

Telepath's Dance

by
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Easter Island

Arthur Guthlac, who could never hope to go further into Space than a cheap package holiday to the Moon, envied his sister Selina more than he could easily say.

Apart from the ramrobots and the few, incredibly expensive, colony-ships, journeys beyond the Solar System were rare, and the queue of scientists with projects for Space was always growing. It was a staggering accolade for the gravity-anomaly project to have been selected for funding.

But the museum attendant and his brilliant sister had always been close, and the separation would be long. They stayed together for the last few days before the *Happy Gatherer* left Earth. He produced the model the night before the research ship's departure.

"Take this," Arthur said. "A small gift for you."

It was an ancient sea-going ship, cast in metal, a little more than the length of her hand.

"An antique? You haven't stolen it from the museum, have you?"

She put a laugh in her voice. So did he.

"Antique, but not stolen. I was at a conference at Greenwich Museum in London on automated security for children's galleries, and they gave the delegates mementos. So I hand it on to you, setting out on a voyage, like those old pioneers of the sea. I got one for each of us. They were two sibling-ships, I gather: built to the same design."

"Nice of them to give you two."

"They were throwing them away to make space for dance history exhibits. I saw hundreds in a trash-compactor... Perhaps," he added with seeming carelessness, "they were Military Fantasy cult objects."

"A depiction of a... military ship? You wouldn't have such things in a responsible museum, would you?"

“I don’t know if there ever were real military ships. There have been Fant stories, of course. If they did exist, they would have been much earlier. This ship is from the iron-age. The steel-age in fact... No, it’s not that.

“Anyway,” he continued in the official voice of an ARM, “it’s impossible that pirates or banditos could have had the resources to build a ship like this. It was very big engineering for its time. Only major companies or governments could have built such a thing. Besides, the Military Fantasy was about sociopathic ideas, and this doesn’t look to me like the idea, however diseased, of a military ship. Where would the war-men fire their weapons from?

“I guess this was some sort of bulk cargo-carrier. These devices here would have been to pour grain or ore or something into hoppers. This is unless they are meant to be giant ‘gun-barrel’ weapons.”

He gave a cautious, almost furtive smile and inflected his voice with mockery as if to show anyone monitoring the conversation that he was making a tasteless private joke.

He pointed to a model of a small boat attached to the main model. “That shows the scale—about 1,000:1. I’m not sure how they measured length in those days, but the real ship would have been about 35,000 tonnes. Police—the fore-runners of ARM—still carried guns then, but for these things to have been guns,”—he touched one of the three sets of triple tubes on turntables on the foc’sle—“they would have had to fire ‘bullets’ as big as a man! Also, see how wide the hull is. That’s for weight and volume. In any real world, of course, races that made war with each other could never advance to build machines like this.”

“That’s a—what did they call it?—a lifeboat?”

“Yes. Analogous to the boats on a Spaceship. Used for going ashore when the water was not deep enough for the main ship to go right in. And for emergencies, I suppose. Not very nice to have to get into such a thing when your ship was sinking in a storm, though. I bet the sailors on”—he read the name and date on the model’s stand—“the HMS *Nelson* of 1928 would envy your conveniences. The other was called the HMS *Rodney*. Of course civilization was long established then. I don’t know what the names mean, but they were built the same. Perhaps a bit like us... It might matter, you know.”

This last was their private cryptic, indicated by inflection. Satellites could detect key-words. “Quixotic” had gone from the unrestricted vocabulary, but she knew something of his mission that dared not speak its name.

A strange linkage between them. It had been suggested that she had some telepathic potential, but she refused to be tested. Her internal life was complex enough, and if she had any abilities, latent or otherwise, in that direction, she did not want to know it. Without proper shields and controls telepathy might be a fatal gift.

Modern research hinted that telepathy had killed the Neanderthals, making them too vulnerable, too able to empathize with the pain of prey, of competitors, and of one another. Modern telepaths—the very few there were—tended to be abnormal in a number of ways, and often desperately disturbed. She had met a few when the idea of testing her was raised and that had been more than enough.

Arthur and Selina were perhaps lucky to be brother and sister. Otherwise they would undoubtedly at their first meeting have become lovers, in an intense, consuming relationship probably ultimately doomed, for they were consort personalities, not complementary ones. As it was, there was much of closeness and comfort they could give each other which no lover or husband or wife could touch, in a relationship that had no sexual tension or jealousy about it.

A last night of delicate, careful talk. Then it was time for her to board the shuttle to the *Happy Gatherer* in its parking orbit. They had driven to the field together, under the gaze of the preserved monoliths.

Angel’s Pencil

“We’ve lost the wreckage.” Steve Weaver turned from the instrument console and stood up. The remnants of the alien enemy had dwindled and vanished on the last screen.

“And no more headaches.” Sue Bhang’s eyes beseeched him for reassurance.

“No more headaches. Maybe never again.”

The nightmare still pressed against them, almost physically, as the *Angel’s Pencil* drove on its fixed course behind its vast ramscoop field. Ship and crew had changed much since the colony expedition

had left Earth. The console was a small cleared space. A colony ship is crowded with cargo at the best of times, but now what had been the few free areas of the *Pencil* were piled with alien machinery weapons, and instruments, whole and in pieces. And in the hastily-improvised cold-room (cold, at least, tended to be easily available in Space) were the corpses and salvaged fragments of the things themselves, dissected, fragmented, burned, or—in a few cases—as nearly whole as explosive decompression in vacuum had left them. Jim Davis and Helen Boyd were supervising the filming.

The cadavers were like a declaration of intent: huge, far bigger than humans, with black razor claws, huge slabs of muscle, cable-like sinews, bolt-cutter jaws with tremendous gape and dagger fangs. All the eyes were gone, but the huge sockets told of binocular and night-vision, and the cast of the features was still plain. Convergent evolution had produced something like enough to the ancient sabretooth tiger of Earth for them to name it *Pseudofelis*. But there was more: bigger than human brain-cases. An upright stance. Hands. A hideous contradiction in terms: *Pseudofelis Sapiens*.

The resemblance to that family of creatures which made up nature's master-work among Earth's predators was obvious. But that qualifier *Sapiens* overarched all else. Not only knife-like teeth: some of the bodies had equipment that included real knives of some monomolecular-edged metal which cut through steel. There were fusion-bomb missiles, weapon-lasers there had been the heat-induction ray. And there was a drive immeasurably better than the *Angel's Pencil's* hydrogen-fusion ramjet which was the best that human brains could build.

The *Angel's Pencil* could flee from the wreckage of the battle it had miraculously won, but the nightmare was travelling with it. The humans aboard looked older now, and more than one had a tendency to wake up screaming. The doc remained busy.

Like so many of the best nightmares, it made no sense. There was no reason carnivores should not evolve intelligence—the dolphins had, and Steve knew something of the story of the sea-statue the dolphins had found—but intelligence like *this*? The evolution of humanity had surely shown that civilization and technology were interdependent.

Well, they weren't. There were plenty of mysteries among the things they had salvaged—the drive-motor that made no sense, the smashed bodies of a couple of things like giant starfish, weird tools and artifacts, an untranslatable script—but the overall picture was clear: the long search for intelligent extraterrestrial life was over, and humanity was in trouble.

“They won't believe it,” Steve said. “I wouldn't believe it...” He stared into the humming, moving battery of camera lenses and shook his fist in confused, frustrated fury.

“They'll have to believe it...” Jim said. Hundreds of pictures had already been sent back to the Solar system.

“And we,” said Helen, “have no business wondering whether they believe it or not. We've made our decision. All we can do for Earth is to keep sending.

“And for ourselves, we had better finish fitting those missiles and pray for time.”

Gutting Claw

First Telepath taught me new uses of the *Sthondat*-drug, gave me new spoor to follow, thoughts to chew bitterly upon. When Telepath talks to Telepath, we are not always humble. Are we not also Kzin?

Long we spent in bases and in the great ship. My hunting began as First Telepath was dying. I was to succeed him.

We had been roused from hibernation by the help-call of *Tracker*, our lead scout, one thirty-second of a light-year ahead of us. Our ship replied in war-code. No messages returned save the ghost-cry.

Later First Telepath probed far down the tunnels of what some call the World of the Eleventh Sense. He thought at last that he touched strange minds at the extremity of his range. Feared Zraar-Admiral expended him. I felt his collapse, though I shielded as I could. First Telepath was old as we are counted but Feared Zraar-Admiral would not scrap him while any of his power remained: we are always used to the end. Though we may not shame the Heroes' Race by breeding our ability is rare.

When I probed in my turn I found no minds. If they had been, they were gone. To find *Tracker* I was not needed, and often I was left alone to sleep. Dreaming,

I was, when Orderly kicked me awake, of Karan when

I was her kitten, the warm, milky time of purring and kneading. Often I had that dream now.

Tracker, when we closed with her, was in two pieces, hull chopped rather than blast-damaged. I saw mirror-shine laser-cutting at myriad points in the gaping structure. Around it was debris, much wreckage of heavy fittings which should have been securely mounted in the hull and seemed to have been pumped out like gut by hind-claws from a prey after the disabling wound.

Damage Control and Alien Technologies Officers with crew had gathered the wreckage and investigated. Alien Technologies was on the bridge when I arrived.

“It was one slash. The laser was close. The ship was ransacked. The gravity-planer, weapons, stores, medical supplies and many computers and memory-bricks are gone.”

“Pirates, Weeow-Captain?” Zraar-Admiral asked. His tail was twitching.

I caught Weeow-Captain’s thought: *Pirates attack a Patriarch’s warship?* And his polite answer.

“That was my first thought, Dominant One. But holes were cut to sealed compartments for bodies far smaller than ours. They did not know access points or service ducts or corridors. They did not disable the beacon. Some remaining memory-bricks are intact and the bridge recorder is in place. If the enemy recognized our equipment they would surely have taken these or destroyed them completely.

“The gravity motor was an Admiralty standard type. Indeed it was fitted here. I estimate from the slash in *Tracker* that it would have been too damaged to use again. Therefore the fact that it is gone suggests that it was a technology which the destroyers of *Tracker* did not possess and took to examine or copy.”

“Urrr. What of the recorder?”

“The laser passed through it. We’re working on it, Dominant One.”

“Patriarch’s priority!”

“It is so ordered, Sire. We have found small artifacts made of primitive alloys we don’t use. We have rayed and otherwise

examined them and I am sure they are not miniature mines. I think they are minor tools. But if hand-tools, not for our hands.

“Further, Feared Zraar-Admiral, some seals re-engaged. That preserved some atmosphere and what was left of the lifesystem recycled a little more. Some compartments were not completely sterile. In one we found this.”

Alien Technologies Officer showed a computer-enhanced print of a space-gloved hand with five long digits. Like the hand of a *kz’eerkt*.

“This is the clearest but others are similar, No bodies, Zraar-Admiral, not of any kind. There were Jotok slaves aboard, but even their bodies are gone.

“We cannot tell if or how deeply *Tracker’s* claws slashed the enemy. It looks as if she was taken by surprise.”

“She was a scout. It was her task not to be taken by surprise.”

“Dominant One, perhaps the attackers used some alien warfare method. But from the absence of spreading we think the enemy laser was fired from close quarters. Perhaps close enough to have been in easy visual sight. I do not understand how such a thing happened.”

Zraar-Admiral twitched his tail and his ears contracted. He mrowered thoughtfully. “Urrr. Her Captain did not have a name.”

“He was of good record,” Weeow-Captain said. “A brave and competent officer though he died nameless.”

“Yes.” Feared Zraar-Admiral still had only a partial name himself. Had name-desire betrayed the scout-cruiser’s Captain into folly? Then Zraar-Admiral’s mind was again an unscalable crag. But an alien Space-faring race that fought! Light-years from any star! No aliens had so far been discovered—at least by what we knew of the Eternal Hunt—with more than interplanetary flight and with vestigial weapons systems. By the time lower races got into interplanetary space they had become soft and weak, had lost honor and warrior skills.

But the Dream of the Day! *Those* thoughts were not new, nor strange, nor secret: *We need a worthy enemy!*

The minds and the odors of the bridge-staff were pouring out messages. Enemies now had the booty of Kzin weaponry and drive-technology to add to whatever demon-arts they already owned. If they eluded radar and Telepaths, they might be targeting *Gutting*

Claw at this moment. Or, beyond reach of my mind or Zraar-Admiral's weapons, they might be assembling a Fleet.

A Tech spoke urgently.

"Sire, we've got something out of their bridge recorder. We're stitching it through now. It's only a few words."

A new voice spoke.

"Keep all your weapons ready to fire but don't use them unless I give the order..."

"That's the Captain."

Hissing interference, then the same ghost-voice.

"What kind of weapons do they have?"

Another ghost answered. A Telepath deep in the World of the Eleventh Sense, strained and bewildered. I caught no secret vibrations inserted for the benefit of a Brother Telepath, nothing of the code we had developed for our own war.

"...a light-pressure drive powered by incomplete hydro gen fusion. They use an electromagnetic ramscoop to get their own hydro gen from space..."

Zraar-Admiral stopped the record for a moment. All thought alike. That was no Kzin ship the ghosts spoke of. Such a drive was not even on the same path as Kzin technology. The ghosts spoke again.

There was a blur. Something in the Captain's voice that I could not make out, then the Telepath.

"... not even a knife or a club. Wait, they've got cooking knives. But that's all they use them for. They don't fight."

"They don't fight?"

"No, Sir, they don't expect us to fight either. The idea has occurred to three of them and each has dismissed it from his mind."

"But why?"

"I don't know, Sir. It's a science they use, or a religion. I don't understand... I don't..."

A scrambled shriek, then a voice identified as *Tracker's* Alien Technology's Officer: *"Sir, they couldn't have any big weapons. There isn't room..."*

There was more interference, then a spitting scream

In the Battle Imperative from the Captain: ***"WEAPONS OFFICER! Burn..."***

There the recording ended, in mirror-surfaced fused metal.

Zraar-Admiral and his officers stood silent for a moment. Zraar-Admiral's testicles were still in the relaxed position and his tail and whiskers did not stir now. An old red-sandstone statue. His tongue flicked out for a moment across the tips of his fangs. Then Weeow-Captain spoke.

"But those first words. 'They don't fight.' No weapons. That was the Telepath."

"Then the Telepath was deceived."

"Urrr."

I shrank further into the submissive position, not meeting those stares. Telepaths, whatever else might be wrong with us, did not make factual mistakes in collecting data, any more than a hunter mistook a prey when it was plainly before his eyes.

Sometimes Telepaths could get things out of context, or be overwhelmed by the alienness of prey minds. Yet the Telepath in *Tracker* had spoken with absolute certainty. "No weapons" did not admit of context errors. All Telepaths searched, unceasingly, for allies in our own war. In any case, reading alien minds was part of our training and the Telepath in a lead scout was specialized in alien animal contact. Thoughts flowed about me, some tinged with disquiet. If we were despised, we were also taken for granted as an infallible weapon. *Can this enemy beat Telepaths?* It was the worst part of our lot to have our minds open to the secret fears of Heroes, but now those were my thoughts also.

Urrr.

Five long fingers. On the cunning and trickery of wild *kz'eerkti* many tales and legends turned, from the admonitory to the obscene. Some *kz'eerkti* breeds used stones as missiles and sticks as tools. Some could ambush Heroes in forest hunts.

Bad, that hand-print in Space, as the wreckage of a destroyed Kzinti ship fell in endless darkness before us. Traps, deceptions. In any event, for better or worse, a Space-travelling enemy we knew nothing of.

"Dominant One, there is more. Later, another cell in the recorder was activated. Possibly by aliens sacking the ship."

Gibbering and gabbling. *Kz'eerkti* gibbered and gabbled, when they had played tricks on Heroes, or when they pelted Heroes with fruit or excrement from the branches of tall forest trees, ready to scamper away through the branches when the Heroes concerned began to slash the tree-trunks down or climb them.

“Record this for yourself, Telepath,” Feared Zraar-Admiral said. “It may be useful when we meet this prey. AT, translate it. You will allow Telepath to assist you.”

I know now what it said.

“Energy discharge now.”

“It looks inert.”

“Look at the meter: there’s movement there. We should get out. We’ve done what we came to do.”

“Yes, we should get out! I don’t mean just back to the Pencil. You know that ship could not have been alone.”

“I have thought of it. However I admit there were once a few seconds when I stopped thinking about it. That was quite a pleasant sensation, I recall.”

“There may be more cats coming here. I mean *here*. We’ve picked up other emissions from the hull. Maybe calling them. They could be here... now. Those first headaches the cats may have caused—I had another not long ago. Milder, though, but there.”

“I had one too. Jim said several people did. I put it down to strain.

“Or some cat probe. At extreme range now but coming closer? Some mind-weapon?”

“Tanj! Do you have to think of things like that? We’ve had nightmares enough since this all began... Anyway, we still have a job to do... There’s a light flashing on that control surface.”

“There’s a Tanj light flashing in my mind. And it’s the biggest warning light there is. Run! Run now!

“It doesn’t look like a weapon...”

“I say run! Aren’t we in a bad enough state already?”

“We’ve got to get every scrap of knowledge we can. We’ve got to keep transmitting to Earth. Keeping the transmission going is more important than our lives.”

“Can we do that if another warship full of cats jumps us? They may not be so obliging as to leave themselves in the way of our drive

next time. Or several ships? These things must be co-operative, with organization. We've got the motor, the weapons, the bodies. Enough to keep us busy for years. It's crazy to wait for them..."

Jabber.

"Weeow-Captain, you may fall the crew out from Battle-stations. Remain closed up at Defense-stations.

"We have the direction of *Tracker's* drift. We track It back. There must be spoor, and *Tracker* has given us a sign. They did not die in vain. Urn... a *light-pressure drive powered by Incomplete hydrogen fusion. They use an electromagnetic ramscoop to get their own hydrogen from space...*"

A sudden rush of understanding.

A trail of burnt hydrogen!

"You may howl for the dead, and you may howl vengeance for our companions in the Hunt. But no heroes are to die in the mourning. And no death-duels till further notice. No station is to be uncrewed."

Happy Gatherer

Paul van Barrow waited for the hubbub to die away, waving for quiet with a smile. His responsibilities as leader of the *Happy Gatherer* expedition tended to make him pompous and even stuffy at times, but he was as excited as any now. There were several projects running on the ship, and a score of impressively multi-skilled people on board. *Happy Gatherer* was a big ship, hired not purpose-built, but they made a crowd in the room.

"The gravity anomalies are still inexplicable. If they really are Outsiders, they may have some gravity control. There's another thing."—He pointed to a projected diagram, a wedge-ended ovoid—that ship has a sort of streamlining, as if it can land and take off through an atmosphere from a planetary surface. And it's big. I think that's also evidence of gravity-control."

Signals to trustees? The thought crossed several minds. An instruction transmitted now would reach the stock-market in about eight years' time.

"We signed undertakings," Paul reminded them, "About windfall profits from new knowledge."

It had been one of the ways finance for the expedition had been raised.

“If we can understand this new knowledge,” said Henry Nakamura. There was a note of caution in his voice.

“People that intelligent should be good teachers.”

“Are you certain, Paul?” Rosalind Huang’s voice had an odd edge to it. Her eyes seemed somehow unnaturally large under her red-black pattern of hair. *She needs reassurance*, Rick Chew realized. *What’s wrong? This is a great moment.* He stepped in.

“If these are signals, we will translate them. It’s difficult, certainly, but that’s only to be expected.”

“A new bunch of careers when we get back,” said

Michael Patrick, “There will be a stream of PhDs rolling down conveyor belts.”

