved clumsily, sluggishly, not properly accustomed to a job for which he hadn't applied. Ruthe Ogan manipulated keys more dextrously. Jocelyn appeared perfectly composed, all instruments tuned.

Keek and the apprentice squatted on the cool floor by a pile of papers, pens poised. Channen scrutinised them. 'No time for fancy filling-in of tapes. You pair are log-machines as of now!' He indicated Jocelyn, Ruthe and Andri. 'They'll be too busy singing out miscellaneous information, sightings, opinions, the lot. Scribble it down, any kind of code or short-hand you can improvise. But don't dare lose a syllable!' It was a warning. 'Keek, see to Jocelyn; Ruthe's trainee'll take her and Andri. We'll go through the formalities of feeding the data-deposits later.' A final check and he crossed his legs, his breathing steady. 'No more queries? Then let's get to it!'

He projected a shimmer of consciousness, grasping every-where for anything: a clue, a hint, anything. No clues, no hints, nothing. Yet the place didn't really *seem* right - a wrongness, a lack of normality, a definite vibration of life and intelligence. The only life and intelligence should have been in the station. He concentrated on the vibration, strug-gling to locate it, to transfix it, to explain it. He couldn't.

Simultaneously he watched the sensors, assessing their moods, comparing their actions.

Andri hadn't donned the tacto-gloves, unnecessary for the present. The danger of a non-psychological weapon's being fired accurately round planet-four must be minute, unless the enemy possessed more sophisticated armament than Channen could imagine. And if they did - well, the appen-dages would have a plethora of repair-work to cope with. But Andri and the entire crew might be dead, so why worry? His hands were spread flat on delicate plates linking him to the external cells capable of perceiving harmful radiations. All he could do for now was await returning impulses as radar scoured the void, left to right, up and down, feeling space. He looked bored and angry.

A chair squeaked protest as Ruthe Ogan's obese figure twisted on it. Her master-screen scanned in slow arcs. Stars drifted by, blurring. Planets and satellites showed remote, then enlarged. They received a minute's study before dim-inishing. She assiduously pursued the gaps between worlds, continually snapping guttural comments. One of her small monitors was locked on planet-four and she repeatedly swivelled the seat to examine it. Would an alien vessel sneak out? Each monitor-check brought the same terse report: 'Four-no sign!'

The youngster wrote placidly, thankful that Andri didn't waste words either. His grunted phrases coupled

with Ogan's blunter brevity made it fairly easy to keep a record. But Keek found it difficult. Jocelyn gave equally concise observation-data, but a three-fingered clutch on the pen hampered him grievously. He grumbled to the gods about certain people's parsimony. Surely talky-tapes couldn't be *prohibitively* ex-pensive? Also, why couldn't he grow a thumb?

Van Channen had a threefold task: infiltrating the area's .obscure places, watching the sensors, correlating what they said as quickly as the secretaries jotted it down. He mouthed an oath furiously. All this ridiculous amount of paper-work was a nuisance, but there'd probably be an inquiry back at Ganymede Base if every word spoken officially during the flight couldn't be accounted for. Entries on log-tapes, matched against all alerts catalogued in the banks, might reveal a discrepancy: a simple lapse, a piece of inevitable human forgetfulness. Add an officious clerk with a streak of sadism and the omission of a single incident in the log - an incident tabulated by *supposedly* foolproof instruments -could balloon into a severe reprimand for the Integrator concerned. Channen's was a rough job. Probe-mechanisms had malfunctioned previously and landed him in front of a Boardroom jury.

The headphones clung taut on Jocelyn's ears, almost pain-ful. Sleek black hair streamed to her shoulders and light hands wandered deftly over the panel. Coiled flex lost itself in glossy tresses, looped around her neck. It traced the line of her back and circled her waist, a plastic-sheathed fifty-wire cable plugged into the console: the connection between her and audio-devices on the hull.

Again it amazed Channen how effortlessly she threw switches and depressed buttons, how dependent upon Keek she was except when on alert. Then, he'd barely have be-lieved her blind. Not that vision was essential to an Ear, listening with mechanical aid to the sounds of the Universe. Space might seem to be a dumb entity, a sparkle of stars and a silent darkness without a murmur to disturb cosmic quiet. But he knew that more than silence burst through into Jocelyn's brain: star-noise, stray radio-crackle, static, a thou-sand shouts and whispers from space, sub- and supersonic by human reckoning. She'd get them all. Jealousy, slight but unshakeable, trembled in him at the thought of her love for big withdrawn Andri, a man she'd never seen: a man whose image he could sully in her mind by a malicious sentence, a bland annunciation of the truth behind the Feeler. He forced himself back to the job, yet fringe ideas persisted. A straightforward pursuit of mineral wealth, seeking material gain for the Company or, less likely, cultural exchange with amicable aliens, had metamorphosed into a battle for survival against an invisible foe. EG13's vulnerability, its monotonous life mitigated only by the diverting presence of Keek - a fortunate crew-choice, that — had been exposed awfully by a threat whose origin could neither be ascertained nor conceived. Channen felt suddenly small and weak.

The wrongness of the system stuck with him, a dim awareness that no monetary return could be expected for Far Search, and no actual return to Ganymede might be possible for the probe. Some sort of irony there . . .

He went to the communications-kiosk. Flicking to Far Search's wavelength he tried to raise Explorer Globes 4 and 37 in nearby systems. '13 calling, 13 calling! Anyone on the ether?' No reply. Perhaps the apparatus was sending but not receiving. 'Hello? 13 here, 13 here! We're in a jam!' Still no reply. He knew 4 and 37 couldn't help much, couldn't come to him and strengthen the Company's repre-sentation. Their paths were as immutable as his, but they'd be able to pass on a message to Base maybe - *if* they heard him. He described the situation succinctly, repeated it and decided on a similar procedure at half-hour intervals. Once more, pessimistically, he explained 13's position. No re-sponse, not a word. What did it mean? Was the radio dead, or were 4 and 37 dead? Had the trouble blasted out into neighbouring systems? He felt smaller and weaker.

A perilous way to earn a salary, he mused: taking a speck of steel and sentience into regions of mystery, risking lives to enrich the Company. And the chance of a discovery that would pay? Meagre enough to bring occasional excitement, yet just common enough to make the business viable. And the chance of death? Too damned high...

He flopped on to the couch, sickened. Keek and the trainee filled sheet after sheet; Channen swore because information had precedence over the crew. Then he grinned cynically, imagining Ruthe Ogan's expression. Through stony features she'd be smiling beatifically as she toiled in her own little world confronting Creation, content.

Buzzers shrieked unheeded and unneeded. An alert was already on, initiated not by them but by Channen. He realised that mechanical imperfections could lead to con-fusion at Ganymede Base. It was ludicrous; instruments clamoured for people who were at their posts. They simply weren't programmed to accept an alert called by the Inte-grator, but he didn't intend to suffer for their deficiencies. He'd have to state clearly on the log who'd ordered the search and why. The buzzers' contributions must be shown to be superfluous. He listened as the sensors added comments.

'Planet-eight nearside visual, negative! Four — no sign!'

'Build-up of noise, direction of primary, could be — Sorry, Keek! Just an increase from Alphecca!'

'No more rogue impulses! *Dieu!*'

Channen's eyes narrowed. Did the fools at Base honestly expect *every* word, even Jocelyn's apologies and Andri's sullen reversions to his native language? Rebelliously he resolved to edit the tape, rules or no rules. Another attempt to speak to 4 and 37 proved abortive — then another and another. False alarms continued to consume paper, and his rage grew. Five hours of exhausting effort uncovered nothing. Either there was only one alien vessel or its com-panions were *all* cunningly tucked away blindside.

He stamped upright, irate. 'Okay, knock it off! We're getting nowhere!'

The sensors relaxed; Keek rubbed aching fingers while the youth stood up, sighing but in no distress.

After ten minutes the tension had gone and everybody seemed calm again. Searing mental force smashed in from the darkness. The trainee collapsed with a horrible strangled scream.

Chapter Three

He put up a braver resistance than the previous teenagers. An arm-thrust and he half-rose from the floor but dropped back again, writhing. His eyes opened, blinked and closed. Shudders racked his frame as muscles strained to obey a jarred brain, blasted and ruined.

13's veterans staggered under the fiercest blow yet. Andri slumped but stubbornly straightened; Jocelyn stared blind bewilderment, hearing the confusion, wincing at the attack, seeing nothing. A clatter, and Ruthe Ogan tumbled out of her seat. Channen, not so shaken, rushed to help her. She muttered tonelessly: 'Thank you.' It sounded inept, a mun-dane word of gratitude amid a bizarre fray.

Keek just shivered as in a chilly wind. *Is it some form of non-human semi-immunity?* He raced to touch Jocelyn and her mind told him she was over the worst. *Praise the gods!* But he stayed with her, flesh to flesh, a comfort.

The youth had lost consciousness by now. A gentle move-ment of his tunic-front proved life still clung. The stabs pulled away as Channen knelt beside him. 'Here, Andri!' The Feeler's immense biceps hardened as he and Channen carried the trainee to the sick-bay, followed by Ogan. 'Ruthe, check how the others are!'

She fingered wrists and crouched to detect shallow breathing. *Please, Father, aid them!* 'They've sunk even lower, God help them!'

'He won't and we can't!' Van and Andri laid the quiet body on the last bed. 'None left in here for the next of us. They didn't allow for epidemics of this magnitude. When someone else breaks — '

'Enough!' Andri interrupted heatedly. 'The years have been severe to all of us who remain. We've come through the Bard's slings and arrows and can survive many more.'

Channen scoffed. 'By taking arms against a sea of troubles? This sea's big and the troubles are neatly hidden! And as for arms - ' He drew from his pocket a ring of keys, selected one and offered it. Locked away for internal emerg-encies such as mutiny was 13's complete arsenal, two small-calibre guns.

Andri refused the key. *Mais non!* I finish quoting.'

Van looked at the three trainees, corpse-like figures, wax models taken down for disposal. 'Nothing to be done. No use standing here.' In Control, he scanned space again at a particular point: planet-four, farside. If the failure of the search for other ships meant there weren't any, the attacks must originate behind four. *The aliens just have to be beyond four!* He couldn't trace them. Briefly he wished for a

seventh or eighth sense, maybe even a ninth -

A tiny hand had touched his knee and Keek's speech split his thoughts. 'We'll know soon enough, without extras. Trajectory! Four in a few Standard days. We can't halt it.'

'Halt it? I'd accelerate it if I could. Anything to get to grips!' *Get to grips? With two little guns? Don't be a fool, Channen!* He chuckled inwardly, sardonically. 'If the structure of these probes permitted building in weapons, there'd be a lot of people made it home who didn't!'

'Professional risk, Van, and yet - they give us hands, eyes, ears, a brain.' Keek smiled. 'But no teeth! Still, structural design —' He realised it would necessitate stripping out every gramme of non-essential equipment.

'Which isn't a deal,' said Channen. 'Anyway, the Company wouldn't do it. They'd rather take a chance on our lives and pile in the machinery!'

'Our lives, yes. Nice of them!' Unaccustomed annoyance dilated Keek's twin olfactory apertures.

'Back to it.' Channen gestured to the sheets of data. 'This's all got to be loaded into the banks. A bloody waste of time, too!' He motioned Keek to the door and nodded in Jocelyn's direction. 'You two can rest. Stop here, please, Andri. And you, Ruthe.'

She began to protest. 'You've called off the alert. I can't do-'

'I asked you to stay! As a result, you stay! Andri may need a witness.' Puzzled, she subsided heavily into her chair while Keek escorted Jocelyn to the rec-room. 'Andri, we'll edit the log-tapes before -'

'Edit them?' he gaped in astonishment.

'Yes, before giving them to the banks. Most of it's totally irrelevant.'

'Agreed, but - regulations.' *How bitterly I remember those!* 'The rules, Van.'

'I'll bend a few.' Sudden rancour pushed Van into oblique reference to a best-forgotten past, impossible to forget. 'You've been brainwashed: unquestioning, unhesitating obedience - or else!'

Andri paled. 'Yesterday, another place! Here, today - it is different, no?'

'Not right now, no! We edit!'

Huge fists balled. 'And if I refuse - ?'

'Why should you? Loyalty to Far Search?' Andri was silent and Channen laughed scathingly. 'When you didn't exactly ask to join? When you were told that - ?'

Andri advanced swiftly, colossal and menacing. 'One word more -'

'Grow up, you imbeciles!' Ogan's authoritative voice froze the gap at a single pace. 'We can't afford -'

An alarm whirled her attention to the monitor. 'Van!' He and Andri peered, stupefied, over her shoulder, dissension squashed by the sight in the screen: planet-four, and creeping from cover, an infinitesimal glinting dot. 'Too far away to see detail, but I'd guess it's under control. Not spatial debris.'

'The aliens!' Channen was assimilating the fact when an Ear-alert twanged at the upper edge of audibility. Jocelyn and Keek stumbled in and she clapped the phones on. Integrator and Feeler fidgeted, frustrated, ignorant of the noises that were penetrating. They watched the ship as it paused, hanging in space. What now? It made a perfect target. If only the probe were armed...

Jocelyn listened intently, a thrumming of engines sinking to a level hum as the vessel stopped its flight - then a metallic grating, a sliding. 'Sounds like doors. Van. Big ones, opening.' 'Doors? Are the devils coming out? Increase magnification, Ruthe!'

'I can't; it's on full already.' *Perdition! I'm squinting again! Some Eye, me!*

'Then full's not sufficient! A speck of light? We want an identifiable image!' But through his eagerness he realised the picture couldn't be increased. A speck it had to be, though it wasn't enough. He couldn't even descry its shape.

'No change visually! How is it with you, Jocelyn?'

'A clang. They've opened. Now a - Oh, no! You'll be

seeing it any time!' Andri saw it first and dashed to his booth. He slammed thick arms into the tacto-gloves and said crisply, 'I shall have much to do, I believe!'

Then Channen spotted it, a speeding mote detached from

the vessel. He noted a familiarity in its course, an outward arc as it gained velocity and then an inward

curve aimed at EG13. He recognised the action but couldn't put a name to the missile. A multitude of encounters from the pre-Company military years crammed his mind: alien weaponry, projectiles, nerve-bombs. Which one was this? Where was the fugitive memory from? The affair out Arcturus way? The sanguinary insurrection in Rim Sector Nineteen? Or perhaps - ?

The mind-attack lashed him. His head ached and blearily he noticed the sensors' varying reactions: a leonine roar from Ruthe, Jocelyn's sob, Andri's obstinate abuse in French. Keek seemed relatively untouched. The prods continued but the crew endured them. Ruthe and Jocelyn went quiet; Andri's vituperation fell to a muted, surly mumbling. Chan-nen kept his gaze on the monitor. The torpedo nosed in, turning. Talking was difficult. 'Hitting us - solid - as well as — ' His tongue dried and appeared to clog his mouth. Talking was impossible unless he exerted every atom of his will.

The quarter-memory nagged him, the familiarity. Where? When? He couldn't think of a precedent for hostile aliens using psychological means of offence. They must be a species never met with till now. Yet how come the recognised out-ward arc, the inward curve? The crazy idea occurred to him that Andri could fend off the missile, smack it spinning into space with the appendages, ineffectual. He didn't suggest it because he knew it was crazy. *Hell, they're warping my thinking!*

Planet-four's image mocked in solitude. The ship had retreated. The torpedo curled in. Ruthe could see it and Jocelyn could hear it, but neither bothered to report. Chan-nen stared as it grew larger and larger, virtually filling the screen.

It filled the screen.

It hit.

The probe rocked violently. The floor tilted and flimsy papers fluttered like ghosts. No explosion. A screech of tortured steel almost smothered Jocelyn's cry: 'It's twisting out, zig-zagging!' *Thank God!* sighed Channen, but re-frained from saying it aloud. Reverberations shrieked in Control, and Ruthe Ogan sat too close. She'd tracked the disabled missile with the master-scanner; it plunged erratically away after a mere glancing blow. Then it exploded.

A fulgent flame-flower blossomed, multi-coloured, hurting eyes. Temporary blindness tossed Ruthe and Channen together in a dizzy heap. He revived quickly but she didn't. Jocelyn fainted at the amplified blast of detonation and Keek couldn't do anything to help her. EG13 bucked and leapt from the impact of debris. Channen grinned regardless of the mental assault; a faulty torpedo that hadn't done its deadly stuff on impact. So the aliens weren't infallible or omnipotent, just strong. 'We are, too!' He spoke solely to himself; too early to become optimistic and build false hopes.

Andri nearly fell. His grip on the gloves held him to the panel despite the concussion. In mechanical idiocy an alarm summoned him. He ignored it and studied the globe by his left knee: a miniature of EG13 covered in lights, one for each grouping of perceptor-cells. The majority shone green-okay, but a patch of them pulsed madly in danger-red. Some were transparent, which was bad. 'Dead cells!' Cranial torment detracted from efficiency, yet he'd assessed the true horror of the damage. He looked round: Keek and Channen conscious, the women out of it. Had the comas scored a double victory this time?? 'Jocelyn - !' He swallowed concern, appraising priorities. The danger overshadowed her incapacity. 'Van! Quickly!'

The Integrator and Keek came. Andri showed the damage-area on the model globe. 'Not *there!*' groaned Chan-nen while Keek clicked teeth. 'Hell! Of all places, *there!* And they rave about foolproof probes! Get those desk-bound swine out here and - Skip it! How bad is it?' He was already fetching the radio-extension from the kiosk to the booth. 'Very. Particularly being on the blank-spot.' 'It had to be, didn't it? The one bit you can't reach, our most vulnerable point. Balls to foolproof probes! That luck with the missile was too good to last! I suppose we're holed?' 'Not yet - but terrific stresses, thinned metal, warped seals ... Might not be long.'

'May have swerved us off trajectory too, though I doubt it. Means a manual repair-job, somebody on the surface.'

'*Oui!* Andri frowned. 'Yet in these circumstances, is it feasible? Or fatal?'

Channen's jaw set decisively. 'Fetch my suit, Keek. It's my risk, I reckon!' But he didn't like it. The

alien's stunning vibrations might be shielded slightly by the hull, blotted fractionally. It could be death to go outside: a gasp, a doomed comedy of resistance, the dive into a short coma and then annihilation in minutes - for a human...

Keek caught the idea without benefit of contact. His click-clacking teeth ceased their noise and anxiety faded. He said easily: 'I'll go.'

He hardly felt the mental stabs. He noticed the occasional twinge, an inconvenience rather than a real pain. It was a little worse outside than in, so perhaps the emanations were absorbed somewhat by the two skins and the bulky machinery between them. His gravest concern hovered to the right, seemingly near enough to stretch out a hand and snatch it from the skies: planet-four. He cast suspicious glances at its spherical indifference. It only needed the ship to appear again and let go with a second torpedo. For EG13's sake and for his own, he prayed it wouldn't. A direct strike would buckle the vessel even if the missile performed as reprehensibly as its predecessor. A complete miss, a subsequent detonation, and the probe could survive.

Keek probably wouldn't, either way. The direct hit might be straight on his head and any explosion in the vicinity must leave him in a mess — splattered against the surface or hurled off into oblivion, severed lifeline, magnetic boots and all. There'd be no chance of a life for the plastic cord to tie him to and no metal to which his footwear could cling. But he might be in hundreds of shreds anyway, so it didn't matter much. 'Ah, but it *does!*' he told himself sternly, serious for once.

'Eh?'

'Sorry, Van. Talking to myself. I forgot the radio.'

'Well, don't!'

'I won't; I'll keep you posted.' He plodded over the hull, clumping, burdened by tools clipped to his belt: unwieldy, heavy objects designed for human hands three times as large as his, with an additional finger and opposed thumb. It wouldn't be simple. He asked his guardian deity, the Love-Goddess, to help him. He arrived at the damage-zone: deep dents, steel crinkled like paper, welds on the verge of ripping open. 'Too bad for me to repair alone, Van. It wants a whole new section, size BB. Tell Andri.' Keek heard a conference at the other end of the radio, then the Feeler started to do what he could. An appendage jiggled joints and came as close as its imperfection allowed. The plating-arm followed, slow and monstrous, thumbed by Andri. It hung several metres away. 'Thanks. Now it's up to me.' He nudged a stud at his hip and the boots yielded their special qualities. A finely judged foot-twitch at the instant of break and he shot towards the plater, grabbed it and gradually steadied himself. 'Size BB, Van.' Andri supplied it.

It slid out of a slot and Keek wrestled it until he had a grip. He pushed off from the plater and landed awkwardly on the probe, bruising a leg before he managed to switch the boots on. With a small magno-clamp he fastened the section down. He wondered if he'd killed any of the Frenchman's cells. The twinges were still there. How rough was it for the humans? Would Jocelyn's unconsciousness help her? Keek didn't know. He worked.

Inside, Channen battled the agony in his head and tried to think coherently. 'We ought to be able to hit back, Andri! At least show some token -'

'We can pretend. I was considering a flare. Maybe one would fool the aliens, make them imagine us possessed of teeth instead of useless bare gums'

'Good idea!' He tottered to communications, prepared a semblance of fight and returned to the radio.

'Keek? I'm about to launch a signal-flare.'

'Why? I don't understand!' The flares were a final expedient in case of malfunction by all other devices both on a missing probe and a searching ship. 'We've nobody to signal to, have we?'

'No. Just watch for it and don't fuss when you see it. It'll be a weapon - ours, not theirs!' Channen threw Andri a strained grin. 'If we can reduce thrust on it so it curls round to four blindside and bursts there...'

'Exactly! Apparently a missile more ingenious than theirs.'

Channen calculated distance, four's gravitational influence, direction. 'Got it! Angle, requisite thrust. If I'm right, four should suck it in and give them quite a display of fire-power slap in the eye - assuming they have them!' He left the Feeler-booth. After pushing a lever he moved across Control. Ruthe Ogan stirred

as he aligned her main screen. An orange streak sliced blackness. It curved, tugged by four, and splashed into fountains of colour half-obliterated by the planet's disc. 'Damn! The bastard blew short!' Spirals of vivid crimson danced from the flare's core. Silver daggers of coruscating light pierced space. Chromatic brilliance stung Channen's eyes as it showered over and around four. 'Not too accurate, Andri, but impressive. I hope Keek enjoyed the spectacle.'

Keek didn't. It took him by surprise because he'd forgotten Channen's warning during the interval between the words and the launching. He was dragging the steel section towards the damaged part of the hull when the shudders of flare-launch whooshed into him from the rear. He twitched, startled. Heat swept through the fabric of his suit, not pain-ful, not pleasant. He began a hasty prayer-of-farewell and then suddenly realised what had happened. He was still alive and Channen had some wild notion that loosing a flare would destroy the enemy at a stroke. Keek couldn't imagine how.

He watched the burst, bored. It drew his thoughts to the system in general: a drab little world-group, unexciting, the same as most he'd worked in; another worthless system, another tedious trip, another empty-handed journey home — if they got home. And they might not. A nostril-dilation at planet-four and he toiled with new fervour. He prayed the humans were holding on, and didn't even notice the twinges depart.

Tools clicked from his belt. Appendages loomed as if groping for places denied them. Keek did the job. 'It's done,

Van, sort of. As elaborate as the rest of the probe, anyway. Stripped paint, shaky seams...'

'I know. Due for a thorough overhaul when it's pulled to Base.'

'If,' Keek replied laconically, and went inside. *If it's not torn apart as we are!* After scrambling out of the suit he palmed Jocelyn's slack body and entered the dim corners of her stunned mind. 'She'll be okay, but - don't tell her about - ' He gestured vaguely at the ceiling. 'She'd only roast me for risking it!'

Into the friction again, Channen thought grimly. He'd carried Jocelyn into Dorm-B and Keek had gone to sleep next to her bunk - one more rule broken, though somehow Keek's non-human masculinity moderated the infringement. Andri and Ruthe Ogan remained. She'd recovered sufficiently to adopt her habitual scowl of defiance, plainly ready to side with the Feeler, two against one. How close was Andri to arrant refusal to obey orders contravening regulations? If he did so, would Far Search support him? Obviously Ogan would give a detailed yet biased report, favouring him. Channen's career was at stake. He decided he could accept enforced retirement almost with a laugh. And if it helped highlight several of the Company's weaknesses . . .

'Ready?' *This is where the fun starts!* 'Pen, Andri!'

Amazingly, he complied. He hunched over his log-tape, waiting. 'I do this under protest, Van.'

'Record that statement! Also that I'll stand by you at any inquiry!'

'Commendable pro-Company spirit, Ruthe.' Channen de-liberately suppressed sarcasm. A sugared tone always stung her. He supposed the inveterate sourness had permeated her so completely her metabolism couldn't bear it. 'Now - '

'A question, please.' Channen frowned at the interruption, but probably Andri was entitled to a hearing.

'Why me? To clarify the fact that I'm the least of us since the trainees went?'

'The least? Haven't you forgotten Keek?'

'No, I've not forgotten him! Though diminutive, he ranks above me. I think maybe you seek a - humiliation? Or you act perhaps on some emotion we need not name?'

Channen wouldn't admit it. 'You write neatest.' *Good shot, Andri!* 'Let's leave it there!'

Ruthe Ogan looked on in silence, not following the drift, the innuendoes. Van watched her watching and she stared at the floor. He wondered if there were any truth in the rumour that she'd once been within a heartbeat of suicide, that she claimed to have been commanded by God to preserve her life and do her bit for humanity. *It's possible.* He knew she'd signed contracts as an apprentice at the age of forty, the oldest anywhere. *Must have demanded a fair degree of courage. Trainees and superiors, sniggering at her.* He summed her up as a strange woman, ill-tempered yet sincere, peculiar yet genuine in her

peculiarity.

He had to respect her dedication. She never took holidays, just flitted from probe to probe continuously, without breaks. Same as Andri, but different reasons!

'We'll make a start, then!'

Andri wrote neatly. Ruthe sulked. *The Moving Finger? Lure it back? Cancel half a line?* Channen altered the tapes. *Oh, Khayyam! An Integrator can cancel all he wants!*

Five uneventful days snailed into eternity.

On watch, Channen glared at the Eye-screens and mentally reiterated Ogan's words: 'Four - no sign! Watch? Why call it that when the watcher listens? Get up with the times, Far Search!' He heard someone moving in the rec-room: a rest-less pacing, the slam of a book being put down irritably — perhaps Andri, prowling, struggling with tenacious memories, never winning; or old insomniac Ruthe, failing in an effort to concentrate on her beloved archaic poetry.

Planet-four was no longer a disc. Corners of the monitor chopped off its roundness. The station would shortly be farside. *And the reception committee, waiting with more torpedoes at a range from which they can hardly miss!* The familiarity of the last one troubled him. Somewhere he'd faced the type before, yet he was positive the aliens were wholly new - an intuitive rather than a rationalised judgement, but he had faith in it.

If they were a fresh species, why use such weapons? Didn't they have any of their own? Did they even need them, with the psychological attacks whittling away the crew? The familiarity of the weapon suggested a known race, intuition the opposite. The races he'd fought had all been pacified. He couldn't envisage them illegally selling arms. Some un-official, unethical organisation must be the source of supply. He paled with disgust. There always was one and undoubtedly always would be one. He stared 'at four, whose proximity now allowed a clear view of desolate terrain. *Soon be there, soon be round it, soon be —*

He glanced at the main-screen, set on low magnification. Not far past planet-four, he could see five and its three moons; not so large a world, though it seemed bigger because of the satellites clustered close to it.

He'd instituted an amended watch-procedure. Instead of relaxing anywhere in Control - usually the Integrator's couch - whoever was on duty had to occupy the Eye-booth and keep alert for activity on four's perimeter. *That's a real watch, not the normal idle listening!* Channen ticked off the fit personnel: himself, Andri, Ogan, Keek and Jocelyn. *May have to lengthen the duty, say to eight hours; I'll think about it. What a bloody monotonous job, just sitting listen-ing in case a sensor has to be woken up! Bit less so at present. At least we can look at the stars, give our eyes something to do.* Then he remembered Jocelyn.

A cough echoed, false, almost apologetic. He turned. 'Anything I can do?'

'Nothing. I went to check and - ' Ruthe Ogan shrugged, then said flatly, 'It's the girl. She's dead.'

Chapter Four

'The freezer?' Jocelyn repeated incredulously. 'Did you say the freezer?' Her slim hands clutched the air for an obvious explanation which neither her mind nor her eyes could see. 'I did.' Channen had assembled everybody in Control. He hadn't wakened the sleepers; he'd let nature take its course. The meeting wasn't crucial or hurried. No amount of con-ferring would bring the girl back. 'Maybe I'm acting on sentiment, but - considering the child's age . . . ' He sighed, wondering where the words were. 'Her parents, the corpse

- they'd want it, I imagine. Somehow a space-burial seems

- a desecration, too obscene for such a likeable kid.' Sentiment crouched also behind Andri's hard-bitten

facade. 'Vraiment, Van! I know men and women die in the wilds all the time and receive no shroud save darkness, yet with this poor little one . . . Yes, it is right that we preserve her for those who await her at

home. Await her, gay and living, alas!

'Is it hygienic?' Ruthe Ogan asked tartly, sure of the answer. There'd be no danger of putrefaction. 'Apart from the morbidity of putting her in with the foodstuffs, is it safe?'

'Of course it is!' The snap in Van Channen's voice surprised her. 'The gadget's in compartments. Shift things around a trifle and she'll go in without a squeeze and with-out any contact. Now -'

'Just a minute!' An arm draped around Keek's shoulder as Jocelyn interrupted. 'You talk of her as though she's only a lump of meat!' Ogan didn't quite manage to speak the obvious rejoinder; her mouth whipped shut as soon as Keek saw it open. The picture of her thwarted malice would already be in Jocelyn's brain.

'Fair enough! The freezer it is!' Channen motioned the Frenchman to follow him. They left together, heading for the sick-bay and a necessary task. Ogan shocked them by tagging on to assist.

Alone with Jocelyn, Keek felt better. He was a good mixer and a fine friend, slow to anger, quick to laugh. But some-times, especially in the confining microcosm of the probes, the interplay of human personalities pressed him into un-healthy introspection: Channen's occasional flashes of spleen, Andri's inexplicable reserve over some pernicious experience, Ruthe Ogan's spite. Though Keek failed to understand it, he perceived ubiquitous tension. Van was plainly keyed-up by this particular trip, and not merely because of the hazards. His intrepidity had never been in doubt. And Andri? What haunting memory-demon clung to him from dead years? What ineffaceable anguish scrawled its mark in those sad eyes, that sombre expression of melancholy so similar to the old woman's? What- ?

'Keek!'

'Yes, Jocelyn?' He swarmed up out of the mind-swamp, suffocating, to breathe again as he broke free into the sound of her melodious voice. He trembled with love be-cause beauty was on her and purity was in her: beauty on her countenance, in her shining hair, her lithe movements, purity in her mind and in her voice that thrilled like the music of distant bells. *But is it any compensation?* 'Sorry, Jocelyn.'

'You should be.' Her words sprang out tempered by ten-derness at his contrition. 'Thoughts so gloomy. You shouldn't dwell on them. Dismiss them and think of all life's good sides,'

He did, for a while. Then by contrast the bad obtruded: death menacing the crew, strain inside, uncaring space out-side - and Jocelyn's blindness! He couldn't hold down the injustice of it, the calamity. It hurt him more than it hurt her. He looked inside her and found a buried ache, looked inside himself and found agony. The swamp slithered to suck him under, but she rescued him.

