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Tiger in the Stars by Zach Hughes

CHAPTER ONE

I, John Plank, being of sound mind and having telescopes for eyes and electronic sensors for fingertips, must be going mad.

I am alive. I think. I see. I feel. But I can't move my arms or my legs. Where are my arms and my legs? I am a man, have been a man for years, and a man does not see the stars as if looking through telescopes.

The stars crowded him. They were impossibly huge, improbably near. Stars are, unless you're close to a system, a sprinkle of light, tiny things. They are not huge, individual suns seen everywhere as if you were looking at old Sol from the Earth.

He could see a galaxy shaped like a small-crowned, wide-brimmed hat. Near that galaxy was a double whorl of merged galaxies, their bright hearts aglow. He was dazed by the richness, the brightness of the colors. Hot, population-one stars were rich blue. A cool, red giant, the nearest star, sported a family of planets: four gas giants, a distant icy midget of a planet, two planets near or in the life zone, which he could see, feel. The gas giants sent out snarls of radio waves. One emanated more heat than it received from its sun and he could make it out, could measure that heat output.

No man could do that.

His senses were acute. They covered the known spectrum. He saw long and short light waves, radiation; he detected the force of the star's gravitational field, could see the huge gouts of flame shooting upward in a

solar flare, could measure the solar wind.

No man could, with his own senses, see so much, hear so much. He flexed his hands and felt the working of wondrous mechanisms spreading over a huge area, connected by thousands of intricate electrical circuits.

His attention was caught by a glowing nebula. Vivid colors pleased his senses and he realized that he was seeing the nebula not with human eyes but as if he were looking through a series of filters.

He sensed movement.

He looked into eternity through Hercules. He knew the configuration, could look past identifiable stars into the distant reaches of space to the cluster of galaxies there, spiral, globular, doubled. For a moment he forgot his confusion and admired the technical achievement as he looked through what must have been the equivalent of a 16-meter instrument of amazing sophistication. His was a giant of an eye, all seeing, the field of view all encompassing.

It was, he knew, impossible. He could not be seeing what he saw. He moved his head and the galaxy rotated around him. He felt a massive surge of vertigo and withdrew, closing himself off. He moaned and clutched at himself and found nothing. He felt smoothly functioning power, muted hummings, clicking relays, lighted corridors and snug cabins, circuits making and breaking with calibrated precision. The inhumanness of it caused him to scream. His voice filled empty corridors and cabins and the big compartment up front, which was empty of all save the muted click and hum of a living ship.

To preserve his sanity he explored his own mind and remembered. He remembered walking laboriously, clad in life system gear, in the sub-Earth gravity of a dim, cold world. He saw *Plank's Pride* as she sat atop her fins on the fused stone of the pad, her hatch open. He could see the white dwarf star rising to begin a 73 Earth-hour day. Before the day was one quarter old, the *Pride* would lift. Earth was four-point-two-eight light-years away, invisible. It would have taken a power instrument to even locate old Sol, but it was there, waiting for him to come home.

Thinking of home gave him strength. He ceased his musings and trained his powerful eye on the stars around him, looking, searching. He had never seen space as he was seeing it now. All the reference points were

changed. All the colors were different. Ordinarily, space was a vast emptiness sprinkled with white. Space was black velvet and salt. But with his new vision space was a study in living blues and reds.

More in control of himself now, he set about trying to solve the problem of what had happened to him. He studied the surroundings.

There was air in the ship and it was rich and sweet. He did not, however, breathe it. Again he felt the threat of shock, forced himself to close his eyes and try to sense the movement of the ship. A near star was closing at a speed that amazed him.

"Light minus ten," he said aloud.

The sound of his own voice was comforting. He heard it within his head and on the speakers throughout the ship, a harsh rasp of a voice, the result of damage suffered when a line ruptured on the *Pride* halfway out from home on the first trip, forcing him to breathe acrid fumes before he could take protective measures.

He continued his study of himself. He was small and compact and his brain was expanded, linked into the finest set of computers and instruments he'd ever seen. Someone had advanced science to the ultimate. The life support system was a dream, operating with 100 percent efficiency. And then there was the power.

The power was a mass of overlapping fields without heavy shielding. Inside the fields was the heat of a sun. The fields shimmered and writhed even in rest. They spoke of power, which once again sent him into a daze.

One thing for sure, he was not on the old *Pride*. This ship, of which he was a part, was bigger. Not as big as one of the colonizer starships, but bigger than *Pride*. And because her power was so compact, there was room for a large cargo hold, extravagantly aired, rich in oxygen. He would need no suit to work that hold.

It was time to look outside again. He scanned the area. He found the Crab, but it was not in its proper position. He searched for other landmarks. Everything indicated that he was a great distance from the last point he remembered. But the familiar guide stars were there, identified by their spectrum. All the points of reference told him that he was in the home arm, the Orion Arm, but exactly where was the question.

All the power of his eyes did not find any of the home neighborhood stars. An hour of scanning gave him no clue as to the whereabouts of his own star, old Sol. It was puzzling. He could remember all of it. But he couldn't remember important details of direction and reference. He could not place Sol in relationship with any of the known points. His memory held all the data needed to seek and find Cassiopeia and to identify her, but when he tried to place Sol in relation to Cassiopeia, or any of the other known points, his mind went blank.

He explored the extensions of his mind represented by the complicated mechanics of his ship and found extraordinary charts that were more complete and more detailed than any he'd ever seen. He discovered more familiar stars, Sirius, Vulpecula. But Sol, as far as the charts were concerned, did not exist.

He began to take stock of himself. His brain was of soft living flesh and connected with materials other than flesh; but it lived. He could trace his own synapses, feel the power of his thought waves. In his mind he was a complete man, an expanded man, but in body he was nothing more than a small mass of cells encased in a container.

There had to be an explanation. He must find it. He would go home and there he'd learn the answer. He had fantastic ability. He could measure the distance to the nearest and the most remote stars. He could shoot a bearing on a distant body and know its mass. He had known points. Triangulate and there was Sol and home.

The point ended in open space, in the area among the vast emptiness between the spiral arms. There was nothing. Drifting molecules. The debris of the universe.

Simply put, he was lost. He realized that, although he could remember home, names—Sol, Centauri Proxima and Alpha—the distances, the times of travel, the ponderous weight of the old *Pride* being pushed by brute force against the old Einsteinian laws, he could not place the grouping of stars in reference to his own position or to any known star.

Plank rested, although there was no need for it. Rest was merely withdrawal. He shut off the thousands of impulses feeding into his brain and looked back. He could remember a fishing trip on Armstrong, an Earth-type planet of Alpha Centauri named after the first man to set foot on the moon. He could feel the near-bass hitting the artificial lure with a

pleasing ferocity, could taste the almost-fish cooked over an open fire. He saw Jake there, sober, since his supply had run out. Looking further back, he could remember his childhood, his mother. She was a mature woman of almost 150 with a beauty that still gave him pleasure. Remarried, happy, soft-spoken. She'd been present to wish him "good luck" as the *Pride* lifted for the second trip.

He remembered shooting fast-flying small birds on New America, of feeling somewhat bloodthirsty and primitive, but rewarded in atavism by a taste beyond compare. He remembered school and the academy and the Mars tour, all dry wind and endless hours in lsg. That tour had earned the down payment on the *Pride*. And the first trip. Pulling Jake out of the bar just in time for scheduled lift-off. The first cargo. Laser-quality rubies. The long months between Earth and the Centauri stars. The loneliness of it. The companionship of only one man and months in space with an old, lovely ship doing her best to fall apart, keeping them both busy with maintenance. He could see the Earth, blue and beautiful from near space; the moon, serene and sterile with its labs and pads and stations. The components of his own sun, its physical characteristics, recognizable from light-years away with ship instruments.

He sent his eyes searching inward. Endless time stretched ahead of him. He could sense that. No need to hurry. There was time to know himself. He was John Plank. 52 years old, a bit short by modern standards at 178 centimeters, trim, not unhandsome. He had space-grayed hair, dark eyes and agile hands. And he was missing. No hair, no hands, no legs, no lungs. His heart was a machine containing powerful magnetic and electrical fields and his nervous system was a complex of circuits covering every meter of a ship that astounded him with its perfection.

Down in the cargo hold was a small runabout. He was linked to it by radio and he sent it moving, easing outward through a smoothly functioning air lock. Via the drifting runabout, he could look back to see the gleaming reflection of the red sun on the hull. He lighted himself. From the runabout, he saw himself glowing in the darkness of space, nearly spherical, skin made of an alloy unfamiliar to him, ports brighter, weapon pods protruding. He moved the runabout, seeing from all angles. On the bow, near the large port, the words, in English—*Plank's Pride*.

He directed the return of the small vehicle and left it to tuck itself away as he traced circuits. His interest was caught by the weapons. Deadly.

Power beamed to incredible distances and capable of cutting through a hull with one touch. And hidden away inside the pods the sleek and fatal missiles, planet killers. Compacted nuclear heads with the potential to split an Earth-sized planet at the equator, shatter it into fragmented, torn pieces.

He investigated the navigational equipment. The 16-meter eyes were part of it, along with the integrated and complicated star charts and a system of detection gear that could spot space debris the size of a pebble at incredible distances.

The memory bank of the computer contained familiar material, the library of the old *Pride* intact, film, books, records. He seized upon it and traced the history of the *Pride* from its log. The first trip complete. The second trip outward bound. Names and distances. Earth to Centauri. Times and speeds and fuel consumption.

His mind raced. He had records of Earth, the solar system, the nearby stars whose planets were being colonized and mined by people from Earth ships. He had a ship so capable of travel that the travels of the Earth starships seemed like local traffic. Finding home, then, should be simple.

Except that all references to exact location of the Sol-Centauri neighborhood were missing. Except that, assuming Sol and Centauri to be located in the Orion Arm, there were millions of stars in that arm alone.

The why of it puzzled him as much as the how. He knew, could accept it now, that he was no longer John Plank, man of Earth. He was Plank, starship. He contained advances that could not have been of Earth. How? He did not know. Why? Why could he not remember how to go home? Why was his brain, a tiny, soft, living entity buried behind shielding at the center of his metallic body, so devoid of any clue as to the location of his home planet?

He searched his brain for signs of alteration. As far as he could tell he was complete, all his memories intact. He searched himself for clues; then *she* hit him with a force that moved him inward, lost him in pain. Laughing, dressed in white swimwear, skin golden, hair long, tousled and light as the sands of the deserts of Earth.

"Sahara," he said.

She was younger than he was, but mature. He had met her at the academy. "Call me Hara," she had said at their first meeting.

He called her Hara, and later, he called her love. He considered giving up his private enterprise plans to join her in the Service. He begged her to join him aboard the *Pride*, dreaming of the long, lovely months with her. But, by then she was first navigation officer on a fleet colonizer, proud of her achievement, impossibly lovely in uniform and utterly dedicated to her job.

"Soon," she'd told him when he'd last seen her, after his first successful venture into space. "We have time, John. We have lots of time."

Now she was light-years away in an unknown direction, lost to him forever, for he himself was lost, altered, no longer a man, merely a mass of gray, spongy cells nestled in the bulk of a fantastic starship.

He felt a vast and white-hot anger. He luxuriated in it, growling into the ship's sound system with it, yelling his hate for whoever or whatever had done this thing to him.

The sensors brought him away from his lovely hate and anger and showed him the planet, blue with life-giving water that was green underneath, a belt of clouds over a wide ocean. There, perhaps, lay the answer. He unshipped the small runabout and powered it down toward the surface of the planet. He used the hours of approach to make distant readings: he found Earth-type atmosphere, a stable system of weather, gravity just under Earth-normal, size just smaller than Earth, all the favorable conditions of a life-zone planet.

Although the ship's atomic clocks kept Earth time, time had no meaning to him. He used it to best advantage without being aware of its passing. When the scout entered atmosphere and its sensitive sensors confirmed his readings regarding oxygen content and minor element makeup, he merely went ahead with the task at hand, seeing through the eyes of the scout.

There were four major land masses, balanced against the planet's spin atop the fluid core. A relatively quick fly-around showed temperate, tropical and arctic zones, the usual makeup of a life-zone planet. Vegetation followed the usual pattern formed by the spin-induced weather systems. There were no artificial emanations from the surface. Subsurface

masses of radioactive ores made their presence known, deposits typical of Earth-type planets. There was no sign of intelligent life.

At slower speeds and lower altitudes, the scout made calibrated grids of the landmasses. Plank saw huge, green forests and open grasslands, mountains and streams, lakes and seas. There was life on each of the landmasses, confined largely to tropical and subtropical areas. That was normal. Armstrong, the one Earth-type planet of the Centauri system, had several species of rodentlike animals, varied vegetation, marine life of a more complex nature.

Satisfied that no advanced life was present. Plank dipped the scout to land, examined the predominant life form close up. In the inhabited areas, the animals were plentiful. They were somewhat like large, shell-less slugs, moving by body convolutions to feed on the abundant vegetation. They seemed to be unselective in their choice of foodstuff, eating any plant that came within reach of their blunt-toothed maws.

The runabout had a hatch, but efforts to entice one of the animals into the vehicle were fruitless.

Plank considered his resources. He discovered his mobile form in a storage area inside the cargo hold, called back the runabout and sent the armored, bipedal machine down.

He stood on good earth, the grass thick under metallic feet, eye-sensors mounted atop the body in a manlike head. Ears heard the grinding, monotonous sound of the eating animals, the call of a dull, primitive bird thing from the high trees, the sigh of the wind. He was there, on the planet, hearing, smelling, seeing. The feeling of being alive distracted him from his purpose. He wandered, exploring, admiring the variety of finely formed vegetation. He stood on the overgrown margin of a forest stream and watched fish swim, extended a hand to feel the water, cool and clear.

It was a perfect planet for man. He would record its location, present his claim.

Such thinking sobered him, reminded him that he was a mass of brain cells encased in a remarkable starship; that he was not actually standing on the surface, but encased, confined, far above this manlike extension, which was sending him his impressions of the planet.

He captured one of the animals easily. The feel of it was fleshy, warm, soft. A thick skin protected the boneless body. It had low-grade eyes and rudimentary hearing organs. There were no protective mechanisms, the creature apparently having no natural enemies.

It was not necessary to kill the animal. Probing and checking, shipboard instruments found surprisingly human cells, blood close enough to Earth-type to be an astounding coincidence, a primitive brain, a simple digestive system and an enlarged heart. It was as if a great blob of humanoid cells had been grown, as cells were being grown in test tubes back on Earth, and had formed into the simplest functioning animal imaginable.

Examination of other specimens provided no surprises. There were few variations from animal to animal. The only unusual discovery was the method of reproduction: asexual, by division, like some huge and bloated one cell animal. The creature simply divided its small brain, sliced itself down the middle, with cells spontaneously forming into heart and digestive organs in the new creature.

Aside from some rather primitive insect forms, the slug was the only ground life on the planet. The bird things were few, living on fruits and berries. The highest form of the primitive marine life was about as far advanced as Cambrian forms in Earth history.

Plank recalled his extensions, mulled over his information and recorded it. He had been directed toward that planet for a reason, and he could not understand the reason.

In the months ahead, he found that planets seemed to hold a vast attraction for him. He could not resist checking out an Earth-type world. Not that there were many of them. Many stars had planets, but the predominant form was the gas giant. Only one in 20 suns had life-bearing planets and many of those life forms were non-terran in type, living in poisoned atmospheres unsuitable for human existence.

Still, in the timeless months, he checked and recorded and searched, working his way outward through the stars, crossing the vast distances instantly with the aid of his heart—his drive that blinked the *Pride* in and out of existence with an ease that ceased to amaze him after he had read, pointed and blinked from star to star 100, 200 times.

There were moments when he had the urge to skip the near stars, to leap far, far away, and continue leaping until he found the small yellow glow of Sol. But when he looked through his outer eyes and saw, only light-years away, a likely sun, he blinked to it, saw its family, orbited the likely planets and went through his routine. Nowhere did he find intelligent life. Nowhere did he find life like the slugs of the first planet, which he had come to think of as Plank's World, since it was his first.

And he did not know why he worked his way carefully down the stars, searching. He knew only that someday he would blink close to a grouping of stars and recognize the characteristics of Sol or Centauri. Then he would be home and there would be answers.

He was alone, but he did not mind. He had the library. He had new sources of information that kept his mind active. He knew secrets about the universe that man had only guessed about; he logged them, sorted them and stored them in the bottomless bank of the computer. He was a creature of space, alive in it, loving it, cataloguing the Orion Arm as he looked for the familiar yellow glow of old Sol. His senses were enormously acute. He could spot and avoid a space traveler the size of a marble. He could see into the heart of a sun and measure the distance to the most remote galaxy.

What he could not do, since his senses were blanked in that frequency, was spot the dark-skinned sphere, three times his size, that was always within planetary distance of him, following with endless patience as he continued his odyssey. It was always near, silent, dark, its presence unknown to Plank. When he blinked it blinked, emerging into normal space as he emerged, waiting as he explored still another world, always within easy range of his eyes, his senses, but undetected.

CHAPTER TWO

Plank's Pride had been listed as overdue at Shepard Terminal for just less than a year when the *M. Scott Carpenter* orbited and sent down the first crew contingent for medical checks and a bit of rehab in the centrifrag tanks of the moon's largest installation. On the way down Hara used the lighter's eye to check the grounded vehicles, which were, unlike

the huge colonizer, capable of entering the moon's weak gravity for landing. An even three dozen ships stood on the ground, but the stubby, familiar shape of the *Pride* was not among them.

She was disappointed, of course. But there could be several explanations. The *Pride* could be Earthside for refitting or repair. The trip out and back took much out of a ship. In many ways, it was harder on the equipment than on the human crews, for there were few moments during the long, long blast when power wasn't operating at peak. Inside, many things could go wrong, but redundant life systems made it safer to ride a starship than an Earth-ground vehicle. Casualties had occurred, of course, but the percentage was small, and she never once admitted that Plank had even a million to one chance not to make it back. Plank was too smart, too strong, too stubborn to let space eat him.

No, he must be on Earth or out for a test run or down below in one of the Terminal shops.

When she felt the weak gravity of the moon she began to hook into LSG. The lighter made a smooth landing and the ramp clamped; air hissed as locks engaged. The ship's monitor gave a clear and she checked her safety switches on the LSG and followed her fellow crew members into the tunnel of the ramp, emerging into the reception room of the center to be probed, handled, questioned, X-rayed and discharged in less than two hours as being in the pink of health. It was the second time she'd gone through the reentry procedure. It seemed familiar, even though ten-plus years had separated the events.

She asked doctors and nurses about Plank, and they could give her no information.

One of the doctors, a cute woman in her eighties, remembered Plank. "Yes," she said, "serious young man, nice looking. Went out on a cargo run. Yes, I remember him."

"I'll bet you do," Hara said, but to herself.

"I think he's due," the doctor said.

He was overdue. The *Pride* had lifted off days before the big colonizer, but Plank's turnaround time on the other end should have been much less. The *Carpenter* spent months on the other end unloading, acting as home

base for the colonists until the temporary shelters could be erected. Plank should have been home months ahead of her. They had timed it that way so that they could spend the time between her missions together on the moon and on Earth.

Finished with the formalities, she made her way to Operations. Her service uniform gained her admission, and still not concerned, she made her inquiry of a young junior officer. The young man took his job seriously, checking and rechecking before he pulled the file.

"*Plank's Pride?*" he asked, frowning.

"Yes."

"Your interest in the ship, sir?"

"Friend," she said.

"I'm sorry, sir," the young officer said. "I'll have to refer you to Intelligence."

For the first time a doubt entered her mind. She knew, however, that it would be useless to try to pull rank and force the young officer to give her the file so that she could see for herself why it had been classified. She thanked the young man and hurried to the third level.

In an installation where everything was scaled down to conserve space, Intelligence occupied a respectable area. She was asked to wait in a rather roomy two-by-three-meter reception area. She sat nervously, crossing her legs. The enlisted man behind the desk reacted and she frowned at him coldly. She waited ten minutes and then was told she could enter the office of the intelligence officer on duty. She opened the door and saw a big, serious-faced man seated behind a small desk, his eyes downcast at papers.

"Matt," she said. He looked up, smiled.

"Hey," he said, with genuine pleasure. "Sahara." He stood and came around the desk to take both her hands in his. "Welcome home. How was it this time?"

"Routine," she said.

"Always nice to see the best-looking cadet in our class," Matt Webb said, releasing her hands and stepping back to take in her trim form clad in space blue.

"Still the sweet talker," she said.

"Sit down, sit down," he said. "Take the load off."

"Yes," she said. "It's not much gravity, but after almost five years in space..."

"I know," he said, returning to his chair. His smile faded and he looked at her, his calm, gray eyes showing concern. "You're here to find out about Plank," he said.

She nodded.

"It isn't good, Hara," Webb said.

"All right." She seized her lower lip between her teeth and waited.

"The *Star Buster* lifted for home two weeks after he left," Webb said. "*Buster* landed here after a routine trip. No communication with the *Pride* en route, although that means nothing, as you know. It's big out there, and even ships traveling the same route with only two weeks between them can be so far apart due to minor variation in trajectory that intership contact is unlikely. But he's way overdue, Hara. I'm sorry."

"That's all you can tell me?"

"That's it."

She was silent for a moment. "Then why is his file classified?"

Webb shrugged. "Routine. You know the situation down below. Opposition to the space program is reaching new heights. The brass is worried. There's a severe threat to cut the budget again. Now you and I know that the colonization program is Earth's great hope, but the other side has different opinions. They want to use the money to better conditions for those on Earth, not, as they say, pour it down a hole in the stars."

"I know," she said. "But are you saying that you're keeping quiet about

a missing ship because of public opinion on Earth?"

"We keep the lid on as long as possible. Sooner or later someone down there will make an inquiry. We keep hoping that he'll come limping in here before someone, his mother, perhaps, gets worried enough to contact Central and demand to know where he is."

"Matt, it doesn't seem right."

"I know. I don't like it, but we have no choice. We're under fire. We're fighting for the life of the colonization program. We think we're justified in playing just a little dirty. And who does it hurt? Because you're concerned, you ask and we tell you. When his mother asks, we'll tell her. We hope she won't ask for a while. We'd like to know a little more about these disappearances."

"You said disappearances, plural," she said.

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"All right. I'll have to remind you that this is highly classified information." He ran his hand through his thick hair. "At any given time, we have perhaps half-a-dozen ships between here and the colonies. Sometimes more. Sometimes as many as 20 or 30 are out there. We've been going out to the Centauri systems for 50 years now. In that time we expected to lose a ship or two. We did not expect to lose a ship every one-point-five years."

She gasped.

"So far we've been lucky," Webb continued. "We haven't lost one of the big boys. If that happens, we'll have a stink we won't be able to fight. Lose 10,000 colonists at once..." He looked toward the ceiling.

"One ship every year and a half?"

"On the average. No regular time intervals between, of course. And we have to estimate time of disappearance, since here on the moon, we're out of contact for almost ten years. But we're able to determine, of course, whether or not they disappear on the way out or the way back. It works

out about equal. Almost half the number disappear going away, and half on the way home. They leave either the moon or one of the Centauri planets and that's the last we hear of them. And there's no rhyme or reason for it. Out of 30-odd ships one should have been able to set the space beacons working. In 50 years, at least one of them should have been spotted in space if they were merely disabled. Communications aren't all that good, but surely one of them should have been able to send out a distress call that, traveling at light speed, would have been picked up either on this end or the other end. But they don't show up by their beacons and they don't send distress signals. They just vanish. They lift off and that's the last of them."

"Some basic problem in the power?" she asked. "Total explosion?"

"We've had every engineer and scientist in the program checking. The hydrogen drive of a spaceship is potentially a huge bomb, but the safety factors are multiplied to such a point that the slide-rule boys figure the odds against total explosion are five million to one. They say the idea of more than 30 ships totally blowing up is inconceivable."

"Some common factor of human failure?"

"Some of the ships had crews' of as many as ten. Ten men go nuts at the same time?" He sighed. "Oh, there are theories. Unknown space elements or factors. Everyone on board affected at the same time. Mysterious currents. Things we know nothing about. But, Hara, you know we've been in space a long time. There isn't anything out there we don't know about. It's just a big, fat empty place with nothing between here and Centauri; no black holes. No eerie gas areas, no bug-eyed monsters to swallow our ships whole."

"But there's something," she said.

"There is," he agreed. "I wish I knew what. I wish I could say that it's as simple as the blink drive thing. That they simply blink out of this universe into another, or into some other dimension and that's it. But Plank was just using our hydrodrive. We're accelerating as near light speed as the laws of the universe allow, and that's pretty close as you well know. Old Einstein wasn't right in everything. We don't push our way out of the warp and frame of space time like the blink drive does."

She was doing her best to keep her lips from trembling. It was only now

beginning to hit her. He was dead.

"Hara," Webb said. "I'm very sorry."

"I know," she said. She rose. "You'll let me know if you hear anything? I'll be moonside for a few days. Then home."

"Of course."

"I'd like to look at what information you have. Could you get me a clearance?"

"With your rank and record I don't think we need expect any difficulty," he said.

"I'm not requesting to see anything you haven't seen," she said. "You understand that I'm not questioning your work or your abilities." Sahara meant the words, but she also felt it necessary to say them. Women had come a long, long way, but they were still women. They had basic differences, differences in strength, in viewpoint. There were still men around, some of them in the service, who said that women were the true aliens, that their minds worked on a different plane from the minds of men.

In short, remnants of resentment among certain kinds of men still remained.

Webb, apparently, was not that kind of man. "Sure," he said. "I know how you feel, Hara."

"Not being smart with you, Matt, but I doubt that." She smiled wryly. "Because *I'm* not even sure I know how I feel."

The human mind is a curious thing. In privacy, it allows itself thoughts that, if known generally, would cause consternation. And, Hara thought, as she walked out of Webb's office, it is true that no one really knows himself. Was there actually a moment of relief when she heard of Plank's disappearance? No. Of course not. Only the quick feeling that a problem was solved. Then the sadness.

For there was a conflict. While marriage between spacers was not totally impossible, it was feasible only under certain circumstances. The

vast distances, the time involved in traveling, made a woman married to a spacer a widow for years at a stretch. Marriages were common aboard the big colonizer ships; but then the partners traveled together and were not separated while one of them went out to Centauri at what, to the universe, was a snail's pace.

If Plank had chosen service instead of free enterprise, the problem would have been solved, but Plank was intent on making his stake. She on the other hand, had spent years preparing herself for her job. Theoretically, a woman had an equal chance to be accepted into the academy, but in practice more qualified women were passed over than qualified men. She had always had to work extra hard to achieve her goal. From primary school on she knew that she wanted to go into space; her competition came from millions of boys who were physically stronger, some of them quicker, some of them more intelligent. She set her goal and worked toward it, doing secondary level work as a primary, entering college two years ahead of schedule. It wasn't easy.

She kept her body in shape with athletics and honed her brain constantly, doing without proper sleep to cram for exams she could have passed easily, in her efforts for the top mark, knowing that she had to be the very best to beat thousands of male applicants for each appointment to the academy.