“Not only with the language. We’ve probably just set up a dozen new academic industries. Meanwhile, we should have identified some keys, but we haven’t.”

Michael laughed. He had an easy, infectious laugh in almost any situation. Although some thought he did not always take things quite seriously enough, the crew owed him a lot. He had shown a gift, during the long flight, for taking the sting out of almost every problem with some joke. “So we’ve underestimated the difficulties. We’ve plenty of time, and so, surely, have they.”

“Rick,” said Selina Guthlac, “Aren’t we making a questionable assumption?”

“We can’t expect the translating to be easy, but if their language has consistent rules—and surely it must—we will translate it in the end.” The Neuronetic lattices on and in the ship were Lambda Platform. Their cell-connections were beyond counting.

Selina worried Rick. The crew and their successful interaction were his responsibility, and Selina seemed at times to be what another age might have called a misfit. And he had met her brother. Scrawny owliness in him was in her a hint of watchfulness which reminded one that owls were hunters. Arthur Guthlac’s undirected nervous energy was in her concentrated accomplishment. Like all in the *Happy Gatherer* she was a winner. Selina had won her way into Space with the sufferance sometimes accorded genius. Arthur had

given up any idea of belonging. She could adopt protective coloration and be accepted by most of the crew, nearly all the time. But interdependence in such a situation was virtually total, and, as on Earth, too many eccentricities stacked up.

Now she spoke carefully, tasting the words and disliking them as she used them: “What if they do not want to communicate with us? What if they deliberately disguise their speech? Deliberately make it impossible for anyone else to translate it?”

No-one asked the obvious question: “Why?” But here and there expressions began to change.

“Selina!” Peter Brown laughed, “What have you been reading?”

She flinched for a second. Beneath its innocent surface, the question might have dangerous implications. Then she came back at them.

“Another thing: you said the alien ship is big. took at the scale. It’s not big, it’s gigantic! And the shape— that might not be for atmosphere entry, it might be to reduce surface area. Why do you think they would want to do that?”

No one answered for a long moment. Then Peter asked:

“What about the *Angel’s Pencil*? Have there been any messages?”

“None we’ve heard.” The colony ship to Epsilon Eridani would have passed through this quadrant, but in the interstellar distances no-one had seriously expected to intercept messages from it. Its big comm-laser would be tight-beamed back to Earth or the Belt.

“I suggest we all assemble at the end of each watch for updates. The crew of the *Happy Gatherer* dispersed reluctantly, with many lingering glances at the screens. Peter called Rick and Paul aside.

Selina had comfortable quarters, decorated with a number of personal touches. In Space “personal space” was a necessity not a luxury. There was a transparent case of stimulated glass and wood on the shelf, a small grey-painted object within. The model recalled a shared life of the mind light-years away. A reminder too of the dangers the old sea-voyagers and traders of Earth had faced in primitive craft. A good-luck charm, perhaps? Something else? She looked at it as she had many times in the past, but HMS *Nelson* told her nothing more.

The door signaled a visitor. Rick entered.

“Why did you say that?” He asked her without preliminaries, ‘About alien messages being made untranslatable deliberately.’

“I hardly know.” She already regretted her previous words, and their inevitable implications. The intimacy of a long voyage could lull one into self-betrayal.

“Selina, I don’t agree with what Peter’s been saying...”

“Why, what has he been saying? Or can I guess?”

“I don’t want to be hypercritical, and I’m sure that’s not his intention either. Or anyone’s. Paul has always defended you, you know. And sometimes Peter says things a little before he’s thought them through, perhaps.

“I’m not suggesting you need conditioning or anything like that, but have you thought of having your psych profile redone, just as a precaution. It would be entirely voluntary”

“No.”

“Suppose there was some chemical imbalance.”

“The doc would notify me and correct it when I have my next check-up. In fact, and as you know, I would never have got past the selection board carrying anything like that. But Rick, both the selection board then and the doc now are of the opinion that I am sane.” His self-assurance was a goad to her. She realized she had never liked or respected this smug, complacent, always unsurprising, somehow *herbivorous* man. *Like Paul, only worse, she thought. Well, it’s not surprising. There was always a chance we might meet Outsiders. The same board chose both of them as the best representatives of the human race... what an error it made when it also chose me!*

“Are you sure you’re *happy*?” It was a weighty question as he asked it. This was a culture that took happiness and its pursuit more seriously than any in history.

“What’s it to you?”

He was hurt by her words. “We are a team. You know that.”

“Thank you, Rick. You’ve possibly seen my profile as you are in charge of crew records. Since one of my jobs is Space navigation, I have studied something of Space-flight. Since I am also, as you are doubtless also aware, particularly as we have discussed it a number of times, a natural scientist, I do know something about human body

and brain chemistry.” She paused, measured him with her eyes and added, “And they may have gravity control.”

Part of Selina’s problem in socializing may have been connected to the fact that she lived in a culture most of whose members had little concept of sarcasm or irony. These people did not insult each other, and it took Rick Chew a little while to work out what she meant.

“I’m only thinking of you,” he told her at last. “Anyone who can’t get on with people shouldn’t be here.”

“Shall I get off and walk home, then?”

He flinched.

Something hurt her. She sensed that the atmosphere of conflict was not only alien to him, it was painful. She sought for words to calm the situation.

“I think you’re tense, Selina,” Rick said, “Perhaps a little current stimulation would help you relax.”

He backed away, raising his hands against the murderous rage blazing in her face. He distinctly saw the beginning of a striking motion before she checked it. She spoke as he had never heard anyone speak before.

“My father was a current addict. He cured himself. I was with him. I saw him cure himself. Have you any idea what that means? Do you know how many current addicts have ever cured themselves? Do you know the price they have to pay?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t know.” Rick was doubly distressed at giving and receiving pain now.

“Don’t you ever, ever, say that again, do you hear!” Selina had dropped into a half crouch. She glared into Rick’s face, now working with signs of consternation, for a long moment without speaking. It was a glare which a generation experienced in such things might have called murderous. Mumbling apologies, he shook his head in bewilderment and left.

How would he behave, how would any of them behave, her thought began to form, how would any of them look if... if at that moment...

A headache. Stress perhaps. The autodoc had outlets in each crew member's rooms and Selina quickly inserted her fingers for chemical analysis.

Gutting Claw

I fell onto my forelimbs as I crossed the bridge. Zraar-Admiral would have to calculate how much more I could take. It was not my place to comment on this, but to report.

“Dominant One, the enemy know nothing of *Tracker*. They know a little of the Ancients, but of no other thinking life in Space. They have no clear aims except to gather data about anomalous radio and gravity events and other useless knowledge. But they are *kz'eerkti*.”

“What radio and gravity events?”

“Probably us.”

Monkey inquisitiveness. There were Simianoids on several planets in the Patriarchy, and it was an ecological niche which often led to rudimentary tool-using. Intelligent beings were generally somewhat alike and also generally edible. Slaver-students thought the Ancients had spread common primitive life-forms through much of the Galaxy. But this on the screens represented more than rudimentary tool-using.

“I believe the same type of apes killed *Tracker*. The drives are similar. Omnivores with five fingers like the print... The species has established itself in considerable numbers in one star-system apart from its original one, and in smaller colonies further away, using reaction drives. They have hibernation...” We Telepaths were expected to understand alien sciences, religious, societies, languages and technologies as well as alien thoughts.

But several inhabited worlds! A Vengeance-Hunt had become a promise of Conquest Glorious! The hunters' minds were volcanic.

“They send messages to us. They call their ship the...” I had trouble translating. *Successful Plant-Eater* was how it came out.

But *Tracker* hung in every mind. *Tracker* and the great swathe of exhausted hydrogen which we had been following.

“What weapons do they have?”

“None, Feared Zraar-Admiral. These creatures have never fought. I find nothing of weapons, hardly a concept of war, save in one

female mind. Even there it is vague.” I paused, then spoke again, all around knowing as I spoke that I repeated the words of dead *Tracker*'s Telepath: “They have only kitchen-knives.”

“Feared Zraar-Admiral,” said Alien Technologies, “how could such a race have evolved a theory of ballistics?”

“Ballistics or no, we see them in Space,” said Student of Particles. “There is a danger of weapons! I care not what the addict says.”

“There is also the Paradox,” said Zraar-Admiral, “Do not forget it ever.”

Zraar-

Admiral had killed enemies in plenty on the ground as the Heroes' battle-legions over-ran worlds, or fought each other, with claw, fang, *W'tsai* and occasionally with beam or fusion-bomb. Not all those battles had been easy, for a true Hero attacked—on the ground or anywhere else—without too much reckoning of the odds. On one planet with wide oceans the locals had had sea-ships hidden under water, armed with missiles with multiple warheads. Heroes died before our Students of Particles developed a heat-induction ray that boiled the seas. *Tracker* had had such a ray. And there were vague stories that came slowly from distant parts of a widespread Empire of other things... But Zraar-Admiral had never joined battle against aliens in Space.

Perhaps he never would. The war between the Slavers and their Tnuctipun slaves that wiped out intelligent life in the galaxy billions of years previously might be the only full-scale war of species that would ever be fought in the deeps between the stars, save for the far-distant, almost legendary, Time of Glory when the Jotok had been overthrown. The few races encountered in the Hunt that had interplanetary and poor weapons were hardly substitutes. There was a legend of a Feral Jotok Fleet which had escaped when the Kzin rose, but in centuries no trace of it had been found...

The fighting against other Kzin was controlled. Struggles of Kzinti Houses Noble produced exhilaration and bloodshed in plenty and the ambitions of young Heroes for names and territory made for a number of outlaws, rebels and pirates. There was always dueling. Zraar-Admiral had owed his first advancement to his dueling prowess and his trophy-hoard contained an impressive number of

ears, but fights between Kzin, in the training arena, the hunting preserve, or even in full-scale military action, were not the Conquest Glorious or The Day. *Gutting Claw's* destiny, he felt, was unfulfilled. Like the whole Navy's. Like his own.

Some priests said Space-faring warrior aliens were a fantasy like intelligent females, a self-evidently heretical denial of the natural order of things. The Jotok alone had been created by the Fanged God to give Heroes access to gravity-motors and High-Tech weapons without shameful dilution of our own warrior culture. But for Zraar-Admiral life with no possibility of The Day, the Triumph Supreme, presented a prospect of doleful dullness. The Battle-Drum on the bridge showed the Navy's view. It had never yet been struck, and for one thing only would Zraar-Admiral strike it.

Alien Technologies Officer suspected dimly the struggle between Priesthood and Military, between religious doctrine and the claims of honor which the Battle-Drum symbolized. I, whom he disdained to notice, knew more than he about the ideas that made him. But instincts less acute than mine would have told him how dangerous a path his thoughts and words might start down. AT shifted to safer ground, keeping matters purely technical.

My report, Zraar-Admiral realized as I did, duplicated *Tracker's* recorder. An alien enemy with no weapons or knowledge of weapons, and *Tracker* sliced by a claw of light. If the enemy deceived Telepaths there was real, and for Zraar-Admiral thrilling, danger. For me the prospect was less thrilling.

Happy Gatherer

“There was a signal coming from Earth,” said Paul, “but I’ve put it on record and left all channels clear for our friends. Whatever it is, it will have to wait on this.”

“think... ?” Anna left the words unfinished.

“Attempts at direct mind contact? It’s the kind of thing one might expect in advanced beings. If so, we’re not equipped to cope. I know telepathic ability was a factor in the selection of some of us, but we haven’t enough of it.”

“So what do we do?”

“I’m unhappy. What if they decide that *we* are too alien for *them* to communicate with and leave? We can’t follow. I don’t think we can just sit here and wait for them to make the next move. What a disaster if they decided we were a waste of time and vanished!”

“Would they, after all this effort?” Paul asked. “That ship is big. *Really* big. It must have cost them energy to bring it here to meet us.” He was instilling confidence. “Look, there are scientists on that ship, people with minds like ours, or better, who look at problems the same way. They’ll adjust to us. Perhaps they expected to recognize us. Now they don’t. Perhaps,” he added after a moment, “they’re frightened. I think we’ll have to pay them a visit. We’ll take a boat across.”

“I wonder,” said Rick, “if that would be entirely... diplomatic? We know we’re dealing with alien minds. What if they saw us as some sort of threat to them?” His confrontation with Selina had left him with food for thought.

“Threat? What do you mean?” Anna Nagle asked.

“Did you ever see an animal in a safari park? Go close too suddenly, and it’ll often run, though you mean it no harm. For all we know these outsiders might think the same way.”

“But,” Paul objected, “beings that get into Space must share certain common attributes of social order, cooperation... isn’t that what the whole history of civilization is about? How could they see us—fellow Space-farers—as a... threat. If it’s obvious to us they are not savage animals, surely it must be equally obvious to them that we are the same.”

“How do we know what they think? I’m sorry now we’ve no Belters with us. Even if they do tend to be paranoiac about Space, I need a different perspective on this...”

“I think we can do without any paranoia here.” Peter said. He may have been looking in the direction of Selina but it was impossible to be sure. “We are mature adults and I think we can arrive at sensible decisions.”

Peter is an ARM, Selina thought suddenly. Of course the technological police would have people aboard. He’s going to have ARM do a thorough job on my files when we get back to Earth, and

this will be my last trip into space. What am I thinking of? This may well be the last trip for all of us anyway.

“As well as the boat, why don’t we send across a free party in suits?” Paul asked. “I will go first.” He was unsure why his position compelled him to say this, but some deeply-buried thing told him it was appropriate. “I take the point that they might be frightened of us. This should demonstrate that we mean no harm.

“Ancient people approached each other holding up empty hands,” he went on. “So civilization started. I’m sorry we haven’t an historian to tell us more... Six in the boat and six in suits. That leaves eight on board to control all essential systems and the major comm-links.”

There was a murmur of agreement.

Paul and Rick turned to Selina again. “You won’t want to come, of course.”

“I certainly do want to come,” said Selina. “You’ve convinced me.” *Get off the major target!* The voice was screaming far in the back of her mind.

The crew of the *Happy Gatherer* scattered with final instructions.

Selina’s Space-suit was standard issue, geochronically linked to the ship’s planar logic lattices, with large pockets in the arms and legs. There was nutrient under high pressure in waist-cylinders, boot-caches and other compartments, and the suit recycled moisture. The lonely Belter rock-jacks might have had it differently, but in Earth’s history of this sort of Space-flight such things had seldom been needed: in an emergency you were usually near help or dead. She could think of nothing more she needed to take. She slipped her good-luck charm, the model ship, into one pocket.

Gutting Claw

Space-suited figures were leaving the enemy ship. Further magnifications brought them into clear view. A port opened and a boat put out. The monkeys made no attempt to conceal their approach. The enemy ship in arrogance or threat was actually shining lights upon them.

The EV aliens moved towards *Gutting Claw* with small reaction jets. One, who I felt Feared Zraar-Admiral mentally marking with his own urine, was ahead of the others. Unless there was something very

peculiar about those compact, long limbed bodies, they carried no weapons.

“Telepath! What is happening!”

“Sire, I detect no warlike intent. But if *Tracker* was somehow deceived, I cannot be sure...”

“AT! What sort of tactic is this?”

“I don’t understand it, Feared Zraar-Admiral.”

“Are they going to attack us with those jets.”

Feared Zraar-Admiral, I do not know, but they are far too small to do any damage to the hull. They are maneuvering jets only. That boat is powered by chemical rockets on the same principle. We detect no radio-actives in it. They still appear to me to be completely unarmed.”

Fight them! I caught Weeow-Captain’s mind. *What are you waiting for, you old fool? Kill now!* Then a blur. *Noyouaremymentoroldfriend...* I broke that very perilous contact.

“They are small creatures.”

“And the creatures that killed *Tracker* were also small. Telepath!”

“Sire, still all my skills tell me they have no weapons.”

“Do they seek to take us prisoner?”

“They seek to meet us. Sire, that must be the reason.”

“I want live specimens,” Zraar-Admiral said. “Telepath, is there anything useful in that ship?”

“No, Dominant One. In general the technology is primitive. The creatures have a number of gadgets and devices we do not possess, and their reaction-drive technology is of course developed, but that is all in their minds and can be extracted. The drive is inferior to ours and the materials are insignificant.”

He turned to Weapons Officer.

“Destroy the ship as soon as the EV *kz’eerkti* and the boat are far enough away not to be involved. Watch sharply for monkey-tricks!”

The battle proved kittens’-play. Under the converging beams the enemy ship’s life-system area melted almost at once. Its fusion plant should have destabilized with a major explosion but the drive was idling and probably some monkey used its dying moments to shut off the fuel-feed in an attempt to save its fellows. Cowards. We knew little of such drives but knew a Hero would have pointed the ship at

his enemy and turned off the fusion-shield. I thought of Lord Dragga-Skrull and his last historic order: “The Patriarch knows every Hero will kill eights of times before dying heroically!”

The weedy creatures made no attempt at attack, resistance, or even evasion. The final explosion was visually fierce but of no consequence. *Gutting Claw* was heavily shielded.

Watching the blue-white glare fading on the screen Zraar-Admiral regretted that the business had been so easy. There had been relatively little honor gained. Whatever had happened to *Tracker*, these omnivore apes, like previously-encountered aliens, had nothing to match Kzin weaponry. But that disappointment also held rich promise—of worlds ripe for the taking by his squadron alone.

“Weeow-Captain!”

“Sire!”

“You have the enemy ship’s course recorded?”

“Indeed, Sir!”

“It is, I declare, a Patriarch’s Secret. When we have avenged *Tracker* we will follow that course to its home.”

“Yes, Sire. They came in a straight line from their first appearance. They seem to have made no attempt to hide their point of origin, if they have changed course since their original take-off Telepath will take the course from their minds.” They took it for granted that I could do such things, and that I would, at whatever cost to myself. “In any event there will probably be records in the surviving boat.”

“They will have destroyed those by now.”

“I wonder. Their behavior is so strange... perhaps they are a death-worshipping cult...”

“Telepath was not deceived.” Zraar-Admiral did not try to hide the contemptuous rage in his voice. He knew all his officers shared it. “They can’t fight at all.”

Perhaps, despite the similarities in her Telepath’s report and my own, *Tracker* had encountered something different to these leaf-eaters. That led to another consideration: as a matter of honor, Zraar-Admiral could not turn aside from the pursuit of an enemy known to be dangerous, and against whom vengeance was owed, to attack the soft targets of this monkeydom. We were on the trail of *Tracker’s*

killer and that account would have to be settled first. That should not take long, however. Zraar-Admiral turned to Weeow-captain.

“When the prisoners are inboard I shall look at them. Bring my gold armor”—this was hardly a ceremonial occasion but it was what the protocol of Fleet Standing Orders declared for first meetings with conquered prey—“detail two more infantry squads for my escort.”

The monkeys had been secured and breathed Kzin air. So we could breathe their air. The monkeydom extended, as I had reported, over several industrialized worlds. Feared Zraar-Admiral could claim the biggest continent of the homeworld for himself. And a Full Name, certainly. A Full Name for Weeow-Captain, too. Partial names for others. Many others, if Zraar-Admiral indulged. Vast fiefdoms. Smells of names, riches, glory, conquest! Perhaps some of the monkeys’ less-advanced sub-species would put up a fight on the ground. If so, there could be rich rewards for the most Heroic and ferocious of the infantry troopers. Partial names and estates might not be beyond the claws of outstanding Sergeants.

Nothing, of course, for Telepath. Except burn-out.

Twelve humans and thirty-four Kzin stared at each other in the ruddy light of the great hangar-deck. One squad of eight flanked the prisoners. Zraar-Admiral, with Telepath at his feet, stood at the head of his Guard squads.