'Tell me what you see, Keek. The Universe sounds so wonderful. I can hear stars in conversation, loud. And meteors whispering, tiny infants who can't out-shout the adults. And hideous death-rattles, the oldsters expiring in a nova-blast. Or is it a sort of rebirth?'

Keek said, apparently inconsequentially, Van and his scribblings. The hag and her treasured classics.' He banged both elbows on the Eye-panel, a laughter-equivalent. 'They'd do well to dispose of their combined rubbish and try listen-ing to a competent poetess right here in 13!' *Is that another attempt at compensation, her skill with words? No rhyme, but such a flow, such evocative phrasing!*

'Please, Keek. Describe what you see, just for me.'

How could I resist a prompting like that? Elbows thumped and humour trickled from his brain to hers, accompanied by a seriousness. He fidgeted in Ruthe Ogan's seat. He wasn't fond of watch-duty, but Jocelyn's presence made it easier. At her request, he scrutinised the screen with a heightened interest. 'I see four, of course. It frightens me slightly, yet it's pretty. Sweeping plains, low crags; attractive in a grey way, as compelling as grief. An oblate sphere in the master-scanner. I almost feel it pulling us closer.'

Fear was born, but he killed it since it affected Jocelyn. He continued to describe what he saw. She took in his words - his mention of colour, perspective, the broad view, minor details - and superimposed on them her child-memories of colour and perspective. The resultant imagery she placed beside her auditory admissions and the Universe became a kaleido-scope, a fabulous painting enhanced by the orchestration of star-talk, meteor-whispers, the strident cymbal-clash of dying suns.

When words didn't suffice or memory was too nebulous, Keek insinuated direct thought-pictures and she briefly knew the marvel of seeing. But the marvel aroused dreadful recollection of its brutal termination twenty years ago. Re-calling the eye-death, she shuddered at the idea of real death. *What is it? A*

moment of pain, then eternal nothing-ness? She understood pain, but she couldn't conceive of nothingness. Terror knifed through her and -

'Jocelyn!' This time Keek had to act as rescuer. He was amazed at the fullness, approaching consummation, of his union with her. He couldn't get quarter-way so near to any of the others. Second behind Jocelyn came Van, then Andri not so far off and Ogan a miserable last. He decided it probably had something to do with a down-spiral of emotions for the individuals involved: love for Jocelyn, respect for Van, admiration for Andri's better qualities strained by suspicion of his taciturnity, and utter indifference for Ogan.

Or something! Perhaps the evil god Hate-Sender worked through Ruthe? Or maybe not. Anyhow, there it was. She came last.

He wondered why he bothered using words when simple touch should be enough, to a greater or lesser degree. *My mind must be only remotely akin to the human. Vocalisa-tion must be necessary up to a point. Or something!* He couldn't be sure.

A door hissed. They entered in single file, Channen, Ogan, Andri. They brought into Control the fragrance of soap. Van flexed his fingers of freshly washed hands. 'She's in!' The two syllables were horribly eloquent. 'How do you tell a couple of people the daughter they're expecting home's now a - a corpse? A problem there for when we get back to Base!' He picked up an errant thought from Keek. *If!* On seeing Ruthe, Keek stared fixedly at the master-screen with his eyes screwed up, Ogan-like. She noticed the action and frowned. He pitched his voice very low and mimicked in chirpy mockery: 'Four — no sign!' She glared, starting to speak. He didn't let her. 'Four - no sign!' He didn't need to touch her to read the thoughts behind her expression: *This isn't the time for puerile, perverted humour!* But Keek knew it was. Puerile, perverted, it hardly mattered so long as someone slipped in a counter to the anxiety. Nobody laughed, but nobody else remonstrated with him. Jocelyn gave sanction; Channen, without smiling, conveyed appro-bation - if not of the remark, at least of Ogan's harassment. Andri was a statue and a mask.

Van's subconscious had been busy in the sick-bay and in the kitchen. He'd been too occupied to be aware of it — rearranging provisions, settling the corpse into an empty compartment - but now it wrote on the upper layers of his brain its conclusion: the end didn't justify the means. What constituted the end? Mineral wealth, a new metal, precious stones, a planet plundered. Sometimes mutually beneficial contact with an alien species such as Keek's, a peaceful meet-ing, a bartering of knowledge, culture, viewpoints. And the means of achieving it? Boredom, months of monotony light-years away from Sol-system; constant danger, jailed within a globe of fragile steel; death through accident, death by design; injury, mutilation, madness; comas hurtling in from space, from an enemy lurking in ambush on four-blindside, a hostile life-form Base hadn't spotted in preliminary surveys.

Perhaps they aren't native. Perhaps they don't live here but have come here for a purpose. Not that it made any difference. They were still lethal.

The end didn't justify the means.

Channen had trained hard to become an Integrator and proved himself by doing it. Far Search had had his best years, but he resolved that they wouldn't have any more. *Even if the old woman doesn't make trouble!* He had no argument against taking risks in the effort to locate friendly races and advance humanity; it was almost a duty. But what he did resent was putting his neck in the noose to enrich the Company. Base always greeted the prospect of money with enthusiasm, news of alien contact with near-apathy.

They'd got their values wrong. He knew there'd be a little contract-breaking, a one-man walk-out, when 13 returned to Ganymede. Visions of the Base-moon sprayed him. Then Keek's recent thought flickered again, among memories of gods, worship and ritual. *If!*

Jocelyn heard a footstep near her and immediately identi-fied it. 'Andri.' His hand fell on her arm, unintentionally rough.

'It is I, *ma chere!*' He apologised for his heaviness of hand. Via her, he could just detect fragments of Keek's non-human mind, diminished somewhat by the fact of touch through touch: Keek to Jocelyn to Andri. He couldn't altogether fathom it, but at the moment it was good, a triangle of devotion. Keek

loved Jocelyn, who loved Andri. The Feeler completed the figure, requiting the alien's affection for her by affection of his own aimed at the tiny occupant of the Eye-seat.

Experimentally he laid his other hand on Keek and the triangle leapt out of two dimensions, not into three but into an incalculable number. A fabulous exchange of emotions tingled in him and after a while dizzied him. It was too complex for his dull, sluggish brain. He wondered what incredible harmony, what an ineffable three-way marriage of consciousness might be attained between Keek, Jocelyn and a sensitive person such as Channen ...

Channen!

The Frenchman seethed, pondering the hideousness of jealousy. Channen held the sword that could attempt to sever his relationship with Jocelyn. Channen was privy to a secret which Andri desperately wanted kept secret. Channen's gaze had often shown lust and envy. Channen -

Her adoration flooded in and Andri snuggled into its warm security. Channen no longer seemed a real threat, yet he was still perturbed. He entertained no doubt that she loved him, but he couldn't understand why. 'Jocelyn,' he said softly, 'I'm at a loss to comprehend what you see in me — ' Then he stopped abruptly, hating his foolish, fumbling tongue. She didn't *see* anything at all in him. He gesticulated wildly as though striking emptiness for his own mistake. Simultaneously she felt his hand lift from her arm and his mind lift from the connection through Keek. She heard wafts of air as he tried to apologise. 'A - a badly-chosen word - I -'

She waved down his self-recrimination. 'I can - sense -that you're a fine man, Andri, sweet and kind and gentle. I *know* it!' Her hands sought and found his. • Channen's brow creased pensively, but he didn't speak, didn't trust himself to. Old Ruthe Ogan, totally without sympathy for Jocelyn's blindness, grunted cynically. And Keek praised his gods. At least *one* pair of characters in EG 13 knew how to live together amicably - and more than amicably!

'It makes you think!' he almost shouted. It worked; heads turned. He had everybody's attention; no actual response, no interest, just attention, enough to be going on with. Perspicaciously, he knew the tautness was creeping in again. The heavy atmosphere had to be lightened, Van's brow smoothed, Ogan's grunt nullified. He wished he could nullify the old woman herself. Was it worth a prayer? No, not really. He looked at Andri and Jocelyn, two silent people, the focus of Van's and Ruthe's feelings of - what? Hostility? *Could be*. Those feelings had to be changed, channelled elsewhere. He took the initiative and repeated: 'It makes you think!'

No one murmured. They stared, Jocelyn sightlessly. They waited.

'Well? Don't any of you want to know what makes you think? Or do you think you know? Or don't you care? Or don't you *think* at all, ever?' Clumsy, Keek admitted to himself, but maybe it would be effective. He carried on in similar vein, certain that somebody would butt in soon if only to shut him up.

'While we're on the subject of thinking, which it seems none of you often do, why don't we - ?'

'Lord! Be *quiet*, you grotesque midget!' It could have sounded playful, could have ridden into his ears on a laugh, but it didn't because Ogan said it. From Van, Andri, Jocelyn, the words might have been butterflies drifting in sunshine. From Ogan, they were wasps on a dismal day, wasps with hot tails. 'What in God's name are you talking about?' 'Ah! We're not all dead, then! I'm talking about - this!' Keek's hand fluttered towards the master-scanner, the disc of four, the stars-and-darkness tapestry of the Universe. He didn't consider it much of a sight himself — too familiar, too scaring, especially planet-four - but he pretended otherwise. 'Such splendour, such mystery, such soul-stirring depths! Yes, it definitely makes you think!' What did the rest of the crew contemplate when they stared into space? He asked himself the question and immediately answered it. Ruthe Ogan: the majesty of Creation, the glory of the Almighty Being responsible for it all. Van Channen: the setting in which he had to do an onerous job. Andri: more or less the same, though with an inscrutable *something* at the back of his thoughts.

And Jocelyn: nothing...

She'd contemplate nothing because she'd see nothing. The question didn't apply to her. He was glad she wasn't touching him; it would have upset her to share his cerebrations just then. Determined to shatter the detrimental atmosphere, he resumed the offensive. 'It raises so many metaphysical points, a look into the screen. Stamps on most of our narrow-minded philosophies, crushes them, shows us how

unbelievably small we are!' He began to enjoy the oration. He hadn't realised his brain could reach so profound a level. Nobody else had, either. Admiration was directed at him, Ruthe Ogan's grudging, but clearly there. 'Also the Universe's such a staggeringly enormous place I can't help but wonder exactly what it conceals; I speculate; I give partial credence to stuff I used to decry as gibberish before I left home.' Keek wasn't sure where his soliloquy was heading, but he'd captured all ears. *A fair bit of progress, anyway.* Tension started to dissipate. He thought he was doing fine. He was. It didn't last long. The spell got ready to break as he went over the question of how to continue. *Where do I go from here?* The answer appeared and he showed proper gratitude. *Thanks, gods — whichever of you are responsible; the Wandering Worlds story!* He'd scoffed at it himself before experiencing the shocks and surprises of cosmic diversity, laughed at a legend apparently fanciful and silly. But time told strange truths and now his attitude was more open, less sceptical. Wild myths had a sobering habit of proving not so wild after all. *The Wandering Worlds, then!* 'Take for example planets that stray out of their systems at a whim and -'

Admiration vanished from Ogan's face. Contempt delineated itself. She said quite distinctly: 'Shit!' The barbed syllable hung for a while in a stunned silence. Then Chan-nen and Andri laughed; Jocelyn didn't. For once, Keek was speechless. He tongue-clicked teeth, numb and dumb. He hadn't expected that from her. Obviously he'd struck her on a soft spot. *Must have been her head!* But no, the roots of her scorn plainly burrowed deeper than her skull, right into the essence of her. Keek thought it odd how one never really uncovered a person's entire character. Invariably there was a fresh aspect lurking around the next corner, a response that didn't fit.

A near-parallel brushed him, but he succeeded in ignoring it: the aliens, lurking with their own shock prepared around the next planetary corner, beyond four. *No! Just Stick to Ogan!* He knew it was a gruesome prospect, but he preferred it to the idea of the aliens behind four - fraction-ally!

Evidently the notion of worlds that had been allegedly observed to leave their orbits and travel gaily off into infinity simply wasn't acceptable to her. Did it conflict with some rigid religious pattern she'd subconsciously fabricated over a lifetime? A pattern that allowed only a Cosmos without aberrations, a miraculous structure of suns, planets, comets, nebulae, all in their ordained positions or courses and forbidden to depart therefrom? *Held together by God's Glue, I suppose? Or Celestial Cement!* *She must have a pattern which the Wandering Worlds defy.* Keek once again wondered if she merited a prayer-for-extinction. *Probably not - yet!*

He decided to bear it in mind.

Ogan's nauseous snores rumbled in Dorm-B. Jocelyn couldn't sleep. Keek had brought her here, then gone to catch up on his work. She missed him and detested having to share the little room with Ruthe. It hadn't been so bad with the girl sleeping in the other bunk, but now -

Jocelyn squirmed, searching for slumber and forgetfulness.

Sleep taunted out of unreachable distance. Oblivion stayed a stranger. Nasal noises nagged. She fingered the safety-strap, a standard fitting on every seat and bed. She couldn't shake fear of four. The probe would be around it by the time she awoke. *If I ever manage to sleep! And if I'm alive to wake up!* She tried to picture the aliens. What bodily form did they have, what type of brain? Perhaps they'd never be revealed in the flesh, just a ship on the screen, a blast of mental force or a missile exploding into lethal thunder. *Not that I'll see any of the prelude to death! Assuming an alert, I might hear it being played and then — then I'll merely die without knowing what killed me!*

Someone whimpered Keek's name. Eventually she recognised her own voice. *Why his instead of Andri's? Why doesn't she stop snoring?* It seemed much louder. *Is she dreaming hate-dreams? Or in a wonderland with God? Or-?*

Does it matter? No! Does anything?

Jocelyn cried without tears, needing Keek. *Why Keek? Why not Andri?* Trivial words spun in her head, absolutely childish, rhyming: Keek, Keek, the comic with the serious streak. She realised they were stupid words, but her eyelids were growing heavy. Maybe they weren't so stupid. Why should lids close over eyes that couldn't see? *Keek — what's that funny little phrase he so cheekily attaches to Ruthe? Oh, I remember: Ogan the Ogress. Suitable. Typical of him, typifying her.* The thoughts had

comfort inside them, the comfort of Keek, a comfort that caressed the heart and pressed gently down on the eyelids. She blessed the nearness and the very name of him. *Keek* -She slept.

Channen had resolved not to even try. The next hour or so could be critical. A stertorous row from Dorm-B proved that Ogan was asleep. Presumably Jocelyn was, too. Keek ought to be. It was his rest-period, but sounds came from the kitchen. He could get along with only a few hours' sleep now and then. He had stamina out of all proportion to his size.

Van considered it best that the women were asleep. They might never wake up, so it should be easier for them that way. Was death ever easy, even lifting life in slumber? Andri watched four. It filled both screens, monitor and master. The station drifted towards farside, towards the aliens, towards -
'Are you calling a general alert, Van?'

'No point. Let those who can miss it, miss it.' Fie paused, fighting pride, then went on quietly. 'Look, Andri, I owe you an apology. I've said some vicious things lately, been rough on you over the editing. And then Jocelyn - I'll say sorry while there's a chance.'

'Unnecessary. I think you were partly right. The editing, possibly. My having been brainwashed, certainly. It was tough where I was and one learned to bend before the rules rather than rebel and bend *them!* If not, one soon became bent oneself: bent so badly it amounted to breaking! And as for Jocelyn — *c'est la vie!* Human nature.'

'Answer me a question, Andri. Your surname; seems you don't have one. I checked Company files. Just Andri, no more. It puzzles me.'

'I imagined as Integrator you'd been told everything about me, about—'

'No, I don't mean your - past; I'm in on that. Your name.'

'I don't use it. It's my family's now, not mine, because I belong to them not at all. I love them enough to split from them.' Suddenly Van half-understood. 'Therefore I re-requested that it be suppressed, that I be - just Andri. Business possesses a trace of sympathy; Far Search acquiesced.'

Both men glared at four.

The freezer-doors were closed. Keek intoned a short prayer for the girl's soul. Would Ogan censure him for it if she were with him? No, not for the prayer, nor for the concept of an immortal soul. *But we'd not see eye-to-eye - or should it be eye-to-Eye? — on the direction of the petition. Her stiff monotheism, my equally stiff polytheism. Her God, my gods-*

He sponged a bench, then bundled plastic crockery and metal cutlery into a chute. They were regurgitated separ-ately, dry. He put them away. *Now, what's next? Nothing.* The dorms were done, the rec-room tidy. He'd neatly piled Ogan's prized gold-bound books of verse on a shelf and fastidiously arranged Van's note-pads of awful doggerel on top of them as if to suggest the latter were the better. She wouldn't fail to spot it and she wouldn't fail to comment on it, if she still existed once 13 had swung to four-blindside. Thought of the nearby ghost made his fingers swirl in a pro-TECTIVE symbol. A superfluous flourish of a cloth and Keek considered he'd conquered the kitchen. He walked into the rec-room, proud of his handiwork: volumes of classics lan-guishing beneath rotten drivel. He smiled thinly, then sud-denly stopped. A scaled tongue smacked sharp teeth, clickety-clack, angry. A cigar-stub lay shredded on the polished floor. Had he overlooked it or had the Ogress rolled out for a smoke in her insomnia? He snatched up the stub and rubbed away its mark with his sleeve. He held it two-fingered at arm's length, as though it were the most disgust-ing object in the Universe. He knew it wasn't; it couldn't be, not with its erstwhile owner around! He hesitated, deciding not to fling it into the trash-disposer. The smile returned, sly.

He had to go to Dorm-B anyway to ascertain that Jocelyn was okay. Duality of motive drove him there. First he stroked her slumbering head: an uneasy sleep, a retreat from confusion and fear. Ogan snored and roared, one hand open above the sheets. Keek banged his elbows together. *Ideal!* Cautiously he popped the stub into the hand. With any luck, the first move she'd make on awakening - *if* she awoke — would be to wipe the sleep from her eyes and —

He left, picturing her parchment-face smeared with tobacco and ash.

He wasn't tired, so he may as well be at the centre of activity, active. Then he amended the thought. Not

active -passive! Completely passive, doing nothing because there was nothing that could be done. Except wait. And hope. And pray.

He entered Control. Silence cloaked Van and Andri, an uncanny silence of awe and apprehension: awe at the impos-ing hugeness of four, apprehension at the menace behind it

— only not really behind it, now; just around the corner, like Ogan's obscenity, poised to strike. It made no difference that this, particular blow was expected, whereas hers hadn't been.

Hers had hit hard.

This would hit harder.

A vagrant iota of Keek's awareness tickled Channen. He didn't recognise it as Keek's and whirled in fighting-stance. Relief sighed out of him as he saw Keek. He laughed a trifle hoarsely at the ridiculousness of it. A single word explained it adequately. 'Scared.'

Andri nodded. 'Me too.' He didn't look it. 'Jumpy.'

The non-human said: 'It's quite understandable.' He thanked his gods that Jocelyn wasn't here. She'd also be scared. It occurred to him that maybe Ruthe Ogan would be the most stoical, the most tranquil, the least anxious. He didn't know why.

Four's jagged surface rolled across the monitor.

Channen estimated that the probe was virtually in an identical position to that occupied by the alien ship at the instant of its last disappearance. Say another seven or eight minutes and -

'Why the pen, Van?' Keek asked.

'The - ? Oh, the pen!' For a moment he seemed surprised to see it in his hand. 'The tapes. A final glimpse; jot down impressions, details, if there's time. It won't help us, but the Company'll have something to go on.' He crossed to com-munications and tried the radio, describing the situation to EGs 4 and 37.

They didn't reply. His hands idled on the con-trols for the emergency-motors, operated from the kiosk, while he dreamed inanely that the tiny boosters spread over 13's hull could avert catastrophe.

'No attack for days,' Andri observed. 'Why?'

'Not to give us a breather, that's for sure!' Channen sounded bitter. 'Nor to make us feel secure. They've had a crack at us psychologically, obviously without complete suc-cess.' Or was it so obvious to the aliens? Could they tell 13 still contained uninjured personnel? Surely they could. If they were able to slice into a human brain from afar, they must know when it had snapped and when it hadn't. 'Just waiting till they can be certain of the kill. Why waste energy bashing at people who've shown a fair amount of resistance? Much easier to sit and wait while we ride dutifully into ambush!'

'You mean missiles again?'

'No. Singular, not plural. A couple of minutes and we'll be in the middle of their sights. Give the job to the blindest bastard on the ship and he'd not fumble it. So, singular, not plural.'

A minute dragged by. Another followed it. Keek found he couldn't control the rattle of his teeth, couldn't for the life of him think of a witticism to signalise the death of him. It was a harsh discovery. Space yawned on the edge of the screen as four drifted across. Four-farside had become four-nearside.

Channen gasped; Andri gaped; Keek muttered something inaudible.

There was no sign at all of the aliens.

Chapter Five

'It's bloody impossible?' Protestation hissed from Van's mouth. 'They're got to be here!' He could see they weren't. 'Why creep off when they had us cold? A bit of patience and they could have destroyed us easily.'

He wondered if they were invisible. No, that was stupid; they'd been seen. But suppose they had an invisibility they could switch on and off? That was more stupid. If they had it, what was the idea of exposing themselves in the first place? Why set a perfect ambush and then fail to keep the appointment themselves? *Clearly there's a factor involved of which I'm ignorant. But what?*

The answer shifted- briefly at the bottom of his brain, so transparent and uncomplicated, so inviting and complete, so infuriatingly obvious. And so elusive. Channen sensed it was there, but he couldn't snare it. Vainly he sought it in his mind, till Andri suggested one possibility. 'If they've continued around four, to sneak up behind us -'

It didn't feel quite right to Channen. 'I doubt it. Where's the advantage in it? They'd hardly find a better chance than they've already had.' But it was an idea and it threw into stark relief another deficiency of the probes: lack of panoramic vision. Still, radar and auditory devices should warn of any attack from the rear.

Should he countermand the order under which a watcher had to spend the period in Ogan's Eye-booth? Probably, since the aliens weren't within the screens' scope. It ought to be safe enough for the watcher to become a listener again and pass his time on the couch in the normal way.

Unless the aliens were a subtle bunch. Just how strangely did their brains operate? Had they planned on such a move? Did they intend to swoop back into sight and loose a torpedo when it was least expected? Channen had no clues to help him make a decision.

Only the deep-down echo of a truth so lucid he couldn't see it, so simple his mind couldn't encompass it. And the skimming memory of a familiar weapon. He had nothing concrete, nothing positive, nothing real. He turned irritation on himself. *Who's the Integrator around here? Who's the rare six-senser? The man that's sup-posed to collect the threads, the hints, the half-facts, the guesses, and weave them into shape? Who's the man with intuition, the magician, the supreme solver of riddles? Me! Okay, so why can't I solve this riddle? Because I can't grab hold of that little truth-echo and force it into louder sound!* It wouldn't even whisper. It merely reverberated inside his skull, cathedral-quiet, flipping from wall to wall, from cell to cell, down the aisles, along the corridors, a ragged fragment in his mind, untraceable.

He chased it. It ran. He chased faster. It ran faster. It wouldn't wait for him. It was part of him - but too swift, too agile, too sprightly, too sprite-like a part. He gave up the pursuit as hopeless.

His thoughts were weary with going nowhere. *Leave things as they are. No choice but to rely on circuitry I don't altogether trust.* Somehow he postponed the weighty lethargy and straightened purposefully. 'Anyway, whether we get through intact or not - which might be purely in the hands of the -' 'Gods,' Keek supplied obligingly.

'Could be, though I didn't want to say it. We've a lot of work to do. A planet to check out.' He pointed with overt loathing at four.

Andri rested his elbows on the control-panel and said: 'Hatches!' Immediately they opened. A bar of blackness appeared above the scout-ship, a star-pricked rectangle. 'Clamps!' They cut off and metal arms shunted the vessel upwards out of its dock between the probe's two skins. 'Release!' They released it and gave it a gentle shove. It drifted through a mass of appendages and moved away from 13, into emptiness. *Far enough!* He tripped levers. The nose dropped as the engines caught.

The scout arced down towards four.

He stretched. *More room in this scout than in the infernal station, relatively! They certainly weren't built for comfort!* He luxuriated in the wonderful glow of freedom, the cessa-tion of the unbearable closeness of everything inside the globes: the walls, the grating of personalities like a nail scratching glass, the claustrophobia. *The walls of steel, those other walls of stone! Years ago! And god-mad Medusa!* He shuddered, battered by awful memories.

Across Andri's mind ran sincere gratitude for what Van had done. Amid the wrangle with Ogan he'd had the con-sideration to spare a thought for the Frenchman. He knew how long he'd waited for a trip like this. Channen could have voted himself into it, or Keek, or Ogan, anyone but Jocelyn. Instead he'd asked Andri - asked, not told - and hidden the reason out of sheer sympathy. *Just as he's hidden my past ever since we left Base, except for a few occasions when jealousy's pushed him to — No, that's over! Thank you, Van!*

Andri skipped the ship through clouds, rode updraughts of air, slowed with the tugging of atmosphere, fell out of the sky towards four. The scout lowered itself on flames and his hands coaxed it to a fair, but

far from expert, landing. *Not bad for a man who was rushed through training, a man who's, apart from it, a self-tutored cast-off!* He felt in-ordinately proud of the achievement.

And then every nerve jangled.

He'd forgotten the aliens and now a frightening thought intruded and he remembered. They'd vanished from space. He and Van had wondered where they'd gone. Off into obscurity to await a better opportunity - not that they'd ever get one! — or around planet-four to take EG13 unawares from the back?

Or had they *landed* on four? Would he see 13 again? *And you, sweet blind Aphrodite?* Andri wished he had a gun.

Ruthe Ogan stamped on the floor in infantile rage, her face crimson. 'You utter fool, Channen!' The name's Van, Ruthe.'

The enforced politeness was lost on her. 'If all our instruments insist there's no reason for a surface-check on four, who are you to order one?'

He leaned forward on to the edge of his chair. The rec-room grew suddenly quiet.

'Only the Integrator, Ruthe! Only the boss!' Did they have to hammer it out again? The argument had already flashed once, in Control, before Andri went down.

'But what motivated you?' she demanded curtly. 'Against electronic evidence —'

'Evidence? Go to hell! What price electronic evidence when the Company's report assured us we were bound for a safe, uninhabited system? Do you call one death and two comas the result of being in a safe place? Do you call ships and missiles an indication there's no life here?' He leaned back, slowly mastering his anger. 'I ordered planetfall, against the — evidence — because I'm what I am: the Integrator, the six-senser.' He tapped his head. 'Intuition; a guess, if you'd rather I phrased it thus. I'm telling you there's something down there, alive and intelligent. Don't forget, our objectives aren't just new metals and the like. If we by-pass possible cultural contact, we've failed in our jobs.' *The bitch! I don't care what her fancy gadgets say, I say different!* Van had scored often enough with his abnormal powers to have a high degree of confidence in them. They hadn't proved much use in locating the missing aliens, but - 'Intuition!' she sneered. 'Of what, exactly?' Her icy tone flustered him.

'Of - of something: of *life!* I couldn't say what; I don't *know?*

'I think perhaps you do,' she said in an altered voice, restrained. It reminded him of the hush in terrestrial air, the pregnant calm while thunderclouds built up in a summer sky. Then she contradicted herself again and the storm broke. 'I believe in your intuition in this instance, Channen; I believe you've sensed living beings below us, on four. And I've no doubt whatsoever why you sent the Frenchman down! Oh, I've noticed the way you ogle at that girl of his, your lascivious -'

Fury mounted inside him. 'What's that got to do with it, even if it's true?'

She smiled; he hadn't denied the accusation. 'Just this: what you've sensed below - or what you think you've sensed below - is the aliens! It'd suit you fine if that saturnine Feeler didn't return, so that —' Channen was on his feet, trying not to yield to the impulse to strangle her. 'So that - *what?* No, don't tell me; I wouldn't want to see inside your filthy, distorted brain!' He compelled his hands to drop. 'No disrespect, Ruthe,' he said tightly, 'but you make me sick!' *There! I've been waiting to say something like that for an age!* He grinned at her slack mouth, her wide eyes. *Never seemed to get the opportunity!* 'Now excuse me while I go and vomit!'

He ignored her stupefaction and went to lie down in Dorm-A. He had to think and think hard. *Were* the aliens on four? It hadn't occurred to him. Had it occurred to Andri? And if it had, would he put things together in the fashion Ogan had? Surely he'd more shrewdness than to size up the situation so melodramatically and arrive at such a spiteful conclusion?

Channen swore under his breath. If he'd consigned Andri to death - even unwittingly - Ogan wouldn't hesitate to make it look like murder. *Damn her! Damn her malice, her viciousness!* He'd asked Andri to do the trip for the best of all reasons and he must certainly realise it. Yet if the aliens *were* on four... Four was big. Channen crawled into the fact for consolation. If they were there, Andri didn't stand much chance of running into them. But if he did run into them, then Andri simply didn't stand much chance. But

he wouldn't. Or would he?

Van could have done the job himself, a routine follow-up to his own intuition. It had seemed only common decency — and perhaps a little recompense - to give it to Andri. He'd appreciate it. Channen was positive he'd appreciate it. Hadn't the sadness died from his eyes temporarily? Yes! Therefore the Frenchman had recognised Channen's com-passion. Van thought it a strange state of affairs when one person nurtured a persecution-complex on behalf of another. *Damn Ogan!*

He was aware of sleep trying to drag him under, but he'd no leisure for it; no inclination either; too much to con-template. He let himself assume the aliens weren't on four and by sheer effort of will avoided the flagrant concomitant question: *Where are they, then?*

Assumption: the aliens aren't on four. Accepted. So what *is*? Something his remarkable faculties had perceived, some-thing - living! Base hadn't spotted intelligence and Ogan's 'electronic evidence' disavowed the presence of any mineral substance that warranted a search. Channen's brain asserted the opposite, not after ratiocination but a direct jump to -knowledge? Or a guess? He admitted it was a guess, but a guess could be correct or incorrect, good or bad, on-target or light-years off.

Fact: he'd guessed at the existence of - something - on planet-four. However improbable, it was alive. If not the aliens, what? A low-level creature not dignified by the desig-nation 'intelligent'? Tempting! It would account for the life-tingle he'd experienced. It did account for it until he recalled the hundreds of worlds he'd orbited on which lesser animals were abundant, without feeling any sensation at all.

This had been a definite vibration of life and intelligence, not instinct.

What life, what intelligence?

It had to be the aliens or -

Something entirely new!

Intuition wouldn't inform him which.

A figure slithered from under the bunk: Keek. He shook his head and came awake instantly. He couldn't remember going to sleep, but that wasn't unusual. When he was tired, he slept; when he wasn't, he didn't. It made no difference where he slept and he always awoke totally free of the memory of where he'd been when weariness caught up with him. If he felt it stealing over him he set off for Jocelyn's bed. Sometimes he got there, sometimes not.

Channen's eyes were open but his mind was far away.

'Van?' Keek touched him. No physical response, yet a farrago of thoughts poured from him. Worry predominated, a host of separate anxieties intertwined with smaller sources of concern, major problems twisted around routine matters. Andri was due to report at three-hourly intervals; Andri might be dead, A vague guilt formed a fragile connection. The station's speed had been automatically retarded on entering orbit, to allow an examination not marred by haste; the station would perhaps be blasted out of space by a foe who could be absolutely anywhere - on four, in the system, out of it, anywhere. Probably on four, a big planet. Would it be large enough to preserve Andri from harm? If the aliens weren't on it, what was? Something new, something unknown. Not an ore, not animals, just something new, something unknown.