Men and women were equal in the eyes of the law, but at the academy it seemed that some instructors had not read the law. There, the female cadets were singled out, and to survive she developed a hardness, a callousness, which allowed her to take anything they could dish out. She excelled in her marks and survived the physical rigors. She graduated with honors and saw the first space berths given to men with lesser qualifications.

In spite of all, she was not a man hater. She recognized things as they were, and she would never change them. She tried to keep under her protective, hard exterior a certain femininity, and apparently she succeeded, for she was pursued.

From the time she was pubescent, boys noticed her. She developed her figure early and it improved with age. In the academy she was taut-skinned and shapely. Her measurements would have qualified her for any beauty contest, had such antique rites been retained in the society. She had perfect teeth revealed in their lovely whiteness as she smiled. Her

hair was heavy in texture, unusual for a natural ash blonde, and she could do anything she wanted with it. Usually she wore it down, brushing over her shoulders, closing in on her face to accent her eyes.

Her social life could have been active. She did not lack, invitations. She limited her dating, however, to official events, never letting any boy or man to become close enough to her to arouse her interest. Not until she met Plank.

She had seen him during her first years at the academy many times. He was one year ahead of her and, on occasion, was in charge of details of which she was a member. He was, during the early years there, merely another cadet.

She was not surprised when Plank asked her to be his date at the graduation ball for Plank's class. His invitation was one of several. She surprised herself by choosing him as her escort. She would have had difficulty explaining it to anyone, even herself. He was not her kind of man. Dark, somewhat stocky, he looked at her from under bushy eyebrows with eyes that seemed to undress her—and she was no man's sex object. But it was Plank who called for her at the girl's dorm and it was Plank who danced like a perfect gentleman, holding her politely close, thanking her at the end of each dance. It was Plank with whom she walked, in the early hours of a lovely spring morning, and talked of her ambitions. Plank shared her dreams of the stars. Plank was a good listener. Throughout the long evening and night, he did not even attempt to kiss her.

He managed to return to the academy for her graduation dance and this time he wore service blue. He had been to Mars. He talked about it and about space with an excitement and an intensity that moved her. Later, when he slowly drew her into his arms, giving her every opportunity to say no, he moved her in another way, in a way she'd never been moved before. And when he called her his love she melted against him and let her kiss speak for her.

It was a strange courtship. When he was away, she longed for him, wanted to see those dark eyes under his bushy eyebrows, wanted to feel the touch of his hand. When she was in space, off duty, she could remember every detail of his face, could repeat every word he'd ever said to her. She was, indeed, a woman in love.

They talked about being assigned to the same colonizer. Plank chose his

way, chose to work the Mars jobs and go into free enterprise, begging her to resign her commission and join him, painting nice pictures about the two of them spending months of time in space together. But she had, at last, reached her goal and she was totally incapable of tossing over a lifetime of work (it seemed to be a lifetime then, although, with the life expectancy of her time, she was still very young), not even to marry the man she loved.

They saw each other at long intervals and tried to work out their differences. Plank made a run to the Centauri systems, and her feelings did not change during the years of separation. He fared well on the trip and, once again, pleaded with her to leave the service and join him. She was tempted. But she was due for promotion.

"My career means as much to me as your work means to you," she would tell him. "There is still time for us."

So it was, when she learned that Plank had disappeared in deep space, that she felt a mixture of emotions. First that spontaneous feeling of relief. There would be no more conflict. Then guilt, for it was after all Plank, her man, who was missing. Then more quick guilt for not having given in to him. If she had married him she would have been with him on the *Pride*. Then she would at least know. But now her emotions were in conflict as she remembered him, felt in her mind the strength of his arms, the tenderness of his kiss, and she began to be angry.

Something would have to be done. She didn't know exactly what, but she would see to it that something was.

CHAPTER THREE

Anyone, Plank thought, can recite the physical statistics of the galaxy. It is simple to say that our galaxy is a highly flattened discoidal system of stars with a radius in the order of 2,000 parsecs. Elementary school children could tell you that a parsec equals 3.26 light-years or 3.1×10^{13} kilometers. Most Earthlings older than two had seen a model of the galaxy, a slowly rotating wheel with a white core of dense stars, which have a central bulge when viewed head on. Seen from the top, the model shows the effects of the slow rotation. Groupings of stars trail into spiraling arms. On the model, Earth is an insignificant speck toward

the inner end of the Orion arm, 30,000 parsecs outward from the center. The Orion Arm is 400 parsecs wide. Four hundred parsecs equal 1,304 light-years. Compared with the galactic core, the Orion Arm is thinly populated. Distances between stars are vast. Yet Plank, looking into the arm with the eyes of his starship body, saw a number of stars which, on occasion, awed him. Glowing salt on a black platter. By the millions.

And he was among them. He could place his position, roughly. He was, however, denied that overall view, as if seeing the galaxy as a model. He knew that he was in the area of the inner extension of the arm. He could position the galactic core to his right and take into account the known and distant star markers. He knew where he was. He was in the ball park. But it was a ball park of such vast dimensions that finding his way to first base was, he had decided, going to be a long process of trial, search and failure.

Still, it should have been simple. His mind contained the knowledge of the heavens as seen from both the Earth and the Centauri systems. He should have been able to relate those positions, zero in, find the characteristic glow of either Sol or the two Centauri stars and return home in one jump. He made the calculations again and again. Time after time the position was the relatively open areas of space outside the arm.

He could only arrive at several conclusions. One, something had happened to his head. Something either accidental or deliberate to knock the sure knowledge of home from his brain. His present condition would have a bearing there. Some minute trauma resulting from his brain being taken from his body and being encapsulated as the driving force of a most impressive starship? Some deliberate alteration making it impossible for him to go home?

Two, it was obvious that he had run afoul of some intelligence not from the old Earth. Earth science was not yet prepared to build a ship like the new *Plank's Pride*. Certainly a race capable of making Plank a starship was capable of making minute alterations in his head to prevent him from finding his way home. The question was, why? Why put him into a ship capable of leaping unlimited distances in an instant and then send him zigzagging down the Orion Arm toward Perseus, star-hopping, planet-checking.

Plank knew that, for all practical purposes, he was immortal. Oh, he could die. If he were careless enough to dive into a star the ship would burn and he would no longer exist. But, as he discovered more and more

about his new state, he realized that he was self-repairing, that nothing ever went wrong with the marvelous machinery anyway, and that he had nutrients to last 1,000 years. Time, then, was meaningless. It was inevitable that he would find home. He'd find it if it meant checking every star in the arm. He'd find it if it took 1,000 years.

There were times when he questioned himself. Why was it so important that he find home. If he spent 100 years, Hara would be as old as his mother and would have, long since, forgotten him. If he found it in ten years, she'd be in her sixties, still a young woman, but what good would that do him, a blob of brain cells inside a casing of starship? His singleminded search was senseless.

He had the capacity to explore the universe as no one of his race had ever explored. He drew his power from the stars themselves. He could travel any distance in an instant, as long as the straight line route was free of star bodies. In a few jumps he could be outside the galaxy, covering vast distance, shooting toward the globular clusters, the far galaxies, the remote extensions of the universe. It was as easy for him to travel intergalactic distances as to jump the few light-years between stars.

But as he thought about it, a massive and heavy loneliness saddened him and he continued his star by star search, checking planets, finding a few life-zone worlds and duly recording their statistics and locations. In spite of everything, he was a man and he sought the company of man. He told himself that he would present himself as a gift to mankind, opening up the universe to them. He was deceptively simple in his workings, and he could be copied. In ten years, a fleet of starships could be flashing outward from Earth, solving the problems once and for all.

And if it took him 500 years, well, the Earth would be there. Man had, at least, grown past the threat of self-extinction. He had not outgrown his urge to multiply, and he crowded every available corner of the Earth and tried, in slow, sublight ships, to transfer himself to other worlds. His population was limited by law but still crowded, straining the dwindling resources of the old planet. Hara would, in 500 years, be dead. That was a sadness. Still he pressed on, stargazing, plotting, leaping zigzag, covering the stars in a 400-parsec arc and swinging back, slowly, methodically, blinking in and out of time and space, using more time to approach a planet than in the travel from star to star.

He was driven. He realized it. He believed the urge came from within

himself, his need to find human company, to fill his empty cabins and corridors with laughing, warm, human forms.

Behind him, blanked from his sensors, the dark ship followed with infinite patience.

CHAPTER FOUR

Commander Walker Heath was not happy on the moon, nor was he happy in his job. He felt that he'd been shafted when he was pulled off the blink project and he felt even more strongly that the service and the whole world had been shafted when Congress cut the funds of the project and, in effect, put it in eternal mothballs. Heath felt that he was being wasted, putting the same old information into the computer and coming out with the same old answers. He thought the work of Section X was a waste of time and he did not hesitate to tell anyone who would listen exactly how he felt. He'd always been that way and that explained, he knew, why he was only a commander after 80 years in the service.

A tall, perpetually ruffled man. Heath had a shock of iron gray hair the consistency of small wire, a strong hooked nose, dark unhappy eyes and a mouth that smiled, his subordinates said, once every 50 years. He was brilliant, one of the three top drive engineers in the world. He was vocal. He was a man with an extremely short fuse. He believed in space and he believed that the salvation of mankind lay in space and he believed in the blink drive. He knew the hydrodrive inside out, had been mostly responsible for some improvements through the years, and he'd been on the first Centauri expedition. He had tried his best to convince the brass to let him ride one of the blink test vehicles. He had been at the console for each of the eleven blink tests. He knew the blink drive worked. He, himself, had pushed the button that sent the first blink vehicle a full light-year from Earth and he himself had pushed the button that sent the last ten off into nowhere. The first returned with proof she'd been out there, salt and Stardust on her tail. He had been a witness to the worth of old John Blink's wild-eyed idea of drawing power from the stars, from the sun. He had seen the test vehicle blink out one full light-year and he'd seen it blink back, all in the period of five minutes, with almost all of that time spent beyond, farther from Earth than any man-made object had ever ventured.

Walker Heath had watched man open up the universe and he'd seen the universe shoot back and close itself, swallowing ten blink vehicles without a clue. They left and they didn't return. He knew they went out, because he could follow them with his instruments. A blinking ship sent a signal ahead of itself through time and space and made subtle disturbances of the very warp of the universe. All that could be measured. The first time the ship blinked out, rested, blinked back, there was jubilation at the blink base on the dark side. He wanted to ride the second one and they wouldn't allow him. And it didn't come back.

Heath had smelled the far stars and he'd had to settle for a plodding, sublight drive to Centauri. He had that, at least. They couldn't take that away from him. He'd been to the stars, even though it was a near star. He knew that man would, eventually, discover the flaw in the blink drive and—shooting outward in millions—populate the planets of a thousand, a million stars.

But at the moment he was facing a worried young first nav. officer across a cluttered desk, explaining why it would be useless for her to run the same information through his computer that he'd run 100 times.

"Think you're going to find something the old man didn't?" he demanded crossly.

"No," Hara said. "I just want *to* know all there is to know about it."

"All there is to know," Heath said, "is that they lift off at one end or the other and they don't land."

"You must have some ideas," Hara said.

"I have the idea that something happens to them," Heath said.

"But what?" she insisted.

"They disappear."

"Why?"

"They are eaten by a space dragon."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Hara said with a smile. "At least that's

a working theory."

Heath used his smile for that 50 years. "I like that," he said.

"Tell me about it," Hara said. "Let's start from the beginning."

In the beginning, five ships went out toward the Centauri systems. They left at one-week intervals from the relatively new moon base and they stayed in contact for a few weeks and then they were simply out there on their own. Then, ten years later, they began to return. Ships one, two, three and four. That was it. Number five didn't come back. Five was lost in space, and memorial services were held on Earth and on the moon. But everyone was excited by man's first trip to a star, a trip that discovered two life-zone planets and several planets with raw materials greatly needed on Earth.

The first colony ship went out and traffic became relatively dense between Earth and the Centauri systems, moving slightly less than light speed, taking ten years to complete the round trip. In 30 years a good sized colony was formed on each of the two habitable planets, and government ships were bringing back cargoes. Then the government opened up space to free enterprise making it possible for a venturesome man to buy his own ship and make the Centauri run. Three runs would take 30-plus years out of a man's life, but if they were successful runs he could spend the rest of his years any way he wanted. With life expectancy up to almost 200, most of it healthy and active, 30 years didn't seem a long time to men like Plank, who worked the planetary system to earn the down payment on a starship and then went winging outward to achieve their goals.

There were casualties. Power failed on an incoming freighter, and she crashed into a crater and pulverized. But casualties were to be expected. A crash into the moon was something people could understand. The dead were given funeral rites suitable to space heroes, and other ships went out.

"In the first 30 years, the unexplained disappearances were few," Hara said. She was getting the facts verbally from Heath and from the computer readouts.

"You'll notice that their frequency increases by a geometric ratio." Heath said.

"And, as they increased, the service began to make efforts to hush them up," Hara said.

"Had to," Heath said testily. "The nuts were on to it. They were talking about how it was wrong to push into God's universe, and that God was warning us to stay home."

"According to this printout, a full two-thirds of all the disappearances have not been made public," Hara said. "Aren't we risking the reputation of the service? There's enough opposition to space spending as it is. If the not-so-loyal opposition should find out we've covered up some rather serious information..."

"They'd have the secretary's head for lunch," Heath said. "And they'd push a 50 percent cut in funds through Congress." He leaned back in his chair and put his feet on the desk. "But we've painted ourselves into a corner. At first we held back on giving out information about a ship here, a ship there. Then the total was so high that we couldn't release it all at once. Total shock if we suddenly announced that, instead of nine or ten ships, more than 30 have just vanished in space."

"Forty counting the blink test vehicles," Hara said.

"Not the same thing," Heath said. "We're dealing with the true unknown, in the case of the blinks. We're entering a new ball game with a different set of rules. With the blink, it's just a matter of insufficient data."

"I don't see the difference," Hara insisted. "Both types of ship disappear."

"But the manned ships do so *in* time and space," Heath said with some irritation.

"Are you sure that the blink ships don't?" When Heath looked at her blankly, she continued. "Could your instruments see or detect the blink ships at the other end of the jump?"

"I like that," Heath said. "No."

"So you're not sure that the ships didn't blink back into normal space and then disappear."

"It could have happened that way," Heath admitted. "Yes, I like that." He scratched his left knee musingly. "I see what you're getting at, young lady. Yes, you're right. Forty-plus ships have disappeared. All, presumably, at a considerable distance from the Earth. For example, the shortest jump we programed into a blink test ship was a quarter light-year. We were going to program some shorter jumps, but the program was stopped. At first, since we were dealing with something totally new, it was decided not to allow a ship to blink back into space too near Earth. We didn't know what happened when a ship came back in, you see. We had no idea what disturbance it would make. We knew what happened at the start of a blink, because old John Blink had sent small generators off into nowhere; so did we in the beginning of the program. The effects of reentry into normal space—"

"If your blink ships went out for a quarter light-year, they'd be in the approximate position of turnover and the initial blast of deceleration for a homecoming ship," Hara said.

"A sudden and spectacular burst of power," Heath mused. "Yes. However, we have to assume that the manned ships disappeared at turnover to gather any valid assumptions of correlation."

"If anything could go wrong, it would be at turnover," Hara said. "You're moving at just under light, still pushing to maintain speed against the resistance of the constant. You cut power for a period of hours, turn the ship on her gyros, then build the drive to full power in a matter of minutes."

"It's all assumption," Heath said. "And I must say that I resent highly your walking in here and coming up with an assumption I should have made years ago."

"Sorry about that," smiled Hara.

"We know what happens when a ship turns and builds power to decelerate," Heath said. He let his feet drop to the floor and squinted at Hara.

"How much do you care about this Plank of yours?"

"Quite a lot," she said.

"Enough to stick your pretty neck out?"

"That depends on the possibility of it doing any good," she said.

"There is a completed blink test vehicle in mothballs over on the dark side," Heath said. "It could be made operational within weeks. In the meantime, we could mount the control console aboard a hydrodrive ship. Take both of them out. Move the blink ship in short jumps. Find out what happens when she comes back into normal space."

"I like that," Hara said, smiling.

"It won't be simple," Heath said. "But the secretary is coming in a few days. Annual inspection. He knows me and thinks I'm a pest. He wouldn't give me two minutes of his time. But a pretty first nav. officer just back from her second Centauri run..."

"What do you expect me to do," she asked, "vamp him?"

"If all else fails," Heath said, "I expect you to blackmail him."

"I don't like that," Hara said.

"Do you want to be an admiral or find out what happened to Plank?"

"Both," Hara said.

"Forget it."

CHAPTER FIVE

Secretary Maxwell Seagle was not a run-of-the-mill politician. He had the look of a spacer about him. In the last years of his reasonably expected vigor, as he faced retirement and the brief downhill plunge of old age, he stood tall and straight. As a young man he'd made Mars flights on the old solid fuel rockets and he had fought for space from the time he was an adult. He had tightly curled gray hair that had once been blond; his skin, although showing the effects of his age, was still bronzed and tight on his well-formed face. He had been Space Secretary for three decades.

On his rare inspection trips Seagle wore the uniform of a fleet admiral. He enjoyed the trips, looked forward to them. He was always trying to get away from his office, and the pressure of his position was always preventing it. During the trip out on the moon ferry he had scant time to look out a viewer to see Earth behind him, blue and beautiful, because he was on the radio with various congressmen and senators lobbying against still another attempt to cut space's budget. But as the ferry neared and began preparations for landing, he cut off his political activity and concentrated on the sensation, always new, of landing on a surface other than Earth's.

He found the moon base to be functioning perfectly, the service ships to be in gleaming condition, the men and women of the service sharp and eager. He donned LSG for his self-promised excursion outside, hopped and grinned like a small boy, ate a huge meal and toasted the future of the service to a gathering of officers and civilian workers. He slept the sleep of the happy man and dreaded the return to office routine. He talked personally with the last ship's captain to make the Centauri run and smiled when he shook hands with a pretty first nav. officer named Sahara.

Sahara returned his smile and held onto his hand for long seconds. She was standing in a reception line and had little time to make her request. "Sir," she said, holding the secretary's hand in her strong grip, "I request an appointment."

"You'll have to see my secretary."

Seagle moved on down the line, but not before nodding at his secretary and gesturing toward Sahara. She saw the secretary, was told that the chiefs time was severely limited, but that she might be squeezed in for two minutes just before the ferry lifted off for the trip home. She presented herself at the ferry dock an hour ahead of time, waited, saw Seagle board, reminded the secretary's secretary that she had an appointment, and boarded the ferry while the ground crew was making last-minute checks.

Seagle was seated in the lounge. He rose when Sahara entered, looking very smart in her best uniform.

"Sir," she said, "I would not ask you to see me if I didn't feel it necessary. I know your time is limited."

"We have very little of it," said Seagle.

"So, Sir, I will not go into too much preliminary," Hara said. "I have been cleared to know the number of ships that have disappeared on the Centauri run."

Seagle frowned. "May I ask why?"

"Because the last ship to disappear was captained by..." She paused, wondering how to phrase it. She decided to be slightly sticky about it. "...the man I love and intend to marry."

"I see," Seagle said.

"I have been talking with Commander Heath—"

Seagle made a motion with one hand, a motion of complete disgust.

"—and we've come to a conclusion," Hara continued. "We feel that there is a correlation between the disappearance of manned ships and the disappearance of the blink test vehicles."

"Nonsense," Seagle said. He was angered. He had been expecting some simple request from the pretty nav. officer, a request that he could grant with a smile, thus enhancing his image with the service.

"Our theory is that both types of ships disappear in the same general area, the area of turnabout. We propose to use the last blink test vehicle—"

"No," Seagle said.

"—to run a series of tests in the turnabout zone, far enough from the moon so that any accident would have no effect on—"

"If Congress thought I was wasting money on the blink drive they'd cut me to the bone," interrupted Seagle.

"Sir, do they have to know? The ship is built. It couldn't cost much to make it operational."

"A dollar would be too much. No. I must say no. And you can tell Commander Heath that this latest gambit of his was ill advised. As for you, my dear, I advise you to choose your companions more carefully if you are looking forward to a future in the service."

"Sir," Hara said, taking a deep breath. "I must tell you that if something is not done with existing equipment to try to solve the disappearances, I will be forced to go to the press."

Seagle's face hardened. "Do I understand what you're saying?"

"I'm afraid you do, Sir," Hara said. "To put it plainly, I'm going to blow the whistle. I'll tell the press that 30-plus ships have disappeared."

"Do you realize what you're doing?" Seagle asked. "I've looked at your record. It's a very good one. It's a shame that you've just tossed away 25 years of work."

"And it's a shame that Congress will know, within a few days, that the service has been concealing most important information."

Seagle opened his mouth. She could see that he was making an effort to control himself. Calmed, he said, "You're quite serious, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"You're blackmailing me."

"Yes."

"Let me get this straight. Heath wants to take out the last blink ship, jump it out in open space. Observing from a nearby ship?"

"Yes, Sir. Short jumps. You see, we don't know what happens when a blink ship comes back. We think that there may be some relation between the blink end and the buildup of power after a ship does the turn and starts deceleration. More than 40 ships have disappeared, Sir, when you count the blink test vehicles. We could gain valuable information through these tests. And, I assure you, they can be done in secrecy. We've hidden some facts from the public, why not hide one more test?"

"And you're absolutely sure you want to pursue this course of threat and coercion?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I could have you busted, thrown out of the service."

"I've thought about that, sir. That wouldn't stop me from releasing the facts."

"I will not authorize use of the blink test ship," Seagle said. "On the other hand, I am not going to do anything to stop its use. You may tell Heath that this is his last caper as a member of the service. You may tell him that he can obtain, through channels, permission to run ground tests on the blink ship. Ground tests. You and Heath seem intent on ruining yourselves, so I will allow you to do so. I will not stop you. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Hara said. "Thank you. Sir."

"I don't think you'll thank me when you are court-martialed," Seagle said. "And I foresee only one possibility of your avoiding it. That is, if you come up with some concrete results from the tests you're going to run when you take the blink ship into space without official authorization." He stood. "If word leaks out, my official position is that the service knew nothing of Heath's plans to take out the ship."

Standing in a viewport, Hara watched the ferry lift off. She mused as the drive stirred moon dust and the ship dwindled as it shot upward. She felt an almost overwhelming sadness. She was due for promotion. Her life had been built around the service, and now she could measure her service life in very small amounts of time. At best she could look forward to a long career as a first officer pushing papers on the moon Base or down below on Earth.

She stood, watching the dust settle on the now empty pad. Then she lifted her eyes to the stars, to the great emptiness. Plank was out there somewhere, dead perhaps, but there.

"Plank," she said, her lips moving but the words forming inaudibly. "You're not worth it, you know."

But she knew, even as she said it, that if she were out there and Plank were down here on the moon, he'd be doing exactly what she was doing. Plank was that way. He'd risk everything for her and she, knowing that, could do no less.

CHAPTER SIX

Earth is never visible from the dark side of the moon. Space is more impressive from the dark side, made to seem larger, more empty by the absence of any near neighbor. The main bulk of moon installations were built in areas situated so that Earthrise and Earthset added dimension. The friendly, glowing ball of home was behind one's shoulder, comforting, endlessly beautiful. On the dark side one looked into infinity and felt the distances.

The psychological reassurance of being able to look up and see the home planet was in evidence on the charts. More spare-time explorations had taken place on the Earth side than on the dark side. The working facilities were on Earth side. On the other side were the experimental labs, the abandoned projects, the scrap heaps, the unexplored areas.

Storage is relatively simple on the moon. The vacuum of space allows no oxidation. To protect electronic and mechanical gadgets from the extremes of temperature—a simple process when the energy of the raw sun is used to store energy to provide cooling and heating—a ship can be mothballed for decades without being encased in goos and greases.

The last of the blink test vehicles sat behind an unlocked door in a round tank, which resembled an antique oil-storage tank from the planet's history. The moon's population was an elite bunch, against which locked doors were unnecessary. The ship gleamed with newness, just as it had gleamed on the day, years ago, when it was assembled from components flown from Earth. The simple storage cells in the bay along one side of the tank functioned perfectly. There were no moving parts, nothing to go wrong. Relays and thermostats, which had never known the tarnish of oxidation, clicked softly, heating elements glowed during dark periods, cooling air moved during the periods of sunlight.

It was necessary to work in LSG. To fill the tank with atmosphere would have required going to Moon Control and would have put an entry into the record, a record that was scrutinized from time to time by anti-space legislators down home. Air was the one thing the moon needed to have to support life inside the installations, and the expense of that air was not an inconsiderable item in the moon's budget. More than once, air consumption on the moon had been the subject of congressional debate. So, rather than risk having a new drain of air entered into the record,

Walker Heath's team went out in LSG and worked in LSG, pumping air only into the blink vehicle itself. This relatively minute amount of air was padded onto LSG issue, tabbed as recreational exploration.

The caution seemed rather silly to Sahara. The moon had long since been self-supporting as far as air was concerned, making oxygen from water pumped up from the interior, breaking down other elements from native rock. However, air consumption was something even the most ignorant Earthling senator could understand, and the moon was saddled with the eternal problem of keeping careful books on air and costs.

The vehicle was not perfect, but it was in an amazingly good state. Some of the more delicate electronics were replaced as a matter of precaution, although they tested operative, and some minor failures of components were expected, detected and rectified. Some additional monitoring equipment was installed. Weight was no problem. The power contained in old John Blink's drive was capable of handling many times the mass of the vehicle and all it could carry.

Although, as a space officer, Sahara was capable of doing emergency repairs on most ship systems, she was not called upon to assist. She went out "backside" with the initial party, riding in open ground cars, and visually inspected the vehicle. She observed the complicated workings of the blink generator, watched Heath and his men begin the check-out procedures.

In the following days, she made a cursory examination of the large control complex, which had been used until no less than ten blink ships had left the moon and disappeared. The complex would not be in use on this last test of a blink vehicle. Instead, the vehicle would be piggybacked to a powerful Earth-moon shuttle ship and lifted out of the moon's weak gravity to space.

Heath cannibalized a portion of the control complex to install monitoring and control mechanisms aboard the shuttle. He was in the midst of final ground tests of the equipment when Matt Webb appeared on the site. Hara, seated at the pilot's controls in the shuttle ship on its pad outside the tank, saw an approaching ground vehicle and alerted Heath, who was inside the tank with portable monitoring equipment attached to the blink vehicle. He called a halt and waddled outside, stood, hands dangling inside the armor, as the ground car swirled up, kicking up lunar dust, and disgorged one lsg-suited figure.

"Aha," Webb said, "caught you."

Hara recognized the voice immediately. "It's all right," she said to Heath.

"It is not all right," Heath said. "Did you tell him?"

"No," Hara said.

"Come off it, Heath," Matt Webb said. "Half the moon knows you're out here."

"That's dandy," Heath said. "Can we expect visits from all of them?"

"I can't speak for everyone," Webb said.

"Speak for yourself, then," Heath said. "Say goodbye and let us get back to work."

Webb chuckled. "I thought I'd watch for a while."

"Nothing to see," Heath said.

"I want to see, especially where I'll be riding during the test," said Webb.

"You'll be riding a desk," Heath answered gruffly, turning to reenter the tank.