Zraar-Admiral saw Simianoids with considerable variations of skin-colors and strangely limited and irregular hair-growth. Their general morphology at least suggested the theory of common life-form seeding by the Ancients. They stood two-thirds of his height and would carry, he judged, a third of his body-weight or less. Some were leaking red liquid, presumably circulatory fluid, where marines had torn their skin in stripping away their space-suits. Frail as well as ugly, he thought. Spindly limbs with puny muscles, branch-grasping monkey-hands, with those five long fingers and tiny, useless horny tips that could not be called claws. Foreheads higher than many *kz’ eerkti* species on Kzin, which was only to be expected. No tails, oddly enough. How did they counter-balance when running on branches or leaping between trees?

They would be able to climb trees too slender to bear the weight of Kzinti. Sport there perhaps. On Kzinti worlds the cunning and

agility of the beasts made *kz'eerkti* -hunts enjoyable as well as useful training for the young. The odd distribution of body-hair on these specimens suggested an ancestry with aquatic episodes, so perhaps they could also swim. There were two large, grotesquely red-centered, teats on the females. Zraar-Admiral wondered why the males had put the females into Space-suits and led them outside the vehicle. Were the monkeys in continual need of copulation? The gross external sexual organs of the males at least suggested it.

Some of the male monkeys were holding the slightly smaller and generally longer-haired females in a manner that suggested they were either trying to groom them or lay claim to them. Evidently the females had belonged to more than one dominant monkey. Several harems in the one ship? *Kz'eerkti* and other arboreals on Kzin behaved in such ways... but the arboreals of Kzin did not have Space-ships. Two were on their knees in an awkward posture. Some were waving their forelimbs and hands as if tantalizing the guards to break ranks and pounce. liquid was running from the eyes of some, and one, a female with oddly-patterned red hair, gave an unpleasant prolonged high-pitched cry and defecated as Zraar-Admiral watched, in what the Kzin took as a gesture of willful obscenity. A guard snarled and stepped forward. The monkey screamed and rushed at him, fingers extended as though trying to attack the guard's eyes. The guard swiped at the monkey's head with instinctively-extended claws, tearing it partly off. The monkey's body flew across the compartment spraying fluid to hit the wall and fall in a puddle. The other monkeys screamed and jumped about, though no more tried to attack. Some covered their faces and wailed. The guards snarled in the Menacing Tense and most of the wailing stopped. The body of the rude monkey soon ceased to move and seemed plainly dead.

They are even more fragile than they look, Zraar-Admiral noted. A proper *kz'eerkt* would have put up a better fight than that. He would not, he thought, punish the guard, who was now looking at him somewhat apprehensively, too heavily. He had used no more than reasonable force. Still, it was all rather disgusting.

He could see Telepath was in no condition to do more at the moment. When he recovered he should be able to discover a lot more with them face-to-face. Their resemblance to Kzinti life-forms

suggested they were meat, but proper dissection would put the matter beyond doubt.

Zraar-Admiral returned to the bridge. He ordered the monkeys to be confined separately from one another. After Telepath had gone through their minds thoroughly he would turn a few loose in his miniature hunting preserve to see what sort of running they made. He turned to Weeow-Captain to outline his thoughts.

“When we have avenged *Tracker* it will take us at least eight and three years’ real time to get back to Hssin, more time for a fleet to be assembled. Then we have the journey to the monkey-systems.”

“Yes, Dominant One.”

“But you are thinking that is a long time? Even in sleep?”

“Urrr.” Weeow-Captain gestured assent. They had been together a long time and thought they knew each other well. Zraar-Admiral believed Weeow-Captain was not so brilliant as to be a threat to him, which was one reason he was there. He also believed him to be a completely efficient and reliable officer, which was the other reason. Ambitious of course, like any healthy Kzin. They had fought side by side on the ground and won scars together. Weeow-Captain met his gaze.

“If it is necessary we must take the time, Sire, but...” That “but” said it all.

“Obviously that is what we should do, if the aliens were fighters, despite any loss of time involved,” Zraar-Admiral told him, “but since it is plain they are not, I say we should leap on with this squadron alone. I will send dispatch vessels to Kzin and Hssin with the operational diaries.”

It was phrased in the Equal-acknowledging tense, a request for comment as much as an order. The squadron riding in *Cutting Claw* was already small for its task, but there was no help for it. Radio or lasers were both too unreliable over such distances and too insecure in what might, after all, be a sort of combat situation, disappointing as the *kz’eerkti* were in that respect. Security was more important to prevent a rush for spoils should other Kzin become aware of them. If what he had seen was a fair sample, even a reduced squadron would be more than enough for the monkey-worlds. Let other prowlers like

Chuut-Riit find their own. Weeow-Captain's eyes flared with eagerness.

"A Hero's leap! Yes!"

There was nothing unfeigned in that delight. *He is a good companion* thought Zraar-Admiral. They had dreamed together of such actions.

Alone in his quarters Zraar-Admiral meditated upon Conquest and its implications. Honored Maaug-Riit might not like such independent action, but surely the monkeydom would produce gifts to appease the Fleet Admiral and other high nobility. Besides, Zraar-Admiral guessed, the Patriarch would not be too displeased to see a relatively minor noble like Zraar-Admiral improve his position relative to a Fleet Admiral of the Patriarch's own house who had grown very mighty indeed.

I shall have to start culling my sons more rigorously, Zraar-Admiral thought. Um-For more than an Admiral's inheritance.

Suddenly Zraar-Admiral knew that the monkeys might be leading him on the most dangerous hunt of his life. *What if this, instead of being a simple leap to glory, turns me into a politician?* His tail curled. Now he would have to do something about Telepath.

Zraar-

Admiral had power of life and death over every creature aboard—any Kzin commander did—but the Patriarch's family would have other ears and noses. To wantonly silence any Telepath would be highly suspicious. He was confident that even if he was a spy for Honored Maaug-Riit, Telepath could not read his own mind, with its inculcate Authority, but those of his officers were naturally weaker.

He thought of killing Telepath and disguising the act, but banished the idea immediately. To murder Telepath would be shameful, a violation of the honor which to a Kzin commander was virtually a physical reality. He would have Weeow-Captain put him in charge of guarding the apes. It was a logical job for the little Kzin when his special talents were not required on the bridge. Already, with the battleship not having such luxuries as eunuchs, Telepath had shown himself a reliable tender of the small harem, which Zraar-Admiral had had little time for recently. No fighting Kzin would want the

degrading task of herding plant-eaters and he could continue extracting information from their minds.

Both Telepath's investigations so far and the first quick dissections of a couple of specimens showed the monkeys were omnivores. That was not unexpected. Pure herbivores had never been found in Space. There seemed no strictly logical reason why the evading of hunters should not have led to intelligence as great as, or greater than, that of the hunters themselves—one, after all, was running for its meal, the other for its life—but it would be blasphemous to suppose herbivores could dominate their environment or defeat and subjugate carnivores! At some time in the past the monkeys had fought and killed.

The two large teats on the females (if that was what they were) were significant. The number indicated small litters, and the bizarre size of the teats suggested prolonged lactation. That in turn suggested the apes' get must survive a lengthy and helpless kittenhood. How numerous must they have become before they controlled the resources to build a Space-ship?

Telepath had said that on their home-world they numbered in billions. So they evidently had no enemies that were a major threat there. Though lacking significant teeth and claws they had some characteristics of a dominant animal—hein [sic], they had Star-ships. They would have had to fight sometime in the past to accomplish that, presumably against real carnivores. The larger size of the males, though nothing like the degree of sexual dimorphism in Kzinti, indicated competition for mating privileges in their history.

Their small teeth were a typical omnivore mixture.

Telepath said their meat had come from automated kitchens, partly burnt in a disgusting manner. Perhaps it was grown from cancers in vats like infantry rations.

Presumably the monkeys' ancestors had been scavengers, and had become used to burning carrion to kill toxic microbes rather than eating their own fresh kills. They must have fought for carrion against large predators, wielded clubs and thrown stones to make up for their deficient teeth and claws.

And ended up with a drive that collected hydrogen atoms from interstellar Space to carry them between stars.

Or had these got their ship from somewhere else? Surely no-one would recruit monkeys for mercenary warriors as the Jotok had once been foolish enough to recruit on Old Kzin.

There was a story of a *kz'eerkt-band* on Kzin that had once seized a Space-craft and performed outrageous tricks and monkey-shines to the discomfiture of certain overly-confident Heroes.

But that was a fable, a joke, an exercise in poets' ingenuity! A piece of entertainment set down by the Conservors to smuggle germs of wisdom into the hot livers of adolescents. It did not seem possible in the real universe. Space-craft were complicated. An idea flicked away from him. Like a kitten chasing the tip of its own tail he sensed something maddeningly just out of reach. Something about monkeys and Telepaths and Kzinretti. Once or twice behavior by Telepath, and also by some of his harem, especially Rilla, the lithest, and Niza who had the biggest vocabulary, had struck a note of inconsistency and puzzled him as the monkeys did. Was the common factor a conditioned species showing less than perfect conditioning. No knowledge of weapons... Was monkey pacifism conditioned? Had their tails, surely indispensable to free-roaming arboreals, been amputated in connection with their conditioned status?

Were the monkeys slaves of a race that no Kzin except perhaps the late crew of *Tracker* had met so far? The glandular rush he felt at that idea had no fear about it, only exhilaration. Postulate a race that had conditioned the monkeys, and riddles disappeared! It remained only to find the Conditioners, and leap upon them with the Fleet. The ship they were pursuing was the obvious place to start.

He thought of Rilla and Niza again. He had not, he realized, seen either of them recently. Telepath had told him they were pregnant and had dug themselves birthing burrows. Two more Sons to compete for the Sire's Inheritance. Well, that might be to the good. Two more daughters, useful gifts to superiors or subordinates. A nuisance that his two most attractive females were engaged in birthing at the same time.

But why did he think of Kzinretti now? There was no odor of estrus in the system, he had deliberately had that programmed out, wanting no distractions for anyone at present. He had not been thinking of mating, but... Rilla and Niza... Was Kzinrett stupidity a

product of conditioning too? That was not exactly what either the Priests or the Conservors said. It was a punishment by the Fanged God, with a bit of help from the Priestly Order long ago. Zraar-Admiral's ears folded. The Navy respected the Conservors of the Ancestral Past, some of the history of the Priest-kind it respected less.

Telepath said the monkeys know nothing of other contemporary Space-travelling species. Had the Conditioners, whoever they were, gained control of the monkeys without the monkeys' knowledge?

Where the conditioners *that* good? Or was he discarding Churga's *W'tsai* and breeding entities he did not need? Perhaps the monkeys were simply behaving as Kzin's own arboreals would had they got into Space. Zraar-Admiral was used to exercising self-control. Now he slashed at the bulkhead in puzzlement.

I slept not only because of *Sthondat*-drug. Sleep was my escape from existence. On the world where I was born I had known my life would be lowly, nameless, despised and short, my minds open to the violating contempt of all warriors. Space was worse. I could never block out entirely the Kzinti minds confined with me. Sleep, some Telepaths believed, helped hold the Death at bay, allowed our minds time to heal. Sleep, I sometimes felt, especially the sleeps when I dreamed of Karan, had taken on some quality of a Hunt, though it was a Hunt for a prey whose nature was dark to me.

Usually I had more or less the run of the ship. The officers did not deign to notice me, the others avoided me. I was unchallenged. My talent which cursed me also protected me. No subordinate would risk destroying such an asset.

Already Zraar-Admiral had delegated me to tend his harem—I was beneath insulting by being given this task normally reserved for eunuchs. Telepaths were hardly thought of as males.

I saw that the Kzinretti were exercised and given space for birthing burrows as necessary. The female tongue is easy and I did not need to read their dim minds to learn, their simple wants and problems. Since the harem was small and Zraar-Admiral often distracted there were few kittens, and the males, when they were old enough, I took to Zraar-Admiral's Family Trainer at the crèche. But

soon the harem gave me new secrets to chew upon. Now I had added to this my tasks as ape-keeper.

The trail of burnt hydrogen we were following was growing fresher. It was similar to that of the monkey-ship we had defeated. It did not deviate and we simply headed straight down it.

It became easier with time to enter the aliens' minds, and I tried to learn more than AT could as he picked through the litter of their boat and suits. At first I felt degraded at having to rummage through monkey-minds but Feared Zraar-Admiral complimented me for finding out about toilet-paper, ice-cream and the potential weapons-properties of electromagnetic ramscoop fields. AT liked toothbrushes and made one, but I should have got the credit for that too.

Ten surviving monkeys to begin with, all yammering at my mind with not only their alienness, but also with pure fear and despair if I raised my mental guard. And fear is a huge part of the Telepath's Curse. All creatures' minds tend to take on what they are bombarded with, to resonate with it. How can we be Heroes, who feel the pain of all, yes, even the secret pains of terror and loss that no real warrior will admit to? Even when I shielded myself those alien minds seemed to crawl around in my consciousness. I had felt shamed, concealed fear in Heroes' minds often, and hated it, but *this* fear was unashamed. Had they no pride?

And they all had names! Full names! Sometimes more than two! They had been born with them! Paul van Barrow (that was a troublesome one) had been the leader (Zraar-Admiral wanted him for himself). Rick Chew, Henry Nakamura, Michael Patrick, Peter Gordon Brown... even the females had full names: Anna Nagle, Lee Jean Armstrong (that one tried to ambush and attack me when I brought it food, not knowing I could read its mind as it crouched behind the door with a length of pipe it had found), Selina Guthlac... But none were fighters, none had *earned* names. I finally decided they could not be counted as real names at all, rather they were the sort of means of identification we gave to Kzinretti and kittens.

Some of the monkeys had a god, a Bearded God that was a Patriarch of Patriarchs like the Fanged God, but different. Where this image was present, the monkeys concerned were usually beseeching this god to forgive them for having forgotten him and crying to him

for help. I tried to follow this further but became lost in monkey-logic and the welter of alien images. Reading their minds when they had been calm and complacent in their ship had been easy by comparison. It did not lead back to useful technology or to monkey secret weapons.

On Kzin the more intelligent types of *kz'eerkti*— those with enough mind to read—often had a kind of playfulness like that of kittens about them with tricks and games. These did not. They were miserable creatures.

They were in general poor performers on the miniature hunting range, too, without cunning, stamina, speed or fighting prowess. Or mostly so. I noticed that once or twice, when I got my tongue round their language and explained to them, their fear somehow diminished. The Peter Gordon Brown male and Anna Nagle female rigged up a makeshift dead-fall trap and did some damage to one of Zraar-Admiral's hunting-party. That amused the others (and me, though I dared not show it) but it also gave me food for thought. Of course, the miniaturized hunting preserve, though it ran cleverly in and out of several decks of the battleship, was hardly a real test of skills.

Those who did not or could not learn to use the excrement turbines with which all cabins were fitted were the first to go, though I did not tell the officers this, of course. Some that I simply took straight up to the officer's banquets screamed and struggled. Some, and this gave me more to think upon, insisted on walking on their own feet and tried, I think, to be dignified. The Peter Cordon Brown died uttering cool-headed curses that might have come from a warrior. His last monkey-words as the hunters closed in on him were:

"I despise you." Although I did not know exactly why, it showed some kind of defiance as he ran at them for the last time.

Although I did not use their words with them more than necessary, this behavior made me uncomfortable. Anyway, I was told by the officers that they were good to eat.

Of course for a Telepath speech translation is quite easy. As soon as I heard the monkey-language I recognized that it matched the speech from the *Tracker* recorder.

Zraar-Admiral was pleased when I gave him a report on what this said. Indeed some time later he sent for me for a discussion with him such as I had never had before.

“You are more intelligent than most addicts,” he told me. He had received me in his own quarters, in an Admiral’s luxury. Then, and rare indeed was it for such as he to ask the opinion of such as I: “What do you think this tells?”

“First, Feared Zraar-Admiral, the creatures which destroyed *Tracker* have the same language as these monkeys of ours,” I told him. “They are connected, though ours know nothing of that battle.”

“Yes. Go on.”

“Dominant One, the words ‘They may not be so obliging as to leave themselves in the way of our drive next time’ seem of the greatest significance. We know now how *Tracker* was destroyed. It was nothing to do with superior or secret weaponry. It fell in with a monkey-ship like the—pardon me, Dominant One— like the so-called *Successful Plant-Eater*, powered by a reaction-drive, evidently called the *Writing Stick*, or, more fully, *The Winged Undying Shining Monkey’s Writing Stick*.” The name was not much odder than many other concepts I had taken from the monkeys’ minds.

“The monkeys in that craft,” I continued, “used the reaction-drive as a weapon. *Tracker’s* Telepath picked up no thoughts of weapons because the apes did not know what weapons were. The laser was a function of the drive, or aligned parallel to the drive. Our own prisoners used lasers for signaling back along the way they had come.”

“Clever of them to think of that. It sounds as if they are adaptable. Or lucky.”

There was a saying, “Monkey-daffy, Monkey-lucky.” It was applied to many stories of the scampering *kz’eerkti*. A Hero should not rely on luck unless he or the Fanged Cod owed one another a jest. Zraar-Admiral looked thoughtfully at the monkey-leader, the Paul, which he had had stuffed for his hoard, as though it might tell him something (Freeze-drying was much more convenient with a universe-sized freeze-drier around us, but Zraar-Admiral was a traditionalist and also had me to do the cleaning and other dirty work involved). The Paul looked back at him quizzically as he sprayed a

little urine absent-mindedly on it and several other trophies, though he scarcely needed to mark them again as his own. Even had I not been Telepath his mood would have been obvious to me.

“Dominant One, these *Space-kz’eerkti* maybe trick certainly. Many of their artifacts are clever, and though I am too lowly to understand such matters in full, AT tells me their boat’s computers are more versatile than our own. Their connectivity is such that they have pattern-recognition and other machine-reasoning capabilities which our own computers, however fast, have not achieved—indeed we have never attempted to achieve it. Those properties could confer great advantages, military and medical...” —“We took military medicine seriously—” Perhaps it is because they are used to looking down from tree-tops and therefore perceive relationships differently to Heroes who once hunted on plains. We have kept one of their programmers, also one of their navigators. It is a female, but in each case I feel there may be useful knowledge still to be extracted.”

“*Merrower*. Say nothing yet of this to any other.” Feared Zraar-Admiral did not need to use the Menacing tense to me. “In any event,” he went on, “their flavor may be a reason to husband them. I am inclined to keep a pair to breed from. Or would tissue be enough? (The Dominant One would not, of course, be an expert in such an unHeroic matter as cellular biology). “Anyway, there ought to be plenty more of them soon. You may pace, Telepath,” he added graciously, “if it will aid your thoughts.”

“And third, Dominant One,” I continued, “We learn the monkeys who destroyed *Tracker* are now warning ‘Earth’ of our presence. That is their home planet.” I felt his conflicting emotions at the thought of the Earth-monkeys’ impotent terror when that warning was received.

Then suddenly he spun, whirling upon me so that I jumped back, fearing that he was about to attack me.

“TELEPATH!”

I rolled belly upward in total submission. “Dominant One, have I offended?”

“Telepath, repeat to me those first words. Translate EXACTLY.”

“Dominant One, the words were: ‘They may not be so obliging as to leave themselves in the way of our drive next time’.”

“Do you see the implications of that?” His eyes and mind were flaring at me.”

“Only what I have said, Dominant One.”