Envy of Andri —

That shocked Keek, but it explained itself. Jocelyn hardly counted in it. Van visualised her and then told himself: *No, that's over!* He wondered where the thought had come from, plucked out of the air, a reflection of someone else's. Whose?

Envy of Andri -

Van envied him the break from monotony, the release from Ogan's insufferable tongue. He could have had the break himself, but he'd given it to Andri for commendable reasons. He didn't regret it. Suddenly his conscience pricked as he pictured four, and possibly the aliens, and possibly the Frenchman lying dead.

And something new, something unknown!

Damn Ogan! Damn her monstrous insinuations! If she were a man —

Channen wasn't even sure he had the strength to take her.

Only a short hop to planet-five. Would the probe be per-mitted to reach it? Would it entail abandoning Andri's corpse on four? Would the unproven new aspect reveal itself? Would the comas - ? Would - ?

Keek tip-toed out of the dorm, infected by worry.

Three hours! Jocelyn thought, distressed. He'd been gone almost that long and should report soon. She prayed.

She'd met Channen ten minutes ago, but he'd kept his distance, hadn't spoken. He'd deliberately avoided her, slunk away on what he must have fancied were silent feet; they crashed. Her acute ears couldn't be deceived by puny attempts at stealth. She could identify all the staff by the merest breathing-cadence, the sound of a footfall, the rustle of clothes.

But it wasn't the same as seeing.

There simply wasn't room for fear, now. It had passed.

Andri forgot his task and swelled with pleasure. He walked a thousand metres just for the thrill of walking a thousand metres. Then a thousand back. Then -

'Get a grip, man!' He snapped the command aloud to

himself. It didn't diminish the euphoria, the marvellous pounding of his heart, the trembles of gladness in his blood. His brain dazzled with spinning gaiety, with near-hysterical glee, with the terrific explosion of a single overpowering concept: *Freedom!*

Freedom to walk, to run, to shout, to laugh, to abide by his own laws for a while or by none at all if he chose! Freedom from rules, regulations, restrictions! Freedom from censure, from discipline, from punishment! Freedom from — Not EG13.

Titan Penal Complex!

He remembered the underground horror of cells, mess-halls, 'correction-blocks', the hospitals where they dumped the shattered, the incurably sick, the insane. Most had entered the Complex more or less sane.

He remembered the guards, the sadists, the heavy-muscled, light-brained torturers who were worse than many of the prisoners. He remembered the armoured labour-gangs on the surface, the methane, the aching, tearing pain. More men went out in those gangs than returned. He remembered -

Hell! How did I survive the early years? Then trying to school myself near the end. Not that he'd served his full term yet; it still had years to run. This was the first world he'd trodden since a crash-course of training on Ganymede. No other Integrator had ever allowed him to pilot a scout down to solidity.

Was this at last a reward? *Thank you, Van!* He thought it must be a reward, firm ground and a landscape.

The view didn't amount to much: sterile rocks, drifting dust, low cliffs. But exhilaration added beauty to drabness, colour to lack of it, turned the dust-whirls into wraiths of shining mist, resplendent beneath a blue sun. And being alone didn't bother him. He'd been lonely before, in solitude, in solitary.

Gradually Andri pushed off the transient madness, the intoxication of freedom.

He sobered and began to examine the ground carefully for whatever Van had detected; scant chance of finding it, though. He hadn't been able to pinpoint it, just hopefully indicate a portion of the globe on which it might be discovered. Nor did he know what it was except that it was in some way alive.

Not down here, Andri thought doubtfully; not among these barren vistas of a world long-dead. If there's any life here on four, it must be —

The aliens jarred his memory and again he wished he had a gun.

He scoured the surface, sweating inside the faceplate although he wasn't hot. He was conscious of the flimsy fabric of his suit, the pliant footwear that would let him run if the need arose. A weighty space-suit and magnetic boots wouldn't present him with the nimbleness to run far enough or fast enough. He knew the clothes he wore now wouldn't either. He searched and endeavoured not to dwell upon the aliens.

He failed. They wouldn't quit his mind. If they were here, how distant were they? Or how close? And if they weren't here, what was?

Nothing, he decided, nothing living.

Yet Van had a superb record as a six-senser.. Had he made a mistake this time? It looked like it. Still, he must have had faith in his intuitive conviction or he'd not have ordered the scout to investigate, especially considering Ogan's hostility. He'd stayed adamant against it, and prevailed.

What did *la vache* hope to prove by resisting Van's authority at practically every opportunity? Did she

think her piety rendered her immune to the rulers? She'd been eager enough to back Andri in the dispute over the edited log-tapes. She'd sided with the rules then. And now, despite Channen's edict - Granted she appeared to be right about four, but the In-tegrator was the one who took the decisions. The least disregard for his judgement constituted incipient sedition. She was heading for big trouble if she persisted in kicking at authority.

Andri had kicked a good deal. He'd found a good deal of trouble, too.

He resolved to support Van - even to the extent of lying -if she caused any fuss over the tapes. Certainly Van had bent the rules himself, but his position carried privileges. Both Andri and Ogan had broken the unwritten rule by opposing him. Channen was the leader and Andri had learned the rough way to follow leaders - in particular those with the power to impose 'correction' on him. Weeks in the Black Hole, months on rations scarcely sufficient to feed a dog, interminable days in the labour-gangs with a monstrous lead weight strapped on top of his oxygen-pack ...

He struggled to forget Titan Penal Complex. He struggled to forget the aliens. He couldn't obliterate either memory. As he searched, he didn't expect to discover anything. Even if Van were right, even if life existed on four, Andri could be hundreds of kilometres off the mark. But he searched. He didn't anticipate finding anything. He found nothing.

A glance at his wrist and he hurried into the scout; time for the radio, in fact *more* than time. A few minutes late, but they wouldn't be worrying yet. He stooped to the mouthpiece, lamenting the poor vision in the ship: a screen, two ports, inadequate. 'Hello? Hello? Somebody fetch Van, please.'

'Channen speaking, Andri! How is it below?' Strain and impatience edged his voice. 'Bare. Very.'

'No sign of - life?' Now it was feverish avidity and ex-citement.

'None at all, Van. Four's quite dead.' Andri could almost hear questions buzzing in the Integrator's head: *No life? Why not? Was I wrong?*

And perplexity and disappointment. 'Only me,' said Andri, 'and -I wondered about the aliens.'

'So did I! I think you ought to get back, and be hanged to my intuition!'

The Feeler paused before replying. A flash of independence moved in him, retained even through the years in the Complex. 'Make it an order and I'll come fast, but I'd perhaps be no safer and there's a lot of ground to cover yet. Shouldn't I stay and keep looking?'

'I don't like it, but okay. Just be careful! First hint of danger, *out!*'

'It's a promise. How's tricks up in the sky?'

'Reasonable. Apart from Ruthe, who seldom is!' Channen laughed a brittle laugh. 'I'll bring Jocelyn to the radio; I imagine you'd enjoy hearing -'

His words choked off into enigmatic silence.

Chapter Six

Keek watched Van dash to communications and take the call. Channen's and Andri's voices conversed and he went to fetch Jocelyn. Van would let her talk to Andri. He guided her into Control and heard the Integrator confirm it.

- imagine you'd enjoy hearing -'

And then he lurched out of the communications-kiosk clutching his head. Jocelyn stumbled, sobbed and fell to her knees. *Again!* thought Keek.

He couldn't feel much himself, a slight discomfort, no pain. His emotions whirled as he saw Jocelyn sprawl forward, hands clutching at nothing. She was crying, pitiful gasps, tearless. He supposed the ducts had burned out when the sight had, in the long-ago yesterday of five-sensed infancy. Why did it have to happen to such a lovely girl by human standards? Keek couldn't judge her physical beauty, yet he knew Channen and Andri acknowledged it. But as for her delightful, ingenuous mind -

Van winced as unyielding floor-plates slammed into his back. A knife of hot agony cut through his brain. *Again!* he thought. Curiously, he was more furious at the Company than at the aliens. *That false*

pre-flight report —

He was certain he wasn't being rational, but he began to notice crazy suspicions nagging at his mind: an enemy in Ganymede Base preparing an erroneous report on the system, plunging an entire crew into jeopardy for a personal grievance. An Integrator made plenty of enemies over the years, men and women he'd dismissed, officials he'd crossed. If one of them were to -

He couldn't keep off a multitude of spectral recollections from the past: an inefficient Eye he'd recommended for re-training or dismissal; Far Search had flung the man out. An episode near Capella when a loud-mouthed apprentice had picked a fight with him and got home with a broken jaw and a lesson that size and conceit weren't everything. A conscientious Feeler had recorded all the details in the log and Far Search had flung the youth out. A sly little menial - one of the rare bad types among Keek's species — who'd . . . He couldn't remember. Anyway, Far Search had - done something or other. Or was it Clemence Mineral Corporation, or ... ? No, he'd worked for Clemence long before sitting the Integrator-exams on Ganymede. Ganymede? Ah yes, that harridan in Personnel with whom he'd argued about the ethics of stripping distant planets of... of what?

He couldn't remember. *They're twisting my brain again, turning it inside-out!*

Reason clouded under the alien attack. He couldn't conduct his own mode of thinking. He sought a reality to cling to, a sane idea. Andri's name supplied it.

Channen clambered to his feet and fell back. Slowly he turned over; metal bit his stomach coldly where his shirt had ridden up with the writhing. He wriggled, wormed, *willed* his body across the floor.

Somehow he moved, slug-gishly, awkwardly. Communications approached, stopped, receded. *God, I'm going backwards now!* His brain pulled him away from the kiosk and another section of his brain pulled against the pull and gradually he inched forward. Communications approached again. Communications surrounded him. He was in the kiosk. *Andri —*

Standing up drained him. He flopped across the console. The radio shouted to itself. He remained prostrate, helpless, gasping. Someone's voice roared into Control. 'Van? What *is* it? I - Holy Maria! Van!'

Channen pondered the familiarity of the voice. At length he placed it: Andri! He grazed his cheek. Blood trickled as switches dug into his face. It dragged along the panel. Eventually his mouth was near enough. 'Andri! We're — being hit!' He had to pause for breath and coherency. 'Stay put!'

'I'm coming to help, Van!' He paused. 'I'm untouched here, so I'm able to -'

'Stay - put! We've enough on!' Channen knew there'd be no one available to aid the scout in, but he couldn't tie down the proper words to say it. 'Just - 'I'm on my way,' Andri insisted.

'Stay - where you — bloody are! An order!' *Progress! Hit back - hard!* At least he could still get angry. They hadn't crushed him yet. And they wouldn't!

He lay quietly, believing it. The radio shouted, then finally subsided. Keek stood bewildered.

A figure appeared in the doorway: Ruthe Ogan, a sculpture of grooves, sharpened edges, planes, the curve of large breasts, the lines of square shoulders. A book of ancient poetry hung from stiff fingers. Her face was motionless as a mountain's: dull eyes, creased brow, lips set in a snarl-like grimace of pain.

Keek realised it resembled the glare she'd speared him with after the incident of the cigar-stub and Van's doggerel. He was amazed that she didn't fall. She did.

A mannish fist thumped the floor with wild rage and she straightened. 'Bastards!' she shrieked. 'Bastards!' She paced and prowled energetically as though defying the aliens to stop her. 'Bastards!' It was a continual repetition now, a screaming of hate and resistance. Still she paraded around Control fiercely, daring them to stop her, to knock her down again. They didn't. Keek wondered if they could. A frenzied light blazed in her eyes, dangerous. He kept out of her way as she blundered about, feet banging to the echoes of her screams. 'Bastards! Bastards!'

You're one yourself, Channen managed to think, *but that's the spirit!*

He wished he could equal it.

Keek dived aside as she thundered by. He dragged Jocelyn into a corner and her mind lifted at the contact. She didn't recover fully, but she improved. He poured into her all the beneficial thoughts he

could raise: thoughts of sweeping green landscapes, of dreamless sleep, of home, of love, of Andri. Ogan had stopped, swearing, but her footsteps clattered noisily.

Channen tried to stand up. He succeeded.

Keek shielded Jocelyn, wrapped his mind round hers, his fingers round hers. He held her hand and her consciousness, succouring her, fighting for her and with her against -

What?

He didn't know, but he didn't cease fighting.

Ruthe was tenaciously hanging on to her own personal reality. Poetry babbled from her lips. Quotations bounced in the air, biblical. She marched, turned, marched, turned, marched. Her voice bellowed verses and extracts. Her feet smacked savagely. She marched, turned, marched, turned and -

The attack ended.

Why stick to a search-plan as rigid as 13's?

The question was in Andri's brain when he awoke. Nearly twelve hours since the attack and he'd examined a circular area two hundred metres in diameter with the scout as its centre. He'd searched methodically, scout to perimeter and back again, swinging through several degrees each time.

He'd found nothing.

He'd snatched a nap between his fourth and fifth call. He made the fifth and went outside. Stones and dust stretched away and he walked in a straight line, determined to maintain it. Why use a pattern when it was only a matter of luck anyway? In all probability Van had erred and four was as desolate as it looked. *And it certainly looks desolate enough: lifeless, empty, forlorn. I'm alone. Unless the aliens*

-

He walked.

One consolation, though. We know the attacks are specifically aimed at 13, not just a blanket-effect covering all local space. Or hadn't we known that all along? I think so. They're definitely after us rather than any form of life that happens to be in their way. In their way? What do they want? The same as us? What do we want? Anything to get Far Search a profit. Bon! Only how do they reckon profit?

Andri wondered if the fact that he'd suffered no pangs on four meant the attack hadn't originated on four. It was a thought that afforded shelter from the fear, but the shelter collapsed within a minute. A bolt of mental force — a narrow beam or shaft, or something he couldn't envisage - might just as easily have been shot from beyond the crags in front of him. They rose ahead, an unbroken serrated line, like the inverted jaw-bone of some monstrous animal, petrified.

So much for my plan! I shan't keep a straight course through those! Round them, then, and we'll see what they conceal! Aliens or—

He walked.

Van wasn't optimistic, just a little encouraged. The last attack had been the most violent yet, but everybody had survived. He felt a new respect for Ogan, for the manner in which she'd withstood it. It had appeared to be arrant madness - the prowling, the yells, the quotes and invocations - but he couldn't argue against one fact: she'd survived.

Fighting fire with fire? No. Fighting mental disturbance with a disturbed mind. Perhaps it was better in some cases to be unbalanced than to be stable. Certainly she was the most unbalanced, yet certainly she'd offered the best opposition.

And Jocelyn? She seemed the weakest, but was she? Couldn't blindness be an advantage? She'd fewer distractions, nothing to see, nothing to interfere. She could concentrate more completely on resistance. Nevertheless she'd fallen immediately. How much did Keek help? Not at all, or a hell of a lot? A hell of a lot! It must be good to have a friend such as Keek, a colleague such as Keek, a pillar to lean on, a mind to hide inside.

You're not so tiny, Keek, where it really counts. As Andri said, you're not the least of us. I wish you didn't resemble that slimy pest I was thinking about earlier; resemble him physically, I mean, definitely not in character! Still, there's muck in the cleanest of races!

Channen considered his crew a strong one. They'd come into the business for potent, though diverse,

reasons: Ogan's visitation from God - if it were true - Jocelyn's decision to do what she could with what she had, Andri's...

Well, Andri didn't have much choice, under the circum-stances. Fortunately he'd brought with him obstinacy, remarkable independence (bearing in mind the Complex), a tough body and a brain that simply had to be tough to have taken all the punishment and pressure. *Don't get killed down there, Andri! Please! My conscience wouldn't let me settle for the rest of my life. Not that I've done anything repre-hensible; I sent you to four in your own interests, not mine; you know that. But with that simian Bible-eater ready to pounce, itching to accuse! And with the aliens! And with — with something alive I can't put my finger on! Just don't get killed!*

Yes, it was a strong crew. Van hoped it was strong enough.

It should be. Correction: it *might* be. The most vicious blast so far and they'd come through. *Did your God help you, Ruthe? Did your gods help you, Keek? Who's going to help me? God knows!*

Channen smiled.

Question: what does it mean that the attacks are intensi-fying? Are we drawing closer to the source or are they step-ping up the power? Two-thirds of the way round four now. Any significance in that? Any clue to where they are? On four or not? What did I feel there? What can I still feel there? Is Andri okay? *God knows!*

Van didn't.

Andri!

Jocelyn thought his name over and over again as if the very force of her passion must make it enter his head, must span distance and halt him in his stride. It didn't.

She closed her eyes, a useless instinctive aid to concentra-tion. The darkness neither decreased nor deepened. It stayed the same as it had been for so many years, except that it now obscured her thinking as well as her vision. It enveloped her mind and she lost herself in confusion.

Ideas whirled, a miscellany without orderly processes to direct them.

Hidden enemies - invisible at the moment even to those capable of seeing and only glimpsed twice, fleetingly - strik-ing insidiously, insinuating, flicking panic and red agony across space. Where were they? *What* were they? Why were they doing it?

Had Andri crossed their path?

He was on four. Suppose *they* were also on four —

Alien intelligences? How similar to humanity? How dis-similar?

If the missile had detonated on impact -

If Van hadn't asked him to check four -

If Keek hadn't protected her through that last attack -

If-

She cried, dry-eyed. She wished she could cry properly. The anguish might squeeze out with the tears. She couldn't cry properly. There were no tears and the anguish remained.

The miscellany dissolved, blurring into black despair. Her awareness scorched and charred, a tract of desolation with a solitary thought branded on it in letters of fire.

Andri!

Decision flowered in Ruthe's mind. Obviously they had to try it soon, so why not now? No telling how many more times they could endure the intermittent torture. No indica-tion that it would stop, every indication that it would con-tinue until they were all as dead as the child in the freezer or as near death as the two youngsters in the sick-bay.

It occurred to her she'd prefer death to coma. *How close I came to that edge once! The drop into suicide, inviting! Another Temptation, eh? It only wanted a step or two and I was ready to take them, ready to hurl myself into emptiness and death and — whatever waits beyond!* She frowned, seek-ing true belief inside herself. It wouldn't quite reveal itself. *Whatever waits beyond? Don't I know? Is it only super-ficial, a sanctimonious facade I've thrown up, a bulwark against horrid reality? How hard it is to be sure!*

Two words intruded: 'Know thyself. *Oh, if only I could! Sometimes it seems I really do, right to the*

heart of me: when I look at the stars, when I look at the beauty, the ineffable, soul-shaking intricacy of it all, the magnitude, the Design! Then, I know myself. But sometimes —

Covertly she glanced at Channen and Keek. *What would that pair say if they saw the wavering in me? They'd mock me to the edge again: fickle woman, lie-liver, cowering behind a fortification you aren't even positive you believe in! And too damned inflexible to ever show a flaw in your defences, those defences you've erected yourself but whose actuality you can never wholly trust! Yes, it'd be the edge for me and I'd take the couple of steps and -*

She fled to her decision, to halt the flow of hideous thoughts.

Obviously they had to try it soon, so why not now?

She didn't put it forward as a suggestion. She asserted it. 'We've got to contact the aliens, find the reason they're hounding us, talk out our differences!'

Keek paused in his polishing. 'Excellent, idiotic Ruthe!' He'd adopted his most affable voice. 'Just tell me how and I'll do it! The radio, perhaps? What's their wavelength and call-sign?'

She restrained herself and sighed instead of snapping.

At mention of the radio Channen jerked. *Get with it, Andri: the radio! Three reports you've missed, nine hours without a word!* He already felt guilty though he knew he'd no need to. Ogan was staring at him. Was she even now work-ing on the exact wording of her indictment? Van turned away from the thought because it presupposed the Feeler's non-return. Nine hours without a word, and on a planet perhaps occupied by the aliens! *Non-return —*

Guilt expanded. Apprehension grew. *Please, Andri!* Much longer and he'd lose the best opportunity for rejoining 13, which whilst not irrevocable would be inconvenient and mean a lengthier trip for the scout. Still, it had plenty of fuel. An extra few thousand kilometres wouldn't be fatal. *Is he dead? Word it well, witch!*

She said: 'I don't think -'

'Eternal gods, she admits it!' Elbows banged.

She sighed again. 'I don't think it'll be easy; it may be impossible. But it's clear we must give the communications-problem a lot of thought.'

Channen had communications-problems of his own. No reply from 4 or 37, not a syllable from Andri. 'It *will* be impossible. How do they communicate among themselves? How do we locate them? There isn't a chance!' *Is there for Andri?*

'Merely keep an open mind, that's all I ask. One of us might dream up something.' An open mind? Dream up something? That was Channen's speciality and it could have landed the Frenchman with a load of trouble. She couldn't decide what to do about the affair if he didn't get back and if EG 13 did. And as for an open mind - what if Channen could read her? What if he could perceive the inner conflict? His insight was astonishing. Could he see the doubts? He was looking. Could he see?

No, he'd jump at her with tongue flying if he could.

She almost wished he would. She yearned for the push that would show her the edge. *I'd be compelled to sort myself out, go in one direction or the other: choose death or try and salvage a little life. And I believe I'd spurn the offer; I'd forsake life and walk off the edge and there'd be no Voice this time because I don't deserve it. Doubting Thomas! Get thee behind me, Satan! Over the precipice, Ruthe! You were shown the road but you couldn't stay on it! Expose me, Van! Masochist!*

She cried inside. She wished she could cry properly. Her image wouldn't allow it. She didn't cry properly.

She stood, pushing down on the arm of the chair. A pain nipped her stomachy She left Control; Channen's level gaze had become intolerable. Could he see? Could he *see*? Pon-derously and tired - *so tired, tired, tired!* — she sought the sanctuary of the rec-room, the refuge of poesy, the rhyme and the metre of a bygone age.

Keek oozed relief. 'The gods are occasionally merciful!'

But Channen wasn't in the mood for quips; he either ignored it or hadn't noticed it. 'I'm worried about him, Keek.' The least disconcerting explanation he could imagine was that Andri had temporarily run

amok under a sudden excess of freedom. 'I can't turn time back, but...' *Why did I send him? Why did I send anybody?* 'If I'd paid attention to the instruments instead of my own guess —'

'You did right! You're a six-senser, and you did right!'

'Glad someone thinks so!' It was heartening to have Keek around, lifting depression, raising hopes, relieving monotony. Strange that one of the most acute minds in the probe - perhaps *the* most acute - should have the lowliest of jobs, the worst-paid, the least rewarding, the humblest. Not that Keek bothered with reward; to serve Jocelyn was recompense enough. And he wasn't humble; he was proud, never arrogant, just proud. Van blessed his luck. Out of Keek's species, he must surely have selected the best.

'She sounds restive.'

A book crashed on to a table in the rec-room. Ogan could be heard pacing again, muttering, melancholy. A door hissed.

Channen felt concern for Andri leaning on him heavily. Would he make it for the rendezvous? Would he be obliged to take the scout on a longer flight than ought to have been necessary? If so, had he enough skill to handle it in deep space rather than on a relatively easy planetfall? Was he even alive to handle it? Or had he met more than any man could handle? More than all mankind could cope with?

'The Ogress isn't happy,' Keek observed.

A door hissed. Footsteps clomped.

Van discovered an out-of-place levity, probably due to Keek's presence. 'Would *you* be, if your mirror told you what *hers* does?'

'Not a bit!'

They both laughed. Footsteps clomped. They both turned.

Ruthe walked in carrying a corpse.

The cliffs came closer. Again the resemblance to a jagged row of upturned teeth struck Andri. Teeth bit. Was there anything on four capable of biting? If so, could he bite back hard enough?

He fancied he could. He fancied too much for his own peace of mind.

He'd never been an imaginative man. He considered him-self down-to-earth - *no, not that!* - even stolid, but certainly not imaginative. Why then should fantastic ideas burst on his brain unbidden? Ideas of inconceivable aliens, ideas of some substance Van had guessed at in defiance of the instruments, ideas of impossible life on a world which his every instinct insisted was dead, ideas of danger where the eye could see at a glance there was no danger. A game of question-and-answer played with him. *Fantastic ideas, Andri! Why bother with them?* The answer was blunt and realistic. *Because, I can't shrug them off! And because I'm not convinced, now, that anything's fantastic!*

He swung left and had to go out of his way farther than he'd thought would have been necessary. He didn't count the strides. When he reached the end of the ridge, he went round it quickly but full of forebodings. *Fear? No, this isn't fear. I've tasted fear before, many times, and this isn't it.*

So what is it? He was near the point where he'd have to turn right and face whatever lay beyond the cliffs. His pace accelerated. *Stubborn! Fools rush in!* He didn't intend slow-ing, but suddenly he stopped altogether.

Why? He didn't know.

The corner waited for him to round it. What else waited for him? Anything? Nothing? *That emotion again! What is it? Those wild ideas!* He told himself that at his age it was pretty late to start being a coward and he walked forward and the wild ideas clung and then he was within mere metres of the corner and he recognised the emotion.

It was fear!

He didn't understand it. All at once he did: fear of the unknown, a primal, atavistic wrenching of the guts; slightly different, deeper, darker, more loathsome than terror of the law, the trial, the punishment, 'correction', the Black Hole, the vile food and vicious guards. This was dawn-fear, a horror with a stink of jungles. He went round the corner admitting his fear and saw nothing.

His nerves relaxed. *Life, you are a sick joke! Who's doing the laughing?*

After that it seemed easy: a steady straight-line search, eyes down, studying the ground: dust, rocks, desolation. Breezes whispered without even a shrub to stir. Distant crags rose, silent on a castellated horizon. Andri pressed on, eyes to the arid ground.

A word murmured importunately in the back of his mind: radio. He knew it had significance but he took no notice of it Radio? Dismiss it! Press on!

And another word: time. Time? No, it meant less than nothing. *Time?* It suggested haste, urgency, caution. *Haste? Here where even the wind is lazy? Urgency? Why, the world itself lacks urgency; the dust drifts so slowly. And caution? I've passed the threshold of fear, the cliffs. What need of caution now?*

Yet the words persevered, quiet echoes: radio, time, haste, urgency, caution.

Plus a dim awareness: *as long as it takes you to get where you're going, that long will it take you to return!* But he couldn't say where he was going exactly, so the awareness sank and became unimportant — except that somehow, insistently, it tied in with the radio, time, haste, urgency, caution.

Andri searched, eyes grounded. Dusk generated itself from the unseen setting of a blue sun. Crepuscular shadows stretched, shadows of crags and of rocks and of a stooped, questing man. *What am I looking for? The fruits of Van's intuition, should any hang on the tree of his six-sensed brain! How can they, here on a dead plain? And yet, his previous successes - Has Van really sensed an absolutely new factor?*

Andri sought without knowing what he sought, oblivious of the darkling sky, the moribund shadows, the advent of night. It stole over the landscape as perilous irresponsibility stole over his mind.

He walked into a world of growing gloom.

Suddenly cold shock stopped him.

Chapter Seven

She held the body as though it had no weight. Thick arms clutched it to her and the face was hidden, snuggled as if for protection against a flaccid breast. *Frustrated maternal instinct? Frustrated sexual - ? Frustrated, anyway!* Hands hung, rigid. Long black hair curled over her arm, limp in death.

Keek stiffened. 'Jocelyn!' *Oh, Immortal Spirit of Love, how could you - ?*

'No. Andri's trainee,' she said gruffly, yet with a kind of grim, misplaced joy. Cold tenseness drained from him leaving an inappropriate elation in the presence of death. Peculiar how the eyes played tricks, picked out the most awful possibility and made it look real for an instant before revealing the truth! A second glance and he realised the stupidity of attaching Jocelyn's name to just a bundle of black hair and the fact of death.

Unceremoniously Ruthe dumped the inescapable fact on the floor. *God! Why am I so morbidly absorbed with the subject, so irresistibly drawn to it? I had to go and check on the girl; I had to go and check on the youths. First I find a dead girl, now a dead lad! 'Surely not the freezer again, Van? It'll get crowded. I thought - outside...'*

'No argument; I agree.' Channen moved towards the lockers for his suit.

'I'll see to it.' Ogan suited-up and hoisted the corpse on to her shoulders with ease. He watched her and remembered his sentiment over the girl, the child, the clay in the freezer. Masculinity made it different.

Why should it? He shrugged. He had no answer; it just did. A dead boy stimulated no tenderness in him. On Ruthe's shoulder drooped a dead youth, no more, no less, a *thing* now, not a person.

She carried it out, to Keek's relief. He prayed the ghost would follow the cadaver. On the hull, her thoughts flew. Here, she could believe. She saw the heavens, a dramatic tableau of star-splashes on ebon infinity, a wonder of colour beyond imagination. Suns shone eternally. Meteors flickered ephemerally. Celestial radiance bathed her mind and her eyes, her heart and her soul. *Yes, I have a soul! I believe, I believe! Here and now, at least! Though -*

She refused to think about the doubt-hours, the Thomas-times.

She could believe!

Praying fervidly, she hurled the corpse into the grave of space, the tomb with no walls to confine. It bobbed away, tumbling end over end, its face to her, its back to her, its feet to her. Soon it was a dot, soon no dot, nothing. 'Amen!' she said to no one, and stared entranced at the divine chiar-oscuro, at Creation in its everlasting glory. *I believe!* She believed.

Inside, Van and Keek watched through Andri's screen: Andri, who might not come back, who might be as lifeless as the lad, who might not make the rendezvous.

Channen smacked the panel irascibly as the corpse diminished. 'That'? it, then! The Feeler-trainee gone and the Feeler . . . ' He couldn't complete it. 'If Andri's - you know - who's going to man this booth?' 'Not much choice.' Keek sat down, familiarising himself with the controls. They seemed fairly simple to operate and he thought he'd be able to get by if the Frenchman didn't return.

'Wouldn't work, Keek.' Channen grimaced as the twisting speck finally vanished. *Have you vanished, Andri? Of course you have, but, I hope, not as irretrievably as that!* The screen held only Ogan and space. 'Try the tacto-gloves.'

'Try the - ? I see!' Keek's hand wouldn't reach the sensi-tised cups at the end. 'Couldn't we shorten them?'

'We'll have to if necessary, but it'd still hamper efficiency.'

Keek counted his fingers. 'It certainly would. By a quarter, if my arithmetic's correct'

'It isn't. You've forgotten the plater and the grappler.'

'And my own physical inadequacies!' He dilated nostrils at the two places where his thumbs weren't.

'Ruthe'll have to take over here and you on the scanners.' *Christ! I'm already formulating plans for his not coming back! I've given him up as dead!* To convince himself he was being too pessimistic, he added: 'As a temporary measure, until he's here himself. And only in the case of a full alert with all sensors needed.'

'Oh, naturally,' Keek said airily. 'He'll be back.'

Van was stretching out his hand to touch Keek, to dis-cover whether the confidence was feigned or not, when the air-lock's mechanism sounded and Ruthe entered.

She unsuited. Her face wore an expression of profound satisfaction and tranquillity. Inwardly she wondered how long the spiritual warmth would last. How many hours before the zeal-hangover shifted aside and the chilly morning-air cleared her system and let in the doubts again? *Cleared* it? No, dirtied it! It had been quite stainless outside — briefly, ecstatically - but the freshness wouldn't last.

She set her features into harsh lines and continued the partial masquerade.