"I assume that Sahara is to be the pilot," Webb said. "I can brush up a bit and qualify as backup."

"Forget it," Heath said, now out of view.

"In fact," Webb said, "I just took a check ride in a shuttle and passed with honors."

"Good for you."

"And there's one other small fact," Webb said. "I have orders from the secretary to ride herd on you."

"Matt, that's sneaky," Sahara said.

"Not my idea," Webb said. "The old boy is getting nervous about the whole deal. I'd advise you to get into space as quickly as possible before he changes his mind. He's afraid of a leak."

"All right," Heath said. "Let's activate systems seven and nine."

"Heath," Webb said plaintively, "have you been listening to me?"

"Get on board the shuttle," Heath said. "If Hara needs help she'll let you know."

Once inside the lock, Webb opened his visor and grinned at Hara. "I just thought you'd like some friendly company to take the edge off that old bear."

"You're all heart," Hara said. "Since you're here, ride that wave monitor. Commander Heath is about ready to put power to the generator."

Actually, Webb turned out to be a valuable man. The technique of piggybacking a ship was one that all cadets practised. It was standard rescue procedure. Hardware was too expensive to be left in space if it broke down. The method had been used a half-dozen times following breakdowns between the moon and Earth. Hara, however, had never been directly involved in a piggybacking; it was a bit more tricky to perform the operation on the moon rather than in open space. So she was glad to have Webb standing by when she lifted the shuttle and lowered it carefully inside the now open tank to land beside the Blink vehicle. Having a backup man gave her confidence. The landing went smoothly, and the coupling of the ships was, then, a simple operation. Lashed together, the ungainly mass awaited lift-off.

In the ten previous tests, blink vehicles had left directly from the moon's surface. Nothing much happens when a blink generator is activated, at least nothing damaging. That had been proven time and time again in the early testing. The only effects are slight prickling feelings in all humans within a few hundred kilometers and an electromagnetic disturbance, detectable for hundreds of thousands of kilometers. A generator cranked up to full capacity on the moon would signal a chance observer on earth, any observer who happened, at that moment, to be using the proper detection instruments. Therefore, the plan was to lift the

vehicle with the shuttle's power, drive it into deep space, far enough away from both the moon and Earth so that the start of the blink would not signal itself to one of the large number of researchers doing work in gravity, fields and magnetics.

In the dark of a moon night, the two piggybacked ships lifted off, a crew of three aboard the shuttle. Heath had programmed a course vertical to the plane of the Earth's orbit, up and away in the general direction of Polaris. The initial stage of the trip was uneventful. The distance chosen for the tests was roughly half the distance to Mars. That was far enough to prevent any chance detection of the blink start, but not far enough away to prevent detection of the blink itself, should anyone inside the solar system or within a few light-years be using instruments that could detect the subtle signal a blinking ship sent ahead of itself. Those instruments were of a highly specialized nature and would not likely be in use.

The shuttle ship had been built to carry as many as 20 passengers plus several hundred tons of cargo. Three people felt lost aboard her. Large unused areas seemed to add to the loneliness engendered by their enforced wheel watches. They took four-hour shifts. Heath spent some of his non-watch time making final checks of the equipment. There was little socializing. The demands of keeping tabs on all the potential disasters that a ship under power is prone to left one drained at the end of a watch and made the bunks in the rather spacious quarters very inviting.

Short, or relatively short, space trips seemed to Hara to be more boring than the long run out to the Centauri systems. At first, the power was the same, but to allow proper deceleration time, power was cut early, and the ship coasted at interplanetary speeds much lower than the speeds attained after months, years of acceleration on the star runs. With the power down, they had time for partial relaxation during the brief period before turnaround and deceleration. Deceleration is always an uncertain time, because the power, which has been cut back, is turned up to full in a very short space of time, and enough stored-up energy is unleashed to vaporize a ship and make a small, temporary star where no star was before.

But deceleration went smoothly. With the vehicles dead in space, Hara joined Walker Heath in lsg and crawled outside into the cold and loneliness to separate the two ships.

She had been outside many times before, and she never tired of it.

There was danger, yes. A severed lifeline meant a slow drift away; it took a very sharp pilot to locate a single human form in the vastness of space in the time limit imposed by the amount of air stored in an lsg. But there was also beauty. The sun viewed through shielded visor. The gleam of the raw light on the metals of the two ships. The feeling of being alone in a universe that was, at best, indifferent.

Hara accomplished her tasks quickly and watched as Heath finished his. Then, back inside the coziness of the shuttle's control room, everyone visibly relaxed.

At the console, Hara fed steam to small steering jets. The shuttle moved slowly, gravely, away from the blink vehicle. Once in position, Heath called a rest period, during which all three of them slept. Later, fully refreshed, they gathered in the control room. The blink vehicle was enlarged on the visuals, riding dead in space 200 kilometers away toward Polaris. All systems were go.

As if talking to himself, Heath outlined the first test. "We're going very, very short. Shorter than ever before. I'm going to send her a mere 2,000 kilometers, and she'll still be detectable on visual if she comes out."

They could feel it, the slight prickling sensation, the tension. Incredible power was being built up in the generator of the ship riding 200 kilometers away. That power swept over them, through the metal hull, telling them of the blink ship's readiness even as they watched the dials and gauges, which confirmed what they could feel for themselves.

There were no dramatics, no countdown. When the power was ready, Heath pushed the button.

Where there had been a ship there was nothing, and where there had been nothing, 2,000 kilometers away, the blink vehicle sat, dead in space. All motion had occurred outside time and space as detected by human senses.

"Good," Heath said quietly.

She had gone out of normal space and she had come back to it. For the second time in the history of man, a ship had been blinked and had not gone off into that unexplained nothing, which had eaten the previous ten blink vehicles.

There was a mass of data to be processed. Heath worked for ten hours without sleep. Then he was ready to try again.

Once again there was the feeling of tension, the prickling sensation. Once again Heath quietly pushed a button, and the blink vehicle returned to its original spot in less than an instant. It was there, whole, looking as though it had never blinked out of time and space to travel 2,000 kilometers out and 2,000 kilometers back.

And once again the data was correct and contained no surprises. Heath, without sleep for 20 hours, called a break. The next jump would be 20,000 kilometers.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When the alarm went off, it took Plank a microsecond to place the system that was calling to him so urgently. Then he was in it and feeling the surge of power which told of a jump. He kicked relays with his mind, but it was already too late, for the signal had been of such duration that not even electronic reflexes could react before it had come and gone.

He had never heard that particular alarm before, not in the months he'd been blinking in and out of the star systems of the arm. Yet he knew its importance. There, at the end of that signal was a ship, a ship using the power of the stars to pull itself out of time and space. That signal, so very brief, was a ship sending a telltale disturbance ahead of itself. And the source of that signal was something that interested him vitally. Something like him.

Plank, of course, did not sleep. And for ten hours he maintained full alertness. In that time he familiarized himself with the little-used system that had signaled the blink of a ship somewhere in the galaxy. When the second signal came he was prepared. He had analyzed that part of himself and had made minor alterations. When the blink signal shot through his cold circuits, which were a part of him, he started a fix and cursed when the signal ended before the process was complete. But he had some information. He had a general direction, and his knowledge, knowledge of which he had been totally unaware prior to the first signal, told him that the distance was limited to a range of less than 1,000 light-years.

For the first time since he had begun his star wanderings, he leaped stars, blinking down the Orion Arm in a giant step, taking time, after the blink was complete, to orient himself. He looked for the familiar star groupings and recognized the ball park, but he was as yet unable to find first base. He was still lost.

There was nothing to do but wait.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Could have been faulty technique," Walker Heath was saying.

"Ten times?" Webb asked. "With every space scientist who was anyone checking and double-checking?"

"I know," Heath said. "I was there."

"All right," Hara said. "What did we do different?"

"Nothing," Heath said, running his hand through his dark, graying hair. "Except cover shorter distances."

"The first test of your series was a short jump," Webb said.

"One light-year," Heath said. "And she came back."

"A light-year?" Webb frowned. "That's not short."

"When we lost her on the second blink out we began to cut down. Half a light-year, then a quarter on the remaining tests."

"Actually, then," Hara said, "we're doing exactly what you did before and we've accomplished the same results. You got one ship back. We've got one ship back."

"From 2,000 kilometers," Heath said.

"So it is not the distance traveled that's critical," Webb said. "At least not apparently. Your first test was successful before and now the first one of ours is successful."

"Cross your fingers," Hara said.

"I'm not going to, but if you think it might help don't let me stop you," Heath said.

The blink vehicle went out 20,000 kilometers and did not disappear. It was there, detectable on the instruments of the shuttle ship. When the data was processed, Heath pushed the button to bring her home, 200 kilometers away from the shuttle.

"Good," Heath started to say, as the vehicle materialized on the visuals. He didn't get the word out. The vehicle appeared, intact, for a period long enough to register not only on instruments but human eyes, and then it wasn't; before it wasn't, it altered its shape, breaking into planes and colors that reminded Hara of the work of some of the twentieth-century cubist painters.

Heath punched full magnification into the visuals, sending beams searching out into the emptiness. There was nothing.

"I saw it," Hara said. "It was there."

"The blink was complete," Webb said. "Power was off."

"Whatever happened to it happened in normal space," Hara said.

"Yes," Heath agreed. "But we don't know what happened when it was in the blink. Ships don't break into distorted planes and disappear without reason."

"Some unknown stress factor," Webb suggested.

"We'll sweep the area," Heath said. "If it merely broke up in normal space we'll find debris."

But he was not to make his sweep.

"Communicator," Hara said, her eye caught by a flashing light. "Someone is trying to call us."

"Might as well answer," Heath said. "If it's moon base, we'll have to tell them about it sooner or later anyhow."

Hara hit switches and the voice which filled the control room was raspy, masculine. "... shuttle ship. Come in shuttle ship."

"Go ahead," Hara said, without identifying procedure.

"This is *Plank's Pride*..."

"John," she said quietly.

"... moon based. call 7-w-xx-3467. Please acknowledge and identify yourself."

"John Plank," she said, "This is Hara. Where are you?"

"Just off your port viewer," Plank said.

She looked. There was nothing. Then a gleaming globe was riding there, majestic, unknown. She felt a chill of fear, but Plank's voice was there, soothing.

"Hara, I want you to board. Only you. Do you understand?"

"I'm afraid we'll have to ask some explanation," Matt Webb said.

"No explanation. Not now. Just Hara. I'll light the port to the lock. I'll do the maneuvering." Already the globe was moving, appearing larger as it neared the shuttle.

"That's no Earth ship," Heath said. "And it came in on a blink."

"I'm going," Hara said, moving toward her LSG.

CHAPTER NINE

She stood, magnetic shoes clinging to the hull of the shuttle ship, and watched the alien globe move in. The alien was roughly twice the mass of the shuttle. She admired the workmanship. The full glare of the sun on the globe revealed no seams. Viewports were blackened from the outside, giving the ship a look of solidness. The symmetry of the globe was broken only by protrusions, which she thought looked suspiciously like weapons

Pods.

Hara was one of those fortunate individuals who, in times of stress, become almost artificially calm. It seemed that all of her bodily processes slowed, heartbeat easing off by six to eight beats a minute, pulse slowing, making for an awareness, which seemed as if she were storing her resources for impending crisis. As the globe moved slowly nearer, she checked her safety line, coiled it carefully. When the ship was a mere three meters away, closer than safety allowed, she said, "That's close enough, Plank."

A light glowed on the dark sphere and in the soundlessness of space a port opened to reveal a lighted air lock. Cutting the power to her boots, she gauged the distance and floated slowly across the gap to catch herself, hands on either side of the open lock.

"Disengage," John Plank's voice told her.

She undipped the lifeline to the shuttle, breathing now on the lsg system. She moved inside the lock and the port slid closed. As the lock filled, she could hear the hiss of incoming air. She tested the ship's atmosphere and found it to be Earth normal. That was a bit rich for shipboard living but not surprising in view of the advanced technology evinced by the ship itself.

The inner door to the air lock hissed open. Ahead of her was a corridor. "Down the hall to the left," Plank's voice told her. She walked ahead and felt her weight.

"Gravity Earth normal?" she asked.

"Would you like it lowered?" Plank asked.

"I've been either in space or on the moon for a long time."

"Moon standard, then," Plank said.

She felt the immediate easing of weight. "That's quite a trick, Plank."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," said Plank, chuckling.

She had reached the main compartment. There was, of course, no one

in it, but it was more luxuriously furnished than any ship cabin she'd ever seen. The huge viewports offered the blackness of space, and, at a distance of several hundred meters, the shuttle ship. She had detected no movement. She watched to see if the ships were still moving apart. There was no apparent motion.

"You'll be more comfortable out of lsg." Plank said.

She took his suggestion.

"Actually," he said, "I just wanted to look at you."

He was seeing her as he'd never seen her before, from all angles, from a viewpoint that enveloped her. And she was more beautiful than he remembered. "I always thought you looked good in uniform," he said.

"I'd like to see how you look," she said.

"All right," he said. "First, however, I want you to take the grand tour. See how you like the new *Plank's Pride*."

"Something's wrong, isn't it, Plank?"

"It depends on how you look at it," he said.

She began walking, taking a route that led toward the center of the ship. She looked into living quarters of spacious comfort, a galley equipped with gadgets whose use was uncertain, but guessable. She saw the huge cargo hold and the small vehicle there, lingered for a moment in front of the manlike thing standing silent and obviously mechanical in a niche in the cargo-hold wall.

"A statue of Plank?" she asked.

"Something like that," Plank said.

In the power room she saw the first evidence of what made the ship work. Nowhere in her tour had she seen any exposed controls, gauges, dials. Nor were there any in the power room; only a small cube, totally encased, with shielded conduits running from it was evident.

"Care to explain this?" she asked. She was talking to an empty room, but obviously the entire ship was wired for sound. When Plank spoke his

voice seemed normal, but it came from specific points of origin in each room, hidden speakers.

"It draws on the power of the stars. It's a sublight drive."

"Like the blink generator?"

"I'm not familiar with that," Plank said.

"No, I guess you wouldn't be," she said. "It was top security."

"Tell me about it."

"Not yet," she said. "Not until I see you."

"Back along the central corridor. I'll open a door."

The door opened in a blank wall. She entered a small room. Four bare walls met her. Then, in one wall, a port.

"Here," Plank said. She stepped forward. The brain was encased in a clear, circular crystal. From the crystal a worm's nest of conduits and tubings disappeared into the walls of the compartment. For the first time she felt a small surge of anxiety.

"I guess it's time to talk," Plank said.

"I think so," she agreed.

"It's not a long story," he said, "but I'd feel better if you go back to the lounge and make yourself comfortable."

"All right," she said.

Plank was waiting for her there. He sat, relaxed and confident, legs crossed, in one of the luxurious chairs. Her heart accelerated for a moment, until she saw the slightly unnatural gleam of his skin and knew that she was facing the thing from the cargo hold.

"I thought you'd be more at ease this way," Plank said, "rather than talking to the walls."

"It's a heck of a choice," she said, laughing nervously.

"Would you rather I sent it back?"

"No," she said.

"All right. First, to answer the most obvious question, I have no idea. I don't know how it happened. I know roughly when it happened. We lifted off from Armstrong on the way home and that's the last I remember before I woke up like this. I'm integrated into this ship, and it's some ship. It can leap an infinite distance with no passage of time. It's self-perpetuating. It has all the comforts of home, including the complete library of the old *Pride*."

"And you've had no contact with whatever or whoever did this to you?"

"None."

"No indications aboard ship?"

"None. I think it's safe to say that this ship was not built by Earth."

"Yes."

"I seem to be perfectly normal." He laughed. "At least as normal as I can be under the circumstances." There was a pause. A section of wall slid away and a star chart appeared on a screen as the lounge lights dimmed. "When I awoke, or whatever, I was here." A lighted arrow showed his original position. "I seemed to be very interested in getting home, but I didn't know where home was. So I started star hopping along here." Again the arrow.

"The distances are incredible," she said.

"In a year, we could equip 100 ships with this drive," Plank said. "The theory behind it is deceptively simple. Once you know what to look for you wonder why someone hasn't thought of it."

"Someone has," she said. "Or at least something similar." She explained, as best she could, the blink drive.

"Yes," he said. "That's it exactly. And we've had this thing for years?"

"It works," she said, "but then something happens."

When she finished telling of the results in the blink tests, including the last one just before Plank arrived, he was silent.

Finally he said, "I have detection equipment aboard which reads a jump. There's a signal that a ship sends ahead of itself."

"I know."

"If the jump is a long one I can locate the point where it will end."

"That's how you got here? You detected the blinks..."

"Blinks?" Plank asked.

"Our drive was invented by a man named John Blink. Since a blink ship seemed to just blink out of existence and blink into existence somewhere else they called it blinking."

"Yes, I detected the blinks. You must have done two very short ones, then two longer ones. I arrived at the end of the second long blink."

"When the ship disintegrated," she said.

"Yes."

"Did you have anything to do with that?"

"No."

"Then the beings who made this ship must have," she said.

"Yes."

"Why?" she asked.

"I don't know. There are a lot of things I don't know. Why couldn't I remember the location of my home system? It was blanked totally out of my mind. I would run coordinates and end up in empty space outside the arm. And I had this overwhelming urge to find my home."

"That's only natural," she said.

"And now that I'm here, it's all falling into place," he said. "I can look

out—I have some pretty powerful eyes—and see all nine of the planets. Now I know where old Sol is situated in relation to the big marker stars. It's as if I'd never forgotten. But I feel uneasy."

"Uneasy?"

"Why did someone go to all the trouble of integrating my brain into this ship? Why no contact? It happened on the return trip from the Centauri systems. How did I get so far away?"

"I think the most important question is this: what are the intentions of the people who built this ship and put you in it?"

"I have a sneaky feeling that they wanted me to find Earth. That they wanted to follow me here."

"If that's the case, then they're here," she said.

"I've been scanning," he said. "The nearest ship is Mars-bound and it's an Earth ship."

"Plank," she said. "I think it's time we called for help."

"Who?"

"Let's start with Commander Heath and Matt Webb. They must be dying of curiosity."

"They've been trying to contact you for ten minutes," he said.

She leaped for her lsg, lying on a nearby couch. "I can patch them in," he said.

Heath's voice was agitated. "If you don't answer," he was saying, "we're coming in if we have to cut through the hull."

She glanced up quickly. The shuttle, using steering jets, had closed to within a few meters.

"I'm all right," she said.

"Hara?"

"Yes."

"What's going on?" Heath demanded.

"I'm all right. It's John Plank. He's been telling me some very interesting things. Now we want you, both of you, to come on board."

"We'll come one at a time," Heath said.

"All right," Plank said. "I understand."

"Webb will board first," Heath said.

Matt Webb, weapon in hand, was met at the entrance to the lock by Hara and Plank's mobile form. He insisted on a quick inspection of the ship. He was not shown the compartment where Plank lived. Satisfied, he reported back to Heath and the Commander was soon aboard.

"I think you'll have to go through it again, Plank," Hara said, when the four of them were in the lounge.

"First," Heath said, "what about your friend?" He looked steadily at Plank's mobile form.

"I don't understand," Plank said.

"The ship lying 40 kilometers off your stern."

Plank's mobile form showed no visible reaction, but frenzied activity went on inside himself as he used every instrument on the ship.

"There is no ship within two light-minutes," Plank said.

"You got visuals on this crate?" Heath asked.

"Certainly," Plank said. Viewports opened. The volume of space behind the new *Pride* was magnified, searched. "You see? Nothing there."

"It was," Webb said. "We had it on instruments and on visual. It was contoured like you, round. It was black and silent, except for low-end magnetic disturbances."

Plank's mobile form moved away, turning its back on the three. "You're

sure?"

"Of course," Heath said.

"He could have blinked out," Hara said.

"Did you feel it?" Heath asked.

"No," she said.

"Neither did we."

"You're assuming that his drive is the same as our blink drive?" Hara asked.

"We felt him blink in."

"We didn't feel Plank blink in," Hara said.

"Because he arrived at the same time as our test vehicle," Heath said. "But we felt the other ship blink in. That's how we spotted it. It was black, light-absorbing. We had to use radar to see it. But it was there."

Plank was feeling a vague uneasiness. "Commander Heath," he said, "would you please return to your ship and run a check with your instruments?"

"Aren't yours better?" Webb asked.

"Please," Plank said.

"I'll go," Webb said.

They waited, Heath prowling, investigating, asking questions, which were answered by Plank. Then Webb was on the radio.

"It's there," Webb said. He read the coordinates. Plank searched the area and still found nothing.

"Webb," Plank said, "I can follow your radar beams. I want you to hold the beams on him for a moment."

"Right," Webb said.

Plank was computing. Atop the sphere, a weapon pod rotated. It was aimed at nothing, but the shuttle's beams said there was something. Just before Plank was about to fire Heath gasped. Not far away from them, the shuttle ship was breaking into colorful planes of chaos. Then it was gone. Plank fired at the same moment, but the release of energy from the weapon came just after he felt the blink that told of movement of the unseen ship. Then his wild searching revealed nothing.

CHAPTER TEN

Matt Webb was gone. Hara would not think the word, dead. He was gone. The shuttle ship was gone, just as the last of the blink test vehicles was gone. She longed for the familiar instruments of an Earth ship, so that she might search the space around them to confirm what her eyes had told her, that the shuttle had broken into bright, geometric planes and then faded into nothing. Plank assured her that his instruments revealed nothing, but she could not see those instruments, could not read their findings. She had only Plank's word and Plank, himself, was not the Plank she had known, but a disembodied brain in a clear and beautiful crystal substance.

An air of crisis hung around them. Outside, nearby as space is measured, their home system continued its eternal march around a star, which had birthed the energy to give them life. The system had not changed. The universe, save for its natural evolution, was unchanging. And yet Hara felt as if something had altered inside her, something that made her realize her life would never be the same. She stood beside Walker Heath, staring out the viewport, willing her eyes to see the shuttle. She felt a touch on her arm and turned to look into the almost lifelike face of Plank's mobile form. The hand on her arm was warm, humanly soft. She felt a shudder begin, but cut it off.

"Help me think it out," Plank said. She nodded. "Both of them couldn't be mistaken. I mean about seeing a ship out there, a ship my instruments can't see."

"No," she said.

"It's there," Heath said. "Or it was."

"Yes, it blinked out just before I fired at it," Plank said. "I felt the blink. Why couldn't I see it?"

"You're not seeing with human eyes," Hara said. "You're seeing with ship's instruments. Wouldn't it be possible for those who built you, I mean the ship, to blank away certain areas? Leaving you blind to the ship that both Webb and Commander Heath saw?"

Plank considered. "I don't think so. I am literally a part of this ship. I know every micrometer of her. I know the function of every circuit, the beginning and the end of each system."

"And yet you couldn't detect the ship," Heath said.

"But I'd know if there were tampering," Plank said.

"Would you?" Heath asked. "You've been wondering why, when you found yourself out in unknown space, you couldn't relate the position of the Sol system to any known landmark. You admitted that this was strange and you wondered how it could happen. Let's say that brain tampering could explain it. Would you know if someone had been playing about with your mind?"

"I don't know," Plank said.

"No," Heath said. "You would not know."

"Are you saying it was done?" Hara asked.

"Very few people know," Heath said. "Yes, there is a certain amount of preconditioning imposed upon every man who goes into deep space."

"When?" Hara asked unbelievably.

"Remember the final physical? Did you ever hear anyone say, coming out of the physical, that the thing seemed to last forever?"

"As a matter of fact, I felt the same way myself," Hara said, "but there was no loss of time."

"At least you were not aware of any loss of time," Heath said. "Actually, you lost some three hours and forgetting that three hours was a minor part of the conditioning. The major purpose of the conditioning was to

blank out, under certain circumstances, any knowledge of home."

"I think I understand," Plank said. "I don't, however, like the idea of someone messing around with my mind."

"I think the secretary and others would be interested to know that in your case total memory loss did not occur," Heath said. "But perhaps your, ah, alteration did not involve enough stress or pain to complete the job."

"Are you saying that if one of us were captured or tortured, that we would be unable to reveal the point of our origin?" Hara asked.

"The program was implemented when ships began to disappear," Heath said. "It was purely precautionary. But there were those who didn't accept the disappearances as being accidents. They feared that our ships were being seized somehow, by some rather powerful aliens. I, for one, argued that if one of our ships were captured as near to home as the Centauri systems, then anyone with a grain of intelligence would be able to cast about in near space and find the only possible source. I lost. Each man going into space was conditioned so that, under stress or torture, his mind would be wiped clean of any knowledge of the solar system, its makeup, its location, its position in relationship to anything in the galaxy."

"But it's so childish," Hara said. "All an alien would have to do is follow a ship home."

"Man has always been a slightly paranoid creature," Heath said. "We've always feared the unknown. And something out there, something unknown, was eating our ships. The precaution was somewhat silly, but it eased a few timid minds and allowed us to continue the space program. There were those who wanted to pull in, cease all travel outside the system."

"And you think that something similar to the mind tampering has been performed on me, on my systems," Plank said.

"It's a good guess."

"Excuse me," Plank said. "I'll be busy for a while."

The mobile extension went off in the direction of the cargo hold. Plank

was already withdrawn from it, concentrating himself, sending himself out, checking with minute care each tiny integrated part of himself. Hours later he rested, having found nothing.

Hara and Heath were growing impatient. He instructed them on the use of the galley and left them again to return to the crucial area of the ship, the computer. He went painstakingly through all the circuits involved in detection of objects in space and, once again, was blanked. Reason told him that any tampering would be with those circuits involved in perceiving the outside universe. His examination told him that no tampering had been done. His knowledge told him that tampering had been accomplished in a way he could not detect.

Irritable and frustrated, he directed a total probe of the volume of space around him, increasing power steadily, extending the circuits to their maximum capacity. Still nothing.

The dark ship seen by both Heath and Webb had blinked away. Perhaps, he thought, it had not, as yet, blinked back. It could be sitting off at limitless distances, awaiting a move. It could detect a jump. He programmed a jump, out past the orbit of Pluto, and made it. Hara demanded to know what was going on, having felt the buildup of power in the generator. He told her, rather moodily, to bear with him. He had been especially alert for the feel of a blinking ship, but the feeling of his own blink, he knew, would override the feel of another ship blinking nearby. He had to assume, however, that his dark companion was now with him.

Once again he threw full power into the detection circuits, finding nothing. He increased power steadily, feeding it in from other sources, exceeding the capacity of the circuits until, overloaded, a circuit blew. The redundancy system switched in and the ship began repair on the blown circuit. He fed power in and blew the standby circuit before repairs were completed. This blinded him in one sector for several minutes before the repaired circuit was completed.

He was acting purely on hunch and in desperation. One by one he overloaded the circuits in the detection system and one by one they were repaired. By watching the repair process he learned. Materials were being manipulated at the atomic level, the system drawing on a bank of stored atoms, building tiny components a block at a time to replace the microscopic circuits as he destroyed them. And after hours of destruction and repair the results were the same. He could not detect any ship within

light-minutes of his position.