“Stupid. Urrr.” But he gave me an absent-minded grooming lick, and now I could feel the pleasure from his mind. He felt he was the first to see something wonderful. Slaver dropped onto my face from the tips of his splendid fangs.

“They speak of ‘Next Time’!” he churred. “Feeble as they are, those monkeys think of giving us a fight!

“Remember, too, those other monkey-words: ‘Keeping the transmission going is more important than our lives.’ What does that tell us about them?... No, perhaps that is not a question for Telepath to answer.”

Fearful Zraar-Admiral stretched his claws. “We have followed spoor into long grass. Telepath, you are loyal...”

“Dominant One!” *Fear! Did he suspect my commission from Honored Maaug-Riit? Did he suspect the Telepaths’ War? Did he suspect that Rilla and Niza...*

“Remember it. You have brains. Of all the Telepaths I have encountered, you are the closest to a warrior.”

And where are those other Telepaths now? I thought. Zraar-Admiral had much of benign mood about him at that moment, but with danger always, always. Did he seek to cozen me into games with the family of the Patriarch?

“A reaction-drive... Urrr,” he churred more thoughtfully. “It is a clumsy makeshift but I do not like aliens having any weapons we lack. Heroes have died in the hunt when a fleeing prey kicked them with hard sharp hooves. Tell Alien Technologies Officer and Weapons Officer to look into the matter. If it is of truly dangerous potential, then they must find out everything about it. Perhaps we can duplicate the principle and better it with our own drive... Tell Weeow-Captain in generalities only if he asks.” *A new weapon-principle, if it works, may be valuable, he was thinking, and I do not know yet where Weeow-Captain may fit into all this new order that may come about it. I hope he will remain my loyal Flag-Captain and friend, but for the moment...*

Alone, I took further thought, probed other minds. Waking and sleeping times passed. There were minds whose rhythms I followed. Zraar-Admiral's speculations... At last there came a certain time for sleep when, as the ship grew quieter and most minds around me grew still, I knew I had to move, to by to leap the chasm I had contemplated in fear so long.

I went to the cabin where one of the last monkeys was confined.

"You female." Pronunciation was impaired by the construction of its speaking apparatus as well as by its fangs.

"Yes," said Selina, staring up from the corner where she crouched. "I am female."

It was the one which had most often watched her, had pointed out the sanitary arrangements and thrown her food. It was smaller than the other felinoid monsters, not much more than seven feet high, and thinner. The lines of jaw and muzzle were thinner too, adding, with the large eyes and ears, a hint of lynx to the tiger face.

The words were grating and slurred, but she made them out. It was saying: "You are astrogator in the *Happy Gatherer*. Sapient are females of your species."

The first thought that penetrated her fog of terror was: *Give it a human larynx and mouth and it would be speaking good English.*

The second thought was: *it is sick.* She somehow knew the other creatures she had seen were normal. In all sorts of ways, its violet-edged eyes, its posture, its odor, this creature was not normal.

She found her brain was racing. She could analyze her own observations of the nightmare thing. She felt clear-headed, too. It was as if what had never made any sense to her before did so now. *I felt the universe was out to get us and I was right.* If she could do nothing else, she could grit her teeth and clench her fists.

She had slept when she could, sometimes with dreams of Earth. Sometimes of childhood, sunlight and the sea she had loved, sometimes darker dreams of the deforming torture she and her brother had endured as her father fought current-addiction, the last sight of Easter Island as the shuttle soared towards the *Happy Gatherer* to depart after years of preparation. In some dreams loomed the statues of Easter Island which, she had been told, some people

had once believed were made by wise and benevolent beings from the stars.

Sometimes it was the moment their world ended: when, the alien ship looming huge before them, autoshields slammed down over the faceplates of their helmets and they saw the *Happy Gatherer* disappear in a pale-blue glare. Nightmares of the demons, and Rosalind torn apart under their helpless stares. The distant human voices and cries she had heard since. Fewer of them as time went on. Loneliness as bad as terror. In any event it was in the cage of demons that she always awoke.

Several times she had suffered the blinding headaches which she was sure now were induced by the creatures. And now one spoke to her. In English.

She found she was largely beyond surprise. Aspects of the nightmares were compartmentalized from the waking reality. She stood, and forced herself to face the thing.

“Who are you?”

“Telepath. I have no name.”

“Telepath? You mean... mind-reader?”

“Yes. Be calm. I know, despite posture, you do not challenge me.”

“Is that how you know our language?”

“Yes. But time is urgent.”

“What do you want?”

“Speech with you.”

“I don’t mean that. What does your... race... want? Why have you done this to us?”

“Conquest.” For Telepath, it was a statement of the obvious.

“I understand.” No surprise now. She stared up into the tired, sunken eyes.

“I not reading your mind now,” it said, “But for a time I remember thoughts also language. I do not want to read your mind now. We Telepaths not live long and overuse of talent not help.”

We Telepaths... I have no name. Yes, this thing is different to the others. An outcast? Why?

Because it is a Telepath!

I know that! How do I know it?

“So what do you want now? I mean you as an individual. Why do you come to me?”

The felinoid almost swayed. Its ears contracted. Its tail rose and fell. It twitched and tried to groom.

“Help.” The voice was low. “Help me.”

She fought down an urge to laugh wildly. “Help you? What do you mean?”

“Escape. I prisoner as you. Do you not wish to escape? To live?”

“Live?”

“Yes. Alternative is death for both. Even if you male your kind have not fighters’ privileges of surrender or honorable death. In soon real-time you eaten. Your species is palatable and non-toxic. Feared Zraar-Admiral toyed with keeping pair to breed but decided many monkeys available soon. Keep tissue-samples. And soon I am burned out. Each new waking I dread first symptoms. Of our two fates, yours I would prefer. I do not know how much time we have—either of us. Zraar-Admiral and other officers have found monkeymeat tasty... I have not been allowed any of course.”

None of that sank in at once. Then it did.

Selina had decided some time before that she had no chance of getting out alive, though she had blurred the details of her likely end. She had visited zoos on Earth, and, with visual enhancers, had seen captive tigers tearing at meat, held safely on spacious islands surrounded by water and electronic barriers. She had floated in a silent airship over the African Continental Park and seen lions kill. Now she remembered red blood, and muscle and yellow fat pulled away from red and white bones, rib-cages opening like fans, great yellow teeth and bloody muscles buried in the body-cavity of prey.

She had seen holos and dioramas of ancient sabretooths at her brother’s museum, where children and adults screamed with delighted horror: the leaping bulk of the Smilodon, the replica leopard dragging the limp body of a hairy hominid, streaming blood, along a tree-branch, the cat’s huge upper incisors fitting neatly into the hominid’s conveniently-spaced eye-sockets, cranial vault fitting with equal neatness between the cat’s jaws and held firmly by the lower incisors driven through the skull’s occiput.

There had been a skeletal reconstruction of that, with Pleistocene remains from the Swartkrans Cave in southern Africa, showing how neat were the punctures of the leopard's lower fangs in the back of the hominid's skull, two holes to match those natural cavities the eye-sockets made for the upper fangs... the gnawed skull dropped or rolled into the cave for fossil-hunters, so many hominid bones dropped into it that they formed a geological deposit called *breccia*... her mind was jerking about what faced her... Rosalind torn and flapping on the deck, Paul gone? Rick? All the rest? The rest? All the *Happy Gatherer's* tight-knit crew? Her mind spun into a desperate loop, turning away from that unbearable question.

And she had her deeply-encoded biological inheritance. She did not need to know consciously of the war of great cats and hominids on the African savannah that had impelled her ancestors towards intelligence. The creature staring down at her was the embodiment of terror. Even without the drug, Telepath felt something of the effort with which she controlled herself.

For the first time, a Kzin looked upon a human with admiration.

She breathed heavily, and wiped the sweat from her eyes and from her body. Her next question was as brisk and businesslike as she could make it.

"Where do we go?"

"Steal boat. There is one chance now that may never come again for us. It is Lord Chmeee's leap, I know, but we face certain destruction here."

She found an odd lucidity. The prospect of being eaten concentrated the mind.

"Your people are hunters. They would pursue us, would they not?"

"That is part of plan. We must make them care for a mad and therefore useless Telepath and a monkey to pursue, but pursue wrong way. Monkeys on Kzin planets have tricks. You are a monkey. You must trick them."

"What do you think our chances are?"

"Perhaps one in eight to fourth or fifth power. But random mathematics not my field... Does contortion of your muzzle signify anger? Or fear?"

“No. Amusement, of a sort.”

“I remember. Urrr. But not Heroic for leaping one to calculate odds.”

She was silent. She noticed again the endless ripping-cloth sound that vibrated ceaselessly throughout the ship.

“How can I believe you.” She was full of fear as she asked this question somehow she knew (a flash of thought: *how do I know*) that to question the honor of this creature might be a deadly insult. But Telepath answered calmly.

“I could give you my name as my word if my kind ever had names. But name or no name, it is dishonorable to lie except as... as... you have no word for it. I have so little honor I do not wish to lose any. And you are not going to get a better deal.”

“Where do we actually escape *to*? Have you thought of that?”

“I told you, this is our only chance. We escape to your monkeyship, of course.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your *Winged Undying Shining... The Angel’s Pencil...* We are following it.”

Winged Undying Shining Monkey’s Writing Stick! Yes! Suddenly an image flashed from her mind to mine. I saw our target at last.

A “colony ship”, carrying a crew and many embryos to a planet circling a star named something like “Fifth of the River.”

A thin cylinder, circled by a halo.

The halo was the lifsystem in which the monkeys traveled, spinning to mimic gravity with centrifugal force. The cylinder housed the drive... and the laser.

A reaction-drive, as I had known. Small attitude-jets and gyros. But so cumbersome, hard to turn! Defense of such a thing would be hopeless!

But then, to fight *Cutting Claw* in conventional battle was not my plan.

To reassure the Selina-monkey further, I gave it back (gave *her* back. I reminded myself it was female) the Space-suit which had been taken during examination. It was badly torn, but the creature seemed eager for it, and hastily put it on its body. In its damaged

state it seemed quite useless, but of course all females love decorating themselves. She seemed more composed then.

“Why are you taking me?” she asked.

“I will need you to talk to the *Writing Stick* monkeys of course. Tell them that Telepath is a useful companion and will help them remain alive. That is the prime reason, but there are others also. I have read Astrogator’s mind recently. I know as much of guiding a vessel in space as Astrogator, but I will forget. The knowledge Telepaths take from other minds cannot stay with us without a... bridge. And I only need to forget a little of astrogation procedures—questions for the computer—to be lost beyond all recovery I will need you then.”

“Or do you just want me to eat for yourself. Spare provisions perhaps?”

“I could not eat you personally, unless I was in hunger frenzy Perhaps not even then. I have read your mind too deeply. It would be like eating myself My condition has many disadvantages, one is inhibition in that area. We have too much... empathy. Unfortunately, this does not diminish with time. There is an effect. Besides, there are plenty of rations. There are provisions in all boats, and I have identified extra stores and prepared them for loading.

“Also, it is generally desirable to have a *zzrow graff* useful companion.

“Yours was a sea-faring race before it took to the stars, I know. When Alien Technologies Officer and I examined this”—I gave it the thing we had taken from the suit—“we were baffled by its function. It was shaped something like a weapon. Yet once, when I was reading your mind as softly as I might, I discovered it was a small replica of an ancient ship. I do not know why you have it, but I thought perhaps...”

“A gift from my brother.”

New vistas of alien thought were opened to me. I felt new images from this monkey’s mind—of blue monkey home-world oceans, wider than those of Kzin, oceans which the monkeys had crossed for trade or even in order to stimulate some alien sense of pleasure, oceans they had voluntarily swum in and which they had written

poetry about. Creatures lived in those oceans and I even caught a taste of them that stiffened my whiskers.

How *alien* these aliens were! And yet... the gift from the brother—would a Hero give a Kzinrett sister a gift? Yes, perhaps, when they were young. Bright shiny ornaments young Kzinretti liked. Heroes could feel affection for sisters they had spent kittenhood with, and Heroes could and should treasure mementos of great deeds and give gifts to those they cared for. Heroes who grew up in the households of Noble Sires, as I did not. But no Kzinrett crewed a Space-ship: the vocabulary of the Female tongue was perhaps eight to the power of three words.

The brother had been a museum guard. That was more strangeness. On Kzin Museum Guard was a task for certain old and honored warriors, perhaps heroically disabled in battle, supervised by the Conservors' mystic order.

These creatures had not a warrior among them, nor, it seemed to me, a real notion of honor, yet they had museums. It made no sense. What would they display in such places? I extracted images of museums weirdly perverted—displaying not relics of battle but of games, of dances, of the origins of monkeydom and the animal forms that had preceded their own dominance.

Or was there something else? A hint of something secret deeply buried? The model had been preserved as a curio not for associations of honor or glory but for the sake of its age alone. Its name meant nothing to the Selina. A mere sound.

Like their other names that were not names. They gave them to objects, to ships, as we gave names to the vessels of our own Space-fleets.

Names in such a context mattered to Heroes. If not a fine and splendid description of function and purpose, full of poetry, like *Rampant Slayer* or *Conqueror's Fang*, the names of Kzinti ships commemorated the names of great Heroes of the past like Chmee or the Lord Dragga-Skrull who lost a forelimb, nostrils and eye before leading his force to death and imperishable glory gutting a superior fleet of the Jotok when Heroes rose against them and leapt into Space at the dawn of the Eternal Hunt.

All this passed through my mind in a moment or so. These creatures were not utterly unlike us in some ways, though in others strange beyond comprehension. Selina had swum in those cold salt waves for pleasure! I thought of how much I hated the feel of water on my fur and tail.

I thought at first that Selina would be impressed by the fact that, as soon as I had catalogued the various monkeys' mental capabilities, I had had others rather than her served up to Feared Zraar-Admiral and the officers. But I now suspected this would not increase her trust of me. There was nothing except truth, however, in what I said next:

“But there is another reason I want you, for me compelling. In your mind is a story of curing addiction. I am an addict. I am going to need that story to have any chance of curing myself even with Admiral's medicine. I will need to cure myself or perish, and in this I will need the example of a monkey. Yes, I foresee I will need to return to that example in what lies ahead. Can a Kzin—even a Kzin such as I—not equal one of your kind in endurance and Will?”

I sat on the floor of the cabin beside her, deliberately relinquishing my advantage in height. Then I continued:

“Those are the principal reasons but there is also another faint, dim spoor. But perhaps a further reason, a... *sentimental*... one” (that was the word I took with some difficulty from the monkey's mind. I was not sure it was the real equivalent of any Kzinti concept but it would suffice). “Part of the reason I was selected for my talent to be developed is that I have a relatively high but undirected intelligence.

“There is no other role for one like me. I am not a warrior and even before I was made what I am I lacked long concentration, intellectual rigor or even creative flair which would have made me useful in other areas. Yet in your mind I have seen pictures of a world which tolerates the likes of Telepath... the likes of you.”

“Of me?”

“Yes, the minds of we two are alike at one level, you know.” It seemed to me I was stating the obvious, even if it was nothing for me to be proud of. And I felt her accept this fact more easily than I might have expected. “I feel... gratitude... that such a society has existed even if its future is to be short.

“There is another thing, too, beyond that,” I went on, “The thing that gives rise to all my plans, small though their hope is.

“This is a difficult thought, an even fainter spoor, a wandering track in a mind-tunnel not ventured before.

Alien Technologies Officer reached the first prints, and Feared Zraar-Admiral has gone a little further, but only Telepath has really followed the trail. If your race now has no knowledge of weapons or warfare—less than any sapient race we have conquered—yet at some time in the past you learnt to throw missiles so powerfully that today you travel between stars, can it be that, instead of never having had such knowledge, your race has actually *suppressed* it to a unique degree?

“If I had not had long times alone and without duties in which to think I would not have seen this. But you have names of a sort. You have ranks. On your Spaceship you divided time into ‘watches’ much as we do. What did you once watch for? Where did those things come from? And I know from your mind that there are areas of your past that few of your kind are allowed to study. Why? I know from your mind of the ARM: you even have a... police of knowledge.”

“I’m no historian,” she said. “I don’t know.”

“You speak truth here,” I replied, “You do not know. But you do not tell Telepath in words all that you think. There is something you suspect, though even to you the spoor is dim. I have read in your mind that there is another monkey, some litter-mate of yours—yes, it is the brother who gave you the small mimicry of the sea-ship—who also hides in its own lair thoughts that it... But if what I suggest is true, that knowledge was suppressed for some reason.”

“I suppose so. Does it matter.”

“It may matter a very great deal. For I can think of only one possible reason that a race—a race whose ships are powered by the fusion of hydrogen atoms—should *suppress* knowledge of weapons and war, and I am the only one of my species it has occurred to.”

“I see,” she said. And then: “I think I understand. But I do not know if my thoughts are true.”

“You do not know of *RRizzinr...* of *Tracker.*”

“What is that?”

“None in your ship knew of it. I searched for that first of all. But I think of the Eternal Hunt and I wonder if we may at last have stuck our noses into one cave too many. It is only a slight possibility; mind you.” I turned from this spoor then, but spoke more of my thoughts, which had grown in the last days. I told of *Tracker*, and of *Cutting Claw’s* present vengeance quest.

“When we have killed the *Writing Stick* our fleet will search for your home-world. With your primitive drives it cannot be far away—indeed I can calculate its approximate distance easily. I know how long you live, how long you have been in Space and your course. Alien Technologies Officer has extracted all data from your boat’s computer and laid it before the Dominant One. You need not reproach yourself for that. We plotted your monkey-ship’s course from the moment we detected you.

“The drives of your vessels and the trails they leave are easily detected. We know most of what you know. We know the composition of your atmosphere, that your home-world is the third planet from its sun, a yellow dwarf, and that it has a single very large moon. We know the other characteristics of your system including the gas-giants. We know of your long-colonized asteroid belt and the distance to your nearest extra-Solar colony world. We will find them without great trouble.”

“Then how does it benefit us to get to the *Angel’s Pencil*?”

“If the monkeys on board are alerted and if pursuit is slowed, they may escape for a long time. Space is big. Or they could fight. They have done so once. If we can warn them, we can give them time to prepare some defense. Or such was my original idea.”

“Won’t there be guards on the boats?”

It was a strange question. Why guard boats? Who would leave a Space-ship in the depths of Space? Did Selina think Kzintosh would fear monkey-prisoners from the live-meat lockers?

“What if the others see us?” She persisted.

“They will assume I am taking you to Zraar-Admiral or Weeow-Captain,” I reassured her. “I have freedom of movement in the ship since I am beneath having general duties. We must not waste more time. Who knows when the Dominant One may not in truth send for one or the other of us?”

Selina pressed her hands to her head. Hope of escape, I knew, had flared in her mind for a moment. But now she thought I had no plan at all, only neurosis. Still, she did not think it would be a good idea to antagonize me by disagreeing.

“We can gain access to a boat.” I said, “Of the small craft Feared Zraar-Admiral’s barge is much the biggest, best-fitted, fastest and most powerful. I have prepared various... stores and cargo to load.

“If we ran out of other options we could self-destruct, which I think you would prefer to being eaten, and which I would prefer to the discipline I would receive in the event of re-capture, or to burn-out. We will have some counter-measures against missiles. But outrunning a beam generated close is another matter.”

“Yes, that would be a problem.”

“That is another way I shall need your help, monkey. Think of a way for us to outrun a beam, and it is just possible we may live.”

“I see. A simple task.” I caught irony in her mind.

“The barge has devices for creating ghosts. I mean ghosts in the electronic warfare sense as well as the obvious one. Electronic replicas of ourselves.”

“I need time to think.”