'An unpleasant job done, Ruthe. Thanks.'

She stared at Channen. Could he see through her, into her? 'It was — an experience.' *Misleading, that! And an understatement!* Yes, it had definitely been an experience: standing alone with God in His own realm, a sublime, supernal sensation. And now she was inside the probe and it was fading. *Please send an Eye-alarm, a drug-infusion for an irregular addict who wants to be hooked utterly and forever! One who poses as incurable and doesn't wish to be cured!*

Keek folded her suit neatly and put it away.

She followed his movements, and thought about him.

Did *he* feel secure in his tenets, his articles of faith, safe with his plurality of gods? Were his alien deities as real as her God, or as false? Did he and she both glimpse Truth but interpret it differently? *Was* there an immutable Universal Truth, the same for everybody yet open to misconstructions because of intellectual variations? What did Keek expect after death?

Death? Now I realise why it fascinates me so: I've dithered on its edge and perhaps I'm looking for it but afraid of it!

And Keek's silly myths and legends: surely he couldn't believe in *those*? They were just time-passers, topics of con-versation, anecdotes to amuse bored minds. They were fic-tional, clever but incredible, ingenious but invented, diverting but not real. They were stories meant only to be entertaining.

She almost smiled. A quote came. 'Idle tales to fill an idle hour.' *It's foolish! Wandering Worlds — 'Mon Dieu!'* He gasped and dropped to the ground, scratch-ing at it in febrile excitement. Dust swirled gently over a rift in the surface-rock. Iridescent fulgency glittered magically in the lowering dark. Andri plunged his hands into it and scooped up dozens of gems. A dazzling cataract dripped between his trembling fingers, a storm of tumbling jewels, a fire-shower with no burning. *If this is what I think it is -* He sighed, then breathed a name in sheer incredulous wonder. *'Hyperdiam!'* It couldn't be, and yet it certainly looked like it. If not hyperdiam, then some stuff very similar. *Not alive, Van, but a fabulous guess!* He'd never seen the substance except in pictures or the occasional flash of a ring or brooch owned by a wealthy woman. *What an immense profit here for Far Search! Yet not half enough to buy me out!* Could he locate it precisely enough? It would be difficult but possible. Count the steps going back, then edge around the cliffs and walk to the scout. The station would have a record of where it had landed. Should be easy.

But for three snags: setting off in the right direction, keep-ing to a straight course, finding the cliffs. He might deviate and miss them altogether in the moonless night. If he did, he could wander on until he fell from exhaustion, lost. Still, daytime had to come and then he'd double back and try again. It could be a long process.

He slipped two of the gems in his pouch. The light had almost gone and he bent closer to the ground. *Mother of God! There seems to be vast deposit of it going down into the rock!* Beneath the scattered jewels lay a metre-wide brilliance, solid and unbroken, shining. *Is it hyperdiam? It must be! Though it's never been found in such an enormous mass as this.*

Andri scratched his head, doubting, suspicious. If it wasn't hyperdiam, what was it? And if it was, then such an un-precedented quantity all in a single block staggered his mind when he attempted to compute the total cost. He couldn't do it. It baffled him and he couldn't call on numbers high enough. His pouch contained the equivalent of an Integrator's salary for three years. He could have concealed both pieces between thumb and forefinger. An Integrator's salary for three years! People of Van's calibre commanded big money. *Not that they don't earn it, though. No-goods such as I, we don't earn a thing. That is, we earn it but we don't get paid it!*

Night was.

He tapped the pouch; the jewels rattled. How could that feeble rattling add up to the worth of Van Channen for eight or nine arduous trips? Ridiculous or not, it did — if it were in fact hyperdiam! And as for that huge block, which might go down into the planet - how far? - a metre, a couple, ten, fifty? No, surely not! Not if it was what it appeared to be! And if it wasn't - ?

But it had to be. It must be.

Only why does it continue to glow even in darkness?

The split in the rock was lit by a brightness, a touch of more-than-daylight in the black night. *Wild fancies, Andri! That's not intrinsic light!* Then why did it look intrinsic? *Very well, it's not! But it isn't reflected either!*

He glanced at the sky: no moon, many stars, but not enough light.

It wasn't reflected.

It couldn't be intrinsic. Or could it?

Yes, if it wasn't hyperdiam! But it was! Or was it?

He turned, orienting himself. Mostly it was guesswork. He picked out a direction and angrily insisted to himself that he hadn't done so at random. He walked forward quickly, hoping for the best, hoping for the cliffs, hoping for the scout. He tripped over stones. *Keep going! Hope!*

Words hung in his head: radio, time, haste, urgency, caution.

He wondered why he'd only brought two gems. Why not fill his pouch, give some to Van and retain some? Why not smuggle a fortune out when he was finally a free man? *Because I'm honest.* His lips parted humourlessly. *And a criminal!*

Black blindness engulfed him and he thought of Jocelyn.

Black blindness engulfed him and he thought of the sur-rounding night. What did it conceal? A man desperately insisting he wouldn't become lost. What else? A pool of luminosity on a barren plain. What

else? Nothing; just a man and a light on a plain. *Yet is it barren? Fine intuition, Van, but not quite accurate. This stuff isn't alive. I wish I believed that!* Thinking wasn't helping. Talking might. He spoke aloud, to push back spectres. 'Maybe with my dismal experience of the stuff, I just didn't realise it shone as though it had a - life - of its own. No, not a life; a splendour. Maybe.' He walked in darkness. 'It's never figured much in my impoverished world. Only among the opulent, the industrialists who use it, the lucky bastards who get rich simply by being born to the right father.' Resentment came when he pictured royal diadems, bracelets, neck-laces, aglow with hyperdiam. He pictured its place in the wealthier planet-bound Companies: drill-tips, cutting-edges.

And he didn't really think it ought to glow.

It isn't alive, Van! Who am I trying to convince? He knew the answer only too well. Van didn't often guess wrongly; he had a reputation, a good one. He'd sensed life on four. Could this be it in the pouch? Could this be what *they* were after? If so, were they on four, waiting?

If so, where?

Andri stumbled through black silence, feeling blindly for nonexistent obstacles. Groping, he undipped the pouch. Groping, he pulled out the gems. Blinking, he stared at them.

They glowed.

Keek lay flat-out on the Integrator's couch, a relaxed metre, eyes closed. He'd hear any alarms. It pleased him that Van had rescinded the order concerning watch-duty in the Eye-booth. It was comfortable on the couch. He opened his eyes.

By turning his head he could see the master-screen.

Planet-five showed large in it now, as 13 left four behind *-and Andri!* — in its inexorable swing towards another world. Three satellites circled it, two visible in full. One was a bulge at the bottom of five's disc. They'd be checked as the probe checked their parent. Small five and its small family increased almost perceptibly.

Beyond, planet-six awaited eventual examination.

Keek worried about the Feeler. He'd missed ten radio-calls. Thirty hours and no news of how he was or even *if* he was. The non-human found in his mind images of the staff's various reactions to Andri's prolonged absence.

Channen: a pensive expression which Keek suspected had more behind it than the fact that the scout had lost its best chance of rejoining 13. That, and a perpetual anxiety.

Jocelyn: a face rendered far less beautiful by dismay, a constant twitch of her lips, a quivering that threatened tears but couldn't fulfil itself, an unsteady hand. In short, a perpetual anxiety.

Ogan: nothing except for semi-accusing glares at Van. No outward anxiety.

Keek closed his eyes again and the radio blasted into noise, Andri's voice. 'Hello? Whoever's there, fetch Van!'

He ran to communications, 'Andri! Gods be praised! Are you okay?'

'Yes, yes,' the voice replied impatiently. 'Fetch Van! Get going!' 'I've gone.'

He shook Channen awake and stood aside for him to rush out of Dorm-A.

'Andri? Thank G - You all right?' *Hell, what a relief! I was beginning to feel like a murderer! Irrational, but there it is!*

'I'm still alive, *merci!* Had trouble finding the scout, lost all thought of time, lost myself too!' Channen couldn't raise a reproach. Andri was unhurt and that was what mattered most. 'And perhaps my laxity's justified, in retrospect. A find!'

'A find? What?' *I'm vindicated, too. Rely on my intuition, crone! I said there was something alive down there and —* 'Living, of course?'

'No, inert.' Andri paused, dubious. 'I think. Or rather, I don't know what to think.'

'That sounds garbled. Try again.' *Inert? It has to be alive! Something is!*

'I may - repeat, *may* - have located an incalculable deposit of hyperdiam.'

Channen's fingers tightened on the console. Hyperdiam? The most valuable of all known precious stones,

the most decorative, the most sought-after, the rarest? 'You said incalculable. Aren't you exaggerating?' He remembered being shown an idiotically tiny piece once; he'd been told it could have bought a quarter of the city.

'If it's what it may be, no! I've brought two chunks and left hundreds more.'

'So it could be feasible to stay down, collect it all and save the big ships a journey? On second thoughts, maybe not. There could be other deposits. I'd say stop there and trans-port your hundreds of chunks to the scout. Is it far?'

'Not far, Van, but impossible! Here's the incredible bit: there's a solid block a metre across, going down into the rock I don't know how deep. Suppose just a centimetre or so, it'd still be gigantic compared to any intact piece I've heard of. And it could go plenty deeper!'

'Not if it's hyperdiam it couldn't! It simply doesn't come that big!' *And it isn't alive! So what is, on four?* 'Nowhere near so large!'

'So I understand, Van, but this -' A faint rattling sounded in the receiver, meaningless to Channen. 'This, I don't understand! Tell me, does it shine by itself in darkness?'

'I've only seen it in daylight. Probably it could seem to. Reflection.'

'No moon here. Black as Ogan's heart! No reflection, yet it shines. It appears I've impugned the accuracy of your intuition. I've never met life like this before, never even any-thing similar; I don't think it's hyperdiam, Van, not any more!'

Channen didn't either. 'I'm depending on your judgement now, Andri: does it look at all dangerous? If it is, get rid!'

'Can't be. Can't have the intelligence to feel hostility. Possibly only alive in the same dim way as a worm, a snail. A plant, even.'

'Possibly,' Channen said reluctantly. *I'll swear I sensed more than that! Life and intelligence! Though how can a stone be intelligent? Have to risk it. If it is hyperdiam and we surrender a fortune for Far Search, a certain person'll make damned sure the tapes learn about it if she learns about it herself!* He knew how hard it was to keep a secret inside a probe.

'I'll bring it up, Van.'

'Hold on a minute!' Channen calculated rapidly. 'Look, we're halfway to five, soon be dropping into orbit.' *Curse this short inter-planet gap!* 'Even with the extra speed and manoeuvrability of the scout, you'd not close with us before we reached five farside. Then you'd have to chase us.' He fell silent, trying to decide on the best manner of uniting probe and scout again.

Andri spotted the obvious plan first. 'How's this, then? I'll take-off for five and hit it from another angle, loop around it and meet you. I know your trajectory, so there's no problem.' He laughed drily. 'You'll not be leaving it in a hurry, I imagine?'

Van acknowledged the truth by a chuckle. He deliberately omitted to mention the aliens. If they were on four, Andri would be getting away from them. If not...

Andri said he intended to lift-off immediately, and contact broke. Van turned, to see Ruthe behind him. Keek's tiny length was on the couch again, recumbent. She stared at him, her expression unreadable.

Fool! Countermanded order or not, I'll still use the Eye-booth for my spells; I need to!

Van bit his lip. How much had she heard? Why was she staring at Keek so fixedly? She placed her obese body be-tween couch and scanner, and Keek shrugged. Four hours of his period to go yet, but he didn't care if she stood there until she took root. He could always close his eyes or detour round her. He shrugged once more, disinterested, and looked at the back of the couch. It was preferable to the back of Ogan. , The Integrator contemplated blanking the screen. No, let her gaze if she wanted. Keek would come running if she grew obstreperous. *More* obstreperous, he amended. He moved towards Dorm-A to resume his interrupted sleep. His mind spun with unanswerable questions about whatever weird substance it was that the Feeler had discovered.

He threw the wrong switch and the scout tilted dangerously. Fire belched from two of the tubes, an unequal thrust. The others cut in as his clumsy fingers corrected the error. He told himself to remember

his training, rushed but supposedly adequate. It was difficult to remember anything except the aliens and the jewels in the pouch.

The ship lifted, wobbling, and flung itself away from four.

At first *he'd* been overwhelmed with joy at the prospect of landing on four. Then after the euphoria he'd experienced a new type of fear. Then excitement on finding the gems, apprehension on trying to find the ship, and joy again on doing so. With doubt about the stones crouching in his brain, he'd thought the delight would increase on quitting four.

It didn't because the stones were still near him. *Those wild fancies! That primal fear!* He forced himself not to look at the discarded suit and belt-pouch.

Five-system hung clear in front of him: the mother-world, a small moon, the visible half of a second; he couldn't see the third but he knew it was there. 'Hazards,' he said, think-ing aloud. He'd have to take into account the gravity of all four worlds, parent and three children. That meant precise calculations, fine adjustment of the controls, quick think-ing, dextrous manipulation, probably several lightning re-appraisals, sudden decisions.

He didn't feel confident.

A glance and he spotted a tiny speck in the scanner, top-left: EG13, moving slowly towards five, three-quarters of the distance covered already. The scout wasn't fast enough to head it off. *Meet it head-on, instead!* He grinned, altering course. *Curl around behind five and rendezvous farside, me and 13 travelling in opposite directions.*

That wouldn't be easy either: a fierce deceleration, then a gradual drift across space until he could dock. Van couldn't change 13's speed or trajectory, so all the delicate work would be in Andri's hands.

He didn't feel confident.

Five-system seemed to dive at him as he turned into it. One of the satellites now appeared larger than five. Swiftly he estimated various gravitational pulls. *I'm guessing!* Deftly he triggered different controls. *No awkwardness there. Just shows what you can do when you have to. I had to survive the Complex and I did!*

He realised he was enjoying himself, the unpredictability, the independence, the total reliance on self, the challenge. Suddenly he entertained the fragmentary idea of staying on with Far Search when he'd served his term and was finally at liberty to leave.

Sharp pain caught the base of her spine. Old age, she de-cided, and this bloody uncomfortable chair! But she didn't shift to the couch; she suffered, her back aching. The chair was in the Eye-booth and Ogan was in the chair, almost glad of the agony. Rapt, she gazed on Creation. She believed. She must do, to suffer so for a view.

Her thumb lingered over a button. How many times had Channen depressed it and cast Creation into a limbo beyond opaque plastic? How many times had he crushed her spirits by the use of a few muscles? And how many times had she forced herself not to turn and smack him in the mouth? Quite a lot, though the blow had never materialised yet. She wondered why she'd even reached for the button. Masochism again? An urge to blank the Universe and open the door through which the doubts would come trooping? A mental self-flagellation?

She snatched her hand away from the stud. A stern triumph was in her expression. *That's it, old girl! You believe! Tell yourself often enough and you'll -*

Believe it?

She watched the stars.

One-third of her spell had gone, two hours meditating on the Universe and on the button, almost pressing it, not pressing it, pushing down her thumb and - *not* pressing it! But how close she'd come to it on occasions! So close that it hurt inside!

She could hear Channen in the rec-room. Almost certainly he'd be reading one of her books. *If he isn't writing crap!* She resented his reading them - not altogether out of possessiveness, nor even because he seldom asked her permission first. She just didn't consider he had the soul to appreciate them in full. *The soul? Why, here am I with a soul so in-constant it can shrivel at the pressing of a button!*

In a subdued voice she quoted to the screen: — "Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." *Keats, you make me cry!* Tears damped her eyes. *I hate to argue, John, but I've always needed more! And we're not on Earth! I can see beauty, yet what's the truth behind it? How true is a beautiful dream, for anyone save the dreamer? Or is that your point? If it's beautiful for the dreamer, it's subjectively true, and to the devil with anybody else!* She dabbed at salty moisture. *I recognise beauty, but I can't completely recognise it as truth! For me, truth fades like switching off a light; a little slower, but* -The Eye-alarm buzzed.

Planet-five had central position in the scanner. Above it and below it, two satellites clung to their parent's hands of gravity. Planet-six was a tiny ball farther on, but she ignored it. It could wait. What she saw in the screen was important. 'Channen, here!' This was urgent, too urgent to allow of his sitting tight a while because of her tone or the appellation. She rephrased it quickly. 'In here, Van, please!'

He was already there. 'What is it? Oh, not again?' *Stupid question, Channen!*

'I'm afraid so. History repeating itself.' Only a small gap separated the upper moon from the planet. Slipping across it was an infinitesimal glinting dot, a speck, a ship! 'The aliens! They've been in hiding behind that moon all the time!' Van realised that didn't explain his placing them on four. Then he remembered. *The hyperdiam; the pseudo-hyperdiam, rather! It wasn't them I sensed, it was the gems. Only, how can a miserable stone have the intelligence I felt? There's more to this than I even suspect yet!* He felt utterly ignorant. His scalp prickled with the knowledge that he simply didn't know enough. *Good God!* 'Ruthe, am I imagining it or is that ship bigger than it looked before?'

'Slightly, perhaps. But don't forget we could be nearer to it.'

Somehow it didn't fit. He said, with reservations: 'Maybe. Unless it's another ship, a different alien. I got the impression earlier there was more than one of them involved.' *Or have we just happened to spot the same ship on three occasions? Or three ships, once each?* 'One's plenty to contend with! Start praying that's all!'

Her face evinced inner agony.

Van studied the dot but made out no details; just a speck, just a ship, unidentifiable. In his mind, reassurance at locating it warred against a conviction that he'd overlooked some vital factor. He couldn't locate the factor.

His thoughts reverted to planet-four. Had they left undiscovered a new form of life apart from the gems? The gems? How far could they be said to be alive? Andri had put them on a level with a worm, a snail, a plant. Alive, yes. Sufficiently sophisticated to be hostile, no.

They couldn't be dangerous and they might after all be true hyperdiam. *Yes, and they might not!* He wished he knew beyond doubt the jewels weren't dangerous. He doubted. The dot vanished into five-blindsides. *Still, if Andri thinks they're safe, okay!* True hyperdiam or not, he was sure he'd done the right thing in letting the Feeler bring them to 13. He trusted Andri's opinion and-
Five-blindsides!

'Ruthe, monitor Andri! Pin him down and see if he's the remotest chance of changing course before he reaches far-side five!' He ran for communications and knew how much chance existed. He bent to the radio. 'Andri? Hello, Andri?' Silence. 'Andri!' No reply. *Come on, come on!* He tried again and heard gruff sounds but no voice. *Lord, this is futile!*

He crossed Control and looked into the monitor: the lower quadrant of five, a moon, dark space, stars. No scout. Ogan suddenly appeared concerned. 'He could be anywhere, even behind five already or obscured by the moon. And would we see him anyway? He's not very -'

'We'd see a tiny dot, I think.' *This is only a gesture. He was committed the minute he lifted from four! I'm deluding myself into believing I can dream up an impossibility!*

Then another irrational thought: *It was his own wretched idea to circle five, yet I feel like a lousy murderer again!*

Chapter Eight

Andri fought the scout and the scout fought back. Inexperienced hands played over the controls, aiming for one switch, striking its neighbour. *Where's the dexterity now? What fool said you can do it when you have to?* The moon was vast in his screen and he'd misjudged the angle of approach. *You've done it once, man! Remember the Com-plex!* He stabbed at a lever; the adjacent lever fell. The vessel shuddered, rocking him in his seat, and plunged sickeningly towards the satellite.

Leather bit keenly across his chest, reminding him that he'd not forgotten the first lesson: strap in tight! He studied the panel, nervously attempting to recall which dial registered what. He hit switches, sometimes correctly, often not. Straps constricted, and his arms flailed as the scout lurched. His fists banged painfully against the metal, not in anger, just because he couldn't halt the careering ship. *You can do it, Andri! Remember the Complex!* Then he realised it was the wrong attitude. *No, forget the Complex; concentrate on staying alive!*

He did. He grunted with the effort and concentrated on staying alive.

Gradually the moon receded, but still it reached out for him, clutching. He knew he wasn't clear yet. Viciously he triggered controls, the right ones. Somewhere far away a voice shouted, 'Andri? Hello, Andri?' He was too busy to answer and the mouthpiece had snapped off; it hung in front of the panel, held by a coiled flex. *Andri! Just a minute, Van, damn you! I haven't enough hands!*

He struggled against the straps and bent forward until his chin touched the cool steel. His teeth fastened on the cord and he jerked his head back. The mouthpiece arced up, then fell on the panel. He heard a noise of breaking. A bulb smashed and the glass of a dial cracked into chips. *Two less to worry about!* His hands continued to manipulate the controls, but the radio was near enough. He leaned to it, glancing upwards repeatedly as the bulk of the satellite diminished and planet-five rushed in to replace it. 'Yes, Van, I can hear you.'

Footsteps clattered in 13, muted over the radio. 'Andri? Listen, have you any chance whatsoever of avoiding five on the course you proposed? Doesn't matter how slight!'

'Not a hope; you know that as well as I do. Why?'

'The aliens are moving round it. You'll meet them before you meet us.'

'Then it's just too bad. *C'est la vie! Ou la mort!*' He chuckled stoically.

'Andri, be serious! You don't have to rendezvous with us at the earliest possible moment; any time'll do. Let me think!' Channen thought. 'Say you pull out of your present course and get way from five. Come round it in the same direction we're doing, so at least we'll be together when —'

'No good, Van. I can't pull out; I've got a battle on to stop being pulled *in*.' Succinctly he explained the predicament: the moon shrinking in his screen, planet-five growing, escape from one world to face the menace of another. All the while he was striving for stability, his mouth to the radio, his eyes inclined upwards.

'Where exactly are you? We can't see you.'

Andri estimated where 13 should be. 'Behind one of these accursed moons, blindside to you. The charts assert five's a small world, but it looks pretty large from here!' He stared at five as though mesmerised by it. Another moon peeped round its rim. 'I've a second enemy sneaking in.'

Ruthe Ogan's deep tones boomed. Channen said politely but unnecessarily, 'Excuse me.' Andri heard him cross to the Eye-booth; Ogan wouldn't be anywhere else. A mumble of words ensued, then Van was back. 'We've picked you up in the monitor, emerging from behind the moon and moving towards -' He paused, hesitant.

'Go on, say it,' the Feeler prompted. 'It's too late, I'm right in the thick of it, and goodbye or farewell.'

'Something like that,' Channen admitted reluctantly. He endeavoured to make his voice sympathetic, but it came out sounding callous. 'You haven't a hope - of pulling out, I mean. We'll have to stick the way we are, both of us orbiting five from different directions.'

'As I said, *c'est la vie!* And there could be an advantage in it. They'll have to fight us on two fronts.'

'Tough luck on them! And on us; we've nothing to fight with!' Channen gave a resigned sigh. 'Anyway, out for now. Keep us up-to-date if anything unforeseen or disastrous happens.'

Andri chuckled. *I've come through the Complex; I'll come through this!* 'Nothing unexpected'll happen,' he re-plied lightly. 'I believe I can foresee all possible occurrences. And every one's disastrous!' He laughed as the radio died, then turned all his attention to the controls and the massive body of five. Terror shrouded Jocelyn continually: terror primarily for Andri, then for the probe, and lastly for herself. The Uni-verse was a dark anxiety, dark in her eyes and in her heart. Prospects of death and horror loomed before her and she knew that without Keek's solicitousness she'd have drowned in an ocean of macabre thoughts.

He was always there when needed, comforting, composed, optimistic, confident, passing on his bright emotions. *You've probably told me a dozen lies in the past hour, you rascal!*

A lie can sometimes be a good thing, even essential. I love you more for mistruths, not less! She touched him tenderly as he lay draped over a table.

She left the room and went into Control, feeling her way. Keek rarely slept but right now he'd nodded off in his kitchen. He'd be upset to learn she'd not wakened him, yet that had to be risked. She told herself she must strive for in-dependence; luck wouldn't stay with her for ever. *Keek* wouldn't stay with her for ever. Six consecutive trips they'd been together, but the next assignment - if there were one - might separate them.

Or had it been more than pure luck? Would some con-siderate person at Ganymede Base have arranged it? Van had the influence and he might have dropped hints in the proper places. Even lowly Keek could have done it; he was held in high esteem by everyone with whom he'd worked. Perhaps life wasn't so cruel, really.

She heard Channen moving around in Control. He escorted her to the Ear-booth although no alarm had buzzed. *He knows what I want to do: just listen, hope, think of Andri out there among the star-noise. And he's helping me. Yes, he could well have dropped hints; could well have made demands. Thank you, Van!* She didn't need to speak. She squeezed his arm in gratitude and he pulled away almost roughly.

The phones messed her lustrous hair. Madly, sounds penetrated. Andri's name seemed to whisper between them, while he himself flashed erratically between the perils of five. It had been marvellous to hear his voice and dreadful to hear of his plight. Somehow Fate appeared to have tangled her puppet-strings - maliciously or by accident or on a caprice? He'd fixed up one rendezvous, yet was being pitched into another, a meeting he didn't desire and from which he might not escape.

The scout sped over the curve of the second moon, a disc on the disc of five. *Like two coins. How long since I spent money?* Suddenly velocity decreased sharply, decreasing more, slowing to a quick agony in his head. Momentum flung him forward and the straps broke. Metal jarred his chest, brutal and bruising. He grabbed for support - *any-thing!* — and found it somewhere. Severed wire slashed his cheek as the panel split. Glass splinters flew and steel shards merged with them. A manufactured hail laid Andri's face open. He screamed at the pain. *Eyes intact! The crate wasn't designed for this! Neither was I! Or was I?*

Three forces fought to dictate the scout's future. Its own thrust poured out the fury of straining engines as Andri struggled with pain and decimated controls in an effort to maintain altitude and direction.

Planet-five and its satellite pulled with implacable gravity, equalising, slackening its speed but not gradually. It stopped. Outer plates ripped. Andri's shoulders wrenched, tearing his hands from supports. Impetus tossed him into the console again and there was a frightening eternity-instant of cosmic counterpoise. The scout hung motionless for a frantic heartbeat and then the equilibrium ended in the moment it had begun. Andri was free, turning the ship upwards and out.

He levelled off safely and continued around the planet. *Roughly in 13's path, I think. And in the aliens'!* He skipped higher, outwards, and checked himself for injuries: no frac-tures, bruises by the dozen, jagged cuts requiring stitches. He wiped a sleeve across his face to clean up the blood. Agony lanced and he snatched the sleeve away, reddened and wet. He'd succeeded only in pushing glass and metal fragments further into the multiple lacerations. It would have to be a gory session of minor surgery when he returned to 13, *if* he returned.

He stared at the screen and tried not to notice the pain.

He noticed it, but through it swirled the image of Jocelyn. Why did she love him? No answer. Would she still do so if she knew the truth? *If I could but see inside her mind, read her! And if she could read me/ Ah, that would be the testing of her!* He realised it was impossible and immediately re-alised it wasn't.

He remembered Keek, the triangle of love, the dizzying spiral of emotions, the interchange, the transcendent concord of consciousness which had staggered him by its fantastic bliss and potential. *Dear God, what incredible planes of con-joined thoughts that opens up! What a sharing of feelings, aspirations, dreams, experiences, memories! What fabulous realms of communicated joy! If man and woman can enter each other through Keek, then —*

Sexual fantasies danced in his brain, a complete blending of man and woman, mind and body, soul-to-soul, heart-to-heart, flesh against flesh and mind fused with mind, a union of body and brain and - A dot appeared.

Heaven's Mercy, the aliens! Hypocrite, you don't believe that nonsense! Don't look to inventions for aid; stop calling on imaginary non-entities! You're on your own, Andri. Rely on your wits, not superstition!

The shock of seeing the ship stiffened him. A deeper shock, in a way less hurtful yet at the moment impossible to assimilate, settled down in the nether regions of his brain, quiescent and disquieting. It waited there, not ready to swim up to the surface.

It either made perfect sense or no sense at all. He couldn't decide which.

The speck crossed the sphere of five, far below him but just close enough for him to spot alarming details. It travelled swiftly at a lesser altitude than 13's. Andri knew it could catch up with the probe and take it from behind. He compared speeds and calculated that he'd reach 13 at more or less the same time, if he were permitted to reach it. He watched for missiles but none came. *Puzzling, that! Why don't they knock me out while I'm here?* He shrugged, searching among the wreckage of the panel for the radio.

Twisted steel met his gaze, covered with powdered glass and curls of plastic. One of the gems shone amidst the con-fusion. What connection did it have with the ship and the mental attacks? How could it be alive? He knew it shouldn't be and he knew it was, somehow. *None of this fits! I don't understand half of it, not even a quarter! Dismiss it; find the radio! Get your priorities right and warn 13; find the radio! Not that they can do anything, but they must be warned; find the radio!*

He found it. He brushed off miscellaneous fragments, then pulled the mouthpiece to his lips. It came easily, trailing a severed cord.

It was too quiet. Something had to happen. Channen knew it intuitively and the rest of the crew knew it because it was so obvious. No special faculties were needed; it was obvious. Something had to happen.

Nobody spoke. The silence threatened. Expectancy tingled.

Nobody moved. The stillness threatened. Apprehension grew.

Nobody slept. The restlessness threatened. Fear clung.

Something had to happen.

Everyone was in the rec-room in various postures, none of them comfortable, none of them relaxed. Ruthe stood stiffly in the centre of the floor, forbidding and imposing, arms folded, face grim. Jocelyn sat upright, back straight. Her eyes stared at the wall without seeing it and her thoughts plainly but vainly sought Andri, somewhere, anywhere, everywhere. No contact yet from five farside, just the awful knowledge that he and the aliens were both there. She tried to cry.

Keek looked uncharacteristically ill-at-ease and mournful. He lay in a corner, tongue shifting over his teeth, nostrils wide. He didn't click but he wanted to, wanted to pierce the silence with any noise at all.

But I don't dare disturb it! I wonder why? And could I do it? It's so heavy it's squashing me; I want to scream! He neither screamed nor clicked.

No one was on watch in Control. Channen accused him-self of not being sufficiently strict. *Somebody should be on watch. On watch? For what? A bloody outdated term! Watch! We don't watch, we*

listen! He realised they could do it equally well from the rec-room. *The word's like every-thing else in this crazy game: obsolete!* He wondered whether to order someone through, to keep his authority on display. He decided not to and then accused himself again.

He wondered, too, about Andri and the aliens. Had they met? If so, had he survived? Van clenched his fists against the weight of tension. *Christ, this is unbearable! I can feel it in the air, a nervous waiting! I'm nervy myself and even Keek can't push off the gloom! Something has to happen! Somebody's going to snap!*

Somebody did.

Ogan moved slowly across to Keek's corner. Quite deliberately, she kicked him and Van's prescience told him the words the instant before they came. 'I blame you for all our troubles, you *alien!*'

Keek sprang to his feet. He didn't seem to bother about the pain, simply glared at her a hatred so fierce it astounded Channen. He was on his way to intervene when Keek said with terrible restraint: 'Please be so kind as to explain your-self!'

'I will.' A fleck of spittle slid from the edge of her quiver-ing mouth. 'Who's caused two human deaths on this probe? Aliens! Who's the only non-human in here? *This alien!* Who's the only one immune to the attacks? The *same alien!*' She stood over him, towering, and he held her eyes. She turned away first, moodily.