He was convinced, then, that any actions he himself might take were fruitless. A technology able to manipulate materials at the atomic level by preprogrammed automation could plant the blanking device in any repaired circuit. But he was not going to admit defeat. If he had been followed by a ship that had deliberately been blanked from him, then that ship was there for no good purpose. Somehow, the undetectable ship was tied in with the disappearance of the shuttle and the blink test vehicle and, consequently, with the disappearances of all the ships lost between Earth and Centauri.

There were no access ports to the inner workings of the ship. It had not been designed for human repair. Still there was a way. In the well-stocked tool bin of the ship were torches, meters, handtools. He had long since been aware of their presence and was, at first, puzzled until he realized that they were duplicates of tools that had been carried on the old *Pride*. Perhaps those who had put him aboard the ship had considered his tools to be on a par with his library, something to make him more comfortable, or to amuse him. At any rate they were there, and with the help of Hara and Heath, he transported the necessary items to the proper area of the ship and very carefully cut into the covering, exposing the detection circuits. Then, one by one, using scrap materials from his tool bin, they began to replace the self-repairing circuits in one side of the system.

It was necessary, due to the crudeness of their materials, to sacrifice some of the efficiency, some of the range. However, as testing followed the insertion of each man-made substitute, the thing worked. Since each circuit was a part of himself, Plank could know its function and could direct his mobile extension and the others to jury-rig a substitute. It was a tedious, time-consuming process that went on and on through circuit after circuit until Hara began to sag with fatigue.

"One more, then we'll take a break," Plank said, although he intended to continue working through his mobile form.

The circuit was bypassed, then replaced. A test was run. The sensitive system was no longer perfect. There was distortion and noise, but there was something else. It was near, very near, arrogantly near. The black ship sat, dead silent in space, a mere 40 kilometers from them.

Slowly, carefully, Plank moved weapons to bear on the ship. His first

thought was to blast it out of space. Then he reconsidered. He kept the weapons ready. He opened a port, sent his mobile form out in the small vehicle and was ready at any moment to activate weapons which would be swift enough to destroy the dark ship should it begin to build power to blink away. He was alongside within minutes. The ship was much like his own. He searched for a port, found it, locked the small vehicle to the dark globe and found entry surprisingly easy. He flowed into the dark ship, found it to be mechanically the same as his own, and he possessed it. There was no directing brain, only an additional bank of circuits in the computer. Quick analysis of that bank told him its purpose; it was sending information even as he destroyed it with a surge of power that burned both primary and backup systems. Repair would take time, time enough for him to find a way to cut that bank completely away from the computer, time to investigate the ship and see its curious layout.

No luxury quarters here. The ship was functional, strictly mechanical. In size and contour, it was the same as his. The interior, however, was given over to one huge bay cut into tiny cubicles, each containing a bed, sanitary facilities and a small store of water and a substance that, upon examination, proved to be an artificial nutrient suitable for human consumption.

It was evident that the dark ship was, in essence, a prison ship, designed to transport humans, or some form of life very much like humans. Chilled, Plank hastily returned to the computer and burned the repairing circuits in the bank he had destroyed. To complete the job, he sent the vehicle back to the new *Pride*, then returned it, Hara aboard with the proper tools, to the dark ship. Then with torch and cutters he permanently severed the sending bank from the ship's computer.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

There were times when it was possible to forget that the hand that touched her was not his. He could feel the liveness of her, the warmth of her. She was so beautiful. In the moment of respite, he stood in his mobile form and looked at her and saw the depth of her ice-blue eyes, the slightly tousled length of light hair, the form of woman under the well-tailored uniform. Once again he touched her, his hand light on her arm. She looked up. Her smile was radiant.

It seemed to him that she, too, was able to forget.

Until that moment he had not allowed himself to think of her. The unanswered questions had preoccupied him. Now there was a moment, and the beauty of her sank into him, overwhelmed him; he forgot and his arms went out to hold her. Her smile closed, lips forming for the kiss. Her eyes were heavy-lidded and he could feel. It was a wonderful instrument, containing all the sensory equipment of his original body. He was lost in the thrill of her and his lips touched and felt the soft parting and the sweet wetness, and suddenly she was cold and stiff in his arms.

"I'm sorry," he said, letting his arms drop.

"For a moment," she said uncertainly.

"Yes, I know," he said. "It won't happen again."

"It's not you," she said.

"It feels."

"Oh, John," she said, turning away.

"Your friend Heath must be climbing the walls by now," Plank said. "If we find that we have a use for two ships we'll have to rig a manual way to communicate. Right now I want to live with this baby for a while, so why don't you get into the scout and I'll zap you back over to pick up the commander."

Alone, he directed the movement of the small vehicle with a portion of his mind while concentrating on the working of the dark ship. The discovery that it was more heavily armed than his own ship did not add to his confidence. Otherwise it was the same, save for the disconnected bank whose purpose was communication. There, he felt, was the only possible source of new information.

Although severed from the main computer of the ship, the unit was still wired into the portion of the computer that directed self-repair, and that work was almost complete. One system was operable, the backup nearly so. It was almost as if the bank of circuits were alive, a self-sustaining unit.

For the first time since he had become aware of being the directing force of a starship he felt the sheer alien strangeness of his surroundings. Man, in his history, had accomplished much, but he had a long way to go before he could call himself master of the elemental building blocks of the universe. Man was still discovering new sub-atomic particles. The beings who had built this ship must, Plank knew, have command of those subatomic particles. The way the ships repaired themselves was astounding, a liquid flow of atomic material forming and growing as if poured into a mold. But the result was the same: mere items of hardware, a bit more sophisticated, perhaps, smaller, more efficient, but hardware nevertheless. And man was a master of hardware. What aliens could build, man could understand. The laws of physics did not change. But he knew that without his ability to be a part of that hardware, to feel it, to flow along its wiring, he would have been hard put to figure out even the first circuit.

He had begun to think of his makers, those who had put his brain into a crystal container aboard a starship, as *they*. *They* had given him an advantage. He could feel their little gimmicks, quickly understand what they were about. Their hardware became his hardware.

He was cautious. He didn't like what he'd found aboard this dark ship, the cell-like rooms. They had sent him wandering around searching for home and it was a lead-pipe cinch that they wanted to fill those cells with humans. He didn't know why, but he was certain it couldn't be for the good of the people involved. Taking away a man's body and putting his brain into a machine showed a certain amount of disregard for the rights of the individual.

The communicating bank was the most complicated piece of machinery he'd encountered. It almost defeated him, baffled him long after Hara drew alongside and boarded with Heath. He left them to stare for a moment at his inactive mobile form. He himself, was deep inside the ship.

He reasoned that if the communications bank could send, it could also receive. He inspected that section, activated it and waited. There was nothing. It was capable of receiving, but not on a frequency he knew. He had expected it to function much as his own detection gear functioned, a radarlike form of blinking energy out and back. In detecting a distant object, his system blinked waves, sending them not through space but into

something else, in and out, in and out, on timed adjustable intervals, longer blinks to detect large objects, shorter and shorter as the search narrowed down. But the communications bank of the dark ship was not geared to receive or send any wavelength in the spectrum.

At home, men were still working on communications by biological energy, the still unmastered technique of using the "minds" of plants to send messages. But there was no biological receptor aboard the dark ship. Another form of mental energy? If so, what mentality? The mind of *them* could be so different as to be removed from human perception. More than anything that had happened, his inability to master the communications bank made him aware of his limitations.

What was he up against? Who were *they*? Super-beings? Because of his integration with a very sophisticated computer, he was superhuman, and he was still helpless. It seemed futile to think that he could tackle beings capable of slowing atoms and electrons and smaller particles into pre-set designs. Who the hell was he even to think about meeting them head-on and having the smallest chance of success? They would squash him. They could, probably, cause his own atoms to flow, killing all that was left of him, that small, unimpressive mass of gray matter back aboard the new *Pride*.

But man had always been a little crazy. He'd always had that arrogant confidence in his own ability. In the beginning he fought the big saber-toothed tigers, stronger, more adapted to the conditions, almost as intelligent, and he won. He killed mastodons with stone-tipped spears and took on white sharks in their own environs. He did it not so much with his strength as with his brain, and Plank had his brain. A human brain.

Somewhere out there was something probably very nasty. Something with some very advanced technology. Something unexplained. But then man had crawled into caves to see what was in the dark and probed into the universe to learn its secrets.

Plank made his decision. He would take on the tiger.

He prepared himself and hooked the communications bank into the system; there was an immediate rush of sending, which he stopped. He had the message on the computer's memory. It was one blip from the bank, cut off in midblip. He knew he had made a risky decision, letting the bank send, but it had led him to the section of the computer that, he

discovered, was full of previous messages, all in the same form. He could find no indication of the energy involved, but whatever it was, it had been translated into mere electronic impulses.

In the end, it was quite simple. There is really nothing new, he thought, only things unknown. The blips were squeezed. Lengthening them, slowing them down, he reduced them to computer language, which he understood. And the last message was merely a report on a malfunction that had been repaired. The others were more interesting. They went back to the beginning and contained coordinates that could be placed on the star charts aboard the *Pride*, They recorded the position of the first planet he'd explored, the planet he'd called Plank's World with the small, sluglike animals. They positioned his ship at all of the stops, at the beginning and end of each blink.

He skipped. The big question to be answered was near the end of the tape. The answer was yes. Yes, the communications bank had sent the position of Plank's last blink. On the tape were the coordinates that would place an alien within visual distance of the sun and the populated planets of the system.

He thought of the cold and barren cells aboard the dark ship, cells just large enough to house, with a complete lack of privacy and comfort, 1,000 people. When he first looked at the cells the image of a prison ship had come to him. And if his suspicions were correct, if the dark ship were, indeed, meant to transport humans, then danger was near. With the location of Earth now known to them, they could fill a million such ships with people if they desired.

He could not be sure, as yet, that they wanted to fill ships with humans. It was difficult to imagine. Man was no longer a hunted creature. He had outlived such threats. He was no longer prey for larger animals.

He felt a surge of anger. Who were they to offer even an implied threat to man? All right, their hardware was a bit more sophisticated, but it was just hardware. *They* had obviously wanted to find man's home planet. Now they had the information which would bring them to Earth. He couldn't prevent that. The information had already been sent. But he could see to it that man would prove to be the most dangerous game in the universe. He himself had been given the equipment to begin resistance.

He did not consult the others lest his plan of action be slowed by their

natural caution. He felt the need to move, to do something quickly. He was angered and he had months of frustration to vent on someone, something. In short, he needed something to hit.

He reconnected the communications bank and let it send. This time he tracked the transmission and found a general line of direction. The beam, brief and powerful, blinked off toward galactic center. Simultaneously, Plank blinked the two ships after it.

In an area of dense stars, he let the bank transmit again. It sent coordinates of the ships' position. He blinked in the direction of the beam and then repeated the process, the short blinks made necessary by the crowdings of the stars. It was a slow process. For the first time man was venturing into the heart of the galaxy: where the giant stars pull with magnificent force; where the emptiness of space is lessened, but not completely full; where deadly bursts of stellar winds blow in confused directions and the mass of neighboring stars influence each other; where planet formation was rare.

There was a glory in the viewport. Hara and Heath found it difficult to sleep, wanting to be awake at the end of each blink to see the new spread of stars thicker than the Milky Way of home. At first Hara had been angry. Plank had given them no choice. But now that she was there she was awed; she felt dwarfed more than ever before by the sheer size and mass of the galaxy.

Near the galactic core old stars lighted the hulls of the two ships traveling in tandem. The deadly gravity of a black hole tugged at them, forced use of all power, a quick blink away. Blue giants blazed. White dwarfs sported an occasional planet, but these were swept clean by the solar winds of nearby suns.

The procedure became monotonous. Because of the closely massed suns, the blinks were short. Each blink was preceded by a transmission burst from the communications bank. Direction established, the ships followed. And, although it zigzagged, the course was ever inward, toward the core.

Finally there was one, carefully calculated jump, and the two ships lay dead in space at a point, vertical to the orbital plane of a life-zone planet. Child of a relatively isolated star tucked into a spot in space almost directly at the core of the galaxy, the planet lived. From space it was blue.

It had water. A probe to the edge of the atmosphere showed the envelope of air to be oxygen-based and breathable. A visual scan from the probe magnified the surface, showed vast land areas and huge oceans and vegetation not unlike that of other life-zone planets. The planet was electronically silent. Plank made sure of that before he sent the probe lower. He was aboard the scout in his mobile form. From eight kilometers high, he magnified the land areas, swept them and saw the constructions. He could not call them buildings. They were figments of a nightmare, a tinker-toy set gone wild: towers and spans and geometric and non-geometric shapes smothered one landmass and scattered into others.

He searched for signs of life. No waves, no electronics.

He was relaying the scene back to the *Pride*. There, Hara and Heath were as puzzled as he. "They could have been built by humanoids," Heath said.

"Or anything," Plank replied.

He directed a beam of information from the dark ship's communications bank and traced it. It went directly toward a wildly contoured mass of metals and plastics on the eastern shore of the most densely covered landmass. By sheer accident he, in the scout, was in the direct line of transmission as a burst came from the building receiving the beam from the ship. When analyzed, the burst from the land surface proved to be identical to the transmission from the communications bank.

"I think we've found a relay station," Plank said, trying to hide his disappointment.

"I think I'm glad no one is home," Hara said.

Plank went down. Entry was simple, accomplished by flowing into the mechanics of the building. Inside there was a confusing maze. Circuitry and components were everywhere. Mechanical devices whose use he could not even guess cluttered floor areas. Everything was in disarray, but it was more than mere clutter. He checked for power drains and found a few of the devices to be functioning, or at least they were using power. After some fruitless wandering and retracing of his steps upon confronting dead-end corridors, he found the room containing the communications device, much like the shipboard bank, but larger and more powerful.

"Send another blip from the bank," he radioed up to Heath. As part of the communication device, he heard the message come in and be instantly relayed. He was noting the direction when Hara interrupted.

"John, a signal just came in."

He had rigged a visual detector. The receiving circuits of the shipboard communicator were left open constantly. He directed the shipboard communicator to send down the message. It arrived in a very brief blip of energy and was stored on the tapes of the landside machine. With great anticipation, he slowed it, replayed it. It was a meaningless rumble of noise. Nothing about it resembled the form of outgoing messages. Puzzled, he relayed it at different speeds, producing not sounds but electronic impulses. Had the impulses been orderly, the outgoing messages, the computer could have read them, extracted information. As a part of the computer, Plank could have read them. But the impulses were not orderly.

They were a confusing random nothingness. Noise. Electronic noise.

"I guess," he said for the benefit of Hara and Heath, "We don't speak the same language."

He made brief exploratory excursions on the planet. He found more of the same incomprehensible mechanical jumble. Two things he recognized. One was a waterfall cascading out of a tall tower into a lake. The other was unquestionably an acceleration chamber for atomic particles. Of all the forms it was the most recognizable. Long, heavily shielded, it stretched a vast distance across a flat plain.

He was recording on visual. He was taking samples. The metals were much like the metals aboard the two ships, the tougher alloy used for the ship's hulls being the main construction material of the towers and buildings. Once he tried to enter one of the electronic devices, this one occupying a building roughly the size of an Earth football stadium. For a while, until he extricated himself, he feared for his sanity. The circuitry had no rhyme or reason. It began nowhere and led nowhere and performed no function he could imagine. Again he was struck by the tinker-toy image, this one an electronic tinker-toy assembled by a talented idiot. He emerged a bit frayed at the edges and, having had enough, boarded the mobile form and rejoined the others on the *Pride*.

There, untiring, he busied himself with the one signal that had come

into the receiver. Hours later, after Hara and Heath had slept, he told them, "I think it must have been random noise."

"What now?" Hara asked.

"We start sending messages to the relay station down below and follow the relays."

Heath was looking at a visual chart of the incoming message. "Plank," he said, "you want to try something purely on a guess?"

"I'm open to suggestions," Plank said.

"How about running this thing through a speaker as just plain old sound."

"Why not?" Plank asked, although he considered the idea rather inane. He rigged the system, translated the electronic impulses into sound waves. When he activated the tape there was a long-drawn-out rumble on the speakers. It was meaningless. Plank shrugged. "So much for man's first communication from an intelligent alien," he said.

"Wait," Hara said. "Play it again."

Again the long-drawn-out rumble.

"Speed it up," Hara said.

The sound was unmistakable. Man's first communication from an intelligent alien was a huge, satisfied burp.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Join up with Plank and see the galaxy," Hara said, with a lightness she did not feel.

Once again they were star-roving. This time the process was somewhat more complicated. First, it was necessary to allow the communications bank to send a signal to the relay station. Then it was a game of intelligent guess and chance to put the *Pride* and her dark companion ship in the

direct path of the narrow beam from the relay station on the core planet.

Both ships were used because the equipment needed was aboard the dark globe, and the *Pride* offered comfort to Hara and Heath. Operations were no problem. Plank could extend his control over both ships with no difficulty. The problem was in calculating each new blink. Although the beamed message generally was in a straight line, it was bent by the huge fields of stars and often, following a new message. Plank missed the beam entirely and had to search for it, sometimes having to return to the last known point.

As days went by, it became evident that the new path was leading back in the general direction of Earth, and Plank began to fear that *they* were already there in the solar system. However, the path began to diverge, aiming toward a point in the Orion Arm more toward galactic center than Earth's sun.

There had been no further communication incoming, and Plank began to think that the one reception was a fluke, a bit of space noise or interference.

Since he was capable of being in more than one place at one time, and since the more he worked his brain the more it seemed to be able to handle, he was spending some of the time working with Heath and Hara to install manual controls on the *Pride*. Although Plank saw no great advantage, it gave the other two something to do and made them feel like more than mere passengers. Parts were cannibalized from the dark ship and from redundant systems aboard the *Pride*.

When the makeshift manuals were in place. Plank acted as overseer as Heath directed the *Pride* into a blink. The new systems worked.

Installing the manuals had served another good purpose. Heath, in spite of his abrasive personality, was a good drive engineer. He was now familiar with the complexities of the *Pride* to a degree second only to the more intimate insights of Plank himself. Back on Earth, Heath would be able to construct duplicate generators. Actually, the drive aboard the *Pride* was basically a blink generator, with some delicate refinements. Most of the advances were represented by the minute circuitry made possible by the atomic flow technique. Neither Plank nor Heath had command of that. It seemed to be automatic in the repair sequences, and the manner of its accomplishment was a mystery. However, the lack of the

ability to flow the atomic material was not a severe handicap. The only sacrifice in building a generator by Earth techniques would be in size, and since power was unlimited with a blink generator in use, size was not the paramount consideration.

Heath was now convinced that the blink drive had worked all along. He had evidence. He had seen it work with his own eyes and he'd recorded it on the instruments of the shuttle ship. The drive had worked, sending the ship out and bringing it back, and only alien interference had prevented man from developing a drive that would have opened the galaxy to him.

There was much speculation as the two ships blinked out toward the Orion Arm, and there were a few tentative conclusions. One, there seemed to be a relatively small number of *them*. During Plank's own travels before he'd found his way back to the solar system by tracking the signals of Heath's blinks, he had minutely examined a sizable portion of the Orion Arm. Then, while following the signal beam to the core of the galaxy, they had covered another considerable area. They were now in a part of space that was new to them, and after blinking thousands of light-years, they had still had no encounter with *them*.

Of course, the galaxy was an enormous place and the likelihood of a chance encounter was small, even if the aliens numbered in the billions and were flying all over space. Still, it seemed likely that they would be few in number. Otherwise, if a swarming civilization had been conducting a search for man's home, they would have found it. Plank, himself, would have eventually discovered the solar system merely by systematically covering every star in the arm as he worked his way outward. It might have taken him 1,000 years; but a civilization that could produce the technology represented by the two ships, the planet of the empty tinker-toys and the medical techniques that allowed Plank's brain to live indefinitely as the guiding force of a starship would have been around for a long time.

Perhaps, Hara suggested, *they* were not vitally interested in finding man, but merely in checking him now and then by lifting some of his ships.

The idea of being checked on by alien intelligence was not new. But it was no more welcome to Plank than it had been to intelligent people in the days of flying saucers, when it was widely believed that alien spaceships made regular check flights over the Earth and even went so far as to pick

up humans for examination.

"I don't think there's anything systematic about it," Plank said. "There's a certain randomness about the entire thing. We've studied the time intervals between ship disappearances. There's no pattern. We're quite sure now that the ships are discovered by reading the tiny disturbances in the continuum. We know the blink generator sends a signal ahead of itself and that such a signal can be read from vast distances. It stands to reason that the hydro-powered ships also made some sort of disturbance when, at turnaround, they built power suddenly to decelerate. The fact that all of the blink test vehicles disappeared shows that they send a much stronger signal, while the signal sent by the hydro ships must be weak and erratic, otherwise there might have been a 100 percent disappearance of the conventional ships, just as there was in the blink ships."

"What worries me is that we send such a signal each time we blink," Hara said.

"That's another reason why I feel there is a certain unexplained randomness about this whole thing," Plank said. "There's almost an indifference on their part. Certainly, from almost anywhere in the galaxy, they can read our blinks. They know where we've been, and they probably can figure out where we're going. Yet they make no contact."

"Perhaps we're not really important enough to demand much of their time," Heath said.

"It's scary," Hara said. "But you know, there are nuts on Earth who could make a new religion of this. They'd build blink ships and go off inviting *them* to seize the ship, praying and singing all the while, waiting to be taken by these godlike creatures with such fantastic powers to a better place."

"It would be nice to believe that," Plank said. "There's such a casual disregard of the human individuals involved. Take Webb. He just vanished. Take my case. I wasn't asked if I wanted to be disembodied. I wasn't asked if I wanted to live, perhaps for thousands of years, without the niceties of human existence." He was in his mobile form. It seemed to make the other two feel more comfortable. He looked at Hara. It was not exactly what he was thinking when he said, "No one asked me if I wanted to exist for a long period of time without even being able to eat a steak."

"To pursue Hara's thought, although I don't think any of us really believe it, perhaps they saved your life," Heath said. "Perhaps they were doing a nice thing for you by giving you a form of life after your body was seriously harmed or destroyed."

"If so," Plank said, "then they were the agent of my body's harm. They were the ones who seized my ship."

"Do you think there could be dozens, hundreds of ships like yours, with the brains of space people encased?" Hara asked.

"The list of the missing numbers in the hundreds," Heath said.

"It's possible," said Plank.

"What we're trying to do," Hara went on, "is understand the thinking of alien beings. It's rather futile to wonder what someone else is thinking, especially when that someone may be very, very different."

"Just how different is illustrated by that tinker-toy planet back there," Plank said. "We know from it, and from the ships, that nothing is done with hands. It's all done mentally. In my case, I actually flow into a mechanical thing through its electric wiring. Is that the way *they* do it? Or do they do it with pure mental force? Along the same line, the message beams can be nothing but mental force. They travel on no physical wavelength. They travel infinite distances with no time lapse."

"A race with powerful extrasensory ability. Telepathic," Heath said. "And what else?"

"Beings that exist as powerful force fields?" Plank asked. "All around us? Laughing at us?"

"No need for hardware, then," Hara said.

"Toys?" Plank asked. "Some of the constructions on the tinker-toy planet had, I swear, no practical purpose."

"As we know practical purpose," Heath said.

"There was an accelerator. It was recognizable. Now we know they're good on subatomics. In effect, they do the old alchemist's magic,

transmuting one element into another. Now you'll have to admit that this is an accomplishment of some value, so why waste the materials on constructions that begin nowhere and end nowhere? A culture that uses an accelerator should be rather practical. The inconsistencies of that planet bother me."

"I think the worst thing of all is that we've always wondered if we were alone in the universe, so we've made attempts to contact others. We used to have huge observatories dedicated to alien contact. We wanted so desperately to find someone out there to whom we could say, hey, we are and you are, how about that?" She paused for a moment before going on. "I remember reading that on the first unmanned probe launched on a path that would take it outside the solar system, they put a stylized drawing of a man and woman and a simple star chart for locating old Sol in relationship to nearby pointer stars. I thought it was a very touching, very human thing, but futile, since the little probe was traveling at a snail's pace and probably won't reach the vicinity of another star for hundreds of years yet, if it's still out there. But we were so alone. And now that we know we're not alone, I'm not sure I didn't like it best the other way."

"This is interesting," Plank said, having completed another blink while Hara was talking. "Take a look." He flashed a chart onto a screen. "Here we are." He illustrated their position with a blip of light. "And here is where I first became aware that I was no longer a man, but a brain inside a machine."

Behind the blip of light indicating the ship, a zigzagging line extended back into the heart of the galaxy. An extension of that line pointed toward the planet he called Plank's World.

"As I told you, it was the only world supporting a considerable amount of life. The slug things, remember?"

"It couldn't be them," Hara said.

"No," Plank agreed. "But that seems to be where we're headed."

"They seemed interested in having you search out life-zone planets," Heath said. "Now they're there, if we're right in believing that the relayed signals are going to them."

"Why would they be there?" Hara mused.

"There are several possibilities," Plank said. "To help. To observe. To harm." He left his mobile extension inert. "And whatever the reason, we're going to be ready."

"To do what?" Heath asked.

"To talk, to question. I hope that's all," Plank said. "But if not, then we have enough fire power on these two ships to pulverize the planet."

He approached the planet at sublight speed. All eyes, all ears on the alert. He had transferred Hara and Heath to the dark ship since it was more heavily armored. He left the dark ship dead in space, keeping contact, while easing the *Pride* closer. The dark ship was always in his view, under constant monitoring. At first hint of trouble he would blink it out of there to a predetermined safe distance.

He was certain he was being observed. It did not stand to reason that *they*, being so advanced, could be surprised. At any moment he expected contact, so he kept the communications bank aboard the dark ship open. It was reasonable to believe that *they* would have their weapons, at least as powerful as the weapons aboard the ships, perhaps weapons he could not even imagine. What was the power of a being who could manipulate atomic subparticles at will?

Once again, he felt futility. The first man to take up spear and rock and go after the tiger must have had the same feeling. And, because he shared a common humanity with that first hunter, he pressed on. When a tiger begins to pick off your fellow villagers one by one, you take arms and go after him.

You know that if you are not quick, not smart, you, too, will be tiger bait, yet you press ahead. That's the way man is. Otherwise, back on Earth, the jungles might be still full of tigers, hip deep in them, with man a small, frightened thing running for his life and hiding in holes in the ground.

The planet looked deceptively peaceful. A water and oxygen world is beautiful from space. Blues and the cover of clouds, a large storm system in the southern hemisphere. Winter in the northern temperate zone.

He boarded the scout in his mobile form and blinked to within the atmosphere to begin his sweeps. He had selected the largest landmass, the one that had been populated most densely by the small, sluglike creatures—the planet's dominant form of life. Moving at low altitudes, slightly higher than 1,500 meters, he scanned the ground. The first thing that came to his attention was the total absence of the little animals. Where there had been millions, there were none. He lowered, slowed his speed. A dozen instruments found and analyzed a new substance, piled and strewn, a reeking, oily, glutinous mass. It was in evidence all over the landscape.

He did not take time to collect a sample. He returned to his high speed survey. Hours later, he was convinced that the largest landmass was not only devoid of animal life, but was empty of the presence of any alien visible to his detection instruments.