Selina sat, head cradled in forepaws. Used to the alien mind now, I found I could mind-read with a most cautious, almost unnoticeable, entry. She was in despair. *Impossibilities*. And beyond impossible tasks another imperative: her home-world must be warned. I had not told her the monkeys in *Tracker* had already taken this task upon themselves.

No. Not quite despair.

“The other humans. Can you put us together?”

“Why? Do you need to mate? We have more important things to do at present. I know what *kz’eerkti* are like but try to control yourself.”

“Together we may be able to think of something... I need to pick their brains.”

“Anyway, there is only one other monkey left.”

I thought I had told her this already but she had evidently not taken it in. Now it shook her like a reed in a storm-wind. She staggered, fell on her knees. There was a storm on her far greater than

when I had first spoken to her. I shielded myself against it. Then I thought she was becoming calmer. I did not want to go into her roiling mind until it calmed, but I was puzzled by what she had said.

“Further, You cannot eat brains, if that is what you mean.” I told her. “They are delicacy for officers.”

“I need to consult.”

“The one called Rick is nearby. I suppose I could put you together.”

“Is he well.”

“He says nothing.”

“I must talk with him.”

“I do not think talking would be useful. He is a coward. His mind and liver are only fear now. Not like you. But you are more a monkey-expert than I and I will bring him if you think it would help.”

“No, take me to him. That is the way it is done with us. I am the female and I must go to him.”

Being dragged here by that thing might well be the last straw for him, her real thought flashed out to me. If that was what she thought, why did she not say so? Her thoughts and her words were not in synchronization. She spoke things that were *not—lied—as* no Warrior or Hero would.

But as a Telepath might.

It was useful to be reminded that these monkeys were but honorless omnivores. But why should I need *reminding* of that?

Then a speaker boomed.

“Telepath to the Bridge!”

“Wait,” I told it. “If your Bearded God owes you anything, ask him to pay that debt to you now.”

“We have the other monkey-ship! It is surely the so-called *Writing Stick!*” Telepath blundered onto the Bridge, looking as always sick and disheveled. The officers drew instinctively away from him, but Weeow-Captain beckoned him instantly to one of the Command couches.

“Get them, Telepath!” Weeow-Captain ordered. “Confirm!”

Telepath sank into the position of the Mind-hunt.

“This is truly the *Writing Stick* and truly the ship that destroyed *Tracker*,” he reported after a moment. “They have detected us. They

speculate that we are *Tracker's* companion... They call us something like... *Big Specialized Four-Legged Solitary Carnivorous Hunting Animal...*“ Zraar-Admiral and Weeow-Captain had expected an obscenely abusive monkey-name. The Kzin felt surprised and mildly gratified that, clumsy as it was, the name these fighting monkeys had given to *Disemboweling Claw* was nothing offensive. Some monkey might receive an honorable death as an acknowledgment of the politeness.

A pause then: “They have Heroes’ dead bodies on board, and machinery from *Tracker*. The gravity motor...”

Then a strangled cry. A brother Telepath might have detected that Telepath was torn between the compulsion of the drug and a desire not to reveal what he had discovered. “They have *Tracker's* missiles! They have mounted them and rigged *Tracker's* launching console!”

“Urrr. Can they run?”

“They seem to be near maximum speed now. We steadily overtake them.”

“Shall we detonate their missiles?” Weeow-Captain asked Zraar-Admiral.

“Not yet. We should be able to intercept such a battery if necessary. But if possible they are to be boarded. There is vengeance to be exacted. And Heroes’ bodies should be recovered for honorable disposal. Unless we must we should not send the bodies of Heroes and Monkeys to the Fanged God together in such circumstances. Let the monkeys responsible be properly laid out upon our Heroes’ funeral pyres. The meat of the rest will be ours.”

Zraar-Admiral stood still in thought for a moment. Telepath seemed unconscious now.

“Weeow Captain, we will not chase them from behind. Divert your course. A large arc.” He swiped his claws across the screen, indicating the angle. “I wish to approach this prey from the flank.”

He went on: “It will be slower, but it will give the prey more time for anticipation.” Zraar-Admiral could feel his officer’s keen joy that he was prepared to prolong the pleasure of all concerned. *And keep us out of the way of that drive...* Zraar-Admiral thought to himself.

There was more that might be learnt about the enemy, but Zraar-Admiral, seeing Telepath lying prone on the deck, was aware that he would have to be conserved.

He was the last of the three the squadron had begun with. He gestured to an orderly who dragged Telepath away by one foot and dumped him on a shelf in a nearby corridor, slack-limbed, twitching, breathing in shallow gasps.

The orderly had no thought for Telepath. Having to touch the addict's ill-smelling fur was distasteful enough. He hastened back to Zraar-Admiral's side and did not see how quickly the little Kzin seemed to recover, then sprang to his feet, and ran.

Zraar-Admiral had been on the bridge a long time as their quarry was slowly overhauled. He gave orders that he was to be called in the event of any developments and went to rest. Weeow-Captain and the rest could do with a demonstration of the value of the ability to relax before action. Perhaps there would be a monkeymeat feast later, before the final pounce, and, with new monkey-prisoners, a larger celebratory one after the victory.

No-one from the bridge saw Telepath pass by again shortly after, hauling a loaded gravity-sledge. He headed first for the boat-deck, then back to the now nearly depopulated live-meat lockers.

Rick Chew was almost catatonic. Telepath pulled the door closed behind them, curled himself down and knotted his ears for a moment. Then he straightened again.

"It is as I said," he told Selina after a moment. "Its mind is blank. I read nothing. It is male, but it is not a monkey like you."

"Can you bring him round?" asked Selina. Telepath had to probe her own mind to understand what she meant.

"Comfort it? Like kitten? Comforting monkeys is nothing I know. Who has comforted me?"

"Try. Project your mind. Try the ideas of 'Friend' and 'Safety.'"

"I do not put into minds. I take from them. I cannot tell a piece of quivering monkeymeat that it is a useful companion or that it is safe when it is neither. If that is what you want you must do it."

It took Selina a long time to bring Rick Chew to full consciousness, holding and stroking him. It was therapy by instinct.

Perhaps the sight of her and Telepath together played some part in helping him accept what was before him.

He could do little more than nod at first as Selina tried to give him a euphemistic and reassuring account of their situation, and when she tried to explain that Telepath was an ally. But Telepath told her that he understood.

Finally, at Selina's instruction, Telepath withdrew and left them, muttering to the effect that time was limited. Rick turned to Selina and, to her surprise, made an attempt at a tearful smile. There was little of the Rick she had known in that gaunt haggard face.

"Aren't you going to say: 'I told you so'?" He asked. Selina felt tears starting in her own eyes at the attempted joke. But she knew it might be fatal to give way to emotion now. She did not realize that something was making her more receptive to emotion. *He is tougher than I imagined*, she thought. *Perhaps tougher than he imagined, too. Is there hope in that? If not for us personally, perhaps for our kind? Arthur, can you hear me? Can anybody hear me?* She held Rick close, touching his sunken cheek tentatively.

"At least," she said, "we have added a great deal to our knowledge of the universe. We wanted to find out what Space contained. Now we know."

"Yes. And it would be nice to have the results of our research published. Though I must confess the prospects that originally motivated us seem somewhat secondary to me now."

"What a learned paper we could write: 'Notes towards tentative conclusions regarding preliminary results of an investigation into certain inter-stellar gravity and radio anomalies.'"

Rick grabbed her hard. "We've got to warn Earth!"

"I know." Selina suspected the *Angel's Pencil* was already sending off warnings, but this would give him a further motive for action.

"That *thing!*" he shook uncontrollably as his mind filled with an image of Telepath.

"You'll get used to him," Selina told him with a kind of grotesque matter-of-factness. "He's not so bad for a... for whatever they are..." She repeated slowly that Telepath wanted them to escape with him. She had wondered if this was some cruel equivalent of a house-cat

playing with mice, but something told her it was not. Again she wondered at how much she seemed to know about Telepath.

“Yes, he would need us with him to get the *Pencil* to take him aboard: But how?” The voice had relapsed into tonelessness but the words at least suggested Rick was handling data again.

He would not have been selected for this crew If he had not been one of the best, Selina reminded herself. *It Is easy to forget that we were an elite.* She told him again what Telepath had said and all she had worked out about Telepath’s position. After a time Rick spoke in a different voice.

“It is a question of getting a sufficient start. We must place some distance between ourselves and the ship before our absence is noticed. Given enough distance from the source of a beam, it might be possible to avoid it. They must have counter-measures to beams, too. Devices to throw out dust-clouds, perhaps.”

“Yes, he mentioned something about that.”

“But if we do somehow get to the *Angel’s Pencil*, what then?”

“We are better off there than here. Telepath tells me they used the comm-laser as a weapon of their own, and that they have evidently taken missiles from another cat-ship they destroyed. And there is the ramscoop-field.”

“The ramscoop-field is generated ahead. The laser points behind. Neither can be moved much... Not fast enough...”

“We’ll have to hope they’ve got other weapons operational by now. They’ve had time to think...”

They were still struggling with plans when Telepath returned. “Now you have awakened the cowardly monkey, what have you achieved?” he demanded.

They discussed anti-beam defenses and how they could gain time to escape. There were intact hexagons of logic-lattice on the arms and torso of Selina’s suit, and on Rick’s, which Telepath also retrieved, but at present there was nothing they could ask them.

“No choice but action now!” said Telepath. “We close with the *Writing Stick!* Battle soon! Place for us in that battle! Urrr!”

He struck an heroic attitude. “Let us urinate from the heights on fear! What do all our legends and epics tells us? Lord Chmee, Krrarrit, Lord Dragga-Skrull, Lost Skragga-Chrnee, Ffeelillth-Wirrh!

Zirrow-Graff Grragz's Third Gunner! Kzintosh Heroes without number, all defied prodigious enemies and great odds! So our race may face the Fanged God without fear! Does not even your Bearded God approve of courage?"

"Let us see what capital we have," said Rick at last. "Selina is a navigator-pilot. I know both computers and reasoning machines.

"If I could have one of this ship's main computer outlets to work on, it is just possible something could be done. Is there an input to a central data-base?"

"Of course. They are all over the ship."

"And in the boats? They are connected?"

"Of course. The boats and also the cruisers and other ships riding in the hull."

"And reasoning machines? Planar lattices?"

Telepath read his mind.

"No," he said. "Heroes use machines when large numbers must be dealt with at great speed, or to enhance hunting senses. We do not use machines to tell us how to make decisions. We are not monkeys."

"That is what I hoped. So you have computers only, with a central computer net?"

"Yes."

"Could that be jinxed somehow? To create an impression that things are not what they seem? We need a... diversion. Something to give us time."

"What diversion?"

A simulated emergency. Computer failure might be easiest. But it would have to be a lifiesystem-threatening situation that would occupy all attention."

"The lifiesystem has ample back-ups. So does the computer system. This ship was built for battle, though it has never fought aliens in deep space. There are redundancies in all essential systems."

"Never fought aliens?"

"No. Only your *Plant Eater*. We have beaten down planetary defenses and we have landed infantry on some primitive worlds. Some aboard have fought other Kzin. But that does not matter now."

"Oh, yes it does! You mean this is actually a crew without much experience of war! What hazards does your kind fear?"

“None! Heroes fear nothing save dishonor!” The reply was automatic and instantaneous, but Selina felt somehow sure that it was not completely true.

“Then what hazards does your command bear most in mind now?”

“*Tracker* is in many minds. Unknown weapons. Zraar-Admiral and Weeow-Captain are puzzled still how weaponless monkeys could react in time to destroy a Kzin scout-cruiser. They thought your ship would fight, though it did not. Zraar-Admiral has wondered if you monkeys are controlled by hidden masters. There are some who fear ambushes. Even Zraar-Admiral has wondered in secret lately if the recording we found in *Tracker* was not part of a trap to make us think that that battle was a freak only—that the real enemy is formidable and different.”

“Then an attack on this ship,” said Rick. “That would be a diversion.”

“An attack with what?” asked Telepath. “Who would attack?”

“We would. We need to paint a picture of an attack.”

“I do not understand, monkey. Is your mind still sick?” Telepath lashed his tail in frustration and disgust. “Heal him!” He ordered Selina. “You may mate with him if that will calm him, but be swift!”

“I don’t think his mind is sick,” said Selina. “Let him explain.”

“We cannot attack a...“ Telepath spoke for all the control he could muster. There were no words for “capital ship” or “Dreadnought” left in the humans’ vocabularies. “Even if we obtained weapons. Suicide gesture only. Urrr. Is that what you intend?... Suicide gesture might,” he added thoughtfully, “be best option.”

“We could attack it through its computers.” said Rick. Telepath stared at him. “Go on,” he said at last, “but I do not understand. We could, perhaps, shut down main computers for short time. But back-up computers phase in automatically. I told you there are many redundancies. We would have time to do nothing.”

“I would need your help,” said Rick, “Can you extract knowledge from the minds of your computer programmers so that they are unaware of it.”

“I believe so. I am good Telepath. You hear how well I speak your language. I am good at taking knowledge from Kzintosh or monkey.”

“What weapons does this ship carry inside itself?”

“The infantry weapons—guns, beams, chemical weapons, missile launchers... The ship’s heavy weapons are under Weapons Officer’s control.”

“The infantry weapons... they would have to be comparatively low-yield?”

“There are some chemical bombs, yes. Weapons the infantry carry...”

Rick was speaking quickly now: “Any diversion should combine events: bombs exploded inside the hull to simulate missile impacts, and from the boat a program loaded into the main computers. With your knowledge of your computers that should be possible. The bomb-damage would also help disguise the fact the boat was missing.”

“Where would we get bombs?”

“Would not the boats carry weapons? The very boat you plan to escape in?”

“How do you know this?”

“I don’t know. There is a kind of inevitability about it, once you begin to think in these terms. It would naturally have weapons.”

“Your own boat did not.”

“No, of course not.”

“Yes,” Telepath nodded. “It may be as I suspected. But they would not believe if I told them. May be wrong cave at last. Stupid. Stupid.”

“Meanwhile,” said Rick, “We must do some creative programming. Not disable the main computers of this ship, but Tanj them: place an image of an attacker in them. It must appear on the screens suddenly as we escape. Can you know the ship’s computers well enough to do that?”

“I told you I am good Telepath. I can know them for a time. I can read the programmers’ and system controllers’ minds, take years of knowledge and training and make them my own. Also Navigator, who has access to Fleet computer banks. Everything.”

“What none aboard deign to realize is that only I, the addict, may know *everything* about this ship if I choose. I have the ability to read Kzintosh minds by stealth, if need be, stealthy as any lurker in tall

grass. For I also have a war, though they do not know it... If a computer can be programmed, I can extract knowledge to program it. If boat is to be flown, if weapon is to be operated, I can extract knowledge to do it!

“And yet they would not let me breed. I have read in your minds of monkeys on your homeworld who have a distant glimmering of the World of the Eleventh Sense, the smallest hint of Telepath’s power. And you give these monkeys recognition and place and *encourage* them to breed!”

“I am also a programmer,” said Rick. His voice had become calm and precise now, no longer with the need to control fear but with the need to discipline and marshal rapid thoughts. *Perhaps even to calm Telepath*, wondered Selina *How quickly things are changing!* “You can read my mind as well. Given this cognitive array, can you place the image of an attacking ship in the system?”

“It is possible. Displays are diagrammatic. But I do not know how long such a false image would go undetected. Not long, I think.”

“Each moment that it was maintained would improve our chances.”

“Better if our attacker had alien design-style,” said Telepath. “It should not be ship of the Heroic Race, for signatures of all nearby are recorded. Nor could it be another defenseless monkey-ship.”

“But what of the thing that waits behind the defenseless monkeyship! The fighting ship that sent it as a lure!” exclaimed Selina. “Let them see that and fear!”

Telepath whirled upon her, claws out.

“What is this? Have you deceived me! Where is this warship?”

“There is none,” said Selina. “Read my mind if you would see whether or not I speak truth.”

She paused, looking fixedly at the alien carnivore towering over her. “There is none save this,” she said. She held up the ancient model of HMS *Nelson*. “Is this strange enough?”

The others stared at her.

“There’s the attacker. Can you put a display of it into the computer?”

Members of the Kzin species did not as a rule tend to develop their senses of humor much beyond witticism or ingenious insult.

Telepaths, however, needed a sense of humor as they needed all the mental defense mechanisms they could muster, though in general they kept it among their own kind. Now Telepath folded and unfolded his ears rapidly, the Kzin equivalent of a roar of laughter.

Selina laughed too, and then Rick. It seemed the only thing to do, but she was careful to bite the laughter off before it went out of control. In some remote corner of her mind she registered that she had recognized Telepath's laughter for what it was without being told. She had caught his amusement... had she somehow, read *his* mind?

"I scout. And I go to programmers," said Telepath. He injected himself with a minimum dose of the *Sthondat*-drug and his ears contracted into tight knots. He curled upon the deck, wrapping his tail around his nose like a house-cat settling into a basket. His eyes glazed and he drooled from slackened black lips. He twitched sometimes but finally appeared to sleep.

After what seemed a long time of tension-screaming silence Rick moved to waken Telepath. Selina grabbed his hand. She knew without being told that it would not be wise to try to shake him awake. She realized, without doubt now, and with a strange cold thrill like some new fear, that she knew more of Telepath than she had ever been told.

Telepath stirred. His voice was blurred and his eyes unfocussed. Then he brought himself under control. His voice, too, seemed to be becoming easier for Selina to understand.

"Move swiftly," said Telepath, "All nearby sleep."

He rose, and the three stepped into the dim ruddy light of the corridor. The humans felt hideously exposed. They guessed the dimness of the light would be no obstacle to the cats' eyes. Telepath led them to a service duct and they clambered in, like clumsy mice into a hole.

It was not like the tunnels of the Eleventh Sense. This was a passage like a Kzinretti birthing burrow that I threaded, the monkeys too noisy behind me.

In darkness I felt the monkey minds very close, the Selina's for some reason much closer than the male Rick's. I was fearful, but I

pressed on. Death awaited me, but it would be death on my own terms. I might die as Hero, not in foul degradation of burn-out.

Sleeping minds all around. Heroes on duty watch, bored, two fighting in the combat arena with sheathed claws, as Feared Zraar-Admiral had ordered. Junior officers and crew staring at screens that showed energy-pulses of unwavering regularity, or the blackness of space. A brief touch against Feared Zraar-Admiral's mind, and a quick shying away.

The monkey minds: the Rick apparently resigned to whatever might become, but with something else stirring that even the Rick was not aware of, the Selina mind that seemed almost too easy to enter now.

Dangerous always for a Telepath in dark tunnels without sleep or distraction. For all my hurrying (I slowed my pace as I heard the monkeys panting and breathless behind me) it was easy to think too much.

Honored Maaug-Riit had long made plain what was expected of me: to report to him should Feared Zraar-Admiral show signs of overmuch ambition. He had given me his word that, though it might be eights of years in the coming, I might have a posthumous partial name if I performed this well. The Patriarch had many ears into which I might speak.

Yet Feared Zraar-Admiral was my leader. He had complimented me. I would betray him now, but it was a betrayal only to save myself. That was permitted: so many stories said.

The boat-deck was vast, like a plain between mountain walls. There rode whole ships, scouts that needed large specialized crews. I and the humans were almost lost as we moved through a ducting-service corridor to the array of smaller Space-craft.