The unprecedented loathing died from his face. Dignified defiance replaced it. 'Your - logic? - sounds by no means convincing.'

'That's true, Ruthe,' Van endorsed. 'Now -'

'Keep out of it, Channen!' She emphasised his second name. 'Or, if you must come in, come in on the proper side! Your allegiances are -'

'With a non-human, yes!' *Prejudice! It always turns up sooner or later! They're not like us, so they must all be bastards! What an attitude!* 'Now either explain yourself sensibly or get out, lie down and cool off!' *If she won't go peacefully, can I force her? Andri could manage her, but can I? And how's Andri?* 'Which is it to be?'

'I'll explain,' she said, but not submissively. Fanatical ardour illuminated her sombre face. 'I believe this - alien -to be in league with those responsible for our misfortunes.'

Channen silently pleaded for Keek to laugh off the ridicu-lous impeachment, but he didn't. He stared up at her and spoke sarcastically. 'Absolutely right. That's why I poison all the food you eat; also why I stab people in their sleep. Why I stole the keys from Van's pocket and pilfered the guns. I shot you a few minutes ago, or didn't you notice?' A faint smile showed. 'You infantile monster! I'd howl with laughter if you weren't so tragic!'

'Don't mock me!'

'Mock you? What do you expect?' The smile faded into a serious expression. 'It's also why I took it upon myself to do the repairs when my fellow aliens clipped us with a missile! The risk -'

'What risk? I could have done it myself!'

'No, you couldn't. Your memory fails. Recall, please: you were out of things, a hideous heap - as usual! I'll grant, you'd have grabbed the opportunity otherwise. You're never slow at looking or going outside!' *The shrewd freak! He's opening me up without even touching me. How much does he see? How much does Channen see?*

Van was startled by Keek's uncanny perception. He'd shaken her by the statement. The sudden weariness in her eyes almost drew pity from Channen. *Don't weaken! Save pity for a woman who deserves it, particularly now with Andri gone! Ogan's had sixty-odd years. If she hasn't made a go of life, it's her own fault! Jocelyn's had so few!* He com-pared the two of them: youthful beauty to ugly age, equa-nimity to evil temper. How often he'd killed the screen on Ogan, yet how eagerly he'd helped Jocelyn listen in hopeful, hopeless futility during non-alert! *I'd even trust her on watch with the phones on; asleep, maybe. She never needs waking for an alarm. She hears it through dreams. Yes, I'd trust her any time. Just as I trusted Andri's judgement on the gems.*

The gems? He thought of them anxiously. What con-nection did they have with the aliens, the attacks? They were alive but they couldn't be intelligent. Could they? Perhaps. Unheard-of, but - perhaps. An

absolutely new life-form, but - perhaps.

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. The words rang in his mind and he couldn't quieten them. *It's incredible! I've come across life in scores of types, but never in stone! Does there have to be a first time? God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. Enough of that! Don't sink to her level and lean on myths. Don't -*

An Ear-alarm shrilled.

Jocelyn jumped up, stumbling forward. Keek guided her into Control and she put the phones on. She shouted at once, excitedly: 'It's -'

An Eye-alarm buzzed.

'Take it, Keek!' Van didn't notice Ogan start towards Control and then stop in amazement, scowling.

Expectancy tingled again and he felt something waiting to happen.

'I'm the probe's Eye, Channen!' *You keep standing be-tween me and the outside and you can't know how much it means to me!* Or could he? She wondered if he were doing it for sheer spite.

'Not just now you're not!' Keek was nearest and could cope with the Eye-booth. *Am I still counting Andri as dead? We've no Feeler! This is when —*

The Feeler-alarm clamoured.

'That's yours, Ruthe!' It made perfect sense. Keek couldn't reach the ends of the gloves and she could. 'I said, it's yours! Get!' She opened her mouth in fury, then sullenly lumbered to the booth. *The bitch's impervious to logic! Why can't she recognise improvisation?* He followed her through and studied the situation.

Ogan had seated herself, hands on the plates. The minia-ture globe's lights were green-okay except for those whose transparency showed useless cells. *Must be radar impulses from somewhere. She'll never interpret them right! No damage, anyway.* He hoped she didn't need to use the ap-pendages; she'd be clumsier than Andri.

Keek had a drifting image on the master-screen and Jocelyn's cry told what it was. 'Andri! The scout!' He was coming in steadily and Channen sighed, relieved.

Suddenly his attention fell to the bottom of the screen. 'Oh, no!' *Integrate, Integrator! If you can think fast enough!* 'Lock the scout in the monitor, Keek!' Keek did so and the image flickered down. Van took control of the main scanner and dropped the view. The bottom became the middle.

Another ship was approaching, distant but closing swiftly. Jocelyn gasped. 'It sounds like - ' She shook her head as if to shake away facts. 'No noise of doors yet.'

A whirl of memories filled Van's brain: a familiar missile, a sparkle of jewels, life on four, aliens, comas, deaths. He touched Keek and a thought shrieked: *If!*

Ruthe Ogan grunted. 'Curse these plates!' Her fingers played over them. 'I don't know what they're telling me. I'm an Eye, remember!' She looked at her own section, fuming. *What's happening? I'm in the dark!* She directed a sneer of warped glee at Jocelyn.

'Hold both screens as they are, Keek.' Channen turned, then qualified the order. 'Unless anything else appears! Use your own discretion.' He moved to the Ear-booth. 'How does it sound?'

'Good and bad. He's getting nearer and so are the aliens. No doors. Yet.'

'Thanks.' He hurried to communications and attempted to raise Andri. No reply.

'Monitor-check,' said Keek. 'He's virtually home; waiting to dock, I imagine.' He realised docking would be impossible before the emergency ended. 'The scout's in a dreadful state, but it's definitely under power. He isn't - ' Hastily Keek decided against speaking the word.

Jocelyn cried almost happily, without tears. Then she stopped, horrified. *Andri, go back, you fool! Around five, anywhere, just go back! Don't be here when these phones pick up the noise of doors! Please go!* But he didn't. He stayed.

Channen tried again without success, then straightened from the mouthpiece and glanced at the main screen. The ship had grown and was still growing, sweeping in rapidly. *This is it, the rendezvous we didn't want! Get out while you can, Andri! The probe can't run, but you can!* The scout stayed.

Van crossed Control and laid a hand on Keek's shoulder. 'They're leaving it late. Just about on collision-course. Soon be seeing details.'

'It'd be nice to identify them, Van. Nice but pointless.' *I'd like to know who's killing me when they do it!* The idea flitted from Keek's brain to Channen's. 'I can't hear you praying, Ruthe!'

The ship increased in apparent size. It sped into the scanner, larger and enlarging, larger and enlarging, larger and -

Details were visible: shape, colouring, true size.

Channen muttered: 'Aliens - ' He couldn't say any more. There was too much to say and no way of expressing it properly and making it fit into a pattern.

It simply didn't add up.

Keek's astonished thought fluttered:

Another probe!

Chapter Nine

Channen's thoughts revolved dizzily. Where were the aliens? Were there any aliens? Surely the other probe couldn't be responsible for the comas and deaths? He didn't think it likely; the missile, yes, but not the two deaths.

Even imputing the torpedo to the globe left doubts and questions. Granted the strangers' presence in the system clarified a few mysteries. Their fixed trajectory had kept them blindsided to 13 throughout the entire orbit of planet-four. The short gap between worlds had allowed them to gain the sanctuary of five's satellite before 13 was in a position to see them. But if their trajectory was inflexible, how could they have emerged from behind four to fire the missile? Answer: they couldn't. So what did? Answer: their scout.

He wondered if they'd utilised a larger scout capable of carrying weapons, which meant ripping out a tremendous amount of sensory equipment - which in turn meant they could manage without it and therefore must have known what they were after, before entering the system. It implied far more sophisticated circuitry than 13's. Were they after hyperdium? Channen hoped so because it wasn't what it seemed to be. Again, what price electronic evidence, what price intuition?

Obviously they were chasing high returns if they were prepared to commit murder. Did they think they'd found hyperdium? Van half smiled. They hadn't found it. The trace of amusement died when he saw the other station approaching, a little lower and faster than 13. They were close enough to fire but they didn't. He realised they daren't, since their orbits were practically converging and they'd run into the blast-area themselves. Had Andri deduced that? If not, why wait when even with the scout in poor shape he could evade what must seem imminent, inevitable doom? Had he a plan or was he - ?

Van rushed to communications but got no response. *Move out, man! They'll let us have it when they're drifting away towards six and break out their scout!* But Andri stayed doggedly, or helplessly? Muttering to himself, Van asked a question: why hadn't they spotted the probe prior to Ogan's glimpse as it went four-farside?

Keek answered. 'I'd say they thought they'd located hyperdium - perhaps with instruments so marvellous they're useless - only roundabout four and five, also six if they go that way. Entered the system from a different angle to ours and didn't bother with the first three worlds.'

'Plausible. If they head for six, the stuff's on it. If they don't, it isn't and their job's done. As a bonus they'll knock us out of space to cover any charge of claim-jumping! I suppose you recognise them by now?'

'Yes.' They were one of the unethical Companies who made a lucrative habit of 'straying' into systems for which legal rights had been purchased by orthodox competitors, pleading mechanical failure as an excuse; a disreputable firm who'd been sued several times for theft or industrial malpractice. They'd always left court exonerated in law but mistrusted by the legitimate Companies. Their crew would be dangerous, desperate: drifters, no-goods, riff-raff rejected by Far Search and the rest. Keek felt certain Van was correct; they'd obliterate 13 whichever direction they took. Why didn't Andri pull away? Andri stayed.

Ruthe Ogan came to the screen. 'Coleridge's painted ship upon a painted ocean. What a glorious ocean!' 'What a glorious ship!' mumbled Keek. *Send her back to the booth, Van; she makes my teeth rattle!* 'So glorious, it's going to blow you into heaven at the press of a button. Me too, and I'm in league with it!' 'I'll ignore that. Looks like a three-way tussle: them, the aliens and us.'

The probe swung past 13. Andri remained in the same place.

13 decelerated to drop into five-orbit and Van swore. 'We're fine targets now, slow and defenceless! To face up to aliens reasonably well, then go down to a load of pirates - it maddens me!' Where were the aliens' ships or ship? Were the poachers really in quest of hyperdiam, verifying instrumental readings taken outside the system? *Are all three of us searching for the same thing?* He considered it improbable. 13 had been looking for anything whatsoever and had found pseudo-hyperdiam. The pirates might have had their sights specifically set on hyperdiam and might believe they'd found it, although they hadn't. And the aliens - ?

He sighed in profound bewilderment. There was no telling what they wanted, where they were, what they were like. He sighed again, plagued by frustration. Would the other firm's giant exploitation-vessels already be in flight, following up a false lead, expecting hyperdiam and discovering instead something entirely different - and alive? He hoped they suffered for it. It was no wonder they always escaped from court on lack of conclusive evidence because the evidence itself got concluded. He frowned resentfully; nothing to fight against, nothing to fight with, just a seemingly endless wait-ing that would shortly end. He admitted he'd had sufficient clues to pin down the existence of a second probe, but his abilities had failed him. *You're not omnipotent, Channen!* He recalled saying the aliens weren't. *No, it's the pirates who aren't. Powerful enough for us, though! As for the aliens* -He didn't know and didn't much care.

The other station swept out towards six.

He cursed himself for not sensing - of all life - human life. The thought brought back questions concerning the whereabouts of the aliens and the enigma of the gems. Were *they* the aliens? He dismissed the idea as ludicrous. They'd had plenty of opportunity to kill or cripple Andri and -

He'd neither shifted nor spoken for a terribly long while!

Pain wouldn't leave him and weariness tugged at his body. It tried to pull him off the seat into sharp wreckage on the scout's floor. He struggled desperately against clutching unconsciousness and forced himself not to submit. A jewel glowed. He clung to snapped leather and remained upright, studying the screen.

The illicit globe was approaching 13 swiftly. It hadn't fired at him on their meeting beyond five - a fact he still couldn't comprehend - but it would do so at 13. Not yet, but soon, there'd be a colossal vortex of destruction loosed. He slumped. *Stay upright! You can't feel the pain!* He could. Memory reminded him of a bad day in the Complex. *Needed five guards to take you, Andri: the constant club-bing, a wall at your back, their voices. 'Cornered rat!' Yes, maybe I was a rat then; definitely I was cornered.* He remembered fists pounding his head, punches drumming in the belly, fingers poking for his eyes. *And they beat you, after an hour — the two who were on their feet!* He pictured a trio of immobile bodies, uniforms blood-stained, a broken nose, teeth knocked out, a fractured skull where he'd smacked the man to the ground, hard. *You were a hero for a month among the prisoners!*

In retrospect, it seemed the action of a stubborn fool rather than a hero.

He determined to resort to the obstinacy now. He told himself the back of the seat was a wall, the blood on his face the result of merciless sadism. He told himself he had to stay erect and it was the truth. He had to stay erect because the survival of 13 depended on it. The plan held steady and ready in his mind. Agony cut and slashed at it but couldn't mutilate or dislodge it.

He didn't want to be a hero and he didn't want to die, but the two were inseparable. *No, it isn't heroism; it's necessity.* If he didn't carry out his plan successfully, 13 would be destroyed.

The other probe passed, large in the screen, very close.

Andri looked at space, expecting it to be the last time, the last look. He saw five, its satellites, the distant orb of six, the station floating towards it. He didn't anticipate ever reaching the planet; it just wasn't

possible because he had to die.

The useless mouthpiece lay on the floor where he'd thrown it in anger, a shred of rubbish among many shreds of rubbish. A jewel glowed. He laughed at it and feared it. It seemed fortuitous that the radio had been smashed; it saved Andri having to disobey Van's final order: Get away!

Or would he have given a similar command even without the emergency? Yes, if his primitive instincts were rising as were Andri's: Get away and dump those stones! They're not hyperdiam and I'm not worried whether Ogan says they are. I'm just starting to worry about the stones, so dump them!

Andri stopped concerning himself with orders that would never come and began a flurry of theorising. *Why stretch your brain, idiot? Because it's never stretched much before and it won't stretch much longer!* He thought of the poachers' probe and imagined it stripped of equipment so it could bear weapons. But surely it wouldn't be operable under those conditions? Could they be working with a skel-eton crew, to limit living-quarters to an absolute minimum? If so, they were taking awful risks and the stakes must be high, the safety-factor low.

A gem sparkled and he noticed it.

Oui, *the stakes are high! Except they don't realise what they're playing for!*

He postulated a bigger scout-ship, comfort scrapped in order to put in missile-launching tubes. It seemed probable.

Suddenly it seemed certain: room made inside the probe, either by restricting instrumentation or crew, and the largest possible scout; tubes and torpedoes installed, hatches fitted over the ends and - *'Voila!*' he said aloud. He realised why they hadn't anni-hilated him around five farside: they must have only so many torpedoes, not enough to waste one blasting a scout. It was 13 they had to wipe out and it was 13 they *would* wipe out. Even if they had only one missile left, it was sufficient at this range.

Andri reached for the controls.

The pirate seemed to pause in space. *Imagination, fool! It's still moving away to six and soon there'll be something moving in at us, fast!* Strangely, he didn't feel scared, just regretful. Life hadn't been good to him, yet impending departure from it didn't bring pleasure. The will to survive arose but he smacked it down. *Like the guard, eh? Don't hope to survive, because if you do 13 doesn't!* Twinges of self-grief clawed at him. Memories crowded: childhood, violent adolescence, Titan Penal Complex, the years with Far Search. Faces swam in his mind: family, friends, fellow-prisoners, hated guards, Jocelyn, Keek, Van, the dead trainees and the youth in coma - even Ruthe Ogan.

Fey humour smote him. *'Nom d'un nom! One goes insane, then, just before the end!'* He laughed. An iridescent twink-ling caught his eye and he frowned, then abruptly laughed again. The jewels couldn't hurt him now. Nor could they harm the crew of 13. Their sparkling mystery would be vaporised together with Andri and the scout. *Ignorant Prometheus! What worse-than-fire were you about to give to your species?* He prepared to move the vessel.

Any time now they'd fire. He waited, suddenly oblivious of the pain, the faces, the memories and regret - waited for the torpedo to burst from the globe, the outward arc, the inward curve. He waited for death with a mind empty save for a grim, overwhelming purpose: to give the battered scout its final chance of glory, its last vivid, explosive show of speed and quick turning.

It should be almost easy to place it right in the path of the missile, somewhere at a safe distance from 13, and absorb the detonation himself. He calculated the amount of room they could have made in the pirate probe and scout, and prayed they'd only managed to squeeze in two missiles. They'd wasted one and refused to waste another on him. Finding space in a probe wasn't simple. *Could well be restricted to two. Mother of God, send that this is their all-or-nothing throw and that I can make it nothing!* He didn't even notice the hypocrisy this time.

He waited, hands on controls. Minutes crept, a subjective eternity, and -

No missile came, but abruptly something did: a stinging agony in his head, a mind-attack, salvation. The other station couldn't be directing it. Utter alienness tremored in it, reaching for the fragile thread whose snapping would switch off consciousness. The others must be experiencing it too, perhaps as near to

firing as he was to intercepting.

I live! I continue to live! You who seek to kill us, you entities of whom we know nothing except your enmity — thank you for it! He chuckled at the thought of unseen enemies providing relief from the visible ones in the screen.

Andri didn't believe in coincidence. He suspected a definite though undefinable intent behind the attack. It had been timed deliberately although he couldn't quite understand why. There was intelligence quivering inside it, guiding it, an alien intelligence whose existence needed no proof yet whose whereabouts remained totally obscure.

He realised they'd spread the beam, the shaft of mental force - or whatever it was - to include both stations. Probably they didn't know of the hostility between their two victims. The pirates must be in identical exquisite agony, tortured as he was. Tongues of pain licked in his brain. Something tried to suck out his reason.

A jewel glowed.

Brighter! God, it shines brighter! Andri's eyes opened wide with shock. The gem shone suddenly more brilliantly. It coruscated, flashed wild whirling dazzlings of splendid, terrifying light. *Yes, Van, It's alive! It isn't hyperdiam!* Extraneous agony throbbed and buzzed in his head, an exquisite torture of burning, blazing, blasting power, rising, falling, rising higher to a screaming torment threatening madness. Through the torment he just perceived the simultaneous actions of attack and gem. The jewel sparkled poly-chrome radiance, rising, falling, rising higher to a screaming vortex of blinding colour threatening madness.

Andri thrashed in his seat and clapped hands to his bursting head.

The agony pulsed and the colour pulsed, accompanying each other, rising and falling - blistering, boiling, excruciating - together in a hideous synchronism of mystery and anguish.

Andri crashed heavily to the littered floor.

Inside 13, Channen sweated. The attack had ended with no casualties. It had followed virtually the same course as the previous one: Ruthe Ogan pacing and shrieking like a demon, Jocelyn tumbling quickly but afterwards shielded by the devoted Keek. Channen himself had clamped his teeth together and mentally concentrated on all-consuming hatred of the aliens.

He wondered yet again where they were. In the system or out of it? Nearby or faraway? The knowledge that the gems were nearby haunted him. The knowledge that the pirates were far away comforted him.

They were once more a mere speck in the master-scanner, left of planet-six's tiny orb, dwindling.

A hit from any torpedo loosed now was unlikely. It would have to be computed with absolute precision and no error-margin at all owing to distance and the rapidly changing pattern of five's three satellites as they circled it. 13 would show as a dot against planetary surface, a dot in a confusion of moons.

Van took the fact that no missile had been released as positive proof that the illegal station had nothing to do with the psychological offensive. Presumably its crew would be as baffled and shaken as 13's. *Worse, perhaps! I hope so!*

It seemed a possibility, since they'd been slightly closer to the source if he'd judged it accurately. It had appeared to lie in the direction of six. *They'll be there before we are, which could help us.* Keek, his foot touching Van's, agreed.

A glance in the monitor revealed the scout, drifting away gradually. It had moved a little, controlled, prior to the attack - evidence that Andri wasn't dead. Nevertheless Van worried about him, and about the scout itself and the gems. The ship needed repairs, but he couldn't contact it and it hadn't moved recently except for the uncontrolled drift. Evidence that Andri *was* dead? At least unconscious, obviously, or he'd attempt to reach the probe.

And the gems? Van shrugged in acute perplexity.

He forced the thought from him. 'We've got to get him back soon, while we can still lifeline somebody to him.' But how? If he were alive, he had to be active enough to drive the scout himself. No one else could enter without exposing him to airlessness.

'Your brain's not functioning properly.'

He looked down and saw Keek. 'Why?'

'I don't know *why*, it just isn't.' The non-human managed a brief elbow-bang. 'He has a suit, don't forget. Question is whether he's fit to put it on. If he doesn't require it any longer, in we go!' Keek fetched his own suit, then began dressing.

'I'll do it, Keek.'

'No, I will! *Sorry, Van, that's mutiny, isn't it?* I've a good reason. These lifelines have occasionally broken. If we lose you, to whom does command automatically devolve?' *That's right, the hag; I don't want to be around if she's in charge!* Channen nodded acceptance and Keek finished suiting-up.

'There's no point in docking because repairs'll have to be done outside. No room in the scout's berth. I'll bring it in somehow, so be ready with the grapples.' *Another reason, see? You're the only one who can handle it. Jocelyn can't and Ogan'd probably crush the scout against the hull and hole us irreparably at the same time!*

'Sound logic, Keek. You should be top-dog, not me.' Van pulled the radio-extension to the Eye-booth and flicked the ship's image from monitor to master. 'I'll keep in touch and watching. When you're in position, I'll see to the grapples.' *The crazy witch might, at that! She looks puzzled. She caught the reference to authority if I'm lost, but she can't fill in the bits between words!* 'Be careful.' *For the woman who needs you.*

Jocelyn simply stared into darkness and cried, denied the solace of tears.

Keek went outside.

The scout diminished. Coiled, the lifeline lay by his feet. Magnetic soles gripped the surface. A nudge of the hip-stud and he kicked off, free, alone, drifting. Emptiness surrounded him and seemed to sneak inside him. A void formed in his stomach, a hollow apprehension. 'I'm on my way.'

'Okay. Hearing you fine. Got you dead-centre visually. Best of luck.'

'Thanks.' The line snaked out behind him, uncoiling. He glanced at the colossal, awkward grappling-machinery. Appendages made a forest of skeletal steel, valedictory. He left the forest.

He didn't turn his head. It would have increased the leaden loneliness to see 13 shrinking. The plastic unwound slowly, serpentine and symbolic. Physically it tied him to the probe. Spiritually it maintained contact with Van and

Jocelyn.

The scout grew. 'Almost there, a perfect aim.' He didn't have to adjust his flight-path. 'Say a minute or so.' Solitary, he sailed on. No alleviation of the loneliness came to him despite the closeness of Andri. Keek wondered whether it was a bad omen. 'Wait for the bump.'

He bumped.

Torn metal provided hand-holds and he crawled over the scout to the front. A transparent disc half-a-metre across rested in its channel: the outer lens of the scanner, capable of being moved through ninety degrees along a single plane. *It's not enough. Inadequate vision, just like in the EGs. Far Search's entire fleet wants modernising, improving. It isn't safe!* For a moment he thought of the superior equipment of the rogue Company, tracing hyperdiam even from outside the system. Then he thought again. *Maybe not! It registered money and it's picked out trouble. I'd trust Van more than the fanciest gadget, any time!*

He backed off from the lens. 'I'm going to peep inside. If he's still al - ' Keek stopped hastily, infuriated. Jocelyn's powerful hearing wouldn't miss a word. He'd have to select well, perhaps include a few euphemisms. *Not that I'll fool her; she's sharp. And is it morally permissible to attempt it?* He decided it must be, if it sheltered her. 'If necessity dictates, I'll rely on lip reading, that sort of thing. Tell him to try and hold out so he can pilot us back, or suit-up so I can go in and do it.'

And what if necessity doesn't dictate, you word-bender? Well, I'll open the hatch and let vacuum in; Andri won't protest. He's the necessity doing the dictating, I hope!

Near by was a cracked port. It would allow him to see inside, whereas the lens wouldn't. *He might have spotted me through the lens, in which case I've got his attention. Have my ugly features filling the screen scared him to - ?*

Keek peered in.

Teeth clicked. Andri was a prone giant among the wreck-age, blood-covered, in pain, struggling to rise. Keek couldn't think of any euphemisms. He whispered as quietly as he could and prayed Jocelyn wouldn't hear. 'Van? He's a bloody mess, literally! Face cut to pieces, but he's alive. No coma, either.' Channen's voice assumed a sudden false gaiety for Joce-lyn's benefit. 'Alive and no coma. He's too tough to be hurt.'

'No, he isn't!' breathed Keek, barely audibly. 'Had a hell of a beating. That, combined with the attack; he's a mess.'

Trying to get up now and I believe he'll make it. The radio's smashed.'

Andri squirmed.

'If he notices me, I'll do what I can to encourage him. Can't enter, myself. His suit's torn to ribbons, mask shat-tered. It's up to him.' *Look this way, Andri! This way! Look -*

He looked. Damp redness split in a ghastly grin. Keek jerked in alarm. *By all the gods, don't do that! You appear even worse. Somebody as far gone as you seem shouldn't smile; you should be dead!*

Keek elaborately mouthed a silent question: 'Can you reach the controls and return us to 13?' Andri nodded.

He reached the controls in seventeen minutes-Standard. Gore splattered the panel as he fell on it. Eventually his eyes, feverish lights glinting through a crimson horror, sought the screen and found it.

Keek's mouth moved: 'You're doing great! Soon be giving you proper treatment. Can you hang on?'

Ensanguined lips parted: 'Yes.' Then again, two words: 'Guards.' Wall.'

Keek interpreted them but couldn't understand them. 'Can you find the right levers and switches?'

'Not so many intact to choose from.' Redness split and Keek felt sick. A suspicion pestered him that one aspect of the operation had altered. As he'd outlined it to Channen, the procedure for rescuing Andri and retrieving the scout wasn't now applicable. Something had changed, but he didn't know what. His stomach lurched as bloodied lips pulled back off stained teeth. 'I suggest you shift from the window; your hideous face distracts me.' The terrible grin flashed.

'Okay, but take it steady. I'm clinging on out here, remember.' *The man's made of stone. He's indestructible.* Keek snatched at a steel sliver and asked the gods not to let it pierce his suit. He braced both feet against a ripped but firm plate.

The scout turned for 13 at minimum speed, smoothly and easily.

He left one hand spare. Deftly, he curled the plastic cord around it as the ship drifted. Coils grew up his arm. He couldn't risk the lifeline snagging on a metal splinter or wrapping round the ship. If the line were sliced and if a clumsy movement by Andri knocked him off his perch -

Keek considered the inscrutable machinations of the gods. /He'd always been true to them, yet they might still see fit to repay loyalty by death. After he'd helped Andri in, they could well requite his efforts by wafting him away into space on a long trip to nowhere. He imagined himself falling through nothing, dwindling to nothing. Neither the scout nor the Frenchman would be in condition to fetch him back. Even assuming they were, he wouldn't be able to enter because -

Because of what?

The altered aspect came to him again, on the edge of awareness. He knew it was there, but he didn't know what it was. He decided the only way to stop thinking about it was to start thinking about something else. The sound of clicking teeth rattled inside his helmet. *Back to the job, Keek: scout into grappler, me into 13, Andri patched up.* He thought Andri should find just sufficient strength to place the ship inside the clutches of the grappler, even if the intricacies of actual docking might be too much for him: the careful adjustments, the delicate touch of controls, the exact timing necessary.

Keek said: 'Everything prepared, Van? I suppose you've got us in the scanner?'

'Fine and central. Well done!'

'Not a great deal to it, really.' He lowered his voice. 'You'd better have the first-aid ready. He looks to me like a hospital case, but we'll have to stitch him up as cleanly as facilities allow. Such as they are!'

It's all laid on. Forget the grapples. He must already realise it, but if he steers for the machine you'll have to signal him to dock. Extra strain on him, yet he has to dock temporarily.'

Keek was puzzled. Why couldn't Andri simply leave the last stage to the grappling-machine? Why did he need to dock? 'I don't understand, Van.'

'Then your brain's not functioning properly.' Channen laughed, tautly and briefly - a release of anxiety now that Andri was so close to home.

'Why must he dock the scout? What's wrong with the grapples?'

'Nothing.' Amusement still tremored in Van's voice, hardened by tenseness. 'Only, how do you expect him to get from the grappled scout to the airlock without a suit?'

Keek mumbled humbly: 'My brain's not functioning properly.'

Chapter Ten

Andri docked; not gently, not easily, not quickly. But he docked.

He clipped one of the appendages as he came in. The scout buckled and the arm snapped like a stick.

Six metres of metal tumbled off into the void, past recovery. Keek nearly lost his grip and surprised himself by the intensity of his orisons. The ship hit 13 violently. Inside the probe, bulbs died into transparency on the miniature Feeler-globe: more extinguished perceptor-cells. Keek's lifeline broke and he clung on till his head ached with concentrating on clinging. He stuck.

The vessel fell into its berth nose-down, angled badly. Docking-mechanisms snatched at it, missed, snatched again and fastened on. They brought it to rest and clamps secured it. Keek peeled himself off the hull and collapsed, exhausted. Above, the hatches closed.

The scout was back where it belonged.

Jocelyn still stared into the darkness, listening. Ruthe Ogan stood by with the first-aid box open. Van gave up talking into the radio; he'd been trying to contact Keek ever since the hatches closed. Rasping breaths, no speech. He left

Control and made for the ladder leading up to the scout's section. Ogan followed, carrying the heavy box without visible effort.

They both halted, shocked.

Keek didn't walk down; Andri did. His back was to them and a metre-long bundle was over his shoulder. He put it on the floor and it lay gasping, reviving. Andri turned, a bloody mask, a body trembling with determination not to topple.

Van began a horrified exclamation but Ogan's hiss silenced him. 'Quiet, fool!' She glanced towards Control. 'The girl. Her hearing.'

'Is excellent.' Jocelyn had appeared in the doorway, her blind eyes trained directly on Andri. The bizarre effect frightened Keek into an immediate grasp of the situation's delicacy. He jumped up and staggered to her but didn't touch her at once. There was a thought in his mind which she must never feel. *Praise be, she's blind!* He looked at Andri. Blood dripped, reddening the floor around him. *She'll hear it and recognise it! Gods, stop that awful sound!* Keek fancied he could hear it himself, splash-pause-splash,

splash-pause-splash, a monotonous noise of the draining off of life. He touched her and fed her reassuring lies. 'Sick-bay,' Ogan ordered brusquely. 'I'm sure it's not half as bad as it looks.' *Damn!*

She'd meant to help Jocelyn, but now the words seemed altogether wrong, ambiguous. She'd admitted it looked very bad. Would the younger woman be calmed or further dismayed? 'Give him a hand, Van!'

Channen started from frozen immobility. Give him a hand? He realised he ought to have done so straightaway, instead of gaping. *Was his brain not working as it should? Was it being eroded by the increasing pressure of the attacks? Suddenly Keek's light-hearted observation took upon itself the*

sombre shadow of sinister truth. He ran forward and put his hands under the Frenchman's armpits. 'Let go now, Andri. You've done your bit. And more besides.'

Andri sagged. The phenomenal will-power that had driven him finally wilted. He became an immense

weight that wrenched the muscles in Channen's arms. He retained consciousness, just, and muttered incomprehensibly and deliriously. 'Guards. Wall. Hero. Don't want to be.'