Reporting his findings to the others aboard the dark ship, he flashed across an ocean to the second continental landmass. The findings were the same. Scattered islands and two subcontinental masses were yet to be searched. He chose to cover the larger area first. Once again he found that the little slugs were no longer in evidence, only great accumulations of that glutinous material he had observed on both major landmasses.

He had confined his search to daylight areas, adjusting his flight plan to the planet's rotation. There was left only the ocean islands, some rather extensive chains in the southern oceans. He approached one of the larger islands from the sea, flying low and fast, lifting the scout over the escarpment and reading the findings of his instruments as they scanned the hills and valleys of the interior of the island. At first, he received no life signals near the coast. Then, inland, he began to get scattered blips revealing the presence of the slugs. And, lifting over the peak of the dead volcano at the center and looking down into a small, beautiful, forested valley, he saw his instruments leap wildly. Below him was a life-force of an astounding intensity. He slowed.

He saw the thing in a jungle clearing. Its pale hump of a back towered above the tall trees surrounding it. Its bulk was, he estimated, in the hundreds of metric tons. Hovering over it, he had microseconds to assess and record. Later, when he had time to look at the visuals, he could not believe that his first instantaneous impressions had been so vividly correct. The form of the creature was a blobby globe. At the front of the

globe, a huge maw as wide as the bulk and lined with hundreds of small, sharp teeth. Two armlike appendages extended forward from beside the maw; they were occupied with gathering and scooping up dozens of the slug animals, which had been herded into the clearing. The small animals waited patiently to be captured and then, unresisting, they allowed themselves to be shoveled into the maw. And behind the maw, in the hump of the globular body, huge muscles writhed with a swallowing motion. Behind the engorged belly at the rearmost extension, excrement was training out in a sort of obscene tail, even as the creature ate.

In that instant, intent on destruction. Plank readied the small weapons aboard the scout. But fast as his electronic reflexes were, the creature was faster. A vast mental roar filled his mind, paralyzed him for that microsecond in which the creature below continued to exist. Then there was quiet. Below him in the clearing, the remaining slug creatures began to nibble foliage. The only evidence of the monster was a reeking pile of the glutinous substance covering large areas of the landmasses of the planet.

The thing was gone. Instantly, Plank blinked the scout out into the space between the planet and its sun where the dark ship with Hara and Heath waited. He came out into normal space within 100 meters of the ship, just in time to see it begin to break into colorful planes and disintegrate.

Although the loss was a pain in his non-existent heart, he acted instantly, blinking toward the *Pride*. He boarded and checked. He was alone. The ship was intact.

Hara was gone. He had insisted on tracking the tiger and the beast had consumed, not the hunter, but the one most dear to him.

Plank screamed into the emptiness of the ship. It was a hoarse whisper of a scream, emerging from his non-existent, fume-scarred throat. It was a sound of desperation, of pain, of mortal agony. And then it was silent.

He took but a few seconds to decide his course. Below him, the planet that once had teemed with life was barren. Only a few of the small animals remained on scattered islands. *They* had come, led to the planet by his instruments. He had surprised one of them and he had failed. He had been too slow to take advantage of the surprise, but if he ever had another chance, he'd be faster.

He longed to have Hara near, to be able to tell her, look, we have at least some answers. *They* are the thing of a nightmare, not some benevolent superior form of life. *They* had me find that planet to provide them with a meal. And the flesh of those slug animals is surprisingly similar to the flesh of those on...

Earth. Was it next?

So the choice was whether or not to blink directly home.

All this passed through his mind in a few seconds, before the message came.

He had no communicator on the *Pride*, but he heard/felt the words.

Plank, said the voice in his head, *you were naughty. You interrupted us during our favorite game. For that you should be punished, but since you were good and faithful in bringing us the others, we will forgive, even as we enjoy.*

Pushing the power to the limit, using the longest blinks possible, Plank flashed through space. His destination was not Earth. The voice of the tiger was in his ears and he knew, instinctively, the point of origin of that voice. He was sure, as sure as he'd ever been of anything, that he'd meet his tiger again on the tinker-toy planet.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The *Pride's* memory banks held the coordinates for the route back to the tinker-toy planet, but the trip was still time consuming. Plank would not allow himself to think that he might arrive too late. He found it difficult to believe that a race that could create near miracles could be represented by the thing he'd seen on Plank's World. Nor could he accept the evidence which told him that the super-being, that thing of maw and belly and teeth, had emptied a planet of life in a period of weeks.

A horror was there that was almost comical. The plot, he told himself, wouldn't even be acceptable for a kiddies' horror show back home. The monster that ate the world. Indeed. And yet a monster had eaten a world.

A sane man just cannot believe that a being who considers man a mere meal exists in the galaxy. But how else to explain? There was the suggestion, made in the endless hours of speculation during the trip to Plank's World, that the other victims of the disappearances had, like Plank, been integrated into ships.

Which, to Plank's mind, was only the least of several evils. Hara a starship?

For the first time he allowed himself to assess his own situation. Since his awakening inside the new *Plank's Pride*, he had been able to forestall such self-examination because he'd been busy. He had had purpose. Foremost in his mind was the overwhelming urge to find home. Then the vital business of trying to discover a few whys, a time made tense and desperate by the implied threat to his race. Now, as he waited through the brief periods of recharging at the end of each blink, he pondered.

Was it all bad, this being disembodied? He was never hungry. He suffered no pain, not even minor headaches or muscle soreness. And out there was a universe waiting to be explored. Under certain circumstances, he reasoned, his state could even be considered desirable.

He entertained thoughts of the *Pride* and another ship, which would be Hara, blinking into endless distances side by side to unravel the age-old questions. But that was far too platonic. He was, after all, a man. He had loved Hara as a man loves a woman and had looked forward to a normal lifetime with her. He could, even as a disembodied brain, know desire. And now that she was, at best, like him, he felt a terrible loss, which drove him to push the generator to peak operation. Frenzied repair operations began in the ship's computer as he overloaded circuits and blew them in his wild rush toward the tinker-toy planet.

He did not abandon hope. That, he knew, was another very human trait. Man hopes until the last possible instant. He clings to life and to hope even as he feels himself being devoured by a faster and stronger adversary.

He would not consider Hara dead. He would not allow himself to believe that the thing he'd seen on Plank's World had, to use the words of the message he'd received, "enjoyed" her. He would arrive before that enjoyment. Somehow, he would save her.

And hidden underneath that hope, was a red, glowing anger and the resolution to take revenge, to ruin, to destroy, to burn and blast and crumble.

He had only one plan. Simple confrontation. No time for involved actions. Moreover, a creature that could instantly disappear without mechanical aids, that could send messages into his brain from distances, would, in all probability, be able to foresee his actions, perhaps read his mind. Maybe he would be destroyed at the instant of his first encounter. And yet, the thing had seen his small ship, had had opportunity to destroy if it were capable of instant destruction. Was he merely being tolerated? He had been called, in effect, a servant. "Good and faithful." Well, man had long since given up being a servant. Man, and John Plank in particular, was not geared for servitude. Better to rush into instant oblivion than to admit that he lived to serve, to scout new planets for the provision of a gory meal for a monster.

He blinked into planetary atmosphere. Leaving the *Pride* in orbit, and using his mobile form as eyes and ears, he shot down in the small scout toward the construction that had contained the communications device. Once again the planet was quiet. And it was so large, so cluttered with the wild constructions... He knew that it would take years to do a thorough search, and he began in familiar territory.

The communications area was empty. As before, there were functioning things draining power and accomplishing no known purpose. The communications bank, itself, was inactive. Plank used it, sent his thoughts outward. No reply came back, nothing to indicate one way or the other that he was being heard. He knew, roughly, the communications procedure now. As a test, he sent orders to any communications device, anywhere, to answer his contact. He reasoned that if other ships were out in space, ships like the dark one that had followed him during his wanderings, he would receive a response. The communications banks, he reasoned, were merely tools for control of various unmanned vehicles. *They*, apparently, did not need mechanical things to make communication possible.

His orders went out and there were no replies.

He tried mental communication. There was no response.

Since it would be impossible for him to cover the planet in anything

short of years, he decided on drastic action. If *they* chose to ignore him, he would force them into some action. With a hand weapon, a rather respectable tool of destruction based on the laser principle, he began systematically to destroy banks of equipment in the communications complex. The smashings, the burnings, the noise of ruin were a comfort to him, and he began to enjoy his task.

He left the communication bank and its power source untouched, but everything else in the huge complex was in smoking ruins when he went outside and boarded the scout. With its larger weapons, he began to raze entire constructions. First he would scan a particular mass of metals and plastics. He did not want to run the risk of killing Hara or Heath with his own weapons. Then, after determining that the construction contained no life, he would use all the power of the scout battery to blast it. He worked in an ever-widening circle, leaving the building housing the communications complex at the center of the area of destruction.

Hours later, the devastation behind him was impressive and ahead of him was the huge, long building he knew must be an acceleration chamber. He was taking a bead on the installation.

No.

It was a single word, leaping into his brain.

He readied the weapons.

No.

He was, he knew, in communication. It was no longer possible for *them* to ignore him. He had, at last, reached *them*, was threatening something that obviously was valued. He blasted a subsidiary annex of the atomic installation and waited.

Do not force us to destroy you.

"Then we talk," Plank said aloud.

When no response came, he readied his weapons once again. As he activated them, he felt a wrench inside himself, and as the deadly beams shot out, the landscape was changed, the beams striking and burning not the atomic installation, but an oddly contoured mass of metals he had not

seen before.

He had been shifted instantaneously. He did not recognize the area. He blinked upward for a view to orient himself. He was above an entirely separate landmass, but still on the planet. By way of experiment, he blasted two more installations and got no response. He blinked back toward the area of the accelerator, began to take aim once more on the installation and again found himself in a different area before the weapons could be discharged.

He withdrew and sent a missile from the *Pride* downward toward the accelerator. The missile ceased to exist just before impact. When Plank aimed all weapons aboard the *Pride* downward, threatening total destruction of the planet, he felt that slight distortion in time and space and all was blackness.

He existed now inside the mobile form. He had no contact with the *Pride*. In the total darkness, he tried to reach up, out, and was blocked. He did not know how he could exist without contact with the one human thing remaining to him, his brain, but he was existing and, as he soon discovered, he was still in the scout ship. He activated instruments by feel, and at first, the readings puzzled him. Then he knew. The scout was encased in solid rock. He could measure vast mass all around him, above, below, on all sides.

Still, he was not dead. He had to believe that they did not want him dead; otherwise, with the vast powers they had displayed, they could have destroyed him easily.

He waited. He thought messages, pleading for contact. There was nothing. Angered, he readied all weapons. Discharging them, he imagined, would do small damage to his solid stone encasement, but would have serious effect on the scout and all its contents, including the mobile form. He poised to activate. He took a deep breath and discharged all beams at once.

Into open air.

He was orbiting the planet. Instantly he punched the coordinates of the area of the accelerator and began firing as he came out of the short blink. He had no way of knowing how effective his actions were, he knew only that he had to do something. Hopelessly outclassed, he could only hope to

gain the attention of those who could so easily manipulate him.

Again, his blast leveled unimportant constructions in another area of the planet and again he tried to gain the area of the accelerator.

He was naked. He stood, in his mobile form, in the center of a large area. The surface underneath him was dirt. Uneven walls surrounded the arena— that was the effect, a large dirt area enclosed by walls. He heard a low, coughing growl and turned to see the tiger come, running low and swift, from an opening in the near wall. It was a beast out of Earth's past, huge, saber-toothed, hot-eyed. The tiger paused, went down onto its belly, tail switching, hot eyes regarding him as it crouched there, 15 meters away, waiting.

Like a house cat stalking a sparrow, the tiger crawled closer, hugging the ground. Then it charged, powerful muscles thrusting, claws digging into the soft dirt, tail switching violently. Plank met the charge head-on and was bowled over, the cat's claws raking his body. He rolled to his feet and the cat, having gone over the top of him, whirled and shot out a heavy front paw, claws extended. Plank avoided the blow and danced away.

He felt no pain. The body of his mobile form had been slit open by the initial charge, but, although the interior seemed fleshlike, there was no blood.

The cat charged, and trying to avoid the rush, Plank was toppled by a heavy blow and felt the huge teeth sink into his thigh. He punched for the cat's eyes, fingers extended stiffly. He found his target and the cat released its hold on his thigh with a roar. The beast rolled him, its massive weight too much for Plank to resist. He saw the blow coming, felt the impact of it, a massive foreleg delivering the blow to his head; then he looked into the maw of the giant cat as the jaws closed over his face and he heard the crunch, smelled the rancid animal breath. He felt his bones giving way.

And he was in space in the scout, looking down onto the quietness of the tinker-toy planet. He punched the coordinates instantly, saw the accelerator and activated the weapons.

He was suspended, hands and legs chained to a stone wall. This time he felt pain. The weight of his body pulled, the metal rings around his arms suspending him, cutting into his flesh. He screamed. Unbearable waves of pain swept through his arms. He had been hanging for an eternity and an

eternity awaited him, an eternity of pain. He fainted only to revive to the deadening, terrible pain. He could not feel his hands. His fingers would not move. He screamed again. He begged. He sobbed in his agony as the slow hours crawled. He willed himself to die, but he knew that he would not.

After an age of it he felt the merciful blackness begin to creep over him once again, and below him the planet was cold, metallic, wildly covered with the insane constructions. He punched and fired.

He was back in the arena with a sword in his hand. A giant in armor advanced on him. His small weapon was knocked aside by the first blow. His left arm was severed by the next swing and the force of the blow sent him crashing to the dirt. He looked up into the bearded face: it was a face out of his childhood, Goliath, the giant from a picture story of the Bible. And, lo, Goliath proceeded to sever his other arm, then his legs. Waves of agony coursed through him, but he did not faint until, a legless, armless torso, he writhed in the dirt, his blood gushing, making the dirt wet and dark. And then the blade of the giant was raised, swung down and before blackness he felt his head roll in the dirt.

It took a moment for his mind to recover from the remembered pain, but it was only a moment before, stubbornly, hopelessly, he reenacted the punching of coordinates, the blink, the reading of weapons charge and the firing.

Chained to a table, helpless, he was surrounded by them, hundreds of them. He had always hated rats. They closed in, their eyes glowing in the darkness. He felt the first pinch of teeth, felt the small rippings, screamed and struggled against his chains. He could move his head. When the rats began to attack him there, teeth ripping his ears, small bodies leaping and brushing against his lips, his nose, his closed eyes, he began to jerk his head from side to side, screaming. He felt the teeth sink into his nose and he bit, closing on a small, squeaking body. He spat and screamed and bit and a section of his lower lip was torn away and an eyelid felt the bite of teeth and his body was a sea of fiery pain as hundreds of teeth sank, tore, ripped.

For a moment sanity went and he struggled wildly, screaming hoarsely. A vein was open in his throat. He could feel the pumping of his blood.

And in the depth of his mind came a flash of insight. At first, when he

was being eaten by the tiger, there was no blood.

He clung to that thought as he was slowly devoured.

He punched the coordinates wearily into the generator and blinked back, trying once more. The accelerator. The fire of the deadly beams.

In total darkness, he recognized the odor. He had smelled it before, in an Earth zoo. The reptile pit. Even as he recognized it, a rattle sounded near his ear and something struck his naked flank, sinking fangs. Pain shot up as deadly poison was injected, and he leaped to his feet only to bang his head painfully against a low, stone ceiling. He sat. Around him the snakes hissed and rattled; fangs shot into his flesh as he writhed.

But, he told himself, when I was fighting the tiger there was no blood. It is only the mechanical form of the mobile unit. I have no flesh, no body.

He could feel the poison from repeated strikes creeping through him, fire burning him. And as death closed down once again, he forced himself to laugh. The sound was weak, croaking, but it was a laugh.

This time he did not, immediately, attack. He waited to allow himself some thinking time. Obviously, he was not going to be killed. He had been taken through all of his old childhood horrors. The only thing left was being boiled alive in oil. He punched, fired and screamed as he was lowered, slowly, into the huge vat of bubbling oil. He felt his skin shrivel. The pain was unbelievable. He screamed again and again as the boiling liquid engulfed him, his feet, his calves, his knees, his groin, his soft stomach skin. Regaining control, he willed the pain to stop. It did not stop. It crept upward, to his chest, to his neck. Then he was halted in his downward motion, and seas of agony swept over him.

But instead of a scream, the raspy, eerie laugh came from his lips. Once again he willed the pain to stop and slowly, steadily, he gained control.

"You will have to destroy me," he said aloud, seated in the scout. "That is your only choice. Destroy me or talk."

Below him, the planet went wild. Quakes buckled the crust, sent wild constructions toppling. Fire and lightning flashed, inflicting tremendous destruction. The sea rose and smashed the shore, inundating thousands of the erratic constructions. Volcanoes appeared where no volcanoes had

been, spouting fire and smoke, darkening the atmosphere.

Plank laughed wildly. He punched, blinked and was ready to fire. "I'll give you a hand," he said, "since you seem to want to wreck the whole place."

But the area surrounding the atomic accelerator was unharmed and his beams did not touch it, smoking instead into a previous area of destruction as he was, once again, shifted.

The voice in his head had a petulant quality.

Why can't you be nice?

Plank roared. The sound was a mixture of rage and laughter. He punched in the coordinates and blinked and fired and felt the shiftings and he was seated in a luxurious chair in a comfortable room. He had a glass of good brandy in his hand. Soft music, his favorite, wafted from huge, but invisible, speakers. A fire burned cozily in a fireplace. He heard a door opening, turned his head. Hara, dressed in a gleaming white swimsuit, smiled down at him, her pale hair hanging to her shoulders.

He was armed. He had been shifted from the scout with his hand weapon at his side. Hara walked toward him, hips swinging with a seductive movement that he knew, immediately, was not Hara. True, she looked real.

"Oh, John," Hara said. "It's been so long."

"Yes," he said, taking out his weapon, aiming it. The beam lanced out and encountered the sweet, soft area of her navel. It cut through. He swept it and her upper body was floating, legs working sweetly as she continued to move toward him, a woman cut in half, her stomach missing.

"John," Hara said, "be nice."

With a wild cry, he blasted the thing, sweeping up and down until there was left only smoking particles on the floor. Then he turned the weapon on the room and began to destroy it. Walls burned through, the roof crashed down on him, crushing him, burying him.

He lay beneath the wreckage for hours, his life ebbing slowly away. This

time, he hoped, it would be a real death. He was tired. Real or not, he had endured the pain of death and dismemberment. And it was all for nothing. He was merely a man, not even a whole man. And he was fighting hopelessly against overwhelming odds with no chance of winning. Give up, then. Die.

But, failing to find the peace of death, fight on. Try once again. If he were nothing more than nuisance, that, at least, was something. He was not simply going to give up, do the creature's bidding. He vented some of his frustration on the blasted planet, smashing and destroying with impunity until, once again, the area of the atomic installation was in his sights and this time a wild sound of fury filled his mind and the scout was buffeted and thrown by insane forces; he himself was jerked and drained as the erratic movements created monstrous g-forces. But even that had to end.

"You will have to destroy me," he said aloud.

He felt a presence. He was being washed in a sea of anger.

"Destroy me," he said.

Slowly the anger abated, leaving a blankness, a silence. Plank slowly punched in the coordinates and was ready to activate the generator.

Come, the voice said in his mind.

The room was red. Softness was under his feet. The walls seemed less than solid. They tended to writhe as he tried to gain perspective. There were changing colors and shapes, a panorama of eerie beauty. The furnishings were low and luxurious. He sensed that things had changed, that there was a new element in his relationship with his unseen enemy. He choose a low, padded freeform protrusion from the soft floor of the room and sat, cross-legged.

"Do we talk?" he asked.

A wall glimmered, altered, became a huge viewport. The galaxy swept away in glory and grandeur. Plank felt a strangeness. Gradually, he faded away from himself, merging, becoming one with a mind that dominated his will, left him no thoughts of his own. In swift movement, stars streamed past as he moved with incredible speed, true speed, speed not

related to a blink—the instant shortcut between distant points. He was moving physically through the galaxy and scattered stars became more than mere pinpoints of light; distances were as nothing and the overall awareness of form, content, the clockwork movement of the massive wheel of stars was his, his to know and possess.

For one fleeting moment he felt a surge of triumph. *They* had finally become irritated enough with him to do something. He did not know why, but *they* were taking time to explain, to communicate. But his triumph faded, overwhelmed by the sensation of seeing the universe before him and that he was no longer Plank but a part of something else. It was as if he were in the mind of another being, seeing through eyes other than his own, and the universe was no more permanent than he. The universe was his, all of it, spread out in its lights and darks from the nearby stars to the distant clouds. He could hasten the natural evolution of a star and cause it to fall into itself to bloom in a blaze of light, which was pleasing to him, because he had caused it. He could see deep down into things, and he realized that the simplest atom had a life of its own, a purpose. That life, that purpose, could be altered but not exterminated. He shared the movements of the most minute subatomic particles. He felt pride, knowing that he was the culmination of endless advancement, greater than the galaxy, lesser than the universe.

Far out, on the periphery, where stars were thin and darkness ruled, he felt loneliness. Behind him in time stretched a glorious history; now he was alone and his greatness was diminished by something there. He hated it. It stood between him and his destiny. He, the most powerful force in the galaxy, was denied exit from that galaxy by something there, something he could not understand.

He felt a soundless, mindless scream of frustration.

He was Plank.

There were no words, but there was communication. He had intruded, back on Plank's World, on the favorite game. This was a minor anger now, for the little animals would breed and increase their numbers again.

No words, but he heard. *You dare to stand between us and a greater game. However, we will find them, the others.* Submerged again, Plank shared a feeling of obscene delight. *We will savor the moment and make it last for more than a moment.*

Plank tried to speak, show his resistance.

Once more we try to explain. Not in words, but inside him.

He was outbound on a ship. Charts before him showed dots representing inhabited planets. The scope of the civilization was awesome, covering large areas of the galaxy.

"We were the first intelligent life form," he was told. "All this was created for us. And other life existed, but only to serve us. We used it, refined it, made useless forms into something of value." He saw the food creatures of Plank's World. "See how beautiful, how functional. They exist for us. We made them to provide our food. And though we are now advanced beyond the need, we remember the pleasure; and it is only a game, a game to help pass away the endless eons of time."

Motion ceased. Around him were the changing lights of the strange room. He was himself again, but the communications continued.

"You pride yourself on producing a drive much like the one existing in the primitive ship we gave you. This and other incidentals allow you to consider yourself intelligent life. There is only one form of intelligent life. You are a quirk, a miscalculation. You have rudimentary intelligence and this is a sadness, for you will never advance beyond your miserable state. Your tiny brain serves only to make you useful to me. If only you knew the effort of will it took to permit your brain to continue to exist, but that is beyond your understanding. Listen closely and I will explain. You have, in your background, an analogy. You enjoy fishing for the small creatures of the waters. You lower a lure or a bait into the water and feel an excitement. It is so with us. It is an amusement. In recent time we felt, but could not believe that we felt, the force of the ancients, the movement of a mechanical ship out of time and space. We know that the ancients are gone, that they could not exist. And yet we feel the signal again and we pull, directing our force into the affected area of space without being able to pinpoint the location.

We catch and are disappointed, for the primitive ship has no life. Ten times we pull, and ten times we have lifeless metal. We increase the power of our lure and, ah, we catch the first of your kind. We are astounded, but we enjoy. There are no more of the nibbles caused by the force of the ancients, but we receive tiny, random signals and it is difficult. We dedicate ourselves to the fishing, and we catch now and again. Then we

caught you and exercised supreme will to preserve the tastiest part of you, the brain, for we wanted to give you a continued existence so that you could serve us. You proved useful from the beginning, finding a planet of the food creatures, one we had overlooked. Now you will lead us to your own planet, a planet of super-food creatures."

Plank struggled, trying to protest, trying to free his mind.

"Do not anger us. You have already annoyed us. You were grown to serve us. You are nothing more than a freak mutation, a slight advance over what you think of as the slugs, and you are ours to enjoy. You can help, but you resist. It is hopeless to resist, for you have already given us the location of your home planet. It is merely a matter of doing the boring checking of the mechanical toys, wherein are the data necessary."

"No," Plank said, forcing past the mind-bending force.

"The master of the galaxy is, by fate, meant to be alone. It pleases us to use you as a momentary diversion. We will allow you to exist for what to you will be an eternity. We bend even more. We offer you the woman thing. What you think of as your mobile form is actually more sophisticated than your own primitive flesh. You want more? Ah, well, with billions awaiting us we can be generous. We give you a dozen others of your kind. Even 100 of your choosing. Together you will serve us. You will exist and know pleasure. You will be free to hunt the galaxy for us. We have seen the suns too many times and travel bores us. You will be our arm. While you hunt to give us pleasure, we will concentrate on the limitation. Observe."

The dark ship was flashing outward toward the edge of the galaxy, Plank aboard. Then he was not aboard, but outside, watching as the ship moved in normal space away from the finest sprinkle of stars into the deep blackness. Suddenly it smashed.

"You anger me almost beyond endurance with your joy to discover that we are limited, confined to this galaxy. We consider projecting you, living, into the heat and fire of a star, there to linger. Or we might have a tiny bit of enjoyment with the remaining morsel of your flesh. But no. There is the game and we have use for you. It is pointless to resist. Look. See us in our natural form. Are we not magnificent? Do not feel belittled. Note how functional, how balanced. Four walking appendages for stability, four sets of hands for dexterity beyond your belief. We are the ultimate form of

mobile life and your ignorance is shown by your repugnance, not recognizing true beauty. But you will realize our beauty as time goes on. Now we give you your friends. Now we proceed with the game."

Plank was in a room. A door opened. Hara and Heath entered. Plank's eyes saw the slightly strange texture of their skin. With a sinking feeling of sorrow, he knew that they were now like him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Where are you?" Plank asked, as Hara and Heath looked around in surprise.

"I was going to ask you that," Heath said.

"I mean, do you know where your brains are?" Plank asked.

A look of fear crossed Hara's face. "'We're like you?'"

"Yes."

She felt herself, running her hands over her body. She was dressed in her uniform. She looked the same, but Plank knew.

"Think," Plank said. "See if you have any indication of where your brains are being kept."

"It's blank," Hara said.

"I'll repeat the question," Heath said, looking slightly dazed. "Where are we as we are?"

"The tinker-toy planet," Plank said.

"And *them*?"

"Here," Plank glanced swiftly around the room. It was the same, but the walls were solid. The huge screen or viewport was not in evidence. "You're my reward for being a good boy," he said. "I can have a total of 100."

"They know?" Heath asked.

"Not yet. They're going over the records of the communicators. It sounds as if it might be a slow process, a process that bores them. I don't know how much time we have."

"You have a weapon," Heath said, noting Plank's side arm.

"Not effective against them," Plank said. "They, or it—since I think it uses the 'we' pronoun as royalty used to use it on Earth—well, it's pretty powerful."

"Is there anything we can do?" Hara asked.