Gutting Claw carried several ready-reserve battalions of Heroes in sleep who, in the event of an inhabited world being discovered, could supplement and spearhead her crew as infantry. There were ranks of specialized armed and armored landing-craft as well as the normal ship's boats and small fighters. There were bins of spare parts and workshop and machine spaces, at present all secured. I still felt no waking Kzinti minds near.

Zraar-Admiral's barge was parked near the massive doors, ready for instant service. There too was the *Happy Gatherer's* boat, canted over on one side where the gravity-jacks had dropped it.

"See there," I told the monkeys. "Now I think the Fanged God is minded that our jest with him shall have success. He has given the means to cause enough damage to mask our escape."

In the same floor-space a gravity-motor and its housing had been set up, part of Weapons Officer's project to offset the possible future use of drives as weapons by monkeyships. It was still experimental and very small-scale, but involved generating a tight vortex to in theory either deflect particles or, like a reaction-drive, act as a gun. In this sleep-period it was unattended.

"Help me!" I ordered.

Weak I was but far stronger than the strongest human. Between us we dragged the gravity-motor round so that its field would cover the nearest main entrance. But I did not activate the field yet. That would need to be done, I calculated, from the barge just after the diversion appeared on the computer display and I opened the blast-doors to Space. I showed the monkeys the controls for its traverse and focus. This prototype was based on one of the smallest standard motors, taken from an infantry lifting-sled—the housing of even a boat's motor would be far too massive for power-driver assists of the size fitted here. I had hoped to use it to propel missiles but I now saw with anger that Weapons Officer obeyed procedures and all ammunition was locked away.

There was no problem getting aboard the barge. I had taken the door-codes from Coxswain's mind for my secret loading of the Kzinretti and there was normally no need for great security for an Admiral's personal equipment: unauthorized Kzin would not board without good reason. The barge was ready for instant use. Apart from other functions, it could serve as the Admiral's emergency headquarters in battle. Its central command position was a miniature replica of a battleship's bridge and there were Hero-sized couches round a central computer terminal for a nucleus staff.

I curled down in the Command chair and took another minimal dose of *Sthondat*-drug. I was prowling through most delicate cover.

No vegetable would I disturb so that its crown might sway against the wind and warn that I moved through that undergrowth.

The sleep period was ending. More senior officers were awakening and eating. They would be reporting for their duties soon. My mind touched, dancing on lightest velvet.. clawed feet, against one officer and then another. Systems Controller, Navigator, Chief Programmer, First Technical Chief, Lesser Technical Chief, snatching any tiny prey I had not taken previously into my claws with the quickest, subtlest of slashes. Yes, Telepath's claws could be sharp for this work, honed long in invisible caves no Kzintosh warrior knew! More I took from the Rick-monkey's mind, leaping then from a high point to look down upon it all.

Strained and fearful were the humans when I returned from the white tunnels. Well might they fear. Heroes in Space do not like being shut away from any vista, even if it is but a vista of the blackness between worlds, and the barge had bigger viewing ports than the human boat. They were normally clear save in battle. Any Kzin coming onto the boat-deck might have seen them. They pressed themselves down as far as they might and lay in silence.

A combatant Hero might have been surprised to see me then, and the speed with which my claws worked the computer's keys. A visual array of sensors took in the model ship, its diagrammatic image appearing on Local Display a moment later. I rotated it through three dimensions and confirmed the display was consistent. Then I handed it to the Rick.

"It is done," I said, "Part of our deception is prepared."

I consulted the computer again, touched System Controller's mind once more, and the Rick's, linked the image to the battle-alert sensors, then set the program to run. A tunneling thing it was. Time, a little time, it would need yet to burrow its way into the entrails of the Battle-Display tank.

"Do you know how to open these doors?" The Rick asked. Normally I might have swiped the monkey with my claws for the stupid and insulting question, but I thought it necessary that the timid thing be reassured.

"There are officers who do," I said, "and this boat has emergency over-ride for any command to be obeyed when issuing from it. Long

ago when he was distracted did I take the code-word from Feared Zraar-Admiral's mind.

"Timing is difficult now. We should load extra stores and what weapons we may."

"More stores? But it is only a short journey, surely?" This time I nearly did swipe it. "And if we reach the monkey-ship, do you expect me to eat monkeyfood?"

Quickly I climbed down from the barge and began collecting the storage-bins I had prepared previously. The monkeys followed and tried to help, but they were slow and clumsy and could hardly lift the containers. I was fearful that they would drop them. Suddenly the door crashed open.

"What are you doing here? Answer, Addict!" I had forgotten Weapons Officer. Stupid. Stupid. He had returned, of course, to work on the gravity-motor weapon.

What did Weapons Officer see? Telepath and the two loose monkeys, surrounded by bins of stores, standing between the weapon's test-bed and the Admiral's barge. For a moment he was stunned with surprise. He had not come prepared, as he would have come to the training arena. But I knew his battle-reflexes. The next moment he would leap.

Yet I had one *W'tsai* hidden in my cave: the idea of Telepath planning to steal the barge and escape was too insane to occur to him. Weapons Officer was a typical Kzintosh, the same as those youngsters who would have killed me in the crèche when they had taken me from Karan, had not my talent been recognized by the Trainers-of-Telepaths.

The speed of thought! But I did not need to read his mind to see its image of me: I had seen it in the minds of all the officers, yes, and in the minds of the lowliest infanters and wipers, too, countless times already. To him I was the addict, eunuch-substitute, herder-of-apes, beneath contempt...

How could he know how Telepaths thought? But I had a moment, as Weapons Officer stood puzzled, staring at me and at the monkeys, and the image of an alien warcraft burrowed its way into the computer's vitals.

A red jet flared in his mind. No clear understanding yet, but: *The addict! The monkeys! Treachery!* Weapons officer's hand moved to the grip of his *W'tsai*.

I had a *W'tsai* in my belt, too, but to touch it would be fatal. I could not fight Weapons Officer. No addict he, but tall, strong, fast, superbly fit, with countless hours of combat training. There was not a Kzintosh on the ship that I, Telepath, could best in combat. None, indeed, so poor and lacking in dignity as to challenge me in the practice arena. "Fight a Telepath" was a Kzintosh insult.

They did not know the Telepath's Weapon. The light dose of *Sthondat*-drug I had taken was still in my system: enough to heighten my power, not enough to disorient me. I reached for the pain-centers of his mind, and struck.

Given skill, practice, familiarity with the one whose mind is entered, an experienced Telepath can avoid causing pain at entry I had read Kzin minds all unknown to them. First Telepath had praised my art. Now I bent all my power not to avoid pain but to cause it: the Telepath's own Hot Needle and Vengeful Slasher.

The agony in his brain Weapons Officer had never expected or experienced. He reeled back screaming, clutching his head, eyes rolling and ears knotted. The effort weakened me, but I was prepared and summoned my will. I stood rampant as Weapons Officer doubled in agony. He dropped his *W'tsai*, its blade clattering on the deck. I leapt upon him and cut his throat.

"That's torn it," said Rick behind me, as I regained my breath and was bending to take Weapons Officer's ears for my first belt-trophy.

I saw what he meant beyond the statement of the obvious. We were committed now. Rick looked pleased. I had no time to read his mind, but the expression on his face, with his little omnivore teeth showing, signified either amusement or defiance.

I could feel Kzintosh minds moving not far away now. "Hurry!" I told the monkeys as I tucked the ears safely away, "Silence has second priority now!"

Selina cried out. Two troopers burst through the door by which Weapons Officer had entered. I could not have held two at once, and for the moment my power was drained. Both carried side-arms.

Selina moved fast for a monkey. She turned the gravity-planer weapon at them and activated it, catching them unprepared, knocking them back and away up the corridor. I took it and spun the controls at random. The monkey-boat, only temporarily secured, broke loose and went smashing away, rupturing cables and ducting. Infantry boats were torn loose and hurtled across the deck. Small-arms ammunition exploded.

Then the huge appalling battle alarms roared.

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The alarms and the howls of damage-alert klaxons mingled with the screams of Kzin. Zraar-Admiral leapt for the bridge, a standing leap upward from one deck to the next ignoring the vertical ladder, his staff and bodyguards close behind him. He was roaring commands for return fire into his helmet speaker as he came.

Some viewing screens blanked out, but enough remained in the dim-red glare of the emergency lights for Zraar-Admiral, as he reached the bridge, to see wreckage exploding into Space on sensor-screens.

And flaring on one bank of screens and then another was a Thing: an alien craft shaped nothing like either the monkey-ship they had destroyed or the still distant *Writing Stick*. It's bizarre asymmetrical configuration was dominated by what appeared to be colossal triple-banked turreted weapons-systems. Rail guns? The *real* lasers that had slashed *Tracker*? Trap!

The battleship shuddered again as broadsides of missiles blasted away from it. Surging odors of blood and battle, natural and manufactured, filled the air. There was a new scream from an internal klaxon. Zraar-Admiral leapt up onto the battle-drum, striking it so that its *Sthondat*-hide chambers boomed and reverberated. The Day! The Day at last!

"We have been boarded! There is fighting on the boat-deck!" Weeow-Captain shrieked.

On the boat-deck! But there was the enemy, in Space!

"Monkeys? Identify the enemy instantly!"

"I don't know, Dominant One. The sensors are being jammed."

"Where is Telepath? Why is he not on the bridge?"

“Dominant One, perhaps the live-meat monkeys have become feral and attacked him like rogue Jotok. He was their keeper.”

Trap! Trap! Zraar-Admiral would betray no panic to his officers, but again *Tracker* blazed in his mind. Did the live-meat monkeys on the boat-deck know the rarity and value of Telepath, that they had singled him out? Or had they attacked him because he was the smallest and weakest Kzin aboard? But monkeys attacking Kzin! And at this moment! Trap! Trap! Had the live-meat monkeys been deliberately planted in *Gutting Claw* for the purposes of the real attackers?

With battle-shielding activated real Space could not be seen, but visual-display screens were aflame with missile explosions and the multi-colored bars of beam-weapons. And in the middle of it all the enemy warship, with its weird configuration and monstrous weapons. It appeared untouched by the star-hot claws of destruction slashing at it. Kzin gravity technology and the investigation of ancient Slaver stasis-boxes had led to various theories of force-fields. Did the enemy have them? Beams burned at it like solid light. Banks of ready-lights flashed and flashed again as salvos of missiles were discharged, launchers re-loaded too fast for even Kzin eyes to follow and new salvos discharged again in barrage, exploding in a nova-like vortex of fratricide.

Suddenly the enemy ship's image disappeared. Its shields collapsed at last? A cloaking device?

There was another series of flashes, then the enemy's outline alone reappeared. The outline reduced to a skeleton, then a scroll of numbers. Behind them on the screen there were images of stars again, as the Kzinti missile explosions roiled away into empty Space.

“A false spoor!” cried Systems Controller. “There was no enemy ship! It was an image in the computer! A worm in its guts!” Human and Kzin physiology and technology had led, in an example of convergent evolution that would have interested a philologist, to the same imagery for the same situation.

“Our own computer was infected. Liver-worm within it! A *rRrarrknarraraaw* seed! There was no enemy ship, but an image generated here! Dominant One, the back-up computers have now found this anomaly and killed it.”

No enemy ship. Not The Day, but... a monkey-trick! He had struck the drum for Nothing! Snarling, slaver spraying from his jaws and fangs, Zraar-Admiral gathered himself to leap at the lying screen. Again he controlled himself what good would it do to expend his rage upon machinery?

Not The Day. But there remained a real enemy indeed! Who had done this thing? Were the remaining monkeys loose?

Weeow-Captain punched up a diagram of *Gutting Claw's* entrails. There was no lie here: the boat-deck was in chaos: flames, a gravity-reaction.

“Forward!” roared Zraar-Admiral, “I lead my Heroes!” Anything else would be unthinkable. The warriors of his personal guard leapt to him.

“Lead us, Feared Zraar-Admiral!” they cried.

“They are coming!” cried Telepath. “The diversion did not hold them!” The Dominant One’s mind was on him like a tidal-wave of lava.

The image of HMS *Nelson* was gone from the monitor.

“No time! No time!”

“Go!” Rick shouted. Selina stared at him, uncomprehending for a moment as he turned to the gravity-motor again.

“I will delay them! Selina, run! Fly!”

She hesitated. “I *order* you!” He whirled upon Telepath. “Go!” he roared.

He leapt away from the boat, and ran to the gravity-motor, spinning the focus-controls. The gravity-field tightened to a thin tube. A storm-wind roared through compartment and corridor. The Kzin attack force burst in.

Zraar-Admiral leading the way, the armored Kzin advanced against the howling whirlwind, clutching at claw-holds.

Rick aimed the gravity-motor and threw the model ship into the vortex of its field, tightening its beam and increasing its force towards maximum with two blows on the control-surfaces.

Zraar-Admiral, braced against the pressure with every atom of his gigantic strength, saw for an instant the image of the enemy warship hurtling at him with colossal kinetic energies. Impact. There was a multi-colored flash as Zraar-Admiral disintegrated. The Kzin by him

were smashed against the bulkheads by the force of the explosion, one beam-rifle firing at full charge. Fragments of metal and Kzin were hurled at bullet-speeds.

Another cache of charges for small-arms ammunition exploded in sympathetic detonation. Rick was knocked back by the blast. He rolled across the deck, then rose hunched over broken ribs and stepped forward. The surviving Kzin were getting to their feet. He advanced to meet them bare-handed.

The field of the gravity-planer slashed across the boat-deck in a snake-shaped pattern of random destruction, dragging flame-filled atmosphere in a roaring typhoon behind it. Then a shot from a trooper's beam-rifle smashed the gravity-weapon. The embryonic fire-storm vanished in an instant. Automatic jets of inert gas smothered the remaining fires. There was a sudden echoing silence. The armored troopers, products of superb training and discipline, did not scream and leap. They fanned out almost slowly, surrounding Rick on the deck and Telepath and Selina in the barge.

Telepath punched in the order to release the locks on the main doors, a complex, multi-staged process.

Selina stared helpless from the port as the Kzin closed in. Rick still stood facing them. Others were leveling their weapons at the barge, coolly, without haste now. Then Rick raised one arm, pointed to his sleeve and to the *Happy Gatherer's* boat. Selina nodded. She raised a hand to him and they looked at each other for a moment. She activated a sensor-point and shouted an order into a fragment of lattice on her sleeve. Aboard *Happy Gatherer's* boat an attitude jet fired, turning the boat so that it was parallel to the barge. Kzin leapt back from the clouds of flaring gas. She shouted an emergency override code and a second order. The boat's main engine fired, vaporizing everything organic and unprotected on the deck. Flame washed towards the barge. Missile warheads exploded in the same instant. The boat itself flew through the hangar to explode against the main doors, blowing them into Space.

Flame and air blasted into vacuum. Other doors flashed shut, activated by emergency triggers.

Aboard the barge neither Selina nor any other human could have moved fast enough. Telepath fired the retaining bolts and kicked in

the motor. Propelled by both its own oversized gravity-planer and the explosion of air from the boat-deck, the barge shot into Space, the edge of a fireball just behind it.

Telepath leapt to the weapons console. Even had he wished, there was no time for arming nuclear warheads but he was firing all that could be brought to bear of the barge's other weapons into the cavity of the docking bay.

Even if Selina knew the controls, her hands could not have matched the eye-blurring speed of Telepath's claws. To venture near him would only have invited injury. She climbed to the upper viewing bubble and looked back. Behind them, the battleship's boat-deck was a glowing crater, venting rose-colored fog and incandescent debris. *Gutting Claw* had been hurt.

But the battleship was growing rapidly smaller as the barge accelerated away. Biggest of the smaller vessels carried aboard, It had oversized gravity-engines, not only to give it the best speed in the fleet, but also so that it could act as a tug. Now *Gutting Claw* was a red star among the stars. Telepath, firing the weapons, flying the ship and needing all his alertness, had no time to read the minds of *Gutting Claw's* officers, but no beams or missiles flashed out to destroy the craft: perhaps in the damage and confusion, the flight of the barge had not yet been noticed.

Telepath activated defenses: a cloud of metallic dust, a small robot craft generating a false signature, computer-stabilized mirrors which might in theory reflect a laser back to its source.

Selina became aware again of the sound of the gravity motor all about them. It was a moment of relative tranquility, even if only the tranquility of exhaustion. *Gutting Claw* was no longer in visual range: the inferno in the boat-deck could not be seen, possibly because the battleship had turned its wounded side away from any possible enemy..

“You are brave for a monkey,” Telepath said to her at last.

“And you are brave for a Telepath.”

“Do not grieve for the Rick-monkey too much.” Telepath said. “It too was brave at last and the bearded monkey-god will take its soul. We could have done nothing to help it...”

“I know the liquid discharged from your eyes is a sign of grief,” he added after a moment, “but you are affected by something else I do not understand. We are companions, monkey who is not quite a monkey, Kzin who is not quite a Kzin. Should I not try to comfort you?”

Admiral’s Barge

I was outcast now from all of the Kzin species that I knew. But I had slashed the deepest wound that any Telepath had struck in all the centuries of our hidden and so far largely futile war.

Still no beams leapt out from *Gutting Claw*. According to the screens before my eyes, no missile-signatures were detected by the instruments.

I cast back now to read the minds aboard the ship. Weeow-Captain spitting and shrieking orders to damage-control parties, junior officers and sergeants leading Heroes against fires where robotics had failed. Rage and shame of Damage-Control Officer in his cabin flinging himself at a cabin-door warped shut by explosions. Zraar-Admiral’s remaining Kzinretti yammering in his harem as explosions rocked them and sirens screamed and toxic fumes poured through ventilation ducts. *Gutting Claw* had not been closed up at battle-stations when the alarms went. *Yes, though we could conquer by sheer power and ferocity, we were unused to alien ways of war. But what had they been taught at damage-control courses? Of disasters, afire out of control in a loaded capital ship’s hangar-deck calls for the greatest Heroism!*

I caught, briefly before I broke contact, death-agonies of a troop of Heroes propelled suddenly into vacuum. There was worse agony to leap at me from other minds: as well as the gravity-motor gun, Weapons Officer had been developing a hydrofluoric acid spray as a way of hosing monkeys out of trees on “Earth.” The tanks ruptured and a mist of acid flowed up ducts and corridors, penetrating tissue instantly to devour bones from within. Too late other armored doors and emergency air-locks were crashing shut. *Gutting Claw* was truly in a space-battle at last, against chemical demons from its own guts. The boat-deck and all access ways to it were sealed off now.

Feared Zraar-Admiral was plainly dead. Though I had seen him die I had hardly believed it, but he could not have survived. It is said among Telepaths that the very greatest of them can contact the minds of the dead, but I dared not try that. I had not wished to betray him or be a spy upon him, and he had paid me compliments, but he had destroyed First Telepath, my teacher and only friend, my leader and commander in our war, and he would have destroyed me. As for the rest, when had one of them given me a good word or a gesture of respect? They had treated me, one and all, as a despised tool to be used and broken. As a *Sthondat*-lymph addict. I had hated them all. And now I had slashed back.

There was no trace in any mind aboard *Gutting Claw* that they knew what had happened on the boat-deck. On the bridge the impacts of the missiles I had fired from the boat had registered unambiguously for what they were. Now Systems Controller and Alien Technologies Officer, with Zraar-Admiral's orders forgotten and Weeow-Captain pre-occupied with damage-control, were fighting a death-duel to resolve the question of whether the enemy ship image had been real or not.