Van manhandled him towards the sick-bay and the noise of his heels dragging across the floor alerted Jocelyn. She turned her head, tilting it slightly, sparrow-like, listening intently. Keek began to pound pleasant thoughts into her brain to cloak the uncertainty and fear.

Ogan glanced round and saw everything in a flash of perception. She dropped the box and hurried to pick up Andri's feet, stopping the sound. 'It's all right, child. He's strong. He'll be fine.' They carried him through into the sick-bay.

Keek did a deliberate touch-break. 'Stay here, Jocelyn. I won't be a moment.' *Do a good job on him, witch-doctor! All that blood!* 'I'll be back before you know it.' She leaned on the doorway trustingly and Keek trundled the box to where it was needed. It slid over red stains. He permitted himself a flurry of thoughts which couldn't have been countenanced before touch-break. Most concerned ubiquitous crimson. As he delivered the first-aid kit, he saw the sole surviving trainee: recumbent, pale, with sunken cheeks. *He won't last long. Nothing we can do for him. But for Andri, though —*

'Thank you.' Ruthe delved into the box and produced plasters, pain-killers, a syringe, a quick-stitch. 'Into the kit-chen, Keek. Cloths, plenty of them. And clean. Can't get to work until this blood's removed.' He vanished on the errand and soon returned.

Andri lay obediently on the bunk, still conscious, his eyes staring with resolute fixity at the ceiling. 'Go ahead, Ruthe. I'll be my own anaesthetic. I'm no stranger to pain.' The fever seemed to have gone, replaced by acceptance of reality. *It'll hurt, but so what? She's reputed to have a gentle hand at times like this. They say she was a medic, once.* He wondered why she'd abandoned a secure career for the hazards of the spaceways.

Her expression disclosed no secrets. She dabbed at the blood almost tenderly, treated him almost maternally. Van watched in fascination, admiring her. But why couldn't she be like this all the while? Why was the redeeming side of her so rarely seen, slipping out only now and then from behind the grim mask? 'Commendable foresight, Keek.' She tossed a damp, crimson rag into the large bucket he'd had the initiative to provide. Then she mopped again at the blood. Andri continued to stare upwards, as though thinking himself into a state of numbness. He didn't flinch, but his eyes narrowed occasionally.

Ruthe straightened from over him when he was reasonably clean. *Andri, you've suffered — not just recently but for many years, and suffered a lot. At the start of this trip He told me you'd been a wicked man; I believe you've absolved yourself since you did whatever you did.* 'It'll get rougher from here, Andri.' She leaned into the box for slender tweezers and studied his disfigured face: abrasions, deep cuts, a gory criss-cross of open flesh. Glass fragments sparkled and metal splinters protruded. 'I'll have to fetch these pieces out.' One cheek was slashed right through where the wire had struck; the whiteness of his teeth showed. 'More than a little stitching, Andri, I'm afraid.' She reached for the syringe. 'You'd be better with a real local anaesthetic'

He shook his head and winced. 'Don't bother. They'd never heard of the stuff where I was. Go on.' She looked at Channen inquiringly and he nodded. 'Do as he says, please. He'll be okay.' Van smiled inwardly. Andri would probably leap up off the bed if they pressed the point. *A matter of pride with him. He's that kind of man.*

'Very well.' Ogan shrugged. 'You're sure, Andri?'
'More than you could know.'

She shrugged again. *We all have our dark backgrounds!* 'As you wish.' Ruthe worked slowly and carefully, removing the glass and steel. Fragments jingled as Keek caught them in the bucket. He kept his eyes averted and was grateful that Jocelyn wasn't present to hear the operation. It nauseated him. What would it do to her? Andri maintained a stubborn silence.

Ruthe removed the last splinter, sighing. 'Now even rougher.' She held the quick-stitch over him. 'Honestly, I must insist on the anaes —'

'Go on, woman!' His voice was sharp, but it swiftly lost its edge. 'Sorry, you don't deserve that. I ought to take the doctor's advice, but - call it a personal principle. Or stupidity.'

'I'll call it principle. I have them, too.' She stitched, practised and careful. He didn't scream, didn't cry

out, didn't whimper. From time to time his breathing stopped or whistled in harshly. /That was all. He lay quietly, stoical, courageous. 'Finished,' she said. 'I think He forgot to put in nerves when He made you.' *Steady! That was nearly a joke, and blasphemous! The image!* 'Considering your exertions and the extent of the injuries, I'd recommend a soporific' She turned to Van. 'But that's your decision, not mine.' He disclaimed authority. 'No, it's yours. This isn't my territory. If you recommend it, I'll approve it. Any objections, Andri?'

'I could use a sleep, but what about emergencies?' He tried to sit up but failed. 'Feeler-alarms.'

'I'll make it an order then! You need it.'

Andri grinned despite his condition.

She rolled up his sleeve and administered the drug. A minute or so and his eyes closed. His body relaxed, limp; he slept. Dispassionately, aided by Channen, she undressed him and tossed the sodden clothes to Keek for disposal. She threw blankets over his nakedness and said: 'Also for the girl. She's endured heartache. His return in such poor shape can't have ameliorated it. A smaller dose, but -'

'Fair enough. We're gambling. Two sensors out. You're right, though. Jocelyn needs it as well as him.'

Channen mentally readjusted the duties in 13: Ruthe as temporary Feeler, Keek as Eye. They'd have to manage without an Ear. *Still, I can dive in myself if we're desperate.* He knew Andri had to rest; it couldn't be avoided. And Jocelyn wouldn't be one-hundred-per-cent effective unless forced to relinquish the anxiety for a while.

Ruthe prepared the syringe. 'Would you explain to her, Keek? I couldn't.'

'Yes. I'll take her to the dorm and then she's yours, if she'll let you do it. Otherwise no, unless Van says she has to.'

Channen's expression was firm. 'She has to, risk or no risk. Another order.'

'I'll settle it.' Keek grimaced as he collected his slimy burdens and headed for the kitchen.

A voice stopped him. 'I agree, Keek. I'm squeezed dry of energy.' Jocelyn stood motionless outside the sick-bay, pallid and pathetic. 'I heard it all. I couldn't stay away, could I?'

'I suppose not.' He spoke without reproach, then deposited the clothes and the bucket and took her arm.

'Come along. She's doing what's best for you, as she did her best for Andri.'

'Is he really going to be as good as new? He'll truly re-cover?'

He broke-touch immediately. 'I - an instant, Jocelyn. I have to get rid of a few things.' He hurried to the kitchen with the debris. Her questions disturbed him. As good as new? Truly recover? *Yes, he'll recover, but never as good as new. Are any of us that? He'll bear terrible scars. Facial. External. To add to those on his mind, I suspect!* Keek dropped his red excuses and rejoined her.

She made no comment on his duplicity, merely sobbed a little, quietly.

He led her into the dorm and helped her to lie down. Then he shouted for Ruthe, and she and Van entered. The injection completed, Jocelyn fell into the peace of sleep. 'I've given her less than I gave Andri. Should keep them both under for about twenty hours.'

'That sounds perfect,' Van said confidently. 'So far, planet-five seems to me to be bare of — ' He spread his hands wide. 'Hyperdiam? No, not hyperdiam!' The expected scowl from Ogan didn't come. 'Empty of life, anyway. That is, I don't sense anything like I did on four.'

'We'll check with the instruments, though, for minerals!' Her tone was cold.

'Naturally, Ruthe.' *Thought it wouldn't be long before the other-self burst out!* 'The point is this: five being so small, they'll be shaking off the drugs round about the time we leave orbit and move out for six.' *And that's where I anticipate trouble! Intuition again, but I'm not ignoring it!* 'I believe we can look forward to a routine five-orbit.' *If not six! Definitely not six!* 'With the poachers having gone on to six, presumably chasing a substance which isn't what they reckon it is, the five-to-six hop's when we'll want everybody functioning. So twenty hours sounds perfect.'

'I see.' Ogan noticed she'd have to wash her hands. 'Grisly task, that!' A smile tried to crack her stiff features; it didn't succeed. 'Still, I've done messier ones.' She left the dorm, staring at the congealed blood between her fingers.

Channen watched the door close. 'Strange woman! I don't ' know what to make of her!'

'Me neither, but there's no criticising her since Andri and I got back. The way she tended him, the stitching, the sedatives - ' Keek broke off suddenly. 'The sedatives!' he gasped. 'I realise they couldn't be avoided, but we're as vulnerable now as we've ever been. At least, two —'

'What's the problem? We can manage without a Feeler and an Ear for the moment. The pirates can't hurt us yet.' 'Admitted, but the comas can!'

'What connection do they have with our shortage of sensors? If a missile materialises, that's when we need all the crew on alert! I calculated the risk and I believe it's justified. The mental attacks aren't altered one way or the other by the number of sensors.'

'Again admitted. Tell me, how did the trainees die?' Channen was bemused. 'Originally they were incapacitated. Then a decline to death. Starvation, mainly.'

'Probably. And probably not. Say, instead, each successive attack - hitting them when they were already in coma, weakened - accumulated the weight on their brains. They were under; they couldn't fight back — consciously, at any rate.'

Channen was no longer bemused.

Keek's teeth rattled. 'Jocelyn and Andri are already under, in sleep. Suppose an attack comes and they can't consciously resist. And suppose it makes them *stay* under, but not in sleep - in coma!'

Slowly, 13 circled planet-five. A full instrumental check re-vealed an atmosphere rich enough in oxygen to be breathable by humans. The climate was hospitable and Channen re-corded five on the log-tapes as a world whose possible colonising ought to be studied — a Government job, out of Far Search's jurisdiction once they'd made a favourable preliminary report.

Nothing unusual or exciting in the way of natural resources appeared. Channen sensed no intelligent life. He wrote five off as a planet which could eventually prove beneficial for humanity but which was of no commercial value to the Company.

Jocelyn and Andri slept on, since Ogan declared the result of the drug to be irreversible except by the application of stronger medications not available in the station. Van worried a lot and Keek worried more. Ruthe slipped back into her shell of cynicism, apparently perturbed by the fact that she'd ever slipped out of it.

Van tried to contact the other probe. He didn't know why, but he tried it. The radio seemed to be working. The probe refused to answer. He sniffed in disgust. 'I didn't think they'd reply. They aren't concerned with talking to us, just exterminating us.' A good aspect of the much-criticised tapes suggested itself to him: even if 13 were annihilated, the data-banks should survive and send the firm into court yet again. The evidence would be against them: positive identification attested by Far Search employees, the tapes telling of the missile and the recurrent sightings of a wandering globe in a system legally owned by Far Search. *Owned? No, we don't own it! Who does? Ogan's Creator, Keek's crowd? Or the aliens?* He wondered if they were indigenes resenting the presence of outsiders. If so, how had the Company failed to trace them before 13 left Base? Perhaps they were extra-system travellers, here in search of something. But what? Not hyperdiam, surely? Or if so, they'd erred. He realised it was possible that they knew exactly what the pseudo-hyperdiam was and hadn't erred at all.

So what the bloody hell is it?

Whatever the answer, he felt certain they were near or on planet-six. A glance at the scanner and he saw a distant ball. No alien ship. Where was it? On six farside, in ambush - a real one this time? On the surface? It could be anywhere inside or outside the system, yet intuition repeatedly pointed to six. *One consolation: we won't be the first there.* He frowned at an idea. *Wonderful! I bet it's just great to die second! Still, we've done what no previous probe's ever managed: got evidence on the poachers before they got us!*

Did their scout land on four to substantiate mechanical observations? Probably not, or they'd have noticed their mistake and —

, Of course they wouldn't, you idiot! How could they break for home if they're on locked trajectory? The fact that they were bound for six — no matter whether they'd spotted the mistake or not — meant that whatever they sought existed on six as well as on four. *Which pins it down fairly*

conclusively to pseudo-hyperdiam because nothing else was on four. And if the aliens want it, they'll be around six. They weren't on four, so they may be working the system from the opposite end to us. There'll be a hot reception for the first to six. And for the second! That's if —

'Either of us reach it,' Keek interrupted a fraction of a second after leaning his shoulder against Channen's knee. 'I'd advise cessation of introspection. It ties the brain in a knot. Don't you think we should make a start on repairs?'

'No urgency. We're not landing the scout on five, even assuming it could. And if we need to send it down to six, we're simply not going to! No hurry.'

T only thought, in view of what you said about wanting everyone for the five-to-six jump —'

'We ought to do what we can whilst we're in a relatively

safe sector? Yes, we'll start. Fly it out of dock and I'll mani-pulate the grappler. It'll have to be done on visual alone, no speech-contact.'

Keek put on his suit. Refreshed by a brisk nap but upset by cleaning blood off the floor, he went towards the ladder. As he passed Dorm-B he heard Ogan snoring. His mind hung on Jocelyn. *Eleven hours now. Please pull out of it, come what may!* Eleven hours seemed a long time. Would she emerge from slumber invigorated or wouldn't she emerge at all? He uttered several prayers as he climbed the ladder. He included Andri.

Inside the scout, he familiarised himself with what re-remained of the controls. He'd piloted the ships before but had never become accustomed to the sheer size of everything. He had to stand on the seat and practically lie across the panel. Dried blood formed horrible patches underneath him. A gem sparkled. The useless mouthpiece and its cord mocked from a cluster of other rubbish.

Out of habit he recited the lift-off ritual. 'Hatches. Clamps. Release.'

A few minutes later the hatches slid open. The clamps let go and arms pushed the scout upwards into everlasting night. *Jocelyn's everlasting night!* The arms released and shoved. Keek drifted out. He knocked on the engines, thrust outwards, turned and approached cautiously.

At minimum velocity, he brought the vessel to rest on the surface. Thumbed by Channen, the grappling-machine secured it, fastened it down tightly. Keek cut the motors, scrambled out and went in through the air-lock. 'There's quite some repair-work required! I don't think we'll finish it before we've covered the entire system.'

'That doesn't matter. I don't intend using the wretched thing except in emergencies. As I said, it's definitely not touching six!' Van earnestly wished 13 itself didn't have to go anywhere near planet-six. It gave him a chilly feeling in the belly even to think about the place. A clangour of danger rang in his head at the thought of it. Subconscious mutters troubled him: *Danger, danger, danger!* The aliens had to be there and the probe couldn't avoid being there too, soon - unless the other probe blasted it out of the skies. *Scylla and Charybdis!*

'I'll take care of the inside, tidy up the mess.' Keek left again and entered the scout. He scratched through the wreckage and made two piles, salvage and scrap. The scrap he flung out into space, a shower of shards glinting in dark-ness, artificial meteors. He saved what he could and bundled it together; there wasn't much. After mopping up Andri's blood he returned to Control. He extricated something from the salvage bundle and handed it to Van. 'Here. They look harmless, don't they?'

Channen took the gems gingerly: two seemingly innocuous crystals, beautiful, limpid, radiant, frightful.

'They scare me, Keek. I don't know what they are and that's why they scare me. I only know what they aren't!' He locked them away with the pistols, relieved by the click as the door shut. 'Alive or not, they won't get out of there!' He imagined he could still see them glowing evilly beyond the steel. 'Probably three of us after the accursed things. And I for one haven't a clue what they are - except scaring!'

The clock bothered Keek. It kept dragging his eyes from the book. It made him wriggle on the rec-room couch. Its maddening ticking combined with Ruthe's breathing to set up a chain of awful thoughts. Ruthe was breathing, awake, in Control; Andri and Jocelyn were breathing, drugged, in the sick-bay and in Dorm-B. *I hope!* The clock reminded him they'd be out of sedation in four hours. *I hope!* He abandoned the book. The clock ticked, impartial.

Van had re-welded a few outer plates and was now asleep. Keek prayed for time to pass more quickly,

for four hours to fly by, for Jocelyn and Andri to awaken. Had he been too pessimistic earlier? Were they indeed more vulnerable at present? He was sure they were, but no attack had obtruded to confirm or confute his theory. In four hours it would be purely academic. Jocelyn would be up and about, revitalised, and Andri would be - not as good as new, but at least better than he'd been. *I hope!* Keek had to check again. He'd peered into the sick-bay and the dorm every half-hour and he had to check yet again. It was an obsession and a duty, inescapable and imperative. He stood up and went first to the sick-bay. *Am I putting off Dorm-B, hoarding the seconds until I have to see how she is? Am I positive, deep down, that I won't find her okay? No! If I were, I'd go there first and fast!* He knew he was being ridiculous. *How can I possibly tell whether she's okay or not if she's merely sleeping? I could only tell she wasn't okay if she were d —*

He smothered the thought and looked in on Andri. He gasped with horror and the clickety-clack of teeth seemed to fill the Universe. *Gods! This is a new development!* He raced to Dorm-B and knew what he'd see. He saw it. Teeth rattled. His fists bunched in futility. His heart faltered, skipped and thundered. He ran for Van.

The door to the male-dorm hissed open and he tore the sheets off Channen. He shook him violently. Eyes blinked and a voice mumbled. 'What- ?'

'We're under attack, mind-attack! Get moving!'

Van rolled out of the bunk. He touched his head and appeared bewildered. 'Mind-attack? I can't feel anything.'

'Neither can I; probably wouldn't if I was human. I think Ogan's all right, too. Come on!' Keek dragged him forcibly from the room. 'A subtlety. A fresh type.' At a run, he led the way to Dorm-B and noticed that Ruthe sat unperturbed in her booth. *Three of us unhurt. But not Jocelyn and Andri!* 'In here. I don't care what you can't feel, I say it's an attack!'

Keek began to open the door.

Chapter Eleven

As it opened, Van rubbed his eyes. Sleep weighted his body, and his brain just couldn't operate quickly enough. He didn't understand what Keek meant. An attack? Then why wasn't he himself suffering it? Why did Ogan continue to stare into Creation, unruffled? Why did Keek believe he wouldn't have been affected even if he were human? Five of Keek's words buzzed: 'A subtlety. A fresh type.' A fresh, subtle form of mind-assault? It must be, though he still didn't understand it.

The door opened fully and suddenly he understood.

Dorm-B had changed and so had Jocelyn. Blankets littered the floor, tossed off the bed by her writhing. Peace had departed from her face. Torment was there. She threshed as though in the grip of a vile nightmare, her lips parting in silent sobs.

Van asked: 'Is Andri the same?'

'More or less. Plus they're hitting the trainee, who's as good as dead!'

Keek stayed in the doorway while Channen hastened to the sick-bay. Andri's figure moved similarly to Jocelyn's: a lashing of limbs, an arched back, hands clutching the air for denied aid. His eyes were closed, his sleep by no means tranquil. The wild indiscriminate jerks of his body had ripped out some of the stitches.

'Can you think of anything we can do to help, Keek?' The non-human gestured negatively as Ruthe Ogan burst through from Control. She clumped from one door to the other, swearing. Channen repeated the question to her. 'Can we help?'

'Never. Unless we give them more sedation immediately.'

'That's out. It's partly responsible in the first place.' Van explained Keek's recent worry. She nodded gravely; the idea had also occurred to her, too late. She realised that additional drugs might save them now, only to leave them even more at the mercy of the aliens later.

She said: 'We'll just have to watch and wait.' *And pray, those of us who remember how. And who are*

sure where their faith lies. She wished she were sure herself.

Keek remained by the dorm, Van by the sick-bay. Ruthe lumbered between the two. The unprecedented attack con-tinued. Channen hoped the sphere of five would block some of the force. Planet-six lay beyond it. *Am I right? Is that where they originate?* He considered the eerie silence was the worst aspect at the moment: none of Ruthe's frantic pacing, her belligerent shrieks, no audible cry from Jocelyn, no obstinate undertones from Andri. It was a hideously quiet attempt at the devastation of human minds, an effort to ensure that the sleepers would never see morning. The thought's incongruity brushed him. Morning? In a probe? But he didn't even smile.

Keek's voice came. 'We're learning about them. Some of the blasts must have been random, others deliberately timed to catch us when we're least able to resist. Like when we had our hands full with the pirates during the missile affair and the meeting prior to this orbit. Or when individuals are at their weakest: Jocelyn and Andri, in a drugged sleep.'

'And the two trainees who've died,' Van offered. 'Already in coma. The aliens seem up-to-date with events in 13, so who's to say they didn't sense an accelerated decline in one of the youngsters and shot accordingly? Result: we think it's haphazard, but it isn't.' He glanced at the surviving apprentice: no movement, but a faint pulse was discernible. Suddenly the youth jerked, an ephemeral spasm. 'Hey, this lad's showing fight! A little.'

'Fight?' echoed Keek. 'He did while I was there, but it isn't fight; it's a few involuntary twitches before the end. He was the strongest of the three, lasted longest.' Nostrils ex-panded. 'But you can forget him; he's gone!'

Van didn't argue. The picture was becoming alarmingly clear. The aliens knew what was happening inside the probe, perhaps even inside the heads of its crew. They could hit where and when it would hurt most, spreading their mental energy to encompass two probes or narrowing it to pierce any brain they desired to pierce. *They've tried to take us all at once and had limited success. Did they underestimate us? Are they endeavouring to take us piecemeal? Maybe, which means they aren't omnipotent. But they're certainly above us on the power-scale!* He punched his palm angrily.

He wondered why they hadn't simply allowed the pirates to destroy 13 recently, instead of preventing destruction by an attack. They could easily have sat back and done nothing while their two enemies shrank to one in the flash of a missile detonation. Did they realise hostility existed between the probes? Probably they didn't, in which case they couldn't read every human emotion - perhaps just pick up isolated tensions or weaknesses dimly, without complete understand-ing. In short, intuitively! He began to feel slightly more confident.

We're drawing level! He reassessed his own position on the power-scale. *I'm climbing that ladder, you bastards! No human'd fail to let his enemies play each other off and save himself trouble.* He looked at Andri, still subconsciously battling, fighting for life and sanity on a dream-plane. Andri and Jocelyn must be much better-fitted for the struggle than the youngsters had been. He'd never noticed the kids re-sisting in coma. Not that this was coma; it was heavy, in-duced sleep. Nevertheless Andri and Jocelyn had previous tragedies to call on; they'd weathered storms before. So many impressions, so many memories, so much experience, had ploughed down into their minds - especially Andri's -that their subconscious cerebrations must over the years have built barricades against further storms. But he had to admit this was a bad one.

He returned to the aliens. They definitely weren't omni-potent. They had limitations. His thoughts were hurtling madly towards a colossal optimism when something snapped in his mind. *Fate, Channen, warning you not to get over-confident and smug!* A realisation stabbed; perhaps not only did the aliens have limits on sensing human emotions, but also on understanding humanity at all — the functions of \ the probes, the destructive-potential of torpedoes. Could they be a non-technological race, lacking common ground altogether? If so, they were entirely new, entirely unhuman, entirely alien. *Therefore our standards don't apply to them and we can't judge their capabilities. They're the unknown quantity we've been terrified of running into since we cracked space. And now we've finally done it! What an honour! What -*

'Van!' It was Keek's voice, loud. 'It's slacking off! Jocelyn's subsiding!'

Channen glanced. 'So's Andri.' The Frenchman's body quivered. A last convulsion and he sank into the covers, motionless. The trainee looked *too* still, but he was alive. 'It's finished, released them.' Van's happiness was shattered by Ogan.

'Unless it's released them *because* it's finished them!' She grabbed Andri's wrist. 'Pulse normal; he's okay.' A stride to the trainee and her tone dropped. 'Nowhere near normal. Slow. No hope.' Then into Dorm-B to check Jocelyn. 'Racing. She's worse than Andri, much healthier than the lad. I can't predict.' Her shoulders heaved. 'We'll watch. They should be out soon.' *It's in your hands — Lord?* Andri came out early. Jocelyn didn't.

'Repairs,' said Andri. He stood in Control, rested, showing no discomfort from the new stitches or the old injuries. 'I'll get outside and do some.'

'No, you won't!' Van held up his hand, preventing the other's passage. 'Two hours, and we leave orbit. Bad luck for repairs, but only Keek's going out now. It's too risky for us.' He gestured to the cupboard containing the arsenal. 'It's risky even inside with those gems near by, so outside's out!' *Pun! So why not laugh?* 'I feel something with claws scurry up my back whenever I look at that cupboard. Crazy, but briefly I actually wondered whether the jewels could be the aliens. A sign of how much they scare me!' 'They can't be what you fancied; it's impossible. Yet they're part of the pattern. I saw proof.' Andri told of his last impressions before losing consciousness in the scout. 'The attack came and a moment later I noticed one of them had increased its brilliance, as though it was affected the same as me or - ' He paused, sombre of expression. 'Or was help-ing the aliens, maybe amplifying the blast.'

'Doubtful. I've been swinging round to the hypothesis that they're an all-psychological species, no gadgets. Blast-amplifiers don't sound right to me.'

'Who knows? Anyway, it didn't just stay brighter. Colour-wise, it went wild!' He described its coruscations. 'As the pain slashed, it grew more spectacular. As it fell, the colour diminished. The variations of the attack were exactly con-current with the glowing of the crystal. They fit together somehow.'

Channen shrugged moodily. 'Let's try and forget it for a while. Keek once said to me you learn things soon enough. I suppose we'll learn sooner that we want!' He glared at the scanner. 'Endless night. Street-lamps so far away we've never mapped the streets. Our existence is so utterly foreign to a planet-bound one!' *Is that why Base doesn't grasp our problems and expects too much of us?* 'Hardly surprising it's sent men mad! Cooped-up like -'

'Prisoners,' Andri interrupted. 'Yes, we're all in jail out here, you no less than I.' *Except you can go home on leave after each trip, not be forced to transfer from station to station until you're finally free - some day!* But he bore no resentment against Van. The probes were at least a form of freedom, better than the Complex. *Perhaps I can stand it easier than he can. He's been trained for it, but I had train-ing of a harsher kind!* He deliberately lightened the con-versation. 'Odd thing, Van. If you'd asked me the name of the last woman in the Universe I'd let undress me, it'd have to be you-know-who. Yet I wake up naked and — and you-know-who must have done it.' He shuddered, smiling.

'And me, if that mitigates it.' He tried to copy the smile, and failed.

Keek's vigil seemed to consume eternity. He stood in the dorm, indefatigable, watching her for the tiniest indication of revival. There was none. Her face was calm again and the calmness reminded him of death. She appeared to be too pale. The sheets lifted with her breathing, evenly. He repeatedly felt her pulse but didn't know whether its rate was good or bad.

'No change?' Andri entered and sat on the bunk beside her.

'No. Could be asleep, could be coma; I can't tell. Ogan's twenty hours are almost up. Allow a reasonable period after them and if Jocelyn wakes, okay. If not, it's — coma.'

Andri held her hand. 'Please be just asleep. That sounded silly, but - ' He saw that Keek understood. *Jocelyn, you're the first light I've had in years of darkness. Could I be the same for you, somehow? I wish we were normal people and could simply leave this business when we get back to Base.* He realised his thoughts were wild. *He* wouldn't be going back to Base. In all probability the probe wouldn't. He dreamed of a free life with Jocelyn. *Don't delude yourself! It's not on! Definitely not yet, perhaps never!* He couldn't push the aliens from his mind, nor the Complex.

Keek was walking round the bunk, reaching for her other hand.

Memory of the Complex wouldn't depart: the sadism, the filth, the pain. Memory slipped to infancy and began a for-ward replay of a tough life: hunger, parental neglect, petty thefts, fights, minor crimes culminating in a major one.

Keek touched the hand briefly and jumped away. He stared at Andri, stupefied, incredulous. *'Murder?'*

'Yes, murder. Not so terrible as murders go, but murder still.' Andri didn't smile at Keek's comical incomprehension. 'Started as a drunken brawl and - well, I'm a strong man and learned my full strength too late! Then Titan Penal Com-plex taught me I wasn't as strong as it!'

'How long - ' *Gods, I've heard tales of that place! He's really been through it!* 'How long did you serve?'

'I'm still serving. Did twenty years on Titan, which left five to complete the sentence. They have an offer for some exemplary prisoners.' Exemplary? Andri shivered. 'I caught on slow. Took me a rough decade to digest the lesson. An-other passed, with me more pacific, and they made the offer. I had a choice: my remaining five years on Titan, or seven in a hard job, this one. I've been with Far Search three years and never felt solid ground since Ganymede, except for planet-four.'

'You amaze me. Not that history matters; you're a good man now. I rate the present higher than the past.' *Poor bastard! I'm going to remember him out here, a decent fel-low in prison, when I'm next on holiday, free. Unless I'm dead!* 'What of the future, Andri?'

'Is there one, with all this?' His arm-wave embraced Jocelyn's recumbent body and the entire Universe. The aliens! If there is, I'd like to show the worlds I'm basically okay. Too hungry too young, too eager for a drink, too strong to be safe drunk - that was my trouble.' His scarred face darkened with regret. 'I was seventeen, Keek, an un-tamed kid. I'm tamer now. A future? She's here, if it's only till we go down to the aliens or a torpedo.'

They both glanced at the bed. Jocelyn was tranquil, either asleep or -

'And if we don't,' said Keek, 'you want your future to be shared?'

'If she'll have me, *oui!*'

'She will; I've seen the inside. She'll have you.' Non-human features broadened as Keek splayed his nostrils in sudden emotion. 'We're going to get out of this mess, Andri; I'm determined - for you, now, as much as for her and my-self. And Van.' *What about Ogan? Exactly! No, she's not so formidable as she pretends.* He decided to add her to the list. 'You've earned a slice of life and never had it. You've paid your debt and I intend for us to get through so you can en-joy your slice and forget what's gone.' 'I won't forget it, ever. But - thanks!' Andri couldn't find any more words; he just smiled tightly. Tenderly he placed Jocelyn's hand on the covers, then together he and Keek watched for her awakening. Keek prayed. Andri hoped. In the rec-room the clock ticked. Its noise seemed unnaturally loud, a stentorian knell. Otherwise there was silence in the dorm for a subjective aeon.

The acceleration wasn't noticeable, but Keek and Andri vaguely sensed it from experiencing it before. They both knew planet-five was falling away to the rear. Ogan's twenty hours had passed. Keek's 'reasonable period' passed also: one hour, two, three, four -

No movement from the bed, no awakening. Jocelyn stayed as peaceful as death, beautiful and pitiful. Something sharp stung all four attentive eyes: bitter, unashamed tears - not quite cried, just held back, glittering salty crystals.

Andri said quietly: 'It - isn't sleep.'

Chapter Twelve

'Not the sick-bay,' Channen decided. 'I'd rather she wasn't in it because there'll be a corpse sharing it soon.' Keek's expression filled with grief and Van cursed his choice of words. 'All right with you, Ruthe, if she's left in the dorm? Say so if not. You'll be the one with the constant reminder.' *As if any of us'd forget! At least she won't be bothered by your snoring or insomnia!* He attempted to stifle the callous

flow of thought. If Keek were touching, there'd be friction. *We daren't risk that now!* Planet-six beckoned from the scanner. Van knew he'd been making little mistakes lately: mental lapses, clumsy words. Were the rest of the staff doing the same but hiding the fact? Were the psychological assaults gradually eating away their brains? Probably, since 13 was moving rapidly towards their source if he'd located it correctly.

Ruthe didn't object. 'Leave her where she is, Van.' 'Fine.' He winced at the sorrow in Andri's eyes, then turned, startled at a noise from communications: a buzz from the radio. Someone was calling and it could only be the other probe. The buzz died and a voice spoke, weakly.