"I don't know. I know this. I know what it looks like in what it calls its primary form. It's a cross between an animal and an insect. It can change forms—the eater on the other planet was one. I think it's insane, at least by our standards. It's very old. It thinks it owns the galaxy, and it probably does. It has fantastic powers over all physical matter. And it plans to make a meal of everyone on Earth and the Centauri planets. It equates us with the slugs on Plank's World. It discounts our intelligence. It considers us as low as the animals and wants us to do its hunting, because it doesn't like to travel around the galaxy. It wants us to find planets where there's life. Apparently, there used to be more than one 'it,' and these creatures seeded planets with the little slug animals for food. It thinks we evolved from the slugs and are, therefore, just a bit bigger morsel of food."

"Is there any way we can warn Earth?" Heath asked.

"I don't think so, and I doubt it would do any good if we could," Plank said. "If anything can be done, we have to do it; and we have to do it while it's concentrating on finding the location of Earth. There's one small thing in our favor. It has a certain amount of arrogance. It's so sure it's all powerful that it probably won't be watching us very closely. I think it gets involved in what it's doing. Back on Plank's World I surprised it. Flew right above it without being seen."

"Perhaps we can find the ship and just get out of here," suggested Hara. "Get back to Earth and try to organize a defense."

"I don't know where the ship is," Plank said. "I do know that the dark ship is destroyed. The creature smashed it into some sort of barrier out

beyond the edge of the galaxy."

"A barrier?" Heath asked.

"It talks of being limited. I have the idea that it's limited to this galaxy, that it can't get out. Now we know that light goes in and out of the galaxy, but when the dark ship was driven at the barrier, the ship just crunched."

"Something out there more powerful than that thing?" Hara asked.

"Yes."

"Or a natural phenomenon," Heath said.

"I might have been able to believe that once," Plank said. "Back when I wouldn't have believed that a being could push a star into the nova stage and move planets, I might have believed that such a force, capable of closing in a galaxy, would have had to be natural and unexplained. Now I'm not so sure."

Plank was looking around the room. He discovered an opening, pushed at the panel. It was unmovable. He used his weapon to cut a hole large enough for exit. The way led upward. They were far underground, but their artificial bodies did not tire as they ran up stairs designed not for human feet, but for the four feet of the creature.

They emerged on the surface in the devastated area around the communications structure. All was quiet. Knowing the directions well, Plank led the way toward the accelerator. Once before he had attacked the creature there and had aroused response.

He knew of no other course of action. He had no plan. They ran swiftly through the ruins, and when Plank reached the undestroyed area around the accelerator building, he slowed, moved with caution. If the creature were using his ability, then it knew their exact location; but they had no choice but to proceed.

The huge accelerator was empty. The surrounding buildings, more practical than the random construction, were obviously laboratories, very functional laboratories. They, too, were empty.

"When it finally gave in and decided to try to convince me by reason

rather than by power, it took me into that underground room where I was when you joined me," Plank said. "I know from experience that it values only the area surrounding the accelerator, not even the building that housed the communications bank. It seemed to be willing to let me destroy everything else on this crazy planet. Most of the constructions are nonfunctional, mere exercises in building. We know that it's busy now checking the tapes from the dark ship's communicator, and we know that those tapes were in the communications bank. But the creature isn't there now. That leaves two possibilities. Either it has another communications facility somewhere or it's picked out the information and has already left the planet."

"Or it's merely being undetectable," Hara said.

"I know a way to test that," Plank said. "But first let's check around. If it has another underground communications facility, the entrance should be here in the area it was willing to protect."

Plank had a feeling that time was running out. He led a desperate search concentrated in the area of the atomic installations. The construction of the area was more logical, from the human viewpoint, but still was the work of an alien mind.

"I know how a laboratory rat must feel trying to find its way through a maze," Hara sighed, after an hour of fruitless search.

"It said finding the coordinates would be a time-consuming process," Plank said, "but enough time has passed. I could have gone through the tapes myself by now. I'm sure it's had time."

One by one, aboard the small scout, they made the trip up to the orbiting *Pride*. When they were together in the lounge, Plank said, "There's still one very important thing we have to know."

"I've been thinking about that," Heath said. "Your first question, where are we?"

"Yes. My home base is right here, on the ship. Where's yours?"

"I feel complete," Hara said. "It's difficult for me to believe that my brain might be down on the planet somewhere."

"We have to find them," Plank said. "I know that I can be in more than one place at once, but I do it through mechanical extensions. My brain stays here on the *Pride*. I just use the mobile form as an eye. I have no idea of the range of this thing. If your brains are down there on the planet we might lose contact as we put stellar distances between these forms and the actual brain tissue."

Plank busied himself scanning the planet below with life-detector gear. For long minutes, the surface was silent. Then, acting on a sudden hunch, he directed the gear toward the two artificial bodies. "Ah," he said. "He took the direct method and put them right with your bodies."

"That's both good and bad," Heath said. "It makes things neat, but we'll have to be careful. You can send your mobile form into a dangerous situation and know that if it is destroyed, you're still alive."

"We'll be careful," Plank said. "Now let's see if that thing is still on the planet." He set coordinates into a weapons bank and fired a single beam downward toward the accelerator, which the creature had been so anxious to defend. A portion of the accelerator disintegrated. Carefully Plank played the beam, making rubble of the entire installation. He got a great deal of satisfaction out of the job, lingering over it, reducing the rubble to fine grains of sand.

"That's enough, John," Hara said, finally.

"Yes," he said, "but I'd like to hear its roar when it returns and finds its favorite toy gone."

He began to set up the series of blinks that would carry them home, back to Earth. When all was ready, the sequence programmed into the computer so that the trip would be automatic, he paused.

"This is its home base," he said. "Down there somewhere we could discover a lot about the thing if we had the time. It's obvious that it's gone. There's probably enough scientific information down there to make man its equal, over a period of time, but on the other hand, how much of its power does it draw from its home base?"

"I think I follow you," Hara said. "You're wondering if we should look to the future and try to preserve valuable information, or destroy the planet now on the small chance that the monster would be handicapped if cut off

from its home base."

"We're not sure there'll be a future," Heath said.

Plank aimed a dozen killer missiles downward, each missile capable of driving into the planet's molten core. The explosions shattered a world, spewed magma into empty space, cooling even as the planet shattered.

"It valued some of the installations enough to become very angry when I attacked them," Plank said, in wonder. "And yet it went off and left them unguarded. Doesn't make sense."

As he directed the movement of the *Pride* he realized that many things didn't make sense. True, they were dealing with an alien mind, a mind of vast power, but the inconsistencies bothered him. The monster's chief form of enjoyment seemed to be eating, and according to its own words, it did not need to eat. It had, apparently, used up the supply of the little food creatures, or at least thought it had, until Plank stumbled onto a world, previously untouched. A rational being, loving the "game" as much as the monster, would have used the creatures of Plank's World for seed stock. The monster leaped immediately into an orgy of gluttony and would have extinguished the life of the planet if Plank had not surprised him in the southern islands. That shortsighted orgy of eating was the act of an irresponsible mind. The act of a child. The act of a madman.

And the great battle of the tinker-toy planet, in retrospect, was almost farcical. The monster had drawn on the childhood horrors in Plank's mind; it had taken Plank only a brief time to realize that none of the dangers he faced were real.

Plank had been given a visual demonstration of the ability of the creature to move through space. At such speeds, with those powers of observation, the entire galaxy could have been given a minute search in what was to the creature a relatively short period of time, perhaps about 250,000 years. At any time during that period, there would have been enough men on Earth to provide a meal. But the creature had not made the diligent search necessary to locate one small planet far out toward the fringe of the galaxy.

During the conflict on the tinker-toy planet, when Plank persisted in his stubborn efforts to destroy something the monster valued, there resulted what could only be described as a temper tantrum. The creature had

joined Plank's efforts to destroy, doing much more damage in a few minutes than Plank had done in hours. And Plank remembered that petulant tone of voice when he was asked, "Why can't you be nice?"

The enemy had vast power. The enemy could blaze a sun and move planets and shift men around with the power of its mind, but the enemy had a short attention span. The enemy, in a hurry to enjoy its favorite game, had left his home base unprotected, and that base was now drifting rubble in space.

If a hope existed, the hope was in the creature's arrogance. All-powerful, it felt it could divert his attention from its "servants," leaving them to their own devices. Perhaps it would make one fatal mistake. Obviously it felt man to be the ultimate game, much more desirable than the food creatures. If the enemy were engrossed enough in its "enjoyment," then Plank might have a chance.

The problem was two-fold: to quickly find the creature on Earth and to quickly destroy it. But destroy it with what? With its own weapons? Surely it would be attuned to its own. Surely the creature would have, in that fantastic range of mental powers, a sense that would warn it if it were about to be attacked with weapons of its own making.

There was even time for some philosophical questioning. Was the nature of all intelligent life warlike? For centuries man had made war on himself. Alone on his small world he had killed his fellows, finding new ways to maim and kill as technology developed. For three-quarters of a century there had been no war, and yet the arms development had gone on. Each ship that went into space was armed. The laser beams of Earth were akin to the beams mounted on the weapon pods of the *Pride*, though not so deadly. Man's atomic missiles were almost as destructive as the planet-killing missiles Plank had fired from the *Pride*. So the ancestors of the remaining member of another race must have fought among themselves. They had no enemies in space, other than themselves.

But there was the barrier. Had an enemy come from intergalactic distances? Had the creature's race lost and been confined to the home galaxy?

As long as man had understood the nature of the galaxy, scientists had predicted millions of habitable planets. Man's theory of the origin of life made it logical that life had arisen on thousands of those life-zone planets.

Man had sent messages into deep space, had built giant observatories to try to detect signals from other intelligences, and all along there had been only the creature. Only two intelligent species in a galaxy? One of them so arrogant that it considered the other to be mere fodder?

Both races warlike. Both adept at killing. And now one outnumbered the other by billions to one.

It seemed that there must be a way for superior numbers to win. One thing was certain, man would not quietly await being swept into the maw of that thing. He would fight.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Eater chose the tailored, densely populated landscape of Equatorial Africa as his beginning point. It appeared in a population band between contoured rows of natural jungle. There the rich farms were surrounded by neat villages, compact, dense with people. When it first materialized in a village square there were screams of terror and then silence. Attempts to flee were frozen in midstride. Quietly, docilely, the people of the village waited for the pawlike appendages to scoop them up. A force closed down over the village, cutting it off.

When communications ceased from the first village, the utility companies sent technicians. The technicians did not return or report. Residents of nearby areas knew only that calls to the village were unanswered.

In the village, itself, houses were opened as if they were nutshells, the morsels plucked from within. The Eater moved across farmlands, plucking isolated tidbits. It crushed his way through a dividing growth of carefully tailored jungle to numb a second village, leaving emptiness behind. Men sent in to investigate the sudden and total cutoff of contact with the first village sent out the alarm.

Viewing the creature from the safety of a flyer, the first to see it could not believe their eyes. Their early reports were received with amusement, then anger. Communications ceased from a second farm village, and reports that the first village had been devastated, that there were no

survivors, were convincing.

Although Central Africa had no army, as such, forces were available. Armored ground vehicles went into the area. A close watch was kept. Contact was lost with the vehicles when they reached the area of the second village. When the Eater moved on, the tanks were found, opened like nuts, their crews missing. The second village was empty. In the streets were reeking mounds of a glutinous substance.

The Eater had depopulated an area of roughly ten square kilometers, cleaning the area of all animal life, when the first service team, called in from the nearest base in the Sahara, made an overflight, filming as they went. The pictures were classified and seen only by top government officials. Public panic was to be avoided. Nevertheless, efforts were begun to organize evacuation of the areas of Central Africa surrounding the Eater.

As the hours went by, a pattern seemed to be established. The Eater moved in an ever-widening circle. It left no life behind.

The first attack from the air utilized explosive rockets fired from a ship that flew in low. Both rockets and ship were destroyed by the force of explosions that came prematurely. Attacks from a higher level resulted in explosions of the missiles in the air before they reached the ground and the Eater. Ground assault was greeted with equal disaster: the vehicles that neared the Eater's area succeeded only in stalling, to be quickly cracked and depeopled.

Antique artillery, firing high explosive shells, was ineffective. The shells merely exploded before entering the area of the monster. Lasers flared against a protective shell of force surrounding it.

Now word was spreading. People outside the numbing zone of the Eater's mind saw and fled, screaming. Roads were packed with ground vehicles with disastrous results. Collisions led to a full-scale panic. Man fought man in his efforts to flee and behind him, moving with a steady slowness, the Eater continued his favorite game.

In desperation, the service sent a small nuclear missile homing in on the Eater. The resultant air burst added the problems of drifting radioactivity. But it was a short-lived problem, as the bomb was fairly clean, and the area most threatened by the radioactivity was being rapidly

emptied either by panicked flight or by the Eater.

Jungle areas surrounding the thing were impregnated by low-flying aircraft carrying flammables, then ignited. The Eater rolled through a sea of fire only to begin a feast on the few remaining members of still another village.

Now the world knew and mobilized. A fleet of spaceships, flown down hastily from the moon bases, used man's most sophisticated weapons, firing from high and low, some ships destroyed by their own weapons, as projectiles detonated prematurely. Beams were simply flared by the field surrounding the Eater and, when the all-out effort had failed, man fell back and concentrated on clearing people from the areas surrounding the Eater.

The world was in a state of shock when the *Pride* blinked out into normal space and started monitoring broadcasts. Plank, knowing the location of the Eater, moved the *Pride* over him, keeping to the limit of his close viewers. He did not want his presence known, not yet. On the trip home he had formed one plan; it had to work. It was the last chance. From the reports they had monitored, he knew that Earth's best efforts had failed.

Plank was sickened to see the people waiting, dumbly, docilely, to be crammed into the maw of the Eater. Were they no better than the slugs? Why were they so unresisting? But he, too, had felt the power of that alien mind.

The weapon was prepared. The scout had been turned into a bomb, laden with the warheads of missiles from the *Pride's* arsenal. From deep space, praying that the single-minded enjoyment of the creature would prevent detection, he sent the range finding signals, checked and doublechecked. He would have only one opportunity. His hope was that the Eater, intent on its game, would not sense the incoming blink of the scout. The small ship would be blinked directly into the mass of the Eater, the effect of that, in itself, destructive. Then at the instant of blinking out, the warheads would detonate. The surrounding area would suffer, of course, but evacuation was proceeding and the population was minimal. Lives would be sacrificed, but not on the scale that would follow if the Eater were allowed to reach the coastal areas of the continent where people were congregating to await transportation from the continent.

They stood together, three ex-humans in artificial bodies crafted by the creature below them. They were silent as Plank finished his preparations and prepared to trigger the scout into its final blink.

"Now," Plank said, beginning the mental order that would send the scout into its final blink.

No, he heard. The word was in his mind. He felt a surge of frustration, as he tried desperately to complete the order. He was frozen. Time was at a standstill.

He knew, then, that the Eater was all-powerful, that he had detected them, had frustrated them once again.

We cannot allow that, the voice in his mind continued. Plank felt both relief and wonder, because the voice was not that of the Eater. *It is, after all, of us.*

Plank felt a small wrench of movement and looked out with his ship's eyes to see a starfield totally unfamiliar to him. Instantly he directed a chart check, but there was nothing to relate with the charts. The entire sky had changed.

The closeup viewers showed a blue planet, at orbital distance, a planet he'd never seen before. The final effort, the last hope, had failed. He wanted to hit something, longed to have his own fists back, if only to be able to bang one of them into a wall. When in doubt, he thought desperately, strike out. Look for something to hit. He moved his mind to direct the ship to close on the planet below. The ship, however, was already in movement, and he had no control. He was cut out of the command circuit.

"What is it, John?" Hara asked. "I heard the voice. Is it another one of them?"

"I don't know," Plank said, "but I have a feeling we'll know very soon."

The ship was closing rapidly. Below them, the planet was growing. The viewers showed a natural landscape of great beauty. Large oceans, wide plains, mountains and lakes. Plank tried to use the scanners and was still blocked from his own ship. He had no way of knowing what sort of life

awaited them on the planet, but he was certain life was there. Someone, some force, was directing the ship down toward the foothills of a huge, snow-capped range of mountains at the center of an elongated landmass.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The low, rolling hills were on fire with color, thousands of blossoms on the bushes and trees like part of a landscape painted by a master of composition. Nothing was out of place. Plank had the feeling that he was in the midst of a huge formal garden, not a stylized, symmetrical garden, but a garden of cunning naturalness. Some of the trees were fruited, bearing delicate blooms and delicious-looking fruits at the same time. In the open spaces beneath the trees, a lacy green ground cover allowed no intruding rock, no detracting patch of soil to show. Insects buzzed happily from bloom to bloom. The ship's ears picked up melodious pipings that seemed to originate from brightly colored birds flitting gracefully about.

The outside temperature was 24 degrees Celsius. The atmosphere was oxygen-based and astoundingly free of impurities. The sky was clear blue, accented by beautiful white clouds, carrying no threat of rain.

The *Pride* had settled into a small clearing at the base of a valley between two hills, near a clear stream that ran over smooth, water-worn stones into languid pools.

In no mood to sit quietly and appreciate the beauty, Plank paced, in his mobile form, and remembered the Eater back on Earth, remembered the dazed and mute acceptance of the people.

Ease yourself, the voice said in his mind, *he has been removed*.

Hara darted a quick glance at him, indicating that she, too, had heard the voice. Heath muttered under his breath.

You may walk, the voice told them. *We think you will enjoy it*.

"Do we have a choice?" Plank snarled. There was no reply. He opened a lock, and they went out into the idyllic countryside, feeling the lacy ground cover give beneath their feet. They did not question or discuss their

direction. They seemed to know. They walked along by the stream, climbed beside a small waterfall to the high point of the valley. The view was breathtaking.

Across another small glen ahead of them, a steep hill shot upward almost vertically. Near the top, tucked under a glistening crystal overhang, blended into its natural surroundings was a building. In its construction the soft tones of an alabasterlike material blended with the pure tones of crystals.

The bright, gay birds seemed to call to them as the three walked toward the hill. A cooling breeze wafted around them and stirred the perfume of the blossoms into a heady draft. They went forward in silence, their eyes on the building at the crest of the hill. When they stood directly below it, no means of access was apparent until, with an almost imperceptible motion, they were lifted through the heady air. With a slight inward move, they were deposited onto an open balcony. In front of them a door opened. Plank led the way into a room of such beauty that Hara gasped in admiration. Sounds of running water from a trickling artificial brook dividing the room in two were mixed with the softness of music. The lighting seemed muted, but had no hint of dimness.

Along the walls artistic constructions sparkled in crystals and colors. The ceiling was painted like a sky with pink and blue tinted clouds. Beside the brook was a sunken seating area.

They stood, feeling almost out of place in the splendor, the quiet luxury. On the far wall a crystal panel shimmered, clouded, opened and the woman stepped through, flowed through, moving with a awe-inspiring grace.

Her beauty made Plank's throat dry. Beside him, Hara sighed.

"I did not intend that effect," the woman said. "Would this make you more at ease?"

Before the change she had been a creature out of a dream, tall, perfectly formed, her body barely covered by a silken sheath that fell to her shapely thighs in clinging glory. After the change the contrast was grotesque. Her face was now a thing from a nightmare, a bleached and shrunken skull from a charnel house, the eyes sunken, the cheeks cracked and dry, the upper teeth exposed in a horrible grin.

"I want you to be at ease," she said.

Plank was not usually a man who used profanity, but the word he said was earthy in the extreme.

"No matter," the woman said. Her face resumed its heavenly beauty. She motioned them toward the seating area, leading them, sweeping down the wide steps to the sunken area to pivot and look at them as they glanced at each other. Then she sat.

Although he felt a bit intimidated, Plank had been pushed to the limit. "You said you had removed the Eater from Earth."

"Yes."

"You said he was one of you," Plank said, his voice low and intense. "Are we going to be your afternoon snack?"

She smiled at him. "All this in a mere few million years?"

"Lady, are you civilized?" Plank asked.

"Please, John," Hara said.

"We like to think we are," she said.

"And is this the royal 'we' or are there more of you?" Plank asked.

"We are many."

"Good for you," Plank said. "Maybe there will be one among you who is possessed of a shred of common decency."

"You have reason to be angry, man," the woman said.

"I think so," Plank agreed.

"You see, we had no idea. We left your galaxy when there were giant reptiles on your Earth."

"Why didn't you eat the reptiles?" Plank asked, still fuming.

"Even then we were beyond such practices," she said calmly. "Would

any of you like some refreshment?"

"What we would like," said Plank, "is the respect due to a living creature. What we want is our own freedom of choice without the interference of someone who can do mental tricks."

"Ah," she said, laughing, "if you only knew how presumptuous you are." She shifted, crossing one leg over the other. The effect was not lost on Plank and Heath. "All right, then. We will stop the preliminary chatter. You are here for a reason. I am tempted..." She smiled again. "Do you prefer the first person singular? You seem to object to our saying 'we.' Although, I assure you, it is much more descriptive."

"I am all in favor of knocking off the chatter," Plank said.

"I have told you that..." and she said a name, but it was a sound that was unintelligible to Plank's ears. The woman smiled again. "He is the one you think of as the Eater, or the monster. I have told you that he has been removed from your planet. Your people are no longer threatened by his childish game."

"Game?" Heath exploded.

"He thinks of it as that, not I," she said. "Now, I believe it would be wise if you listen and let me talk." She smiled and waited for comment. Plank shifted in the soft seat and looked at her. In his mind was a conflict. He kept seeing, in her beautiful face, the death's skull she had shown them. "You have reason for pride, for you have come a long way. There is reason, also, for humbleness, because you are, after all, only an accident. When we left your galaxy your ancestry was eating vegetation on a thousand planets."

"Sorry," Plank said, "I don't buy that."

"You yourself ran tests on the planet you call Plank's World. You noted the amazing—that's the way you expressed it—similarity between your cells and the cells of the slugs."

"May I ask how you know all this?" Plank asked.

She laughed. "You made it rather difficult," she said. "We had to search through the remains of..." Once again there was that ear-twisting name.

"...s planet. Fortunately the data banks were rather well protected and were still intact. You will see just how fortunate that was for you later."

"Yes," Plank said, "the cellular construction was similar."

"But still you doubt that you evolved from our food creatures."

"There's a body of pretty firm evidence on Earth that life was spontaneous on our planet. You mentioned the giant reptiles. Were they evolved from your creation?"

"Life arises in many ways in the universe. However, advancement to intelligence is quite rare. Without a head start your rapid rise would have been impossible."

"Is that crucial to our discussion?" Plank asked.

"Not really. Actually, we are very impressed by you. Only one other race we know of has shown such development."

"Yours," Plank said.

"Ours. There are vague similarities. We are very old and no race can trace itself to the beginning, but when your planet was the home of the giant reptiles we had achieved the ultimate state of development and were in the process of changing. We had, then, been in deep space for a million years."

"Why were you so slow?" Plank asked.

For the first time an unpleasant expression marred the beauty of the woman's face. "Please do not try to antagonize me. You are, at best, an annoyance. We are being generous to give you our time to explain to you. There is a question to be resolved. First let me confirm one of your suspicions. The Eater, as you call him, is of us, but he is, how can I say it, to use your term, retarded. He is a great rarity. Of all the people, he alone was incapable of development. He was not at home with us. It was best for him, and for us, to give him a place of his own. We looked and found your galaxy. It, as you may know, was largely unpopulated. There were a few signs of developing life, but so primitive that he would live out his life span—since he is what you think of as mortal—"

"Where you are not?" Hara asked.

"Our existence is not limited. His is. He would, we reasoned, die before he could endanger the developing forms of life on the scattered planets. We established him, gave him ways to amuse himself. To give him every opportunity, in case we were wrong and the centuries would effect a change in him, we left him the necessary history of our people to guide his development, if any."

"And you fenced him in with the barrier around the galaxy," Heath said.

"You anticipate," she said. "But yes, we fenced him in. We provided him with his food creatures, things out of our primitive history. We gave him the basic tools to build. He loved toys."

"A retarded child with a galaxy all his own," Plank said.

"How did you happen to come back just at the time you did?" Hara asked.

"He was capable of self-destruction," she said. "We were notified of the destruction of his planet." She looked at them with a smile. "You must understand that he is not bad. He is merely afflicted."

"Depopulating a planet in a game not even necessary to his survival is not bad?" Plank asked.

"No," she said, "you judge him too harshly."

"What is the question to be decided?" Plank asked.

"We simply must decide whether to leave the galaxy to him or to you," she said, with a delicate little movement of her shoulders.

Plank smoldered for a moment. "All right, what do we have to say about it?"

"Whatever you please," she said. "I am here to evaluate our knowledge of you. We know that you have developed a rather primitive technology. We know that you now understand the principle of the drive aboard the ship you call *Pride* and, although that drive is still primitive and

mechanical, it is a rather sophisticated work. To know that you could so easily understand it is surprising. That, more than anything else, is the reason why you are here to speak for yourselves."

"You know, then, that we developed the blink drive independently," Heath said.

"There was insufficient data on the tapes, but there was evidence that the trips were based on the buildup of power during a turnaround from your ships, which use hydrogen power. Please don't try to impress me. You know and I know that it is quite impossible for you to create a device as sophisticated as the drive."

"No," Plank said, looking warningly at Heath, "Let's not try to lie to her." But there was an unanswered question. With all her mental powers, couldn't she read their minds? He sent, with his thoughts, insulting things, rude things. She smiled, looking at Heath.

"He is right," she said. "Your advancements are worthy, without lying about them. Knowledge of our drive will be cleared from your mind before you leave here."

"We are to be allowed to leave, then?" Plank asked.

"You would be out of place here," she said.

"More retarded children?" Plank asked.

"You bore me, man. But yes, and worse, for you have seen the abilities of what you call the Eater. Can you match even one of them? You are worse than a retarded child; let me assure you that your continued existence depends entirely on what I decide here."

Plank made a low bow. "I ask your forgiveness."

"Now that you are more calm, perhaps you would like to tell me of your race. Your goals, your aspirations."

"We aspire, more than anything else, to perfection," Hara said.

"Rather noble," the woman said. "Perfection by whose standards?"

"Our own, the only standards we've known," Hara said.

"John Plank went into space for money," the woman said.

"But even as he went into space for money," Hara said, "he was trying to be the best ship captain, the best trader, the best navigator. He tried to make his ship the best one of its type."

"I see, in your activities, something that reminds me of..." the ear-twisting name... 's games. And his games were for nothing. Is money a way of keeping score in your game?"

"We also seek security and comforts," Hara said. "Money buys us security and comforts."

"And the search for money is a game to be won by the most able," the woman said. "I suggest that you are a grossly competitive creature, competing with your fellows since you have no one else with whom to compete. I suggest that your entire life is a game and that your one object is to win."

"Why do you have weapons on your ships?" Plank asked.

"Ah, that is a good question," she said laughing, showing her pink tongue. "Perhaps this will not be so boring after all. You show an animal shrewdness. First, the ships were primitive toys of a retarded child. However, the toys, in their time, did come equipped with weapons, for we went through a period of competition. We had our wars among ourselves."