And still, as Heroes sealed red-hot doors shut with naked, charring hands, and, naked or in armor, advanced into holocausts with chemical fire-killers, as they leapt shrieking their battle-cries down corridors in lurid flame-lit darkness, and fought the demon-claws of hurricane winds that would drag them from the ship, as fire-storms hurled white-hot knife-edged debris, as clouds of choking fumes poured into the air-space of the bridge itself, as Weeow-Captain spat and roared his orders in the Battle Imperative (and wondered with a mixture of blazing ambition and a shameful touch of private grief and fear if he had succeeded to Supreme Command) Zraar-Admiral's barge was fleeing at the full thrust of its motor. There was no eye upon it.

I realized slowly what I had done. I was racing into the darkness of empty Space, to a dim and uncertain goal—a weak ship of alien omnivores—and with a mighty enemy behind.

More than an enemy. Zraar-Admiral had made the location of the monkey home-worlds a Patriarch's Secret, not merely hiding it in the computers but removing it from them. Now that secret, aboard

Gutting Claw, had died with him and the Rick-monkey. I had hoped that with both vengeance and the defenseless monkey-worlds with all the rewards of a High Conquest beckoning, the warriors of *Gutting Claw* would give little heed to as useless an object as a mad Telepath. I had miscalculated: not only had my escape done immensely more damage than I had anticipated, but the Selina-monkey and I were now not worthless but were the only keepers of a secret beyond price. Further—the constant use of the *Sthondat*-drug in the last few days had clouded my mind so that I had been foolishly slow to see the implications of this—we were heading for the *Writing Stick* which was in any case *Gutting Claw*'s first-priority target.

Torture if we were re-captured would be one of the few things worse than burn-out. Heroes may despise torture for its own sake as an indulgence of the weak, but have no hesitation in using it either as condign punishment or to extract secrets. I knew the instruments, and had sometimes had to read the minds of torture victims. I felt my own fear like a solid thing. There was fear from the monkey's mind, too, fear of fangs and claws, fear that was in some ways like my own.

Too like my own! And now I was aware of thought leaking *not from* Selina's mind but *to* it: a leak that was broadening to a torrent. I felt-saw walls collapsing, a thing lunging out, growing between me and this female ape.

The fabric of the pale tunnels was suddenly tearing. My fear and Selina's fear merging. I felt other things merging, too: I knew what it was to have a flat whiskerless face with tiny teeth, udders, a soft, boneless, vulnerable stomach, well-padded rounded tailless buttocks. And a name. Zraar-Admiral had wondered why their tails had been amputated. I now knew they had not had tails for millions of years. They did not live in trees. More than the idea of salt oceans now—the stinging cold of salt waves. Swimming in a tumbling green ocean under a blue sky lit by a yellow sun, wind drying salt-crystals on exposed skin, darting silver fish in the water, quick as *viiritikii*, yellow ground and green vegetation behind. Weird memories of human mating. Memories of human kittenhood... childhood.

More. Emotions which I had analyzed and reported previously had changed as if from two-dimensional to four-dimensional things. A nameless blend of loss and excitement at the sight of a blue and

white planet dwindling into Space. I saw myself, saw Telepath, grown taller and more terrible than any warrior, and fear like a *W'tsai* of black ice in the liver—in the *heart*, and then Telepath again but changing.

The viewer and the instruments moved far away. And as I returned to them, I was not the same. *Nwarrkaa Kishri Zaaarll...* the Double Bridge of Demons.

It is a term of Telepaths' Art, to describe an event that is not rare. It is particularly common when dealing with a subject that itself has some telepathic ability, latent or actualized: when the Single Bridge of Demons is erected, the Telepath loses his own identity and *becomes* the subject whose mind he has entered. With the Double Bridge the process is mutual but may be only partial *for* each party. Perhaps with the communality of our hopes and fears as a catalyst, that is what had happened here.

I had felt too much empathy with Selina before to regard her as prey, but Selina was truly in my mind now. Because I was Telepath I had never thought entirely like a Kzin. Now I no longer thought entirely like Telepath. There was a monkey—a *human*—in me too. I was reading the alien thoughts and feelings from *experience*.

The Bridge, once erected, is not completely broken while both of the two parties live.

I could now enter Selina's mind without the *Sthondat*-drug.

And she could now enter my mind.

While both of the two parties live. I could end that in an instant, with one sweep of my claws. Yet I did not. Could not. There was now too much of Telepath in Selina too.

"You know what has happened," I said. It was not a question and needed no answer.

We were silent for a time, but each mind was assimilating what had flowed to it from the other. The motor snarled and rippled and purred behind us. A long time passed as the two bruised minds recovered. I think we both slept at some time. As in a dream, I rose at last and wandered to the barge's trophy-drier and preserved Weapon's Officer's ears for my belt. Selina watched me.

"Do you still feel a duty to warn Earth?" I asked her at last.

She knew from my mind now the fragment of human speech that Zraar-Admiral had ordered me to memorize in a time that suddenly seemed long ago.

“It seems the *Angel’s Pencil* has done that already,” Selina said. “I wish I did not think it so likely that it will be disbelieved. But if they disbelieved the *Angel’s Pencil*, they will come to know that *Happy Gatherer* has disappeared in the same part of Space. We never answered their last signal. Let them make of that what they will.”

Selina thought of Earth and of her brother, guarding and herding gangs of children through the strange human museum, her brother with a secret collection hoarded as a Kzinrett might hoard playthings. A collection with a purpose I now began to understand truly for the first time. Crumbling pages of forbidden books and “military” paraphernalia.

A secret history—or set of false legends—of Earth that the government had *banned*. “Banned” was a strange concept (Or was it so strange? How much of Kzin’s own history was in the control of the Priests and Conservors?). But was this brother a secret rebel against the dominant humans? Both he and Selina thought of something called the Military Fantasy: a forbidden cult that suggested the humans had once been something very different to what their histories told. I followed this a little way, some of it over ground I had previously guessed out for myself. Many of Selina’s own thoughts were not clear on the matter, but when her thought combined with mine a picture emerged.

Then, perhaps because I had touched the image of her brother in her mind, I felt her thoughts flare with something almost Kzin-like: *Your destiny is upon you! Rouse them! Rouse the silly sheep before the tigers spring!*

Sheep? Brainless quadruped grass-eaters, I saw. Herds of them had once been husbanded by monkeys for food or to make clothing from their fur. They were almost displaced on Earth now. A few were reared as delicacies and others were kept on hunting preserves called *zoos*, but these latter were not hunted. Humans came simply to watch them. Strange. Strange.

And tigers? What were they? *Merrower!* There was an image there! Kzin, and something else. Fangs, and leaping and eyes like

fire. The images became conflicting. But the overwhelming impression was unambiguous: I knew what she thought of tigers.

Or did I? For in the images of blood and death and fangs and slashing claws, all the splendid rampant slaying, there was a strange claw-point of something else that Selina herself was hardly aware of, to do with my attempts to console her for the death of Rick, something that contained the words: ‘spoor creature!’

What did this mean? Did it matter? Why?

And other thoughts: *I know their reaction will be disbelief, denial... And then panic? Gangs of humans swarming through hive-like cities... and screaming in terror and then... and then, perhaps...*

Overwhelming all again came the image of the sheltered sheepfold and the tiger leaping from the stars. But even if the sheep were roused, what could they do? Then I thought of *Tracker*, and the wound blazing in the side of *Cutting Claw*.

And another Kzin-like thought leapt in Selina’s mind, perhaps triggered by own. A leap against Fate, a thought that in the Heroes’ Tongue might have been expressed in the God-Defying Tense itself: *The launching lasers!* In the human system were giant laser-cannon used for boosting the launch of reaction-drive Space-craft, some on the planet nearest the sun of the human home-system, a few on the human home-world and its moon, some in the human-settled belt of asteroids and the moons of the outer gas-giants. And then another thought, Kzin-like but of a different kind: *they are obsolete. They are being phased out and not replaced! Time! Time! Will there be time?*

And then: *Nothing I can do.*

For an instant she tried to keep these thoughts from me, knowing it was futile. In any case, what did it matter now, driving into black Space, death behind us and death, surely, before us?

That took my thoughts back to *Gutting Claw*, and Weeow-Captain on the bridge, in command, determined now to make an end of the *Angel’s Pencil* straight away, once and for all, without toying with It.

The Angel’s Pencil!

If Selina and I conferred, it was at a level too high and at a speed too fast to record. From her mind came the radio frequencies used by the human ship.

And then I cast my mind back to the *Claw*, and knew what Weeow-Captain planned.

Angel's Pencil

“Explosions. And Big Cat is moving at a tangent.” Crouched over the makeshift weapons console, Jim Davis shook his head as if trying to clear it. The autodoc was good, but it was not intended to keep a man keyed to this pitch for so long.

“What does it mean?”

Steve Weaver made a gesture of incomprehension. “I can only guess... somebody else is fighting them.”

“It can't be one of our ships. Nothing human. Not against that maneuverability.”

“Were you expecting a human ship? Why do you think there were anti-missiles on that ship we struck? They were expecting attack from... something else. Something worse than they are, perhaps. Something higher on the food-chain.”

Steve! Steve! Jim!” Sue Bhang leapt to the console. “There's a message coming through!”

Fingers flickered at keyboards. The comscreen lit. A picture rolled, slowed, stabilized. A human woman, haggard, eyes huge in black, sunken pits, clad only in the torn scraps and under-strappings of a Spacesuit. And behind her one of the felinoids, huge and alive.

“Who are you?”

The woman and the felinoid were in a small compartment, obviously in a cat Space-ship. The fittings and design they could see were cat not human. Panels behind her head showed stars. The reply came quickly. Either she was very close or she had anticipated the question.

“I am Selina Guthlac of the *Happy Gatherer*. There is no time to talk. Fire your Kzin missiles now! Jettison them! They are slaved to the Kzin battleship's computer. It can detonate them whenever the enemy wishes! Inside your own hull! Do it! Do it!”

Steve and Jim stared at each other in horror. They had been braced for a battle against odds since the huge pursuer had been detected, but not for this. The comscreen shouted at them again:

“Do it! Do it now!”

Her voice propelled Steve's hand to the firing button. Jim snatched it away.

"Don't! You see she's a prisoner! The cat is forcing her to say that. You can see she's been tortured."

The face on the screen was still speaking.

"This is an ally. We escaped in a boat from the Kzinti ship. Listen to me!

The felinoid's lips moved. It spoke in a hard, grating English:

"Zelina zpealcz trruth. My wurrd az my honorr."

Then again the woman spoke.

"This is a Kzin Telepath. We read your thoughts. You think we want to disarm you. But we can prove we are your allies. We have struck a blow against the enemy. See! This is our escape!"

The screen rolled again. There was film of a ship, apparently an oversized version of the one *Angel's Pencil* had encountered, burning with internal fires and spewing wreckage into Space.

"It means nothing," said Jim. "It could be a virtual reality simulation."

"Jim!" Sue held her voice as low and steady as she might, "There is some activity beginning in those missiles."

On the control-panel that had been fastened to the *Pencil's* main console lights were glowing. Green lights, the alien color for danger. That panel had been taken from the alien ship, as had the missiles it controlled.

"The missiles are arming themselves!"

Jim Davis stabbed the firing button. The *Pencil* lurched violently as, eight upon eight, the missiles fired. Propelled by Kzin gravity-planers that left no chive-flame, they were invisible from the viewing ports.

"Now we're disarmed." There was no question of using the ramscoop as a weapon unless an enemy with suitable physiology flew into it. Its conical field covered a vast area of Space, but it projected ahead of the ship. The laser, intended to beam messages back to the Solar System, could only be adjusted within a narrow cone behind them. The small attitude jets and gyros could be disregarded as measured against the total, inertialess, mobility of a ship powered by Kzin gravity-planer.

There was a heavy, fearful silence in the control-room. Then black visors crashed down over the ports. Across the gulf of Space, blue-white spheres were swelling like new suns.

“Where are you?” Steve asked the screen. “We’ll take you aboard.”

“No time for that. The *Claw* is coming. And it thinks you are clawless now.

“We are. When we armed ourselves with those missiles, we gave ourselves hope and courage.”

“No. You are not clawless and it is time to fight. Your laser is still a weapon... wait!”

The watchers in the *Angel’s Pencil* saw her turn to the felinoid. Something without words was taking place between them. The bulk of the Kzinti battleship was returning a bigger echo on the radar screens now, almost directly behind them. There too was a smaller echo, a little closer and to the Galactic north-west. Then the screen spoke again.

“Are they in range of your laser yet? We do not believe they know this frequency or that they could translate these transmissions.”

“Extreme range for damaging their hull-material, I think. We tested it on wreckage from the other ship.”

“No good. The Kzinti fight each other a good deal. They attack head-on and they expect to take enemy... slashes... head-on. The bow of *Gutting Claw* is designed against beams as well as bombs. It is mirror-finished and in battle other mirrors and dust projectors are deployed. It is made of super-hardened materials and has super-conductors to lose heat. This is a capital unit, not a scout-ship.”

“The *Pencil’s* laser is Tanj big. Bigger than they might expect.”

“Hit the bow and you might burn through eventually, if they kept still for you. But it would take more time than you have. And there would be beams and missiles coming the other way. The sides and the damaged area are less well-protected but you cannot maneuver to attack them. Be thankful she can launch no fighters from the boat-deck yet. Your best chance is to hit the Command Bridge or the center of the damage in the side if they are presented. But they are small targets and they do not present when *Claw* is head-on.

“What can we do?”

“Keep your laser on the target but do not fire yet. You must let her get closer. And we must make her turn.”

Admiral’s Barge

There was *Gutting Claw*. With radar, infra-red and sense enhancers and my own senses guiding me I could find the hull now. The human ship was no problem to find on the end of its vast column of exhausted hydrogen.

The vented material that *Claw* had trailed like a bloodstain had tapered away. The hull was cooler with fires under control, and the hangar area had been sealed off. The motors were undamaged, and the weapons capacity was still colossal.

Time moved slowly. But the Selina’s chatter with the *Writing Stick* humans became instantaneous as the distance between us decreased.

The barge’s computer and weapons-systems could not be overridden from *Gutting Claw*. It had been the Admiral’s own. I armed a fusion-missile and fired it at the *Claw*. Beams and anti-missiles converged on it and destroyed it. Another. It got no closer. I sent a stream of ball-bearings at the *Claw*. Its meteor defenses could cope with that but it took up more computer capacity. They must have identified the signature of the barge’s motor now. They had some idea of who was attacking them. Rage on the bridge was moving out of control.

The blind noseless fools! Never to think what an enemy a Telepath might make! They had no conception that I was reading the minds of Weeow-Captain and the whole bridge and attack-team! It was easy after the minds of aliens. They might have felt pain in their brains—I had no time for the subtle dance—but the *Claw’s* lifesystem was still full of noxious fumes which would explain that.

Weeow-Captain’s rage engulfed him now. I punched up the visual comlink to *Claw’s* bridge. He saw me. He would not understand Telepath insults, so I did *my* best with ordinary Kzintosh ones. But coming from a Telepath at all, they must have been shattering.

“Eat vegetable matter from the dung of the *Sthondat* that *ch’rowled* your mother! You seek only to *ch’rowl* the female monkey!” I snarled at him. “Where is Weapons Officer, you wonder? His cinders

float in Space, but see, his ears hang from Telepath's belt! And from my belt hangs the path to the monkey home-worlds! Try to take them if you dare! Come and fight me! Fight Telepath, if you dare, Coward-Captain!"

The screen went blank as Weeow-Captain leapt at it. He had less control than Zraar-Admiral. My last picture was of his fangs. And *Gutting Claw* was turning towards us. I was already breaking contact. No Telepath could long stand that intensity of rage and hatred tearing directly at his own mind. I sent the rest of my missiles on their way. If some by chance got through the battleship's defenses, so much the better. But no missiles or beams were fired back at us yet. Weeow-Captain still wanted us alive.

Gutting Claw and the human ship were much less than a light-second apart now. One flash of thought to Selina, one command from me, one word from her. *Gutting Claw* had turned its bow away from the human ship now, and had at that moment no attention to spare for it. The loss of Zraar-Admiral and many other officers was like a brain-wound for it.

There were the *Claw's* missiles! I fired our anti-missiles. They would probably stop the first wave, but the first wave only. The humans would have to be quick.

In the darkness of Space ahead and a little below us a green nova-like light flared, impossibly bright. Then there was another light-spot in space, another incandescent green star.

Cutting Claw was hit side on. I felt it in my mind as the laser hit the bridge, then it began a slow slicing move into the hull. But it still took armored bulkheads and the massive bulk of the main gravity-engines and their containment-fields long seconds to melt. I had told them *Tracker* had been far more lightly built. It was moving out of the laser's field: the green star that was *Gutting Claw* faded. Then the ravaged containment-fields failed and it exploded.

There was agony in my head. It was the Death. I had burned my brain too much. But when I died Selina would lose all my knowledge of piloting the barge. Honor demanded I get her to her fellow-monkeys... fellow-humans.

Green light flashing! A missile fired from the *Claw* in its last seconds still alive and heading towards us.

I had to leap again, to trigger our remaining anti-missiles. A huge, blinding explosion, too close. The stars spun, the meteor-defenses activated. There was an indescribable sound as something hit the bulk of the gravity-motor behind us. I thought that bulk had saved us but then came the dreadful howl of air escaping from an hull-puncture. I struggled with a meteor-patch. On the dials lights and wave-bands were showing engine malfunction. Power would be gone in a few heat-beats. Think quickly! From Selina's mind I snatched what no Kzin astrogator trained on gravity-motors would have had ready enough: a knowledge of inertial forces sufficient to turn the barge with the last of its power and align its course towards the human ship.

I had done what I could. My claws slipped on the control panel. I saw them tearing strips from it as my muscles began to convulse. Then pain... pain...

"I think your cat is dying," said Steve Weaver. As he saw her face he added: "I can't be sure. I'm only a human doctor."

The human and Kzin seals could not interface, of course, but four of the *Angel's Pencil's* crew had crossed in suits.

There had been embraces, greetings, some explanations between the humans. Telepath lay on the floor of the barge, not curled like a sleeping cat, but with his limbs sprawled out, violet eyes a quarter open, unseeing, breathing irregularly.

Selina stared at the *Pencil's* crew around her. Her movements were like the twitches of a cornered and desperate feline. *A hunted animal*, thought Steve.

"Yes," said Selina, "Dying with withdrawal from addiction, perhaps from burn-out. But that is not all.

"Kzin normally have no guilt about killing each other, if requirements of honor have been met. Young males kill each other often. Death-duels are a recognized way of advancement. Telepath has been trying to convince himself that he owed nothing by way of comradeship or had any other obligation to the crew of *Gutting Claw*, who had treated him like dirt. He loved and feared the Admiral, but it was not by his hand that the Admiral died, even if he had set up the situation. But he is not quite convincing himself. The tragedy of all Telepaths: too complex and vulnerable to be a Kzin, psychically

damaged and then forced into a life that worsens all that damage. He's always been neurotic and now he's going mad. He'll die unless I can save him."

Let it die, then, thought Jim. Another cat less in the Universe.

"He's been trying to shield me from what he is going through. That is weakening him also. He feels an obligation to me. Once they accept them the Kzin take their obligations seriously."

"Well, what can you do?" asked Steve. "I can't treat it. Nor can our autodoc."

"There's a doe here. Put him in that. He's beyond resisting if you lift him. If I stay in touch with him, whether I'm here on in the *Pencil* I feel... I don't know... After all, we owe him something. But..."—
There were tears again suddenly on the sunken skin below her eyes—"I'd rather like to get aboard a monk... a human ship again."