'Hello, Far Search; do you hear us?' Van acknowledged and waited. 'We're in trouble.' *I'm not surprised! Now begging for assistance, are you?* 'This world's so weird it's impossible! Screwier than anything I ever imagined!'

'I can believe that. So?' He immediately regretted his tone. The stranger was human, a potential friend despite past actions. 'Aliens, obviously. Can we help?'

'You know you can't! I'm not even asking!'

Recalcitrant bastards! You should be on your knees! 'Look, we've a common enemy and if we unite —'

'Go to hell! I just want to tell you this: we're in trouble and might not get out, blindside to you and might not come round. But if we do, you're in trouble too! *We may limp home, but you're not going to!* We've something explosive says so!'

Van paled with exasperation. Why couldn't the man set aside human enmity and see who was the real enemy? 13 couldn't hurt him; the aliens could. To Channen it seemed simple. Postpone their differences and combine against the elusive aliens. It might get them nowhere, but at least a few humans could bow out fighting in unison instead of squabbling among themselves while the aliens waited patiently to eliminate the survivors. It was the age-old human stupidity again. 'Listen, man -'

'No thanks! I'm being fair; I've given you a warning.' The stranger laughed.

Andri crossed Control and eased Van away from the mouthpiece. He was thinking back to the time he'd intended to intercept the missile. How many had the other station held? If only two, 13 still had a chance. 'You've forgotten something. Suppose you're forced to keep off an alien ship with your *one* remaining missile.'

'One? How did you-?'

The Feeler smiled. 'I didn't, but I do now.'

'Clever! It won't save you, though. We shan't need to use it on the aliens. Where their ships are Christ knows! We haven't seen any.'

Channen wondered where they were hiding. Not a single one had been sighted, yet there was no questioning the fact that aliens existed somewhere in or near the system. More, they existed on or near planet-six; he felt confident of it.

But why hadn't they been seen? He took over the radio from Andri. 'I'll make no secret of it, we're in poor shape. So must you be. Tell us the seriousness of your predicament and my offer still stands. We'll manage somehow if we join hands.'

'We help you home, you help us into prison? No! We'll get by alone. We've four dead, two laid out and two of us intact. Sufficient to launch a torpedo.'

Full crew-space? Then they did chop out most of the sensor-equipment, surveyed the system from outside with better instruments than ours. Van remembered Keek's words: '... instruments so marvellous they're useless'. He grinned. 'You don't honestly think you've found hyperdiam?' *Minimum equipment and I bet you gloated!*

'Thought so at first, but not any longer.'

'That means you've no profits from the trip. Be reasonable and throw in with us. Why fight us for worthless rocks?'

'No monetary profit, no hyperdiam; I agree. But staying clear of prison's profit enough for me.' The man's voice was defiant and Van realised it had to be a three-cornered battle all the way: the other station

appearing from behind six, its scout detaching to fire the missile. He fumed at the mad-ness of it. If between them they could conquer the aliens and survive, he was willing to say nothing about the illicit probe and erase all mention of the trespass from the tapes. It might entail protest from Ogan, but surely she'd admit that it wasn't a high price to pay for life. He didn't suggest it be-cause he didn't expect acceptance, nor could he conceive of any manner of defeating the aliens, even combined. He almost felt sorry for the pirates. They'd been depleted more than 13 had - again not surprising, if he'd judged the where-abouts of the aliens rightly: in the vicinity of six, very close to the rival probe. The stranger's voice interrupted his thoughts, fainter. 'Watch out for us coming round the planet. You won't see much more. Just a curving Moon-Buster and then nothing!'

A Moon-Buster? Yes, Van remembered them now: the most potent device invented during the slaughterous Dubhe II uprising. After the rebels had been crushed, every arma-ment-factory on the planet had been pulverised. He swore at the insanity of the Universe's creatures. *Always some de-praved character who'll build on an off-the-track planet and manufacture weapons illegally and make his fortune in innocent blood, selling regardless of the buyer's scruples or intentions!* 'A Moon-Buster? I'll grant they're somewhat on the deadly side.' He hoped he sounded calm. 'But they don't work every time, do they? My offer's retracted; get by alone!' Furiously, he broke contact. Planet-six taunted and grew. Time played tricks. Wantonly, it appeared to speed up and snatch six towards the probe alarmingly. Again, it slowed down as though toying with the crew, putting off what must come, yet never letting the threat be overlooked. The world's image expanded, dim-inished, leapt forward, retreated, according to the mood of the watcher and the seeming vagaries of treacherous time. Nerves frayed yet tempers didn't flare. Equanimity reigned, placidity, patience, resignation. 13's four compara-tively fit personnel faced reality without flinching: the reality of the pirates, the missile, the inexplicable gems, the aliens. Every one could spell a single word: death. It was impossible to ignore it, but they upheld the facade. And they waited for the next move, powerless to make one themselves. It had to come from outside.

It came from the aliens: a perfectly orthodox mind-lash - no specialisation, no fresh angles or craft, just a general attack striking everybody in the station. It wasn't selective and it didn't coincide with any distracting crisis. It simply came, viciously.

Channen wondered whether it contained an intrinsic cun-ning none of them could comprehend. Had it flashed in at precisely this instant because of an imperceptible — to humans - upsurge of mental decay in the trainee? Or perhaps a deterioration in Jocelyn? Or even in all the staff? Or had he become prone to pessimism?

Keek dashed into Dorm-B and threw his body across Jocelyn's. *Instinct! I'm trying to shield her physically though there's no physical hazard!* He crept off her and knelt by the bunk, maintaining touch, fingers intertwined. Any touch was sufficient. If he could partially protect her during non-coma, why shouldn't he be able to do it during oblivion? 'Don't worry, Jocelyn; I'm here.' *Folly! She's out!* She didn't answer. Not even a glimmer of recognition shone beacon-like against the dull grey of her blanked mind. Keek squeezed her fingers, praying.

Through anguish, he could hear some of the others' reac-tions: Ogan chanting like an immense evil sorceress, Andri muttering. Neither the trainee nor Channen made a sound. One couldn't and one didn't. Van was clutching the edge of the kiosk, holding himself erect, thinking violence and cast-ing it into battle against violence. He knew which was the stronger and it wasn't his.

Jocelyn's fingers didn't respond; they were limp, loose, cold. Keek squeezed them more vigorously. 'I'm here, I'm here/ he murmured soothingly and superfluously. Then he prayed with multiplied ardour, for Jocelyn, Van, Andri, Ruthe, himself, for an end to the attack he couldn't feel. But others could, and selfishness and Keek were strangers. So he prayed. *The only way I can help them, whether or not they believe as I do.* He knew none of them did, but still he sought intercession. *I can't aid them except by —*

Touch! It was an answer, an inspiration. *Why didn't I think of it before? It's not the ultimate remedy, but it may be a palliative!* He gave due credit to the gods and then shouted, 'Everybody! Into the dorm,

quick!' Would they realise he'd been shown a revelation? Would they gather to his voice? *Could* they? They would. They had little choice. They could, with difficulty. They did.

Ogan clattered in, quotations dripping with saliva from her mouth, quietening, prepared to listen. Andri followed, a stitched and restitched horror-face, eager to listen. Then Van arrived, already listening.

'Fast! Bundle together! Include Jocelyn, then if I can somehow touch —'

They understood. A crowd assembled hastily around the bunk, three people peripheral, Jocelyn central. Keek scrambled between them. 'Might be easier if all of you touch all the rest; I can't say - ' *Can I spread myself four ways? I'll be thinly spread!* Hands, arms, feet, legs moved. They crossed, wound, pressed. Knee touched wrist; wrist touched ankle; ankle touched elbow. Contact was achieved as Keek wanted it. Jocelyn lay beneath a pile of bodies, beyond the pain of weight, comatose. Keek topped the heap, miraculously managing to touch everybody. He spread himself.

Mentalities mingled, flowed together, thought-rivers merging in an ocean of swirling, diverse cerebration. Memories, conjoined, made roaring waves of recollection: of a filthy cell, of an edge, of an apprentice who got his jaw broken near Capella, of rituals at home in childhood. Ambitions flecked the wave-crests like outflung spume: to be finally free;, to find true belief, to quit the probe-game, to live a good life and stay faithful to the gods and a blind girl. Experiences danced, water-droplets, the poignant and the beautiful, the shameful and the sublime. Group-conscious-ness had its hour, its acme, its simultaneous testing and graduation. There were few secrets retained. It was different things to different people. To Andri: the sympathy and companionship for which he'd always yearned, swept to an extreme of which he'd never even dreamed. To Ruthe: the closest she'd ever been to a truly ultra-human personality whose existence allowed of no dispute or doubt, the spiritual pinnacle of her unhappy life. To Van: the consummate human harmony, albeit alien-stimulated, which with regard to humanity *en masse* was a marvellous theory but a complete impossibility. To Keek: a sign of the omnipresence of the eternal gods. And to Jocelyn: nothing at all, not even a blurred interlude in unrelieved greyness.

The concord was too complex to be sustained for long. It confused the mind. While it lasted, it held the aliens at bay. Psychological thrusts crashed against a mighty mental wall and fell back in disarray. The siege continued but the fortifications couldn't stand indefinitely. Keek knew he'd have to crumble the barrier, or those inside would break under one load whilst fending off another. He hung on and eventually the aliens vanished. He relaxed. The humans gratefully sank to the floor, spent They were safe - until next time.

It just didn't seem like an attack, to Keek. He knew it must be, yet it felt altogether wrong. It didn't conform. The symptoms were different, less widespread, vaguely and perniciously altered. Everything appeared normal, almost, yet he knew it must be an attack: a new type, localised again but with a change in direction and victim.

Ogan was snoring, undisturbed, loud and level. Andri sat resting in the rec-room, unaffected. Jocelyn was still in coma, not as deep as the youth's but coma nevertheless. Everything appeared normal - except for Channen's behaviour. It troubled Keek because it indicated an attack aimed specifically at 13's most essential crew-member, the probe's brain, its heart, its Integrator: Van.

He stood in the middle of Control, quiet and introspective - too quiet and introspective. His gaze held steady on the screen and planet-six's image. He looked faint, tired, drooping. His hands trembled and his knees shook, buckling. Keek thought he was about to fall. His expression combined weariness, perplexity and a slight suggestion of a growing decision.

The non-human approached him hesitantly. 'You okay, Van?' *What an infantile question! Of course he isn't! Are they concentrating on him now? If they cripple him, they've really scored a vital victory over us!* 'Van? I said, are you okay?'

Channen seemed to clamber out of a dream. 'Okay? I think so. Why?'

'You look far from it. 'As if - an attack. I wondered -'

'No, it's not that.' He brightened. Perplexity died and weariness died with it, buried under a sudden decisive expression and a straightening of the body. 'Full alert again. I want everyone who's fit. Get them here, Keek. Something's odd.'

Keek woke Ogan, passed the message to Andri, and the staff assembled in Control: Van, Keek, Ruthe, Andri. 'Only four of us, Van. A sorry crew.'

'Not as sorry as the poachers. They're taking their time coming round six; I expected them hours ago. But that's their worry, not ours. Yet!' *What's happened to them? What's waiting farside for us?* He allocated duties and gave instructions. Ogan went to her Eye-booth with surprising alacrity, nearly smiling. Andri settled in front of his own panel; Keek grimaced as he took Jocelyn's place. *Sorry! I know those phones hurt without being tight on you, but we couldn't work it any other way.* Van pointed over Ruthe's shoulder at six, now quite large. 'There's the target. Give it everything we've got. I detect life again like on four, only much stronger. And something else, different, intelligent life so abundant it's making me dizzy.' He looked at the screen. Planet-six appeared harmless: a sphere mostly concealed by dazzling cloud-cover, too thick for the surface to be checked visually. Van knew it wasn't harmless. Behind it, the pirates had been halted or retarded. They were late. Channen wavered between relief that one threat had been temporarily lifted and fear of what exactly had lifted it. 'See what you can find. Nothing, I imagine. But it's there!'

Ruthe brought six into the highest magnification and scrutinised it. Andri felt the planet via radar and other instruments. Keek listened. The result was negative: no discernible life of any sort.

'I didn't expect our equipment to pick it up,' Van said evenly. It hadn't done on four; it had missed the crystals. As he'd anticipated, it missed them again on six. They were definitely present, and in quantities that staggered, him. He glanced at the cupboard and thought about the two gems within it. Andri's colossal deposit on four bore no comparison to the amounts Van sensed on six. *It's ridiculous! The entire world's alive with them! Another badly-chosen term, dammit! The stuff's everywhere; I don't need to see the surface to know what it's like: crystalline, sparkling, alive with colour and alive anyway!* He couldn't assimilate the idea because it was so overwhelming.

The idea of the other abundant intelligence was more so. Sentience hit him in a violent wave and his head seemed to be spinning with the power and volume of it. 'Keep trying. Forget the surface; concentrate on the space around six.' He wondered why he'd told them to ignore the surface. It, too, vibrated fantastically with the non-pseudo-hyperdiam intelligence. He suspected the jewel-stone went far below the planet's crust and the separate intelligence went with it. Also it filled local space, cloaking the world, stretching out. *God, we'll soon be in it! The pirates already are! They don't look as though they'll be emerging, either!* He said firmly: 'Scan space. There's life surrounding six like an atmosphere!'

Andri turned. 'Atmosphere proper shows oxygen, similar to five.'

'It's the only similarity, then! Nothing else Earth-like here.' He realised there'd be no colonising planet-six. It was hostile, foreign, lethal. He remembered the stranger's words on describing it: weird, impossible. *Yes, and more! I'm with you on one thing: it's screwier than anything I ever imagined, too!* Its strangeness defeated him: living crystal perhaps through to the centre, permeated by a second life-form reaching way out into space, an atmosphere of ambient intelligence and hostility. He wished 13's trajectory could be stopped, and recognised the wish as futile. The probe would shortly be in the thick of it and there was no preventing the fact.

The resumed instrumental check matched the first result: negative.

'Give it a few more minutes. Pointless, but - ' Words

jammed as a wild notion claimed his thoughts. *It can't be!* He knew it shouldn't be and couldn't be. Yet it was. *It's -it's growing, expanding! This is crazy but it's actually doing it!* Now that he thought back, he realised he'd sensed it all the time but refused to admit it. Suddenly it was too blatant not to be admitted and accepted. He scarcely believed it, but he had to acknowledge it.

The crystal part of planet-six was increasing in size. He could feel it pushing down into the world's core, cutting across what remained of deserts and forests in slashing glit-tering fingers of jagged colour, ballooning up into huge translucent mountains, blocking drying, dying rivers with dams of solid sentient brilliance - a slow but inexorable process which had probably been going on for weeks, even years, a gradual conversion of every substance on the planet into fabulous, pellucid *conscious* stone. 'A takeover,' Van soliloquised in an awed whisper. 'The rock's transforming everything else into rock, consuming it!' The gradual pro-cess continued and he knew that before long planet-six would consist

entirely of sparkling stone, aware. Hungrily it devoured all other materials, assimilated them and grew. Almost furtively he walked to the cupboard, placing the key in the lock. He asked himself what he expected to see and was all too sure of the answer. How big would the jewels be? He couldn't estimate because he had no positive clue to the rate of expansion. He opened the door cautiously.

The jewels were still the same size, unchanged, a deadly twin-glitter.

That seemed to be a clue in itself, though he couldn't grasp its import. One minute's determined contemplation and he had it. He laughed quietly at his earlier thought that the gems were the aliens. They weren't. Instead, the aliens were *in* the gems - not those in the cupboard, yet, nor those on four. But they were in the crystalline rock of planet-six, in it and around it, pervading it, encompassing it, forcing it to increase.

Question: *why?* Was it some bizarre act of reproduction, *between two separate species?* If so, what inconceivable entity would be the offspring? Horrible pictures crawled in his brain as he conjectured. He tried to stop them and succeeded. They returned with greater force. How long since the possibly reproductive process had started? Answer: since the advent of the extra-system aliens, after Far Search's first survey. If this were procreation, the gulf dividing human and non-human was becoming broader and broader, vaster, uncrossable. They could never meet on equal ground; they were so different, so alien each to the other. They might have absolutely nothing in common. Must it inevitably be war to the death? He shuddered. Was it now a matter of racial survival, for one species? Or the unavoidable extinction of both? Could either protagonist withdraw and leave affairs as they stood, irreconcilable? If alien pride and assumed superiority mirrored human, no! They'd have to meet again, if only to settle who really was superior to whom. Van visualised Sol's bipedal hordes sweeping the Universe in search of presumptuous aliens, to squash them. *Like those poor devils on Dubhe II! We smashed them because they had the audacity to feel free! But you shake off the yoke, you get the whip across your back!* Channen felt sick. *Friendly contact, fine. But show a bit of resistance, independence, even apathy, and we bring you into line the hard way! That's how we're made! To avoid Sol's conceit, you bend the knee! God above!* For a moment he sympathised with the aliens, then remembered that they meant death for him as an individual, whatever the inter-racial culmination.

It sobered him. They were still a threat on a personal level. He hoped there could be peace after this particular contact and he knew that right now there wasn't. One fact comforted him: the crystals weren't hyperdiam. If they were, pride wouldn't come into it. Human greed would. Mankind would want it because - well, they'd want it because man was man. And the aliens appeared to want it themselves for something. He couldn't imagine what, but he was reassured slightly. *If it were what we thought it was -* He tried to form a mental image of the aliens and immediately blushed at his stupidity. How could one form an image of an entity which was invisible, intangible, inaudible — untraceable by the circuitry of Eye, Feeler and Ear -noticeable only to a rare mind such as Van's - an entity of sheer awareness and intelligence, pure and simple, bodiless?

And then he did a re-run. Pure and simple? Never!

'That's enough,' he said. 'End of alert.' The sensors turned, shrugging: no life, nothing. Channen denied it. 'We've found what we were looking for. We've located them.' He passed on his knowledge and speculation.

'Do you truly love her?' Keek asked. Andri didn't need to answer. 'Yes, of course you do. Sorry.'

Non-human eyes reflected the sadness in human. 'I promised to get us out of this, didn't I?'

Had Keek a practicable plan? Was there such a thing? 'You did.' Beneath the scars, Andri's expression could have been either sceptical or hopeful. 'An idea?'

'Not to get *us* out, no! The gods will decide. Jocelyn, though; we've a chance.' He could see he'd captivated the Frenchman, given him unexpected hope. But he'd still have to play it carefully. Andri's upbringing wouldn't be conducive to success. 'Back home we have an annual festival, a parade of the gods: fertility-deities, the life-bestower, the life-taker, gods of sun and storm, peace and war and so on. Are you following me?'

'Yes.' *I can fault his tenets but not his motives.* Andri was glad Keek wasn't touching. 'I follow.'

'We get happy, frenzied, enthusiastic. And wildly fervent. And often drunk! We aren't perfect.' Keek

wondered if he'd ever made a more accurate observation. 'It's quite a festival! One of the most popular aspects is the customary contest between our Love-Goddess and the Sender-of-Hatred - in effigy, naturally; on the mundane plane, not the celestial.' *You'd say just a drama, Andri? A ritual? Maybe, to your manner of thinking. Yet for us it's a very real and significant enactment, in terms we can cope with, of the everlasting higher conflict. If only I could make you see!* 'Leaving out details, here's the essence: every year Love conquers. She's killed, she's born anew, she conquers. Okay?' Keek paused. 'Hatred lives too, but beaten.'

'Yes,' Andri replied reluctantly. Where was all this lead-ing? 'Love wins every time.' *Couldn't be otherwise, could it? Necessary dead gods have to be reborn. They can't die, so the cycle's invented: life-death-rebirth. Primitive symbol-ism. Marduk, Osiris.* Andri was astonished that Keek actually believed in such superstition. *Yet remember his motives!* Patiently he waited for the talk to drift round, to Jocelyn.

'The lecture was just to demonstrate to you the power of love. I think you and I may be able to rescue her. Your love and mine — different but equal - against the Sender-of-Hatred in the aliens. If you'll trust me, we might do it.'

Andri hadn't much choice - again. He did trust Keek, but he didn't trust the religious foundation of his idea. 'After you.'

Keek moved towards the dorm, glancing at the pitiless clock. The rival station was overdue by hours. Something had stopped it; it couldn't stop itself. He refused to worry, and opened the door. He sat on the bunk and motioned Andri to the other side. 'You and I -'

'Why the two of us? Why not Ruthe and Van?' he whis-pered. They were in Control.

'Firstly, you know how hard it is to suffer so large an exchange. Secondly, there's subconscious elements in them, detrimental. Aversion and - a vestige of jealousy, even if he doesn't realise it himself.

Undercurrents that wouldn't help us help her. You and I are in this one respect clean. *Hold her hand!*'

The imperative tone slammed him into instant obedience. He took Jocelyn's right hand, Keek the left.

Three fingers slithered across, her body and gripped Andri's wrist. The triangle was complete, but this time it didn't bewilder him. The Jocelyn-angle remained quiescent. Keek's mind flew into him, a

straight-line contact. Two lines and one angle had yet to be invoked, before the figure became mental as well as physical. Could Keek draw them in?

'Yes, with you and the gods backing me. Now stop what you're thinking, that this is black-magic or idiocy or both! It's neither!' Andri stilled the thoughts, embarrassed. Keek had him stripped bare. 'Don't even think about Ogan, or Van or anybody or anything - except Jocelyn!'

Andri did his best. Straining, he banished Ruthe, Van, Far Search, Titan. Vagabond memories showered in and he steamed them into annihilation with a burn of effort. Suddenly it was almost easy to think only of Jocelyn. 'How am I doing?'

'Tremendous. Stick it out.' Keek's hand contracted in congratulation and his mind enveloped Andri's warmly. 'Dive into her brain through mine; do as I do. Find the effects of Hate-Sender and cleanse her of them!' *And pray if you will. Or can. We won't argue theology.* 'Think Jocelyn, think love, defy hatred! Cleanse her!'

He thought Jocelyn, thought love, defied hatred. Her mind lay dormant, ready to be revived or extinguished. He thought Jocelyn, thought love, defied hatred. Sex insinuated itself, currently vulgar, out of context, not permissible. He swore at it, roared at it, exiled it to a possible or impossible future. He thought Jocelyn, thought love, thought Jocelyn, thought -

Was that a spark of animation?

It wasn't. He toppled into black despair and Keek tugged him out. *Thanks! I'm okay again now. I'm following you all the way, copying, learning! Lead; I'll follow!* Keek was the guide - into Jocelyn, not just a guide to steer her body around obstacles. Andri was being guided - into Jocelyn, into the obstacles created by Hate-Sender, into them and piercing through them and shattering them and - *That was a spark of animation!*

Nothing physical, but a narrow channel opened in her mind, a point of entry. Keek exulted as it widened, became a rift through which they could be admitted, an overt invi-tation to enter. They entered, smashing

away the debris of the Sender's broken obstacles. Andri found himself filled with zeal. He could believe, even if it were a transient faith. He tunnelled down into her brain, a junior partner to Keek, yet every bit as excited and passionate, not noticing as 13 rocked and rattled.

Her lips parted, trembling, and parted more. White teeth shone jewel-like in a grimace of agony, a grinding against pain, a — smile! Keek quivered with delight. 'We're winning, proving a coma-reversal's feasible! Stay at it! Stay -'

'Trouble!' Channen was in the dorm, his expression aghast. 'Biggest emergency yet! Perhaps disaster!' He sig-nalled towards Control. 'Come on!'

Involuntarily, Keek and Andri dropped Jocelyn's hands. So nearly purged, she relapsed into the grey pit. Van turned away, not realising what the emergency had ruined, and hurried to Control. The others hesitated, tortured by emotion, staring at Jocelyn in coma. The door yawned, demanding.

'The timing of the gods,' Keek said philosophically, his voice choked. 'It has to be bigger than she.' They went out of the room and into Control, then stopped and gaped in amazement at the screen.

Van looked uncertain, shaken, afraid. 'Not a mental hit. It's rough and tough and physical. We've been halted dead in flight. They're dragging us down out of space!'

Chapter Thirteen

The screen showed apparent madness. Planet-six leapt from side to side, vanishing from the picture, returning. It jumped, jerked, gyrated. Control's floor canted and shuddered. Unfettered objects whirled in the air. Six whirled, too. It spun and changed position, drifted away and came back. Its turbulent efforts seemed to be directed at yanking itself clear out of orbit. Keek gasped: 'It's wan -'

'No, it's us that's deviating,' Van insisted. 'Six isn't dancing any of those crazy jigs. We are.' The floor kicked upwards as though to endorse his opinion, 'See? Six is hanging exactly where it should. It's us that's shaking! They're tearing us out of trajectory to crash us!' Ruthe, about to protest, desisted.

Keek didn't argue, verbally. *Contradicting yourself, Van?* He'd overheard the recent conjecture put forward by Channen and recalled the words: 'I've been swinging round to the hypothesis that they're an all-psychological species, no gadgets.' Keek couldn't imagine the aliens capable of upsetting the engines of the probe mentally, without machinery of some sort. He was sure they couldn't do it by brain-power alone. *Upset us, yes, but not 13!* He reasoned that if the aliens weren't pulling the station down, then the world itself must be. *Gravity! We've got too close to it. Rather, it's got too close to us! Therefore it's moving, which can only mean one thing: another myth punctured.* He decided to argue after all. 'I concede we're shaking, but I still say the world's beginning to -'

'Quit the polemics,' Andri interrupted practically. "What can we do?'

Van wavered and Keek assumed command. 'Fight, obviously, whether it's aliens or an aberrant planet!' Three pairs of eyes stared at him interrogatively and he started to throw out orders. 'Ruthe, strap Jocelyn and the lad in, tight! Feeler-booth, Andri? The gloves!' They responded immediately while Van seemed to dissolve into the background, immobile and puzzled. Andri seated himself, buckled leather across his chest and stuck his bruised arms into the tacto-gloves.

A minute and Ruthe reappeared. 'They're both secure.' She wobbled as 13 did.

'Good. Now go to the dorm and harness yourself.' He halted her on the verge of dissension. *She wants to stay here and gaze at that hypnotic scanner of hers! Well, she can't!* 'Ruthe, we're either going to crash or not crash! If we do, you need the straps; they'll lift your chances from zero to perhaps one in ten thousand. And if we don't crash, you need them anyway because there's some violent flying ahead. So harness yourself!' *Can't she follow logical thinking, for once?* She could. She nodded almost meekly and made her exit. Keek glanced at Van's immobility, frowned and turned to Andri. 'Slap everything possible on the scout. The plater, all the usable appendages. Clamp it down as firm as you can without holing the hull.' Why didn't Van move or speak? The image in the screen performed spatial gymnastics. Why didn't he suggest something or do something? Planet-six veered across the plastic, nearly left it, then flashed back. Why did he resemble a shock-paralysed novice more than an experienced Integrator? Suddenly Keek realised why. *That insidious intelligence he talked about, we're in it! He's a*

six-senser and it dizzied him from a distance. He must be in torment just now!

'Andri, get him tied down on the couch if you've finished with the appendages. Two of us can manage my plan. You and me again.'

'All done here.' Andri unbuckled himself and went to aid Van. He reached him precisely as he slumped, face grey and terrifyingly aged, eyes closed. The Frenchman snapped straps and Channen now more resembled a corpse than either a tyro or a veteran. 'What now, Keek? The plan. I'm in your hands.'

'And we're both in those of the gods. They heaped too much on Van's brain, but they may let our inferior articles prevail.' Six glided and sucked and menaced. 'If you'll fasten yourself in the kiosk, leave yourself a view of the screen, be ready with the controls?' Andri did so. He could manipulate the controls yet still see the scanner. 'That's it.' *This is where I pray hard. We're actually inside the aliens — if it's possible to be inside entities of their ethereal nature!* Keek considered it fortunate that he and Andri were on a lower intellectual level than Van, or at least less sensitive. It hadn't required an attack to disable him; the mere surrounding presence of alien life had been enough. In the event of an attack, Keek knew he couldn't shelter everybody as before. And an attack wasn't even necessary to destroy the crew. A crash would suffice and a crash there'd be unless his plan worked.

'Instructions, Keek? Let's act instead of think, shall we?' Andri said bluntly.

Keek crushed self-recrimination. 'Quite right! Here it is, then: I'm going into the scout. Your job's to keep me aligned at ninety degrees to six's surface by applying thrust as and when needed on the emergency-motors - or as near ninety degrees as you can. If six gets close, we pray the scout's own thrust can push us away.' / *don't think it can, but if six really is wandering we can only hope it wanders from us rather than towards us. And that's not worth betting on because we've no idea where it's going, or why!* 'Van's wrong. Gravity's pulling us, not the aliens. So we combat it the only way we can.' He wondered why being inside the aliens didn't bring attack-effects and decided it must be like entering a human brain, which could reject him at will - if it were strong enough - by figuratively slamming the mental door on him: thinking resistance, forcing him backwards and out. It didn't matter that the alien brain was non-material, constructed of - *nothing? How can it be? Don't know, but it is! Are they made of the fabric of dreams, of thought? Dreams and thought are real, though we can't perceive them by our five senses. Is the Cosmos a dream, a thought? If so, whose?* He became confused and dimly realised the human-brain parallel held: the aliens too could reject an intrusion at will, by attacks, by coma. And probably would! 'I'll tie myself into the scout somehow. Got it air?'

'I understand,' Andri said. 'Lack of radio won't help. Just have to hope we can work in harmony without it. I'll check the appendages now and then, in case the scout jolts loose. Might be a stormy crossing to reach the booth, but rely on me. You do your bit, I'll do mine.' He shook Keek's hand, a valedictory touch of flesh and minds, and they parted company.

A feminine baritone droned from Dorm-B. 'Ah, Keats! I'm crying again.' Andri sighed. *She's at it, reciting as though in an attack. Perhaps expecting one. So am I!* His thoughts didn't stop her. 'Did you pen "Nightingale" specially for me, for this moment? When you wrote of his song, "Perhaps the self-same song that found a path Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, She stood in tears amid the alien corn"?' The Feeler heard her sobbing. He could see the analogy. He shrugged and tried not to listen any more, but the melancholy voice persisted, distracting.

He slapped at levers, pressed switches, cutting in a short or long blast of emergency thrust when necessary. Keek had to be kept with the scout's tubes pointing down towards six's surface. *It's not so far away now!* He could tell from the occasional vibration - more even and predictable than the general shuddering of the probe — that Keek was applying his own retros to the task already. The bouncing threw Andri's body against the straps. They didn't stretch; they held tight, hurting his chest. He knew it was better than a breakage. How had Keek fastened himself in? Probably just lashed himself with any old length of cord from his kitchen. *Courageous little creature! I hope your improvised harness doesn't duplicate the trick mine played!* Andri slapped levers and pressed switches.

Gradually his mind was swerving towards Keek's view that simple gravity was the culprit, not the aliens. *Simple? Christ! Sick for home, alien corn? Yes, I'm sick for it too, except I haven't got one!* But even though he almost agreed with Keek, he didn't like to because it meant admitting a certain amount of

cold fact hid inside a legend: that of the Wandering Worlds. Keek postulated that planet-six had begun to wander. Where to? Why? How? If it were moving out of orbit at all, the aliens must obviously be the motive agents. Again, why? Where were they taking it? What did they want with it? The pseudo-hyperdiam, naturally; the living, growing, world-devouring crystal. For what purpose? How could they use it? He slapped levers.