"That sounds very human to me," Plank said. He lifted a hand to stop her reply. "Yes, we are competitive. We are competitive with our fellow men and with ourselves. We compete with nature, and with the universe. Although we take care of our own retarded children, those less able to compete, we still reward the ablest with the most riches, the most comforts, the most security. In the jungles of the young Earth, the fittest survived to sire more survivors. This continuing process of evolution goes on still. We can document a change in our race in a short period of time. We are taller, stronger, more resistant to disease. Our life span has increased from approximately 70 years to three times 70."

"Let me ask you this," said the beautiful woman. "If you could, if you had it within your power to provide the ideal existence for your Earth, what would that existence be?"

"Freedom of choice," Hara said.

"A meaningful life for each man," Heath said.

"Health, wealth, love and time to enjoy it," Plank said.

"Three answers."

"If there were three million men here you'd get three million answers," Plank said, "all leading toward the same thing, perhaps, but expressed in different ways. One man would think the ideal existence would be to have a plot of ground on Earth and the time to till it. Another would want a ship like the *Pride* to rove the stars. Another would want a dozen women at his command."

"You are stating a concept we have been studying," the woman said. "Each of you is individual."

"And your race operates with one mind?" Plank asked.

"Many minds attuned."

"Can you make the water in that brook reverse its flow and run uphill?" Plank asked.

"Easily." She demonstrated.

"But you can't read my thoughts," Plank said.

"Another good point, but not conclusive. Neither can I enter the mind of the small birds that you saw outside."

"You mentioned games," Plank said. "Let me tell you about Earth games. On Sundays, during the colder months, young men don armor and do battle in an arena. The object is to take a small object, called a football, from one end of the arena to the other. Men devote their lives to this game and those who excel at it are heroes to our people. A man begins to prepare himself for football when he is very young and works to develop his abilities and his body until he is too old for the game and his reflexes slow. Other men and women spend their lives developing skills. A girl will begin to skate on ice on two thin blades when she is six years old. She may spend many hours every day of her life in an effort to win a gold medal in a

series of games that has the attention of our entire world. This is what Hara called the search for perfection. Each individual wants to be the best at what he or she does and is willing to make great sacrifices. Many strive, but there can be only one winner. We exalt that winner and so we create the desire, in other young people, to emulate the winner. You may call this a useless game, but we on Earth feel that man is at his most magnificent when he is forcing his body to do something it was not designed by nature to do; when he is stretching his abilities to the ultimate to achieve that one moment of triumph which has been attained by no man before him. If you gave a man the garden of Eden..." He paused.

"I understand the concept. I've acquainted myself with your culture."

"Give a man everything. Put him into an idyllic situation where he does not have to work for food, where he has eternal shelter and wants for nothing, and he'll start counting the fruit on the trees or trying to arrange the garden in a way that comes closer to pleasing his own senses. Man is a doer, a striver. Give him the universe, and he'll want to find out where it ends and why it began."

"By your information, how long has man been on Earth?" she asked.

"It depends on when you begin to think of our primitive forgoers as man," Plank said.

"We can, although I don't think it worthwhile to do the calculations, tell you exactly when we first fashioned your original primitive ancestor," the woman said testily.

"We return to a basic difference in opinion," Plank said.

"My point is this. You've been on Earth a few million of your years. While this is not, by our standards, a long period of time, in our history we showed faster development. Our period of warfare was very brief. We began to develop beyond aggressiveness. You have killed your fellows from the beginning."

"Our last war was 75 years ago," Heath said.

The woman laughed. "That is but a moment."

"Without meaning too much more malice than the question implies,"

Plank asked, "who gives you the right to judge us?"

Another laugh. "Who is there to deny us that right?"

"A good point," Plank said wryly. "But let's get back for a moment to what you think of as man's games. It comes to my mind that there may be a very good reason for man's competition with himself and with his fellow man. You say your life span is unlimited. Even your retarded child has enjoyed what is to us a tremendous and almost immortal life and still has time to live. I assume, then, that you've never been faced with death, guaranteed death, death that comes in a certain span of time regardless of what you do."

"That is true."

"How would your race have developed if, in its youth, each individual had a life span of, say, 30 years? When our people began making technical advances, looking upward to the stars through primitive instruments, we were faced with that problem."

"I see," she said, nodding.

"You show an interest in what we think to be the ideal existence," Plank said. "Perhaps we could learn by asking you the same question."

"You would not understand," she said.

"Try us," Hara said.

"You lack the capacity."

"It seems to me that you, as we do, like comforts and luxuries," Plank said. "This place. It is beautiful, but different only in degree from the same sort of home on our planet."

"A moment," she said.

Each of them felt a slight alteration; suddenly they were standing atop a wooded hill. Around them the woodland was dense, heavily brushed, the ground littered with the debris of fallen limbs.

"Do you think I needed a building? A home?" The woman was looking at them with a tiny smile. "Did you think the flowers were for me?"

"What are you then?" Plank asked.

"Even that you would not understand," she said.

"Can you show us?" Plank asked.

"No."

"The Eater's basic form was functional," Plank said.

The woman-form began to fade. In its place was something, a disturbance, not visible so much as felt, a twisting, a distortion of an area of space in front of them. And then they were seated again in the luxurious room, the beautiful woman before them.

"I have one question," Plank said. "It's been demonstrated that you have control over physical things, but how much is real and how much is in our minds?"

"I could, if I chose, leave the area, here, as it was. In time the natural growth would creep back, but the other, the flowers from a far planet, the building itself, they would remain."

"What do you do?" Plank said. "What is your purpose?"

"I told you that you lacked the ability to understand. Greatly simplified, we blend."

"With what?" Plank persisted.

"With ourselves, with the universe."

"Is the universe limited?" Plank asked.

"You would not understand."

Plank snorted.

"Let me say, then, that it is not my function to educate you beyond your abilities," the woman said. "And now I think we have reached the conclusion of our discussion."

"No," Plank said, standing quickly. "You have merely talked with three

humans. You can't possibly have an overall view of the race from such limited contact. You should, before making your decision, talk to our philosophers, our men of science and religion, our artists and writers, our physicians."

"That will not be necessary," she said. "You deserve your chance."

Plank sat down, sighing.

"And now you have a choice," the beautiful woman continued. "I will return you either to your planet or your base on the satellite of your planet."

"As we are?" Plank asked.

"I told you that you were most fortunate that your missiles did not destroy the data banks when you fired upon..." She said the name that could not be pronounced, the name of the Eater. "...'s planet. He was well trained in scientific methods, even if he did not have the patience or the intelligence to use the material he gathered. He very carefully recorded the basic patterns—you think of them, I believe, as the dna chains, which form each of your individual cells. Had he cared to, he could have duplicated millions of you, but he was too shortsighted for that. However, you will be made as you were." She laughed. "This should remove any lingering doubts that you are, for a fact, merely a more advanced form of food creature."

"And the others?" Hara asked. "Matt Webb? All the men who were taken from their ships between Earth and the Centauri systems?"

"We could recreate their bodies," the woman said. "They were measured before they were, ah, enjoyed. But apparently the human brain is a tasty morsel." She smiled and Plank saw, or imagined he saw, a hint of the death's head she had shown them. "He described the taste so well it raised an atavistic appetite. He saved only the brains, and thus the personalities, of just three. You three."

Hara suppressed a shudder. Plank started to speak, angered, but there was a blackness.

He was aboard the *Pride*. He knew it, could remember how he had been

a part of it, but he was no longer. Once he had flowed in that ship, had known each intricate system. Now, as he looked at it from the interior, from the lounge, he was blocked out. His mind could not extend beyond the smoothness of the panels that hid the workings of the ship.

He pinched the flesh of his arm between thumb and forefinger, twisting until he felt pain.

Beside him Hara looked up, her eyes wet. A glow of life was in her cheeks. Heath stood as if dazed, hands hanging at his side.

The voice was in their minds and in their ears. "Here is your final instruction. Remember it well. Do your best to impress it upon your leaders. See to it that it is recorded well. You have your place. We leave it to you. Stay in your place. It is large, large enough to accommodate even your animal-breeding habits. Do not ever expect more. We give you your galaxy, and we will not hinder your development in any way. We will not intrude upon your privacy as long as you remain in your place. It is your nature, however, to want more than you have. You will never need more, but you will want it. Admittedly, this warning is academic, for you lack the capacity to threaten us in any way, but we have had enough of you. We will not interfere with your actions inside your place, but we will be here, on the far side of the barrier, in the unlikely event that you develop to the point of threatening our privacy."

The *Pride* was moving, up and out, positioning itself for the first blink.

"When you arrive near your satellite, you will be given time to leave this ship. Do so at the first opportunity. Do not try to take it to the surface. I will be monitoring until the ship is empty."

"I've grown rather fond of it," Plank said. "I'd like to keep it."

"I have already explained," the voice said. "We will not contribute. Some of us were opposed to allowing a continuation of what is obviously an artificial species. Feel fortunate that we allow you to exist in your own state."

Plank felt the generator building, felt the jump. It must have one heck of a jump, he was thinking, as he looked out the viewers and saw the familiar landmarks of the Orion Arm spread across the space before them.

Walker Heath was rumbling around the ship. As the ship prepared for another blink, he returned to the lounge. "I don't know what makes this baby go," he said, "but it must be something very much like our blink generator."

"She wiped it out of my mind," Plank said. "I knew this ship."

"Yes, I remember," Heath said. "She couldn't believe that we had developed the same principle." He grinned excitedly. "Yes. It will work now. There's no one to stop us, no one to interfere. The blink drive will work. It's all here." He tapped his forehead. "She didn't touch it. She didn't believe it was there."

"So they are not all powerful; they are not infallible," Plank said.

"Plank, we have the galaxy. She left us with it. Let's not start wanting more right now," Hara said.

"No," Plank said. "She did not leave us with the galaxy. It was ours, more so than it was the creature's. It was introduced into it. We are a product of it."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Somewhere, someplace, back in the dawn of time, an apelike animal stood on his hind legs and pounded his chest," Plank said. "That was my ancestry. She is not infallible. She depended upon the Eater's information to form her opinion of us. That was false data, for the Eater, himself, thought we were merely more advanced food creatures. But we are man. We grew in this galaxy. We grew from simple one-celled animals, which had formed from the soup of life on a young planet. And, by God, no animated force field is going to make me believe anything different."

As the *Pride* entered the Orion Arm, blinks became shorter. Out of boredom, Plank tried the manual controls he had once rigged. They had no effect. The tools from the old *Pride* were no longer in the cargo hold. They had no choice but to be mere passengers during the ship's huge leaps toward home.

Plank had one consolation. He was alive, a man, and with him was the woman he loved. There was time for talk, for planning. They would be married immediately.

With Hara in his arms, John Plank was happy. He would not have changed places with anyone in the universe, not even a being who could manipulate the whole works at will.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When the *Pride* blinked out into normal space in close orbit around the moon, she registered on scanners. Hastily prepared defenses went into effect. A general alarm sent the moon's population into action. When the ship's contours proved to be those of an alien, two patrolling ships made course for her and, without preliminary, ten atomic warheads were launched from pads on the moon. Earth had found her external enemy and all her warlike feelings told her to strike first and strike hard. She had seen one alien.

Aboard the *Pride*, having no access to the ship's systems, Plank's first knowledge of the attack was the blossoming of ten small stars in the space surrounding the ship. Viewports darkened to protect their human eyes. Plank had been engaged in donning his lsg, because, denied access to the ship's communications, the radio in his suit offered the only chance to contact the moon.

"You can't really blame them," he said, as two ships closed in on the *Pride*, rockets making misty trails across empty space as the ships fired. "They saw the Eater."

He began to place his call in a steady voice, identifying himself. The attacking rockets exploded prematurely, detonated by the ship's systems or by an overseeing presence. Plank didn't know which and he didn't care. He just wanted out of the ship. He had work to do.

The two attacking Earth ships were joined by a third, and the three were hard to convince. The attack continued while Plank patiently called.

After shooting up an area of space around the *Pride* and nothing more, the ships withdrew a distance, orbiting the stationary *Pride*. Now both Heath and Hara were using the radio in Plank's lsg, adding their own identification to Plank's.

Finally, a reply. "We order you to surrender," the call came.

"Yes," Plank said. "We surrender."

"Stand by for boarding."

"I don't think that's possible," Plank replied.

"Open a lock and stand by for boarding, or we'll blast you out of space," the voice said. It was tense. Plank pictured a young captain on one of the nearby ships.

"You've tried that," Plank said. "Look, we're Earthmen. We've given you our identification numbers. We are not in control of this ship. That will all be explained."

"Stand by for boarding," the voice said. One of the ships blasted, moving closer.

"Go easy," Plank yelled.

The ship smashed into the field surrounding the *Pride*. Only the fact that it was just getting underway saved it from total destruction. As it was, it was damaged, its hull ruptured. One by one figures in lsg left the damaged ship and were picked up by a second ship. During that period, Plank's calls went unanswered.

When radio contact was made again, the voice was different. "Again, we ask you, if your intentions are not hostile, to surrender."

Plank muttered an oath. "That's what we want to do."

"Then allow us to board you."

"We have no control over the ship's defenses. We are merely passengers. We are being delivered home. We want to come home."

"Then exit the ship one at a time and you will be picked up," the voice ordered. It was an older sounding voice, perhaps, Plank thought, a senior commander.

"And be blasted in space?"

"Not if you surrender."

"We surrender," Plank yelled, rolling his eyes at Hara and Heath.

"Come out one at a time."

"There are three of us and we have only one lsg," Plank said. "I will come out. Then I'll have to borrow two lsgs and bring them back over."

"If you will allow us to board you we will bring LSGS."

"I have no control over the ship's defense. It will not allow boarding."

"Hold one," the voice said.

When the radio sputtered again, the message was, "All right. One at a time. Come out."

"They're nervous," Heath said. "I don't know if I want to go out or not."

"We have to go out sometime," Plank said. He went into the cargo hold. As he expected, the lock operated itself. When the outside port opened and the air was exhausted, he stuck his head out cautiously. The second ship was near, and he could see missile launchers pointed his way. "I'm coming out," he said. He attached a line and pushed himself away. The line allowed him to travel about three meters before jerking him to a stop. He saw the missiles fire and they detonated on the ship's field in front of him. He pulled himself back and the lock accepted, allowed him entry to the ship. That had been a big question in his mind, whether or not, once he had left the ship, he would be allowed reentry to bring lsgs to Hara and Heath. He rejoined them in the lounge and peeled out of lsg.

"I think we're just going to have to wait for a while, until they cool down a bit."

"Let me use the radio," Hara said. She activated the instrument and said, "This is Commander Sahara." She gave her serial number. "I want to speak with Secretary Maxwell Seagle."

"That is not possible," the tense voice informed them.

"It is possible," Hara said. "First you patch through to Moon Control, and then you ask them to patch you through to Earth and the secretary's

office."

"Hold one," the voice said. A moment later, it returned, "Your request is impossible."

"All right, then," Hara said. "We'll wait until it is possible."

Another attack was tried. A huge laser cruiser almost burned itself while blasting away at the *Pride's* shield from close range. Plank was having a cup of coffee from the galley. He was beginning to be slightly put out. He did not begrudge them their caution, but he was fed up with their stupidity. In irritation, following the laser attack, he turned on the radio and, affecting a weird accent, he said, "All right, this has gone far enough. Now you will connect me with your leader."

There was a long pause.

"Identify yourself," the voice on the radio said.

"I am the Creature Who Ate Central Africa," Plank said. "I will eat you unless you take me to your leader."

He looked at Hara and grinned. "It's no joking matter," she hissed at him.

"Which leader?" the voice asked.

Hara took the switch. "Space Secretary Maxwell Seagle," she said.

"Hold one."

She recognized Seagle's voice. He sounded tired. "This is Secretary Seagle," he said. "Why did you ask to speak with me specifically?"

"Because you should remember me," Hara said. "I came aboard your ship to ask that Commander Heath be allowed to use the last blink test vehicle."

"Yes, I remember the visit," Seagle said.

"But you're not sure that I'm the same woman who paid that visit?" Hara asked.

"We have reason for caution," Seagle said.

"Yes, of course," Hara agreed. "But, sir, we want to come out. We'll come out one at a time. Then we can explain everything."

"Try to explain it now," Seagle said.

So she talked. There were many questions. In the end, Plank was in lsg again and standing in the lock. But he, himself, insisted on precautions. Between him and the nearest ship were men in lsg. They were directly in line of the ship's fire. He used his steering jets to push his lsg toward them, joined them, used their lines to draw himself into the ship. There he was seized, his lsg peeled off him. He did not resist. A doctor examined him.

"He's a man, all right," the doctor said.

"Now give me two extra suits and let me get the others," he said.

"Not a chance, buddy," said a stern senior commander. "One of my boys will go."

"He won't be able to get in," Plank said.

"The port is still open."

"It won't admit him."

"We'll see."

The man couldn't even get past the shield.

"Look," Plank argued, "You're worried about the ship, not about three people in lsg. The ship has proven itself to be impregnable. Get the other two off, get them here, safe, and the ship's defenses go down. They're geared to protect life. Remove the life and you can blast her or board her as you please."

"I think you're lying," the senior commander said.

"Get me Secretary Seagle," Plank requested wearily.

"Not a chance," the commander said. "I'm authorized to make field

decisions."

"All right, then," said Plank, "it's your funeral."

"What do you mean by that?" the commander asked nervously.

"Our only radio is in the lsg," Plank said. "My friends are now out of communication."

"Or they don't choose to communicate," the commander said.

"We don't want to have to do it, but we arranged before I came out to send a missile down to the base if you held me."

The commander's head jerked. "Send word. Tell them immediate evacuation."

"All you have to do is let me go over, with two lsgs for the others. Then it's over."

"I'd like a mind scan," the doctor who had examined Plank said. "Perhaps he's telling the truth."

"No mind scan," Plank said. "I've had enough of people fooling around in my mind."

It was stalemate, a stalemate broken only when Maxwell Seagle boarded and talked personally with Plank, asking many of the same questions, going over and over the story until Plank's temper was worn thin. Then and only then was Plank allowed to return.

Hara and Heath donned lsg, and finally the three of them were aboard the cruiser, closely guarded, facing Seagle, the doctor, the ship's commander.

"You said we could board after you were off," the commander said.

"I said it, but it's not true. The ship won't allow you to board," Plank said.

"We can try," the commander said.

A cry of alarm came over the communications system. The commander

ran for the control room. When he returned, his face was grim.

"Sir," he said to Seagle, "it broke up. It turned all colors, disintegrated, and disappeared."

"Now it is over," Hara said.

"No," Plank said, "it's just beginning."

And it was. He had something different in mind when he said it was just beginning. What began were the mind scans and the questioning and the endless repetitions. They were separated. For days Plank did not see Hara. For days he submitted to their examinations and their questions; the three were a closely guarded secret, kept hidden away at moon base. The moon and Earth were on full alert. As the days passed, the tenseness died.

When he was allowed to see her she looked haggard. She came into his arms with a little cry of gladness, and he kissed her.

Within a week, they were Earthbound. They were married in a quiet ceremony and rented a suite in a hotel in the Amazon Natural Forest. After two weeks there, they visited Plank's mother and Hara's parents. Then they reported in to work. Plank requested transfer from free enterprise back to service to be allowed to work with Walker Heath.

When they arrived on the moon, Heath was already in construction. Using an existing hull, he was installing surplus parts left over from the blink experiments.

On the day of the first test, a battery of Earth dignitaries clustered in the control room.

The test vehicle blinked out a few thousand kilometers and blinked back. It blinked out a light-year and blinked back. Heath insisted on riding the third test. He returned safely.

Some months later, Commander Sahara led her ship into a dense starfield toward the core of the galaxy. A diligent search produced not a single scrap of the tinker-toy planet. The search was made more interesting by the persistent attentions of her first officer, one Commander John Plank.

EPILOGUE

On his ninety-fifth birthday, John Sahara Plank III walked through an early-morning fog to stand atop a hill looking down on the campus. It was May, and the Virginia hills were dressed in spring togs; the temperature indicated a warm day that, at that sunrise hour, was invigorating. Plank had chosen to wear uniform. The choice seemed to be in keeping with the day. He was alone on the hill. Below him, as the fog began to shred and lift in the first heat of the early sun, he could see a few students beginning to move in the plaza, some of them walking toward the cafeteria for breakfast, some just strolling to enjoy the beautiful morning.

The university filled the small valley, climbed the hill on the far side toward the towers of the blink-stat station. To the left, the parking lot was packed and, as he watched, two atmoflyers came in, bearing, perhaps, off-campus students, workers or visitors. In an hour the campus would be a hive of activity.

To John Sahara Plank III, the perfect morning seemed to be a good omen. With the sun over his shoulder, he walked down the trail, a tall, well-built man in his prime, his ash blond hair medium long, his eyes alert beneath bushy blond eyebrows. By the time he reached the plaza it was filling with students hurrying to class. Many of them recognized him, nodded, spoke to him by name. He walked with his hands behind his back, his head lowered, giving the impression that he was deep in thought. He was a familiar figure on the campus.

He still had time before meeting his morning class, a seminar of graduate students in engineering, so he bypassed the classic lines of the Walker Heath Building and walked through the arboretum. He cast only a casual glance on the exotics from the populated planets of the galaxy. Emerging into sunlight again, he turned left, pressed his palm on the identifier at the door of his laboratory and entered. Musing, he stood in the main lab, hands still clasped behind him. The lab was empty, the work done. The equipment would be preserved. Unless he were wrong, it would be there when he came back.

His desk at the end of the lab was neat, straightened and emptied the previous day. He walked to it, sat down, threw his long legs up and leaned

back. Unbidden, the equations began to march through his mind and he let them flow, feeling the satisfaction of a job well done. Right or wrong the work would be a milestone in physics. Already it was paying dividends. Applied to gravitational field equations it had increased the comfort of every ship going out from Earth, every ship that blinked its way through the galaxy between Earth's far-flung settlements. A mining company out beyond Antares was using the equations, applying them to a gas giant mining drone, to allow the drone to dive deeply into the tremendous pressures of a gas giant's atmosphere. Royalties went, of course, to the university. Plank had no need for more money.

John Sahara Plank III was a product of the free enterprise system, an extremely wealthy man. He did not scorn money. It was Plank family money that paid for the lab and the fantastically expensive equipment. He enjoyed money and the freedom it gave him. He used it wisely, bought himself all the comforts he wanted and felt no guilt. There were those who thought his long service as a mere teacher at the university founded by his grandfather and grandmother was, somehow, a show of guilt, a penance for possessing one of the galaxy's great fortunes. Those who knew him best, and they were few, knew better.

Old John Plank's grandson was a solitary man, still single although well past the age for marriage. Not that he was a woman hater. At social functions he chose to attend, he always escorted one of the most beautiful women—the chief of his research team, Ellen Walters, a woman of dark-haired beauty who caused heads to turn when she walked across the campus. It was rumored that more than work was between them, but then Plank was a favorite subject for talk. It was well known that his brother, Matt Plank, scorned John's scholarly career and often spoke in public about the black sheep of the Plank family, the one who retreated from life and holed up in a quiet university, neglecting his responsibility. Plank Enterprises reached outward from the Earth and secondary headquarters on Plank's World to put a web of commerce and scientific development around the galaxy. And Matt needed help. He had Frank, the second brother, but Frank was only good as a front man, a glad-hander with no real abilities. Matt wanted the organizational abilities of his brother John in Plank Enterprises and John's refusal to take an interest puzzled Matt.

At that moment on Plank's World, Matt was puzzled anew by his brother John. Matt had received a blinkstat that stated, without explanation, that John would be landing on Plank's World in a matter of

weeks.

"I will not," Matt Plank told his secretary, "give the professor the satisfaction of being asked why he's chosen this time to visit us." But he was curious, and he put out an order to the Earth office to send a man to nose around Plank University to see what old John was up to.

John, by that time, was on the top floor of the Heath Building in room 1040, seated comfortably in the informal atmosphere of a seminar room waiting for the last of his six advanced students to arrive. When the tardy student hurried in, John leaned back in his chair, smiled at his students, and said, "This will be my last meeting with you." There was a stir and a mutter of dismay. "The seminar will be carried to conclusion by various members of the department as individual time requirements allow. You will be in good hands. Your work is going well and your programs are nearing completion. You will have no problems."

"May we ask why, Professor?"

"Not at this time."

"You will be missed," one of the female students dared to say.

"You assume, then, that I am leaving the university," Plank said. "You are right." He held up a hand. "Now, instead of talking about me, let's review the findings of our program to date. I want to be sure that you're on a firm footing for the completion of your program."

After the two-hour class meeting it was time for lunch. He could have used one of the private rooms in the cafeteria, but he was not the sort to demand special treatment. He found an empty table, placed his tray upon it, and was beginning to eat with a healthy appetite when he saw Ellen Walters weaving her way through the tables toward him, tray in hand. He watched her, not without appreciation of her trim form. She smiled, engendering a smile in return.

"The big day," she said.

"The big day." He took a bite of good Texas steak and chewed thoughtfully. "Will you be at the ceremony?"

"Of course."

"You're all ready, then?"

"I've been ready for weeks," she said. "Would you pass the salt, please."

He reached and his hand knocked the salt container off the table. It fell, obeying the laws of physics, until it was within five centimeters of the floor, then it halted and began to rise of its own accord. Leaning over, Plank put out his hand and plucked it from the air. "Show off," he said.

"If you've got it, flaunt it," Ellen replied. "And since I'm reminded of it, you know Sparks, of the Parapsychology Department, has enrolled another receiver."

"Astounding, isn't it? Man goes along his merry way for millions of years accepting evolution only in part and then, suddenly, we're living a change."

"I wish I were a receiver too," Ellen sighed. "There are times when I'd like to know what's going on up there in your head."

"As I look at you, my dear, I can tell you I have some very interesting things going on," Plank said, grinning at her. "By the way, tell Sparks to warn his new receiver that he... male or female?"

"Female. The ratio still holds true. Females two to one."

"... that she will, no doubt, be getting an offer from my brother. Tell him to give her the standard lecture about continuing her education before going off into the galaxy to make her fortune."

"I'm sure it's been done," Ellen said.

"I'm glad you're not a receiver," Plank said. "I always feel uncomfortable. I've never sure they're living up to their oath. I have to guard my thoughts even around our Susan."

"I think she's very conscientious," Ellen said. "She says it is extremely embarrassing to look into someone who is unaware. I think it's actually unpleasant at times."

"I'm sure it would be," Plank said, finishing his meal. "See you."

He still had the formal call to make on the university's president, his

afternoon seminar to meet, and then the ceremony. He had been against it, but he felt that it was his obligation to attend. If his fellows valued him, he would be insulting them to refuse their honors. He spent a quiet hour in the privacy of his apartment, dressed in formal wear, and walked the short distance to the assembly hall of the School of Physics. He was early. He sat on the stage talking with the president and the various deans until the hall was filled and the appointed hour had come. Then he sat, rather uncomfortably, listening to various speakers tell of his long years of service to the university and of his achievements. When he rose, a sincere roar of applause followed. He stood, waiting it out, saying, "Thank you, thank you."

He went through the formal opening, addressing the various elements of the gathering; then he stood, hands behind his back, and looked out to the sea of student faces.