I was Telepath. I was in the medical unit of Zraar-Admiral's barge. It was a scene of wide cold plains. The grass tall so a hunter must stand of hind legs to see above it, even a hunter used to growing on all fours. Scrabbling slopes of red sandstone, of scree, of red ironstone. There were distant mountains and somehow there were also forests, with leaping arboreal animals. Cliffs. Ironstone walls. I knew I was looking at a planet I had never seen: Old Kzin, as it had once been.

But now tunnel after tunnel was opening to me, opening and expanding to flash away. I saw scene after scene in a lattice-work.

Barer landscapes, stony heath. The strange landscape of dreams, clearer than I had seen it before. It was a great plain I wandered now. Alone? Or was someone with me? Zraar-Admiral? Karan? Selina? Gullied stone now, rock ridges, red under a red sky. Deeper gullies, rising about me, turning to caves, to tunnels...

Karan? Karan? Was she here? I felt her presence surely.

Recognition like a membrane tearing! I saw the blackness of the birthing burrow. And then a sudden light and what seemed a memory of the Harem. Karan was with me, grooming me as I played and kicked with my tiny, clumsy feet. I felt her tongue rasping at my fur. Then the grooming stopped and I lay back, full of contentment. The last contentment I would know.

I was small, small, my fur still spotted. We were alone, with the female kit, my sister, asleep. Karan's belly and teats swollen with her next pregnancy. Then I knew my last day with her had come, and I tried to cling to her.

And then the scene changed to madness! The dream of an addict in withdrawal! For it was a dream of Karan speaking to me, and speaking to me not in the Female Tongue, but in the kitten's version of the Heroes' Tongue itself! The tongue no Kzinrett spoke!

But did I imagine now, or *remember*? Karan's eyes shone above me huge and luminous as moons.

"Remember! Remember! Brave little spotted Kzin. I will plant a memory of words with little hope, but I must bury that memory in your mind deep, deep.

"Telepath they may make you, if you live. Little do they guess. Certain kittens they will test for Telepath talents. Rare kittens. What if they tested the mothers of those kittens? And the mothers of those few mothers?

"The few, the few... But the enduring. Not quite every line of female brains did the priesthood kill. Not yet. But soon. The speechless, mindless Kzinrett is the Kzinrett that lives and breeds. Each generation we, the secret, secret Others, grow rarer. Remember, though you do not understand my words.

"Someday you may find a sapient female. If fortune lets that happen, let that trigger your memory of these words. For a Telepath and a sapient female could do great things together..."

Karan's tongue rough on my fur again. A purring in her throat so loud I could barely hear the words she chanted.

"A great secret. The greatest of all. And each of we few must plant it deep at the bottom of a few poor minds, hoping against all knowledge that one day it will shoot.

"The priesthood bred Kzinretti to be brood-animals before ever the first Jotok ship landed upon Kzin and our kind leapt into the stars, as they bred Kzintosh to be Heroes that laid worlds waste. Conquest, Empire, world upon world. And the Kzin becoming a race to smash itself at last, as it smashes all else. So small is our hope that we can save It, and the Telepaths and their war so poor and flawed a weapon. No more can I say but: Remember, when the time is right,

that the way of the Eternal Hunt is not the only way. So small a word to whisper! So poor a hope! And yet, as we may, we keep alive a tiny flame, we tend a tiny seed.”

Seed? Tend a seed of vegetable? Who spoke of tending seeds. Our herbivorous slaves and prey-animals tended seeds. And yet—why did this image not sicken me as It should? The dream-voice of Karan again, chanting as she purred to me in her rippling throat.

“I cannot prophesy. Hunt in the glades of sleep. Remember...”

Karan’s eyes filling my eyes with their light. And I falling into sleep, my face against her fur for the last time. for indeed they came to take me to the crèche and the training-ground that day.

It was imagination, not *memory!* For no Kzinrett used that tongue. A mad dream. And yet I wondered, as the scene changed.

Telepath alone.

The blue-gold sky of the human world. Green vegetation and that blue above.

Telepath within a human dwelling, and knowing it for what it was. There was a smell of charred meat and a smell of the partially-burnt eggs of some flying creature. A day fixed in Selina’s memory, the day she too had left for a training crèche, something called an Advanced Astrophysics Institute.

A human speaking: ‘I know we’ll be proud of you. We’ve stiff with pride for you already. I know you wanted to do biology first, but keep that as a second string for your fiddle. You’re like your brother—each has brains enough for two.’

An old female human. Mother of Selina, I knew. And now came a single certainty in one part of my mind, one doubt dissolved: as I knew that I moved not in real-time or real-Space, so at one level at least I knew the things I was experiencing to be only monster-images of wandering imagination, not memory from Selina’s mind or my own. For the presence of an impossible animal made this that I saw, even on a human world, impossible: it appeared as if, curled and asleep upon the old human’s legs, stroked by the old human, there had been a goblin-creature like a tiny Kzin.

What tortuous symbol was this from Telepath’s sick brain? But it proved that the scene had no reality Bridge to Selina or no, this scene could not be from her memory And as this vision was unreal, the

delusion of a poor addict's mind lost in the tunnels, so the earlier scene must be dream and delusion too. There were no tiny goblin-creatures in the shape of Kzin, so Karan had never spoken to her kitten save in the few soft words of the Female Tongue. And Karan knew no other than those few soft words.

Then Telepath alone once more, Telepath stumbling over a rocky landscape, the pale tunnels ghostly and transparent, and then the pale tunnels fading, a dark stalker, whose shape could not be told, appearing and disappearing. I felt my mind dissolving, and knew I had at last seen the approach of the Shadow, the End and Last Despair that First Telepath had warned me would come like this.

I cried out for help. To First Telepath, to Karan, to Zraar-Admiral, to Selina.

An empty space, and then arches like a high-roofed cave. Naked sky A gigantic face. I fell into the position of supplication. It was the God. Fanged, rampant, come for Telepath's soul, and Telepath was not the warrior to fittingly defy Him. Or was it the Fanged God. The face seemed to shimmer, and was bearded like the face of the human god? Fanged God or Bearded God, or somehow... both?

I mewed like a kitten. Stars whirled about me, and *Gutting Claw* exploded.

Angel's Pencil

"And those females? It's obvious what he loaded them for."

"Wouldn't you, in his position?"

"Give you a continent to breed cats on? Selina, are you insane? A colony of Kzin to attack our colony the moment they've got the numbers?"

"Hear me out." Selina half rose, as the senior crew of the *Angel's Pencil* fell silent about her. "Telepath is highly abnormal. You can see that. If he lives—and he may not—he has a chance of being the first of his kind even allowed to breed. What he breeds may be something quite new.

"The Kzinretti are unintelligent. They can do nothing to educate their children In any real sense. I can. I know Telepath's mind, and I know that no other human can come close to the knowledge of the Kzinti that I have. Dammit, I doubt many *Kzin* know as much about

the Kzinti as I do! Few but the Telepaths have a multi-leveled picture of their own make-up, and the Telepaths have it only flickeringly and without proper context.

“I think I can guide such a colony. You can keep watch on it—put a satellite above it with camera, sensors, weapons. If I fail and it becomes a threat, you’ll know in good time. You can help me guard it, guide it, trade with it, maybe. Visit it before aggression and xenophobia can take hold in the culture. Of course I can’t give guarantees. If necessary you can discipline it and if necessary you can wipe it out. Obviously with the Kzin in space the human colony must be on a war-footing always. But here we have a chance to create a Kzin society as it ought to be.”

“A chance to play god, you mean? I don’t like that idea.”

“What else are you going to do? Kill them here and now? Helpless prisoners? One of whom you owe? A desperately sick Telepath and two females in hibernation? Isn’t that playing god, too? I am offering the human race an asset. No-one else has it to offer.”

“If Earth is conquered by the... Kzin, what good will having a few tame cats do?”

“Almost certainly no good at all. But then nothing will matter anyway, unless anything from the more distant colonies can flee further into Space. And I do not think the Kzin will find Earth as easy a conquest as Zraar-Admiral imagined. Unarmed and surprised as we were, we have met them twice and beaten them twice already...” Her voice trailed off. She suddenly understood what Telepath had meant when he spoke of the wrong cave at last.

“I think it is likely the war will be long. I suppose there will be prisoners taken, but I doubt Earth can deal with Kzin prisoners. That’s another reason Telepath and the females are precious.”

“Your motives sound very patriotic, Selina. But is that all your agenda? It comes down to breeding Kzin?”

“To breeding Kzin you can talk to,” she corrected him.

“Is that really an asset?”

“It could be a bigger asset than you can imagine. Not only for this colony... There can be interchange between the two kinds right from the start. Humans will have the advantage of numbers, and Telepath’s children will not be the Kzin of the Patriarchy.

“When I learnt Telepaths were not allowed to breed, I wondered: when the gift is both so rare and so valuable a military asset, why is every effort not made to increase the strain, as it is among humans when even the smallest trace of such ability is found? I think I know why:

Telepaths are introspective, empathetic—qualities that could be a deadly threat to the Patriarchy, if they became common among Kzin. Even if the proportion of Telepaths to the general population was only a little higher than it is now, they could be an intolerable influence for destabilization. So they cannot be allowed to breed.

“And I think they would breed true. That is the First Secret of the Telepaths. My Telepath thinks the breeding prohibition is because they are too ‘shameful’. But I think the... Patriarchy... also prohibits them from breeding because at some level it knows what a danger they could be were they not rigidly controlled. As well as needing them and despising them, I think it also fears them.

“Kzinretti... female Kzin... usually have one male and one female kitten in a litter. You know female Kzin are morons. But the female kittens of Telepath may be a wild card, and we are going to need all the wild cards we can pull out of our sleeves. A collection of non-Conformist Kzin could be a great threat to the Patriarchy. Some Telepaths already see themselves as at war with Kzin culture, but from what I have gathered their war is pitifully confused and disorganized, almost completely futile.

“I get a feeling there has been some kind of intervention, something inculcated in some Telepaths, perhaps an integral part of the whole syndrome that allows them to survive as Telepaths, that makes them at odds with Kzin... rigidity, but the chance and the motivation for them to actually *do* anything comes rarely.

“They’re not morally better than ordinary Kzin, whether by our standards or theirs—often they are worse. They are not necessarily more intelligent. They are not happier or more stable—quite the reverse. But they are different. The actual quality of their resistance or non-conformity has a great deal of self-delusion in it. We might change that.

“I gather from Telepath that the worlds of their empire have a great deal of local independence—I suppose that is inevitable with

the limitations of light-speed— but they all conform to a pretty basic set of common values and culture. Here we have the chance to plant something different enough to make a real change. At the same time, humans can learn an enormous amount from these Kzin—things we'll have to learn, and learn quickly, too.

“And I can't come back to you. Not without Telepath. There is too much cat—neurotic cat—in my brain now, and too much of me in him. You need not look disgusted. Believe me, you have no idea what an asset the human race has in that relationship.”

“Assuming that is true,” said Steve, “how could we make the human race aware of it... if we've made them aware of the Kzin at all. Even if we still dare advertise our presence by signaling?”

“We can only think in the longest term,” said Selina. Her words hung in the air a moment as the assembled humans thought upon what the longest term might be. Steve Weaver stared at the map-display with an ashen face. The controller of the *Angel's Pencil's* laser was suddenly a sick man. He swallowed, choked, then raised eyes of despair to Selina, Jim and Sue. “It doesn't matter,” he said, “Don't you see? Nothing matters. We are dead meat.”

“We've won a battle!” Jim said, “That matters! We've won two battles!” He jumped to his feet and struck the table. “If we meet another Kzin ship we'll fight that too. We're armed with knowledge now.”

“Meet another? Oh, we'll do that all right. Don't you understand? It's obvious enough, isn't it? These maps only confirm what we should have known—what we did know” There was something twisted in Steve's voice, “Only we haven't let ourselves think about it because It's so Tanj obvious!

“Encountering one Kzin ship might have been chance. But we've encountered two, and Selina tells us they are part of a Navy and an Empire, and coming from— there!” He pointed forward, through a port and past the great Collector Head and fusion torus at the “point” of the *Angel's Pencil*.

“We are heading straight into Kzin space! We are heading towards what the ramrobots tell us is a roughly Earthlike world in order to establish a colony. There will be no colony. An Earthlike world is a world Kzin can live on. A main-sequence K2 star—of course they

would seek it out! It even has handy gas-giants with their own large moon-systems for bases and mines.

“We know they have been in Space far longer than humans. We don’t need Selina’s knowledge to tell us that apart from their aggressive instincts carnivores that size need elbow-room, territory. They will have settled all possible worlds within reach.”

“Yes,” said Selina. “And their hibernation technology for Space-travel is at least as good as ours. Probably better.”

“We are heading into a part of Space where Kzin ships will be more and more frequent. And even if we miss them—Space is still big enough for that, I suppose—one thing is sure: when we reach Epsilon Eridani they will be there waiting for us... We should have realized it long ago. After the first one...” He buried his face in his hands.

There was silence as his words sank in. Military Command Psychology was a long-forgotten science among humans. There was shame now that they had not let themselves see anything so obvious. Horror as they allowed themselves to realize the implications.

“We couldn’t have known. Not until now...”

“I think I did know,” said Sue. There were tears on her cheeks. “I didn’t let myself think about it. The doc was treating me for depression and it was increasing my medication. Maybe that happened to us all. I bet if we checked the doc’s supplies we would find that tranquilizers and anti-depressants are way down. It’s been keeping part of our minds in a Zombie-state. Not to disable us against the immediate threat, but suppressing the symptoms in our sub-consciousness of the implications. But I had an inkling. I should have spoken before.”

“The doc wasn’t programmed for war,” said Steve. “How could it have been? It was doing the job it was programmed to do on Earth: to identify neurosis and relieve the symptoms while the neurosis cured itself. If it identified a psychosis like paranoia it would treat it. And it had no way of telling if that neurosis or paranoia was justified. You might say its job was to unfit us for war, and we achieved what we did in spite of it. We’re not used to this. I knew we weren’t used to physical pain. We turned away from it. I should have realized we

weren't used to any kind of pain. The doc was only doing its job by deadening it. But, Selina, you didn't see it either."

"You're forgetting. Your doc gave me a going-over as soon as I got aboard. Filled me with stuff. I didn't ask what. Like you, I'm still the creature of our culture."

"Another thing. Relativity. With time-dilation effects we will be there even sooner from our point of view."

Words like a low upon a wound.

"Another thing. Those two Kzin ships got *behind* us. It's against the odds that that would happen again. We can't expect our weapon to be any use at the next encounter."

"It we had a Kzin gravity-engine we could turn and fight them. Or use the ramscoop-field, if it affects them like other chordates."

"If..."

"If we had a gravity-engine we could turn and run. Head for the colonies on the other side of Space. Or head back to Earth... Warn them in person if they have ignored the messages... Pity about the physics."

There was no need to spell out what the physics were. They all knew that with the *Angel's Pencil's* forward velocity the turn-around time ruled it out.

"Why talk of impossibilities? We haven't a gravity-engine."

Despair filled the room like fog. It was not hard to imagine, once the obvious had been spelt out, what their reception at Epsilon Eridani would be. *Think! Think!* Selina told herself. *Think like a Kzin! Think like Telepath.*

"We do have a gravity-engine," she said. "The barge is a tug. It could turn us. With the delta-v we have plus the gravity-engine we could turn quite tightly and still keep enough velocity for the ramscoop to function. The Kzin use the gravity-fields to shield themselves from acceleration effects. We could do the same. The gravity-motor is damaged but we can repair it. Even with losing some delta-v that would give us the capacity to maintain constant one-G acceleration. In a year we would be back to .8 Light... or run our own drive and the Kzin engine together. If we can control the gravity-field we can accelerate as fast as may be without medical problems."

They looked at her as though they might not be dead meat. Then Steve said:

“We can’t use a gravity-engine. We sent Earth all the specifications we could of the first ship’s engine. It is still stowed here in pieces.”

“Then we have two. Even better!”

“No. Hear me out, Selina. The engine we have was also initially damaged by our laser, although we salvaged all we could of it. We can describe most of the parts. We can film them and transmit the pictures. If Earth and the Belt believe us they can duplicate them. That’s all we can do. A steam engineer of five hundred years ago could have described the shape of the parts of a Bussard Ramjet, but do you think he could have understood it from that? I’m not saying repairing and operating them is beyond our intelligence but the technology is too different, given the time we’ve got.

“We have two damaged engines that we don’t know how to repair. We don’t even know how to make the tools to work on them. Even if we had an engine in one piece we can’t understand it. We can’t operate it. It’s like trying to build the Dean Drive. Tanj! Maybe it *is* the Dean Drive, or its descendant.

“Ours has melted parts, yours has holes in it. They have massive energy-containment fields and if we were to activate them without those fields fully functioning... well, that would be that.

“Oh, I grant you that perhaps we could learn, given years and research facilities and skilled teams. But we are a small specialized crew, and our colonists are frozen embryos. How many years do we have? We are getting deeper into Kzin space every moment.”

“Then it lies with Telepath and me,” Selina said. “He had Weapons-Officer’s knowledge. If he still has that, we have a chance.”

“If he still has it?”

“Telepathically-acquired knowledge decays much quicker than ordinary memories. Telepaths would go mad much more quickly otherwise. But he was in Weapons-Officer’s mind not long ago.

“I have some of it, thanks to the Bridge... Weapons Officer was working on gravity-motors. Between us we may be able to retrieve something.”

She was speaking in a peculiar mumbling monotone now, with the grating Kzin accent surfacing in it.

“But this makes it a bigger, harder thing than I thought. Rearranging his chemistry to cure his addiction—or to stop the withdrawal syndromes killing him—is complex enough, but it’s something the Kzin autodoc and I may be able to do, if I can give him psychic support through it. He/we knew that—Kzin reparatory medicine is good. But to do it without scrambling his addict-acquired memories as well... If I can reach him, talk him through it, you might say... but it’s much more than that... I haven’t the human words... But to cure him of his addiction without breaking the bridge... I feel it can be done—Telepaths have secrets and I know some of them now. But it’s not going to be easy.”

“If he’s still alive.”

“He’s still alive. If he were dead I can assure you I would know.”

Jim suppressed a shudder. This woman’s bonding to the cat made him physically disturbed.

Selina’s face was changing now. Color was draining from it. Her features were twisting into something like the Leonine Mask of leprosy. “But he’s sick. He’s very sick. He’s in great pain... He’s not strong enough. Urrr.”

“What should we do?”

“I must go back to the barge,” said Selina. “I should be as close to him as possible.”

Admiral’s Barge

Stars whirled above me. I entered a new space: a bowl like the arena at the training-crèche. And the cliffs.

I stood about it, and I knew they were minds to which
I must cling.

The cliff of Zraar-Admiral’s mind. I clutched it, knowing he was dead, and felt my claws pass through empty air, as when they had tried, long ago at the crèche, to make a fighter of me. But they had taken me from the other kits and let me live, like the science-geniuses and other despised ones, for they saw that I was a Telepath (“You may be the greatest of us.” First Telepath had said, one sleep-time aboard *Gutting Claw*).

Something held me then. Was it something from Zraar-Admiral's mind? Had I indeed touched the Dead?

"You are the closest to a warrior..., hold yourself like a warrior then... fight like a warrior. Earn the compliment I paid you."

Was it he? What was that other mind that held me like the mind of First Telepath? Or Karan?

"The way we were made was not the only way."

I could not tell. Were they all come from Telepath's poor sick mind?

And then, in the cliffs and tunnels, the running white lattices, and bare plain and the grass that was both the orange of Kzin and the green of Earth, I saw Selina coming towards Telepath, towards me, bending above me, and felt her holding me. And somewhere a yellow sun was rising.