Ogan's voice rumbled on, a cacophony of quotations, mostly new to him. Some seemed apt, but the majority had no relevance he could catch. He wished she'd shut up but she didn't. He wished *she'd* wander, whatever six was doing. And what exactly *was* it doing? Leaping, jerking, prancing in the scanner, coming ever closer with the inevitability of death. *No, it's not coming at us; we're jailing into it. Wander all you want, six, but wander away from us!* Where could its destination be, assuming the myth were entirely true and the planet was about to leave the system? In the opposite direction, he hoped. Definitely the movements of the image failed to correspond to those of the probe. The planet jumped and disappeared frantically, independently. Every glance at the screen forced him more and more towards the conviction that Keek must be right. Therefore the myth could no longer be classed as a myth. It was reality. Six was without doubt drifting from orbit, tearing free of the Universe's chains which had for aeons held it in its accustomed position. *They can't be weaklings if they can shift a world! Shift it from orbit and -*

Something crashed behind him. He turned, eyes wide. *This is nightmare, only it's real!* The door of the cupboard had smashed; metal swung, ripped, on broken hinges. On the floor rested two large hunks of gem-rock: alive, coruscating, the size of a man's head. Were they still growing? He stared, remembering that the rate was gradual. They didn't seem to be expanding but they must be, imperceptibly. His brain reeled under a sudden threefold revelation. The probe was in the aliens, the aliens were in the jewels, the jewels were in the probe. *Triangle! Hate and enmity, not love!* He didn't know what to do and hadn't much leisure to do any-thing. Keek's alignment had to be maintained. Andri concentrated on the panels and blanked the crystals from his mind. They'd have to wait. They weren't an immediate danger. Or were they? Again he didn't know.

Deep tones droned. Van lay unconscious. To Andri, the Universe appeared to have gone mad: spinningly, staggeringly, stupefyingly insane! He fought for 13's stability and for his own. Planet-six wobbled and wandered. He unbuckled and went unsteadily to the Feeler-booth, looking into the small screen to check how tightly the scout was gripped. Two appendages had sheered off. Into the gloves, and he pulled down on the grapples, pressed the plater in harder against the vessel and locked on the remaining arms more securely. The scout's hull dented slightly and he didn't dare do any more for fear of holing either it or 13. *Pre-carious, but it's got to hold at that! Any extra pressure and we'll asphyxiate!* He had to leave things as they were. If the scout stuck, they had a chance of sorts. If it didn't, they had none at all.

He harnessed himself in the kiosk, adjusting 13's angle relative to planet-six, doing as much as he could to combat the plunge. Ruthe's voice intensified to a revolting booming thunder as the final attack struck. Keek lay across the panel, hastily lashed with a section of lifeline. *It better live up to its name!* The controls were a tangle of shattered dials, mangled steel, crushed glass and plastic. It reassured him to know the jewels weren't inside. They should be safe - *no, not exactly safe; just locked up* - in Van's cupboard.

Vertigo assailed him as he fancied six looping and spiral-ling below him, rushing up. He couldn't see it because of the scout's imperfect vision. The screen bore a picture of stars, nearby planets, a blue sun, all flashing to and fro with the probe's lurching downward fall. Beneath him he knew there waited a void, a ghastly abyss whose bottom was the solid crystal ground of a world at the commencement of its inexplicable wandering. The cracked altitude-meter screamed at him a height that scared him. *Too low! Retros again! Have I enough fuel? Enough luck?* He gauged the duration of firing and the drop seemed to slow a fraction - a few seconds more, worried about fuel-expenditure, and it had definitely lessened in velocity. But it hadn't ceased. EG13 continued to tumble and the meter's pointer crept inexorably towards critical height.

He was now certain it was gravity that gripped them, not the mental-energies of aliens beyond his

comprehension. He didn't think they possessed the ability to tamper with the station. They must have limits, too. Abruptly he sensed the merest twinge of the attack. What was it doing inside 13? Who was it affecting and how? If it took Andri into oblivion, that would be the end: no application of emergency motors, no stability for the scout, nothing to prevent the fatal crash. *Hang on, Andri! You've done it before, so do it again! Keep me lined up and hope the fuel lasts.* All he could read on the fuel-register was an illegible mass of criss-crossing cracks, hieroglyphs in glass.

A dazzle of sudden optimism illuminated his mind, a confidence that 13 could escape. He smiled at the scowling altimeter. *We can do it!* He brought in the retros, a squanderous twenty-seconds burst, heedless of propellant consumption or conservation. *Don't go under, Andri; the load's on your shoulders, so square them and we can do it!* He now accepted as an absolute fact that the aliens were preparing six for departure. Why and how didn't matter. He formulated the important questions. Where? In which direction? Towards 13 or away from it?

And he knew the answer: *away from it!* Otherwise, why bother with an attack? If the struggling probe were on six's intended course, an attack was a superfluity. It would be easier just to let the world swallow 13 in and squash it flat on the surface, ready to be converted to crystal. Keek theorised that they must be moving it away, not nearer. It couldn't be the most straightforward of jobs, tugging a planet from its sun. It was bound to entail a few false-starts and difficult manoeuvres, with the primary tossing the world about madly while the planet-snatchers strove to steal it. *We merely got trapped during the first ponderous conflict, as six jumped our way. And we can beat it if Andri survives and the fuel-tanks don't empty.* It seemed so ludicrously simple an explanation that it just had to be true.

A world wandering *towards* 13 would destroy it without additional efforts by the aliens. A world wandering *away* wouldn't harm it except by sheer misfortune - misfortune for the probe: becoming captured in the initial stages of the battle between the blue sun and the entities endeavouring to thieve one of its offspring. Keek thought of the pirates: a heap of wreckage, perhaps already being eaten by the gems. *Good! A lesson they asked for but didn't have long to improve themselves by learning! They couldn't have had time to grapple their scout to the hull, even if the idea occurred to them — which I'll warrant it didn't!* He wondered what was the reason for the attack and concluded that the aliens' motives in trying to eliminate 13 were the same as the poachers': leave no witnesses alive. Yet that didn't quite feel complete. Planet-stealing wasn't exactly a crime; it wasn't mentioned in any of the statute-books and its perpetrators weren't a known species. So would normal law apply to them? *A nice problem in ethics and I don't know the answer.* And were they really *stealing* the planet? He decided they couldn't be; it didn't belong to anybody, so nothing could morally prevent them from taking it away to regions unknown for an unguessable purpose. Their title to six must be every bit as strong as anyone else's.

His thoughts turned full-circle and reverted to the first conclusion: leave no witnesses alive - witnesses not of a crime but of the mere existence of the aliens themselves. They'd been undiscovered until recently and must desire to remain undiscovered. Keek could understand their wish for privacy. He respected it but wasn't happy about it because it necessitated his death.

A spar of metal tore loose and whipped over his head. *Praise the gods I'm not a man, or I wouldn't be; I'd be a decapitated corpse!* He cut in more thrust and ignored the fuel-consumption. The probe was definitely decelerating. Another thrust and it almost stopped. He banged elbows with amusement and relief. 13 was barely falling. Planet-six was set to go off away from it. The two facts added up to salvation.

Everything went wrong. The scout tilted. *Have I come adrift? No, we're still attached.* So 13 itself had tilted. It revolved once, twice, three times, steadied itself with the scout underneath. *Andri's lost control! Have they got him or is it just a temporary lapse?* Keek saw six below him, close but not too close: white clouds flying across the screen, broken here and there to reveal a resplendent crystal plain, a stretching vista of living, alien-permeated gem-stone. He didn't look for the wrecked pirates. The odds were against him seeing them and he didn't even want to. Apart from which, they'd probably be partially digested, changing from steel and flesh to rock in the uncanny maw of an omnivorous, sentient world - a Wandering World! The thought bewildered him but perplexity didn't detract from reality. The

Wandering Worlds actually did wander. No one knew why or whither — except the aliens — yet the Wandering Worlds actually did wander.

Six wandered, slowly but under control, in the instant that the probe righted itself. The scout's scanner flicked upwards and the planet had gone. Keek felt oddly cheated, angry, disappointed - and overjoyed. Andri hadn't been knocked out, or if he had he'd recovered. Keek poured on the fury of the retros for half a minute, to be on the safe side. Without needing to see, he knew they were clear of six. Now it would be a case of waiting while the effects of three separate thrusts sorted themselves out: the emergency-motors, the scout's downward blasts and the programmed actions of 13's main engines. In the end the original trajectory would dominate, but altered by his and Andri's contributions. *We'll probably find ourselves erratically orbiting the emptiness where a planet once was, and hoping the system doesn't kill us by collision as its members do their own sorting out!* Elbows bumped cheerfully.

The attack had finished. *Must've realised they couldn't destroy us all and that we're impotent; can't hurt or locate them, even prove they exist!* How could they back up a claim of encountering a race they could neither see, hear nor touch? Van's testimony wouldn't be sufficient without tape-evidence to substantiate it. Also, he might well be dead or in coma, since he'd been incapacitated before the assault. The uncorroborated attestations of Andri, Keek and Ruthe would perhaps only have them hospitalised as victims of hallucinations. *So they've let up the pressure and gone home, wherever home is, smug in the knowledge that there's no possible way for us to learn what the stone means to them or where they're taking it!* Teeth clicked and nostrils broad-ened. *Perhaps get accused of murdering the missing kid, too!* He remembered the corpse in the freezer. Would a post-mortem give any pointers to the real manner of her death? Would it help? Keek kept clicking.

Safe but frustrated, he noticed the cessation of all shaking. 13 cruised again, twisting as it levelled into a new path. He untied the harness and wriggled free, then left the scout and entered the station. Glancing round Control, he opened the visor and stripped off his gloves. *Something's wrong!* What? He couldn't place it. Van was still oblivious on the couch, but something was different. He wondered how the others had come through.

Andri seemed mentally and physically exhausted. He limped from the kiosk and stooped to embrace Keek. 'You did it.' He refused to listen to his insisting that it had taken both of them and a lot of luck. He pointed to the screen. Six drifted smoothly into the distance, diminishing. 'We're privileged. A Wandering World!'

'And we've witnessed it and lived.' How many people had witnessed one and died? Keek studied Control for the wrongness. Glass powdered booths and seats: smashed bulbs and dial-covers. He was worried but didn't know why; more than concern for Jocelyn, certainly. 'Nearly had it when we spun. A black-out?'

'No, I had to make a couple of stormy crossings. First to the booth, no sweat. Got bruised badly on the second with the room spinning. But I managed to reach them.' Again he pointed. 'Your thrust, me out of position; we spun. But I reached them!'

Keek spotted the burst cupboard-doors, warped and swinging. His premonition grew and he gazed down. 'Gods, I forgot those!' Two huge jewels winked vividly at him. *Could be more urgent than checking the others! What an increase!* 'So busy I scarcely gave them a thought.'

'I did, plenty! Second trip, I'd no sooner moved from the kiosk than it all happened at once. We tipped over, the crystals just sat there, and then the significance dawned.' Andri hobbled impatiently towards the dorm, anxious for Jocelyn. He paused to complete his story. 'They were — corroding the floor. I tried to kick them away so they wouldn't fall through and eventually bore to the outer skin. They didn't stick to me - I was a little scared they would -but they only budged a fraction. And stuck to the floor despite the probe's revolving!' He showed a pair of indentations, craters in metal. Gem-twins glowed.

Keek's foot pushed them. They rolled. 'Out of the aliens' mind-field now. Reverted to the state of those on four: not expanding, not pervaded by extraneous intelligence.' Andri asked if they were dead; Keek snapped: 'As dead as the ones on four! Therefore alive.' How were Jocelyn, Ruthe, the trainee? He shrugged; the gems must be thrown out first. 'As imponderables, potentially dangerous.' He imagined a

tongue of alien mentality licking back across the Universe into the jewels, then an increase in size, larger, ever larger. They'd become too big to dump out of the lock and he had no idea whether they could be cut. *Real hyperdiam, no chance!* He didn't like experimenting on such enigmatical objects. They had to, be jettisoned without delay. 'Look at the others, Andri. I'll get rid of these.' He slid the face-plate into position and put on his gloves. Squatting, he scooped the stones into his arms. Then he gasped and stumbled back-wards. He retained his grip, his brain aflame, as Andri advanced swiftly.

'Too heavy? Let me -'

'No, no, fairly light.' *Gods, what is this? Less weight than I expected; it knocked me off-balance.* It was a lie. *What are they doing to me? My mind! A jangle of whirling thoughts! I can't bear it much longer!* Could the humans bear it at all, even though their brains were different to his, their mode of communication sluggish and clumsy? *Remember, Andri kicked them; a brief contact, no adverse effects. But a protracted contact? It can't be risked; they've got to go!* 'The — first time I've touched an impregnated gem. It -surprised me.' *Understatement!* 'The others! I'll dispose of these.'

'I'd say Jocelyn's top priority,' Andri suggested, turning.

'So - would I.' *I'm having trouble talking. Did he notice? No, he's gone.* Keek exited through the air-lock and stood on 13's hull, baffled. A brilliant burden rested in his arms. *What am I holding? Two stones, yes, but what else? Goddess-of-Love, what else? What exactly am I holding?* Suddenly he realised.

He was holding a revelation!

Chapter Fourteen

He was holding a revelation, and a truth and an answer and a memory.

Pictures formed in his brain, consummate three-dimensional images, precisely detailed. He saw with a sense beyond seeing, heard with a sense beyond hearing. His mind and insight expanded almost intolerably. Total clarity came. Extra cells seemed to blossom inside his head, additional synapses and abilities. Somehow, he *knew*.

He perceived a far sector of space, dozens of planets orbiting a fading star and — *something else*, outside all his species' and mankind's combined experience. *So that's why they need it!* The aliens dwelt on, in, around the worlds, penetrating solid matter with no difficulty, like light through glass. With a faculty transcending vision he could *see* them: tenuous whispers of colour, ethereal, beautiful, protean. With a faculty transcending the auditory he could *hear* them: quiet conversations, louder chatterings, voiceless, in patterns of pure thought. He recalled Jocelyn speaking of stars in noisy intercourse, murmuring meteors, old suns crying their deaths in the holocaust of a nova. Had she heard fragments of this, without knowing it? And was she alive still?

He *felt* the intangibility of the aliens, touched them in and with his mind. *How can I ever explain this, assuming I return inside? A word, 'feel', with connotations applicable neither to Andri at his panel nor to Van with his intuition! It's all so untranslatable!* Part of his brain worried about his air-supply; it wasn't infinite, yet eternity must have passed already. Other words, familiar, drifted into his consciousness and he knew they bore no meaning when thinking of the aliens: length, breadth, depth, age. They couldn't be measured in such terms. They might be long or short, broad or narrow, deep or shallow, young or ancient; or long and short at the same time, or any permutation of the un-words, or all of them conjoined, or none. The aliens and the un-words didn't belong in the same sentence or the same thought. They were different.

Yet similar! Keek trembled with excitement as a similarity offered itself, a meeting-point, an intersection of alien activities and his own. He saw a group of aliens detach itself from the home-sector, then another and another. Each went its separate way yet his exploded awareness easily kept track of them all. They spread out over the charted and uncharted Universe, small bands of intelligent life. Some entered a stellar-system, discarded it and tried elsewhere. Some, for-tunate at the first attempt, stayed in their selected sun-area and - began to search!

System-grubbers like us, scratching in the dirt to find things. Pick a locality, turn it upside-down, pronounce it a success or a failure. But there was a difference in the similarity. *Obvious what they want, whereas we're never sure what we want until we find it - if then!* Cynicism turned his mind to Ruthe. How had she made out in the ordeal? Probably as well as Andri, with her iron will and fierce, though suspect, zeal.

One of the alien groups surrounded a world and Keek experienced by proxy a strange emotion compounded of vast glee and unutterable relief. *Myself, I'd feel like that if I'd just escaped death by awhisker—almost; only there's hazy distinctions.* The happiness had been altruistic rather than personal, the relief identical. The party — comparable to the crew of a probe but possessed of much more accurate and acute discernment, non-mechanical - descended not on to but *into* the world, diffusing itself through it. It searched and found. The place reminded Keek of planet-four and the pseudo-hyperdiam deposit was tiny. He knew six had been like this before they arrived and altered it. A scatter of crystals coloured barren ground, little stones, a surface-sparkle. Larger rocks were embedded in dry, dusty soil. He sensed their minimal life-force: dimly sentient, seemingly inert but positively intelligent to some degree. *More than a snail or a worm, Andri. How does the casualty-list read?* Discarnate, the group pervaded every atom of rock. Time went by, a minute or a century, he couldn't tell. 'Time' was a sixth un-word, unrelated, unread, a foreign concept.

The crystal grew neither quickly nor slowly to the aliens; it simply grew as it was intended to grow, at its intended rate. A parallel shrieked: male enters female and female grows. Yet these were separate species, the propagation completely different. The gem-stones increased.

A probe appeared.

Keek watched in fascination as the rock claimed the world, as the planet changed from four-state to six-state, from minority through majority to maturity — total assumption of every other substance. *A perfect symbiosis, the higher intelligence bringing benefit to the lesser. Except it's far more subtle and vital than that!* Then a further parallel fluttered: aliens and Companies, both searching, both taking all they could from one world before moving on and tackling another. Transformed, the planet held itself ready to wander.

The probe plunged out of the sky and became crystal.

Time hadn't passed for the aliens because it didn't truly exist for them. They'd vaguely noticed the intruder - *yes, they've a valid point there!* - and taken steps to obliterate it. Again Keek picked out motivations, not all analogous to any he'd imagined previously: the desire not to be interfered with, not to be contacted, not to yield what was theirs rightfully to others who seemed interested in it - plus several weird motives as untranslatable as the un-words were inappropriate. So the station was brought down and he couldn't avoid watching the horribly familiar procedure: a flash of mental force, a crewman in coma; more attacks, more comas or fatalities; the sensing of strain or decline in the minds of the intruders, followed by an attack timed -*inapplicable, dammit!* - accordingly; someone calling for help and the aliens jamming his brain, not the radio, preventing his hearing a reply which was coming through clearly; and then the ultimate crash and conversion.

They can shift a world yet still can't affect our engines, our radio, our equipment; just our minds, but not completely. We all have our limits, even the apparently omni-potent among us, save only the almighty immortal gods! We're learning profound secrets, Andri. How is she? And Ruthe, Van, the boy?

The world wandered, a mobile planet whose composition was far more precious and necessary to the aliens than real, ordinary hyperdiam was to the Companies. *We only want the stuff; they need it!* But *why* did the Companies want it? *Because it's a pretty bauble to adorn a woman, a supremely indestructible tool for industry. Say refinement and progress!* His facial apertures widened scornfully. *Instead, say greed! Or we want it because it exists and therefore it's ours!* Another splaying of the nostrils and he realised his air hadn't gone, surprisingly. *Though it isn't ours, it's theirs! They need it! No avarice, no presumption. Just survival.* He remembered the probe crashing. It had shocked him, since he'd witnessed the death of people like 13's staff. And it had shocked him more on account of its absolute logic, undeniable if one could adjust and take the objective view. He felt his

sympathies swinging as the planet swung through space. *Without the gems, no self-perpetuation, no posterity, no - memory! Extinction! Yes, they need it!* He wondered how he could describe the aliens to the others. What could he use as the nearest approximation? Could he liken them to ghosts, dreams, locomotive thoughts? *No! They're perhaps all of these and more!* A fact entered his head, unverified, requiring no verification; he accepted it unhesitatingly: that no creature can exist entirely in the spirit, bodiless, in the sphere of mind and sheer thought. *Sounds plausible. It has to have an - anchorage, a solidity to fasten to.* A dream or a thought clung frailly to a brain. He believed a spectre to be tied either to the place of its flesh's death or the vicinity of its rotting corpse, temporarily. Alike, a brain and a corpse couldn't last for ever; they crumbled, collapsed, became nothing. *So the aliens acquire a more durable anchorage, as permanent as we mortal beings can acquire: rock! The gems aren't just to ensure a future, they're also a — stabiliser, a firm reality.* Again the inter-species fissure widened.

The Wandering World reached home. A host of planets circled their sun and the fantastic *something 'else*, the less-credible partner of a dual pivot. The Wanderer approached the gigantic non-stellar object, then lost its individuality as it flowed into it. It seemed to liquefy, losing shape and coherence. It diffused through the object exactly as the group had through the original crystalline deposit.

Mentally, Keek stared in colossal awe at the thing: a massive, monstrous orb of coruscant jewel-stone, much larger than the sun, illuminating space with a magnificent intrinsic light, alive; a stupendous agglomeration of Wandering Worlds, brought together from the depths of the Cosmos; a mass of flawlessly smooth, glassy, many-coloured gems, a single gem which would have dwarfed Sol-system and which aroused in him a mountainous admiration for the creatures whose indefatigability had constructed it.

Its purpose amazed him because it was so alien yet so logical. *It's more than an anchorage, more than insurance. To them, it's vital! A repository of the accumulated knowledge and experience of a thousand lifetimes! A fabulous racial-memory, containing every fact they've ever learned! A solid mind and memory — a life-preserving reality — for immaterial beings whose capacity, like mine, is finite!* He knew his own mind and memory could be overloaded. *Nor can I add to it, but they can.* He saw the gem-globe as a vast museum, a library, a living link with the past and a hope - *no, a necessity!* — for the future, always increasing, always having to be increased. Death's shadow hung ever-present as the alternative, death eventually for the whole race. If his own mind were forced to take in more than it could safely hold, the result would be unconsciousness, imbecility or death. Thus with the aliens, whose solid mental capacity must stay at least marginally ahead of population-expansion and the gathering of fresh knowledge. Every trip must send them farther out and one day there wouldn't be any jewels to be found and —

Then they've had it! He asked himself a question. Could they control desolate, non-gem-bearing planets and herd them into the scintillant sphere for assimilation? That would add to its size even after supplies of pseudo-hyperdiam had been exhausted. No, it had been tried and wasn't possible. The only planets that could be moved were the related ones, the rock-containers. Were the stones capable of further growth, given more materials, once they'd consumed a world? *Yes, their potency isn't ended at the moment of total assumption! Good!* Keek didn't know why he should concern himself with the problem of a hostile race: how to get a non-gem world to the racial-memory for assimilation, when that world couldn't possibly be shifted because it *was* a non-gem world.

He thought he detected an emanation of sadness from the two rocks in his arms. He'd forgotten them; he hadn't forgotten Jocelyn. Were the abandoned gems yearning to be somewhere else? He would be himself if the roles were reversed — if, impregnated, activated, he held the full story and couldn't be where he ought to be. Did they actually have emotions? They did; he felt them tickling his mind.

He wondered if a sort of fringe-memory could be induced in crystals such as these, left behind, outside the aliens' scope; an exclusive knowledge possessed by them yet not by the superior memory-globe. Perhaps it could. He hoped so, since he had an idea. Why not simply dig out lumps of pseudo-hyperdiam from the globe and plant them on dead worlds? It should be feasible to *change* a planet into a rock-container, then change it further until it became a world of crystal rock! The idea had the right ingredients, simplicity and ingenuity, and it just might work.

The inter-species fissure seemed to close a little. *I've given you something to chew on, if you find these two when you come back for planet-four. Call it the hand of friendship, though we won't be here to offer it in the flesh. Not if I get a say in the matter! We're not quite ready to meet amicably, yet! Sometime, though, we may be! Someday -*

He flung the jewels into space and turned towards the air-lock.

'We didn't all survive,' Andri said gloomily. 'Come on.' He led out to the rec-room, where Keek glanced briefly at the door to the sick-bay. 'As expected. The kid's dead. Two died. Come on.' He went into Dorm-B, Keek following.

The non-human stopped, sickened, when he saw the body. It lay terribly mutilated in a corner, head split messily. Something caught in his throat and he nearly vomited. Blood splashed the bunks, still dripping. Her breasts were bare, clothing ripped open by the violence of the fall. 'She never deserved this, but I think maybe she pined for it. Her God didn't help, did he?'

'Weight,' Andri explained laconically. 'The spin whipping her against the straps, probably wrong way up. She was heavy. Leather breaks.' He sighed. 'No, she didn't. Neither did Jocelyn; I don't know how *she* is.'

Keek gripped her hand, seeking awareness. He met grey-ness. 'Gone deeper, but not irrevocable. We'll drag her out, with love and patience.' *The Goddess Reborn!* 'And Van?'

'Seems the same as before, though I'm no medic'

'I am, in my own fashion.' Keek released the hand and went to Control. His touch lingered on Channen's cool face. 'Coma! Not alien; catatonic. Shocked by that intelligence he couldn't take. He'll be okay, provided he doesn't starve to death while we wait a few days for the rescue-ship.'

'Rescue-ship?'

Keek smiled at his astonishment. 'There's every reason to believe 4 and 37 received our distress-calls; naturally they'd signal Ganymede. You can bet the vessel's already outward-bound. I'd better elucidate.' Haltingly, Keek told a strange tale.

Andri listened in mystified, almost mystical silence until he'd finished. I understood about a quarter of that. A store-house of knowledge, similar to our data-banks, only more marvellous. System-to-system rovers, disembodied rather than operating from a probe. I sympathise with the need for solidity, too - in a different manner, of course. Then they're not *so* alien, after all?'

Keek denied it emphatically. 'Indeed they are! More than any of us can imagine! I stood out there for what seemed eternity - perhaps three minutes - yet I sneaked inside them enough to realise just *how* alien they are. True, parallels exist, but to me they spotlight the differences that are un-bridgeable as yet. We *daren't* face each other till one or both of us grows up some! It won't happen in our lifetimes, nor our grandchildren's, nor theirs. We've merely laid the first centimetre of an enormously long road. And what's at the end of it I really -'

'Never mind!' Andri cut in irately, tense. 'I can't see the far view; I don't even want to! But we can say that 13, now, is in the clear?'

'I wouldn't say so, no! Four of the crew dead; the Inte-grator helpless and in need of doctors; a young woman we *can* pull out, if we work harder at it than last time - and don't forget, when she recovers she'll almost certainly know the dark side of you from the group-contact during the penultimate attack!' Keek's tone softened since he knew that friction couldn't be risked. 'Sorry. I don't think you and she will have any problems that can't be surmounted. You're a good match. But please don't consider us in the clear! Two of us still standing, you with scars you'll be buried with, me with a heaviness on my brain that'll press on it until they lob me on the pyre at home or out the hatch here. Informa-tion inside us, scant - yet we'd sleep calmer without it!'

'I'm sorry, too. I was hasty and shouldn't have been.' Suddenly Andri did see a far view, but it was so nebulous he didn't mention it: a glowing future for Keek's people, an elevation from menial duties to meaningful - as inter-mediaries between separate races, solving misunderstandings and wafting away animosities by simple touch. *I picture him laying hands on two politicians, emissaries, diplomats,*

let-ting each study the other's mentality, through him. That triangle again. Maybe he'd manage a jour-way communica-tion! Andri smiled slightly. It might be an idle dream, but he allowed himself to dream awhile. Soon, he relaxed his clutch on fantasy and it flew away. 'So the two of us keep 13 out of trouble, and wait?'

'That's it. Wait for a message from 4, 37 or the Base-ship, now the aliens can't obstruct us. Wait for the vessel to dis-cover us *not* exploring a disrupted system. We ought to have Jocelyn back by then and the medics'll sort Van out.'

'Do we say anything about - ?'

'Not yet! I'll talk to Van, get his opinion. It'll mirror mine: that they're too alien for contact to be tried for generations. I hope he's sufficient sway to convince Far Search that none of the Companies should send probes out here for a long time.' Keek's voice dropped ominously. 'Because they'll return for planet-four, rest assured! It'll wander. They need it for survival, so they'll fetch it.'

'What if Van hasn't the sway?'

Unaccustomed intractability crept into Keek's expression. 'No harm done; *I've* got it!' Andri stared blankly. 'Not to stop stations being ordered into this system, but at least to prevent any expedition - peaceful or not — looking in the right place for the aliens. I honestly think I could mark them on a star-chart, but I've absolutely no intention of doing so!' He banged one elbow lightly. 'Anyway, it's possible nobody'd believe our story. I suggest leaving to Van the decision whether to tell it or swear ourselves to silence. I suppose we'll have to tell, but I can block your species and mine if they try to locate the Wandering Worlds and ask for directions. No one knows except me and my mouth's staying shut!'

Unless they use force, nail me to a bench and dig into my brain! And they may do, if they want the aliens badly enough! He wondered if silence might be best and decided it wouldn't. Silence could condemn innocent crews to come to the system and perhaps cross the group that would return for four. A Government Survey was a certainty because Van had taped planet-five as a promising colony-world. 'Yes, we'll have no choice but to tell. Then what ensues is left to credulity and common-sense in the higher-ups.'

Andri nodded. 'You may have shortened that pre-contact period by implanting your "fringe-memories", extant only in our two jewels - if they manage to collect them when they fetch four. Those rocks have seen our viewpoint, our difficulties, so they'll give the storehouse something to ponder; also a practicable idea, yours. If it helps them sur-vive, hostility will surely diminish. Let's hope there's credulity and common-sense in their higher-ups, too!'

'Nothing else for it. Except here and now, get busy. We've a couple of space-burials to perform, then a nasty clean-up. Then Jocelyn to revive and 13 to keep functioning.'

'*Oui!* I suggest we address ourselves to the goriest job first.'

'Agreed.' In Dorm-B, Keek nerved himself for a full minute before he could approach the corpse. His gaze rested on Jocelyn, the Goddess-of-Love to be reclaimed into life -and blindness! Then he touched Ruthe and repugnance at her mutilation vanished. He regretted his feelings for her while she'd been alive, but the past had gone and there was the end of it. *I'll pray for your future, your soul! You weren't a happy woman, were you? Are you more content now, somewhere?* He doubted it but prayed for it. Andri put his arms round her and lifted her from the floor, grunting with exertion. Keek helped in his own small way and felt the Frenchman's thoughts as they coursed through dead flesh. *I never liked you, but I wouldn't have wished you an unpleasant death such as this.* Then a blur of frank amendment: *No, I confess I often despised you and did wish you this! Seems wicked of me, looking back, but it's too late to apologise. And I couldn't even do it!* Obstinacy flashed from Andri to Keek as they fought the cadaver out of the dorm. *All we can do is toss you where you'd have wanted to be tossed: outside, into the dark and the stars. Into — Creation}* His thoughts trailed away into dubious waves of blackness.

Ruthe was wrestled through into Control and Andri suited-up. Keek said: 'Don't worry about her. She had her moment in the next-to-last attack, when we all sheltered together. I shared her mind. Some of the

doubt and self-hatred dissipated. The sanctimonious mask slid aside for an instant and I saw - oh, I don't know; a gleam of suppressed but admirable qualities, maybe. Something good, well-hidden. She'd sat on it so long she thought she'd killed it, but it still lived.' Quietly they dragged her bloody remains into the air-lock. 'Just a minute.' Andri walked slowly, solemnly, into the rec-room. He came back grave-faced, carrying her gold-bound books of poetry. He placed them against her dead heart and wrapped her arms round them. A few knots in a piece of cord and her wrists, tied, secured her treasures to her bosom for eternity. Andri closed the inner door. 'Could be childish sentiment, but -' 'Sentiment,' Keek whispered, 'though not childish.' He pressed a button and Creation appeared.