"We are fortunate," he began, "to live in what is, perhaps, the most exciting era in the history of man. We have seen the galaxy opened. We have watched the ships blink out from home by the thousands, the millions, carrying Earth's surplus to the far stars. By picking up the telephone in our homes we can cross parsecs of space in an instant via blinkstat to send greetings to friends and relatives who are colonizing. For breakfast we may have fruit from one of the planets of a star that, 100 years ago, had only been a number in an astronomical catalog. We live in an age of plenty. No man goes without the basic needs. No man need be idle. And each man has his opportunity, in our rapidly expanding society, to fulfill his own potential. There is opportunity for all. There is challenge for all. And if the race survives for a million years there will still be, in our vast galaxy, challenge and opportunity."

He paused. The last echoes of his voice faded away.

"In every scientific field we are advancing. Here at the university the work being done in micro-metallurgy has advanced the art immeasurably in two decades. Our work with elemental particles has opened the door to what was once thought to be an occult science. If we needed gold beyond the natural supply now available from a million planets, we could make it. When the natural food supply is low, we synthesize foods. And we advance steadily in other fields. We are, we men, in the midst of a vast change in our race. Something is happening in the basic structure of our brains. Our youth show astounding abilities. Not all of them, but a small percentage of

them are developing abilities that were unbelievable when they were predicted by the esoteric science fiction writers of our past. We are able, through these new abilities, to know ourselves better. The science of medicine has been advanced immeasurably by the application of para abilities to medical problems. There are mental healers among us. Healers who can use the power of the mind to overcome the age-old ills of mankind. In one generation, the lifespan of the average man has been lengthened by five decades. Evolution is at work. Man has come a long way. I choose to believe that our advance is more than a matter of chance, more than the accidental results of existence. I believe that man has a destiny."

"As you know, para abilities are being applied to the studies of all the sciences. Para anthropologists have come up with convincing proof that life evolved on this planet with a richness of variety unknown elsewhere in the galaxy. I believe that man is the end result of billions of years of evolution under the guidance of an unknown hand. I believe that man is his own creature, a product of this Earth, a master of his own fate."

"In Central Africa there is a monument. It is a reminder. It was erected on the spot where an alien came to our planet to show his complete lack of regard for an intelligent species. I, for one, will never forget that once man was considered to be nothing more than a food creature. Not by some dumb animal, some beast of the jungle of man's past, but by a being with superior abilities and dangerous talents. My grandfather and grandmother received a warning. Since I was a small child that warning has been engraved on my mind, always with me, always in my thoughts. We were told to stay in our place. We were told not to aspire beyond our abilities. We were, with some show of generosity, given our own galaxy."

"It is my belief that the knowledge that we are not alone in this universe, that somewhere out there is a being who could manipulate us at will, can be nothing but inhibiting to man's future development. I think each of us should, at some time during our lives, visit the Central African monument and remember the Eater, I will never forget."

He smiled. "Nor will I forget our university and my association with thousands of young people who are doing so much to make man more than he has ever been before. Thank you."

"I think," John Sahara Plank III said, seated beside Ellen Walters in his

personal atmoflyer as it arrowed south on autopilot, "that we'll be married aboard the *Pride*."

For a moment her eyes narrowed in surprise. "All right," she said.

"I think it would be fitting," he said. "We'll be spending a lot of time there." He took her hand and smiled at her. "We don't want to shock our young crew by living in sin."

"You are," she said, "the very soul of romance."

"You could say no," he said gently.

"You're not a receiver, but you should be able to read my mind better than that."

"I'm sorry. I just took it for granted, I suppose, that when the time came we'd be married. Would you like for me to start all over and propose properly?"

"I think I'd like for you to kiss me," she said.

After minutes during which his attention was occupied, the beeper told them of contact with Canaveral Control. Plank disengaged and sighed. "As first officer and captain we'll have to be on good behavior. No unseemly passionate displays before the crew."

"Just so you haven't arranged separate cabins," she said.

"Not a chance," he grinned.

Control landed them in the private sector of the base. There, the *Sahara Pride VII* rested on her pad, large as ships went, almost globular, gleaming with the blue and red of Plank University. Ellen laughed at the display of the school colors.

"Will you also laugh when I tell you that the library contains films of all of last year's games?" Plank asked.

"You're kidding."

"I'm going to analyze them, find out where we went wrong."

"Oh, the coach is going to love you."

"He's not my type," Plank said, leading her toward the entrance port of the *Pride*.

The port was opened by First Engineer Joker Osbourne, red-haired, muscular, blunt. Osbourne, a product of the university, had Plank's gift, as it was called. He came closer to becoming a part of his equipment than any man since John Plank. Susan Lite, receiver and navigator, was in the lounge to greet them, along with Tom and Martha Peters, electronics and parakinetics. Martha Peters made Ellen's small abilities seem like the work of a minor magician.

All had been carefully selected, hand-picked by Plank himself. All had worked with Plank in the lab back at the university. All had participated in the building of the *Pride*.

Within an hour of the arrival of Plank and Ellen, the *Pride* lifted. An extra passenger was aboard, a civil servant who performed a simple ceremony as the ship positioned itself for the initial blink. The civil servant was picked off by a lighter, and the *Pride* departed from Earth.

The ship received V.I.P. treatment on Plank's World. Both Mark and Frank Plank were present when the *Pride* lowered to the surface. The party at the home of the president of Plank Enterprises was gala. When it was over, two of the brothers sat in Mark Plank's study over brandy.

"Each paired off, like Noah's ark," Mark was saying, speaking of John's crew.

"We'll be gone a long time," John said.

"Where?"

"Around."

"You wouldn't care to do a little work while you're star hopping, would you?" Mark asked. "I can use you."

"Sorry, Mark. I have my own thing going."

"Yes, I know."

"Spying again?"

"Keeping my knowledge up to date," Mark said, smiling. "You are constantly amazing me with some new gadget from that lab of yours. I have to spy on you to stay ahead of you. Otherwise you'll spring some development on me, and I won't have a use in mind for it."

"How much do you know about the *Pride*?" John asked, reaching for a decanter to refill his glass.

"Not as much as I'd like to know. I know there's a pile of electronics on her. I know you have triple the power of the most advanced ship. And you have some things that I can't even guess about. Wanta fill me in?"

"There's a mental amplifier."

"A what?"

"I'll tell you about it after we test it completely."

"What does it amplify?"

"Power."

"We have an infinite power source in the blink generator. Power to fill all our needs. Why an amplifier?"

John shrugged. "For more power."

"For what?"

"For things that require more power."

Mark laughed. "All right. I'm sure that when you're ready you'll hand it over to the firm, and I'm sure I'll find a money-making use for it. Where do you go from here?"

"Out," John said, waving a hand. "We need open space."

"The clouds?"

"Not that far. At least not in that direction."

"John, you do need to file a flight plan, you know. In case of trouble we must know where to look."

"No flight plan," John said.

"Do you have all you need? Anything I can get for you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I'd like six cases of this brandy."

"Done," Mark said. He filled his glass. "John. I hope you're not going to do what I'm afraid you're going to do."

"And that is?"

"You're going to the barrier."

"Does anyone else suspect that?"

"No."

"I would appreciate it if—"

"You don't have to say it. Look, you know and I know that if the word got out that you were testing the barrier there'd be one helluva hue and cry."

"How did you guess?"

"I know you, brother. I remember when you were small you showed a great deal of interest in the barrier. When grandfather was alive you used to bug him to tell you about it, over and over. It still bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Very much."

"Can't stand prosperity, huh? We have a galaxy. We're making do nicely with it, thank you. If we continue to breed at the present expansion rate and double our population every few years, there's still enough for the race for a million years. Why the barrier? Are we ready?"

"Because it's there, I suppose," Plank said.

"And the hell of it is," Matt said, "100 credits to ten you'll break the

thing, if that's your goal."

"Just a preliminary study."

"Promise me one thing?"

"Perhaps."

"Promise me you won't go through, even if you can, until you talk with me. Until we can make plans. John, I don't think we are ready. There's something pretty hairy on the other side of that force field or whatever it is. Before we go out there to, as they told our grandparents, invade their privacy, we'd better be damned sure we're ready."

"If we can break the barrier we're ready."

Matt frowned. "Why not give the race a bit more time to develop? I know you have your mentalists. But from remembering grandfather's tales, your mind people are amateurs compared to those people out there. They wouldn't even be able to hold their own with the Eater, and he was retarded."

"Grandfather used to say that they were not infallible."

"He used to say a lot of things. He talked a lot about tigers."

John smiled. "When a tiger is eating members of the community, a man picks up his spear and goes tiger hunting."

"Right now the tiger is sleeping," Matt said. "I'd feel a lot better if we sort of tippytoed around him and let him sleep."

"Do you remember one of the things that impressed grandfather most about that being he spoke with? She was explaining why she could not rebuild Matt Webb, for whom you were named by the way, and she said it was because the Eater didn't have enough willpower to give up the tastiest morsel of a human body, the brain. The description of the delight of the Eater when he was enjoying a brain was so vivid, she said, that it raised an atavistic appetite in her."

"No," Matt said, "I won't buy that rationale. You're not going out there to protect us from some future threat. Those people are not going to bust

into the galaxy and start eating humans. No. You're going out there for the same reason that old John spent the second half of his life establishing a university and engaging in pure research. All of your work to date points to that. Grandfather spent a lifetime and vast amounts of money to better the race, to make it more powerful in its technology. He even became interested in parapsychology and was the first to apply psychic power to the search for man's ancestry. He was afraid, just as you're afraid, that the beautiful woman and the Eater were right, that we are evolved from the artificially created food creatures. You think that by proving that man is, at least, the equal of those people out there that you can disprove the theory of our artificial origin once and for all."

"I'd be lying if I said you're 100 percent wrong," John said. "But you're not 100 percent right, either."

"Think it over carefully, John. I won't try to stop you, although I have the power to stop you if I wanted to. But I respect you too much to try to impose my will on you."

"You're becoming truly civilized."

"Just don't come home with the tiger chasing you, nipping at your tail."

"I am rather attached to my tail," John laughed.

When the stars thinned, they advanced carefully. The *Pride* functioned smoothly. Susan Lite, prior to each jump, blended her mind with a new detection system and searched the space ahead. Not many ships had been all the way to the barrier. In the early days of blink travel, the existence of the barrier had been confirmed, and after that, there was no reason to venture out beyond the galaxy into the deepness of true emptiness. Among spacers the barrier was rarely mentioned.

Plank's grandfather had seen a ship crunch to ruin against the barrier, so the general area was approached very cautiously. No one was sure that even the mental abilities of Susan and Martha would be able to detect it. To ram it would be disaster. To blink into it would produce an unknown result, but to be effective, the barrier had to be able to halt a blinking ship, because the Eater had possessed blink technology and the barrier was, after all, first installed to imprison the Eater within the galaxy.

Within a few million miles, plus or minus, of the barrier, the *Pride* ceased blinking and began to move carefully forward at sublight speeds. Plank was reasonably sure that electronics alone would be useless in detecting the barrier. Electronics in combination with the mental tricks of Susan and Martha might, just might, detect it, but he did not leave it to chance. On the front of the *Pride* a small cannon fired a non-explosive projectile containing a tracking device; fired it at a speed that sent it ahead of the *Pride* at regular intervals. Light and radiation and radio waves passed the barrier at will. A solid object would be stopped.

In a blink, parsecs disappeared instantly. At sublight speeds a man could appreciate the vastness of space. The ship crawled. Time passed. A comfortable relationship was being established aboard ship, all members compatible. Automatic systems made round-the-clock watches unnecessary, so there was time for socializing, for bridge, for long bull sessions, for lovely nights in his cabin with his wife.

Plank came to know why, up to the very end, his grandfather and grandmother loved space, why, at the drop of a suggestion, they would board one version or the other of a *Pride* and be off. There was a grandeur about it that made a person stand taller. There was an indescribable feeling of comfort and safety inside a good ship, with all that was hostile to life outside, cold, airless, empty.

As weeks became months, however, Plank grew restless. The barrier was farther out than he had calculated. He was tempted to do some jumping, but he didn't dare. Sooner or later it would be encountered.

After almost a year of cruising at sublight, firing projectiles into the space ahead, the barrier was found. And it was not found by mental detection, but by the rebounding of a projectile from an unseen screen. Plank halted the *Pride* at 10,000 kilometers and began to run a series of tests. Physical instruments showed only the emptiness of space. The light of distant galaxies came to them as if there was nothing between the ship and the far pinpoints of light. Neither Martha nor Susan could detect the force of the barrier.

It was going to be tougher than he thought.

But he had come a long way. Once again he moved the ship and, easing her forward on steering jets at less than two kilometers an hour, felt the solid impact. The *Pride* bumped to a halt. The barrier was just outside,

centimeters away from the forward viewers. Plank suited up and went outside to feel the barrier for himself. Using the advanced propulsion unit of an lsg, he skimmed along the barrier for a kilometer or so and then returned to the ship. Martha and Susan had been using the mind amplifier. They could detect nothing.

For years Plank had been theorizing about the barrier. To sustain the barrier would require energy. In intergalactic space the only source of energy would be the radiation from the galaxies. There were scattered particles of matter of course, since nothing is truly empty, but they were so few that he doubted the possibility of using them in any way to create enough power to build a field around something as vast as a galaxy.

When the initial investigations produced nothing, Plank set out on a task that would take, even at blink speeds, two years. First, it was necessary to determine the contour of the barrier. This was a laborious process, accomplished by short blinks. After several months he had what he thought was a pattern. Holding his breath, he made a long blink; the ship stayed outside the first scattering of stars and came out within projectile distance of the barrier. The remaining months of the two-year mapping period were easier. The barrier could be figured to be at a uniform distance from the nearest star of the galaxy, and it bulged out to take in the satellite clouds of stars. After two years Plank had built a model of the galaxy and the clouds; and around that model a film to indicate the barrier. It was all encompassing. The work of two years—it did not require the attentions of all of the crew to complete the mapping—produced no clue as to the nature of the barrier.

Having returned to a point near their initial encounter with the barrier, they settled down to some hard work. Plank was convinced that the barrier was formed from something physical. He could not swallow the concept of pure mental force. The others disputed him. He pointed out that although mental force is in existence, as witness both Ellen and Martha's abilities to move physical objects with the power of the mind, that mental force is undetectable. To be evinced, it must act on something physical.

While the mentalists concentrated on using the mental amplifier at different frequencies—this was not an accurate term, but rather than take time to invent a new word they used it—Plank reviewed his work in elemental particles. He could not escape the idea that the barrier was

something physical. He remembered the Eater's ability to flow particles at the atomic level and below. He was in an area where man had not, as yet, equaled the ability of the Eater, but there were solid advances.

In the end, the solution was surprisingly simple. It was merely a matter of knowing how to look and where to look, and in the looking Plank recorded entire new families of subatomic particles. It was possible, then, to tune the mental amplifier.

"Yes," Martha Peters said. "I can see it now."

Susan Lite, the receiver, felt the power that held the field together. She tried to put it into words. "The particles are mesmerized," she said. "They make contact with other particles coming into contact with them and, in effect, pass on the mesmerization. The effect is an order—thou shalt not pass."

And, two days later, after sleepless, frantic hours of study, Susan said. "All right." She sank back limply in her seat.

"You can now counter the force?" Plank asked.

"I think so," Susan said.

"Selectively?"

"Yes."

"A small test, then," Plank said. "Do I hear any objections?"

"Will it alert them?" Ellen asked.

"I don't know."

"I don't think passing an object a few millimeters in diameter will cause much of a disturbance," Susan said. "They would have to be watching very closely."

"I feel that we can count on the very element that helped my grandfather, arrogance. The Eater was so sure of himself that he left grandfather and the others to their own devices. From what John Plank said and wrote, I'm sure that the parent race feels the same sort of smug arrogance toward us. They told him that it was quite unlikely that we'd

ever be able to break the barrier, that it was unlikely that we could develop a way around the old Einsteinian laws." He let his gaze take in each one of them. "It is a serious step. I will abide by majority rule."

"Do you vote yes?" Ellen asked.

"Of course," Plank said, smiling. "That's why we're here."

"Then it's two aye votes," Ellen said.

"Three," Joker Osbourne said.

"Carried," said Martha and Tom Peters together.

The object that passed through the barrier was the size of the tip of Ellen's little finger. It went through and continued to move, unhindered, toward the far corners of the expanding universe.

It was a time of celebration. The old brandy supplied by Matt Plank was broken out. When the short period of congratulating themselves was over, work began. All the data was compiled and organized into a form that could be easily followed by Matt's technicians. When all was ready, Plank beamed a message toward the nearest blinkstat relay and sent the *Pride* after it. They made rendezvous with a ship from Plank's World. Matt himself was aboard. The data was handed over.

"You're going back now?" Matt asked.

"Yes."

"Give us some time, John. A year."

"That's not too much to ask."

"We'll be able to accomplish a lot in a year. With what you've given us we can duplicate their techniques. Of course, I'd have two or three if you gave me a choice."

John shook his head.

"All right. A year, then. I'm not going to spread the word, not yet. But when you're ready to go through, contact me. We owe it to others to at least warn them. Meantime, I'm going to be working. We'll have a few

things ready just in case."

"Good."

He spent the year refining his findings. His results were sent back into the receivers of Matt's organization. Word from Plank's World spoke of glowing successes in atomic flow technique. Force-field-equipped ships were cruising the periphery, some of them in contact with the *Pride*.

On the eve of decision, Plank gathered his crew in the lounge over the finest vintage produced on a million worlds. "You all have a choice, you know."

"I'm going with you," Ellen said.

"Life would be too dull back at the university," Joker Osbourne said.

"I'm going, but I'm not sure why," Susan Lite said. "I won't tell you I'm not scared out of my wits."

"I'm not sure it's time," Tom Peters said.

"We have a galaxy," Martha said. "Isn't that enough?"

Many others before them had said the same. "We have no territorial ambitions," John Sahara Plank in said. "We seek only knowledge." He looked at Tom and Martha. "We can call in one of Matt's cruisers and off-load you."

"No," Martha said, looking at her husband. "We would only wonder."

The *Sahara Plank* nosed up to the barrier. From her, certain forces were transmitted. She moved through slowly, on steering jet power, inching her way. Inside the ship, the passage created a prickling sensation on the napes of the crew's necks and, almost unheard, there was a low, grating roar. There was no time to think again. No way to reverse their decision.

Free in space, the *Pride* was checked. She was intact. Tapes were studied. The passage was analyzed in every way. Behind them, the barrier was intact. Everything had gone as planned. The only abnormality was the low roar that each of them had heard. They replayed it on the ship's sound

system, measured its frequency, subjected it to all the tests of science.

"It shouldn't have happened," Plank said.

"A resonance of some sort," Tom Peters suggested.

"All right, tell me why," Plank said, as Tom went back to work.

Hours later, they still had no answer.

"We can be on the fringe of the nearest galaxy in one blink," Plank said.
"Perhaps we will still have the element of surprise in our favor."

"Perhaps," Susan said.

"We can turn back."

"And never know?" Susan asked.

"We'll sleep on it," Plank said.

Alone in their cabin, he replayed the sound of the barrier. It was Ellen who said it, although he, himself, had been thinking it.

"Remember when we visited the zoological park?" she asked.

"Yes," he said absently, deep in thought.

"Run the tape again and close your eyes. Place yourself back there in the park. Remember the sounds."

He punched the button. The low roar began. He closed his eyes.

"Tiger, tiger burning bright," Ellen said.

The sound became the low, snarling, threatening call of a great jungle cat.

"I think," Plank said, "we've attracted their attention."

"Then there's no turning back," Martha Peters said, with a sigh.

"Afraid not," Plank said. "Full alert, everybody. We want to do our best

to go in on our own power."

"It would save time and searching if we just let them bring us in," Joker said.

"When my grandfather and grandmother were out here, they were jerked in without any choice," Plank said. "I think it would be psychologically beneficial if we could resist just enough to do it on our own."

"Here we go," Susan Lite said. She was in contact with the mental amplifier. Her voice was tense. Quickly Martha and Ellen linked hands with Susan. Plank, a bit tense himself, watched the ship's instruments. They were undisturbed, but something was in the air, an intangible force. The hair on the back of his neck seemed to stand on end. He felt a charged tension. There was total silence as the struggle continued. Susan, the main force in the mental resistance, began to show the strain. Plank went to her, put his hand atop Ellen's as it clasped Susan's hand, closed his eyes and, although he had not been able to develop any of the para abilities, willed his mind to help in any way it could. The ship's lights dimmed, became black. In the total darkness of space the struggle continued. Plank could hear someone breathing in quick, hard pants. Sweat began to bead his forehead, and then the lights flickered and were full, and the hum of life was back in the *Pride*. Susan, breath fast and shallow, was failing from the seat; he caught her and leaned her back and used his handkerchief to wipe the moisture from her face. She was crying.

"Pure force," Susan panted.

"They'll try again," Plank said.

"I can't—" Susan began. Suddenly she stiffened and the air of the cabin was charged with fire. It rolled around and past them and the sound in Plank's ears was Susan screaming. But the fire stopped, and once again there was that frozen, frightening moment of absolute silence, save for Susan's labored breathing.

When it was over, the stars were the same. The *Pride* was still stationary in space just inside the barrier. Tom Peters ran from the cabin and reappeared with a glass in his hand. Susan accepted the brandy gratefully, but weakly.

"And all of you can do it," she said. "It's all here." She indicated an area behind her right ear. "You feel it and just will a wall against it. Look at me, Martha."

Martha looked into Susan's eyes, and a glazed look came over her. In a moment she sighed. "Yes," she said. And then, more excitedly, "Yes!"

"Now you, Ellen," Susan said, but she had no time.

The ship lurched. Quickly Susan went back into the trancelike state of resistance to the powerful mental forces that were trying to jerk the *Pride* out of its place in space. And this time Martha helped and it was over quickly.

"I learned," Susan said, excitement in her eyes. "They couldn't have guessed, but the force, the feel of it, was as if I were being opened up. And each time I seemed to be stronger."

"It's as if some new area of the brain has been suddenly activated," Martha Peters said.

"It's so simple," Susan said. "Anyone can do it. It's just a matter of knowing..." She paused. "This is not a good analogy, but it's like knowing which key to turn. I can show all of you."

"They were trying to move the ship," Plank asked, "no doubt?"

"No doubt," Susan said. "Now, quickly, before they come again."

Ellen felt the force as Susan looked into her eyes and entered her mind. Joker, already gifted with some para abilities, felt it. Tom Peters tried and failed. Plank felt nothing. As Susan looked deeply into his eyes and tried to reach him, Martha and Ellen were playing games.

"I'm sorry," Plank said, after a moment. "I just can't seem to concentrate with those two flying about the cabin." For Ellen and Martha were moving about, as if in free-fall, floating and darting against the artificial gravity of the ship's system.

"Look, I'm superwoman," Ellen laughed, soaring to the cabin's ceiling and, at the same time, lifting with her mental force a seat that was normally bolted to the deck, twirling it dizzily in midair.

The voice was in their minds. "Very well, you may come."

Plank mused. Ellen and Martha floated to the deck and the chair took its place, firmly bolted.

"We accept your invitation," Plank said aloud. He waited.

"We accept your invitation," Susan said, when nothing happened.

They all heard the laugh. It was delightfully feminine. "Good," the voice said. Blink coordinates were given. Plank wrote them down and punched them into the computer. The ship gathered power and leaped.

The planet was on the fringe of a galaxy, the stars thin around its parent sun. It was a blue planet, a water planet. Close-up viewers showed a tailored beauty. Plank looked knowingly at Ellen.

"The same," she said. "The planet John and Sahara Plank visited."

"Yes," Plank said.

"Will you accept our transport to the surface?" the voice asked.

"Gladly," Plank said.

They stood below a vertical cliff. Above them the house perched high and stately, all crystals and glowing angles.

"Brace yourselves," Susan said. "We're going to try something." And they lifted. All six of them, rising effortlessly on the mental force of the combined minds of the women.

The balcony was the same. The room was as John Plank and Sahara had described it. The woman was the same, entering the room in her graceful flow of motion, all beauty. She gestured to the sunken conversation area. The six Earth people seated themselves.

"You continue to surprise us," the woman said.

"We come in goodwill," Plank said.

"With a certain amount of belligerent pride," the woman said, smiling.

"Admitted," Plank said.

"And an unlimited quantity of curiosity," the woman said.

"That, too, I admit," Plank said.

"One galaxy was just too small for you."

"Wouldn't it be for you?"

A slight frown crossed the woman's face. It faded rapidly. "This is the quality in you that we feared."

Plank looked at her, eyebrows raised.

"It is a strong word," she said, laughing. "But don't be deceived. We feared it not for us, but for you. At least most of us felt that way. In all honesty there were those who, when you appeared once more, wanted to destroy you. There were a minority of votes to reduce all of your worlds, to return you to primitivism. Those who voted thus said you broke the barrier too quickly. That, of course, is true, but the majority saw the amusing side: for how could one small race from one small galaxy threaten the serenity of a coalition of thousands of races from billions of planets in a sweep of the universe beyond your wildest imagination?"

"I have said we come in peace," Plank said. "We ask only—"

She waved him into silence. "You have earned the right to enter our community. You have passed the tests."

There was something in her voice that caused a flash of anger in Plank. "Tests?" he asked. "The barrier?"

"The barrier."

"The Eater?"

For the first time Plank saw what could have been uncertainty in the beautiful face. "That was unfortunate."

"Unfortunate?"

She opened her mouth to speak. Plank went on, overcoming her

objection. "The Eater destroyed thousands. Wasn't that a rather severe test? What kind of people are you to allow a thing like the Eater to prey on other life forms?"

"Your status then was not the same. We were, and I admit it, unaware of the facts."

"You were very human," Plank said. The woman looked at him questioningly. "You were not infallible."

"You may express it that way."

"I think my grandfather asked you this same question," Plank said. "Who are you to judge us?"

"You ask the question with even more right than your grandfather," she replied.

A wall misted, shimmered. The room darkened. Images began to appear in the shimmering space: worlds of cities marched by and worlds without cities and worlds with objects that defied description; varied life forms, some manlike, some so alien as to cause shudders, some so beautiful that Plank would feel a pain of admiration in his throat. It continued for a timeless period, a capsule look at a universe so diverse, so fantastic that he was numbed. When it ended the woman smiled.

"You have much to learn, man from Earth. Will you join us?"

"That is for our governments to decide," Plank said.

"Of course," the woman said, smiling. "I'm sure that your leaders will decide that you have much to gain."

"I believe they will," Plank said.

"Our discussion is ended, then," the woman said. "Now may I offer you the hospitality of our coalition?"

Over food and wine they talked of many things, the tone friendly, the mood one of cautious optimism. As evening came to the landscaped and tailored world, the beautiful woman, feeling mellow, looked at Plank and said, "We look forward to your becoming a part of our little community."

A wave of her hand showed that she was being facetious in referring to the vast stretch of the peopled universe as small. "You won't, will you, come out here and take over immediately?" She smiled.

"Not for at least 100 or so years," Plank said, laughing; but in his mind he heard a roar, a familiar roar, beginning low and rising into the gutty, coughing call of a jungle beast. He looked swiftly at Ellen. There was a pixie gleam in her eyes as the tiger's roar in Plank's mind trailed off into a small and mewling whine.