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KEITH
WOODCOTT

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Philip Gascon

For him the secret of death contained the meaning of life.

Jazey Hine

He could unravel men's thoughts, but not the mystery buried in his own soul.

Errida Crowb

She was young in years, but old in the ways of pain.

Gustus Arraken

Proud and ruthless, he used people for toys—and found the game was for real.

Breckitt

He was his masters' voice, until they decided to listen to someone else.

Harys Fold

Cunning dictated his every move, but even he couldn't unfathom the message of doom.

THE PSIONIC MENACE

by

KEITH WOODCOTT

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THE PSIONIC MENACE

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Keith Woodcott has also written:

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CAPTIVES OF THE FLAME

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I

THE AIR was as clear as glass. The stars burned the sky like white-hot needles, offering an indistinct, shadowy twilight, and the last of the day's warmth was seeping away from the Painted Rocks which had been the excuse to come out this far from the city.

He and Aura, Gascon thought, were probably the only people for ten miles in any direction, except those living in the psion village further out toward the desert—and psions had never bothered him when he had come out here before. Aura, though, had been nervous at first, and it had taken him a long time to soothe her worries.

But the car was a cozy haven, and the tautness was going out of her.

Abruptly, it was back. She was lifting her head, her eyes widening.

"Philip!" she whispered. "Philip, what was that?"

"What was what?" Gascon said, nuzzling her fair hair.

"A—a noise!" She pushed him away from her and sat up. "Listen, there it is again!"

Gascon sighed and turned his head. This time she wasn't imagining things; there was a shrill hoarse cry from somewhere nearby, etching the night like acid. It was an eerie, unpleasant sound, and he felt his scalp crawl.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I've never heard anything like it here before."

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He put the window of the car down and leaned out. The cry came again, and with it an irregular grinding noise, as of footfalls on loose stone. But then there was renewed silence.

He said eventually, "It's probably only a wild animal—there still are some out this way."

"Wild animals!" Aura's voice was sharp with alarm. "You didn't say anything about wild animals!"

"Honey, I don't mean anything big enough to be dangerous," Gascon soothed. "Little things, like foxes—that's all." He gestured at the car. "They won't bother us in here, anyway."

He tried to put his arms around her again, but she avoided him, her eyes searching the featureless dark. She was shivering.

"I can't hear it now," she said.

"It's—" Gascon began, and broke off. This time the cry was louder and more desperate, and seemed even closer. There were scrabbling noises.

"I don't think it's an animal after all," he said reluctantly. "It sounds more like a child."

He came to a sudden decision, picked up his laser-flashlight and moved to open the door on his side of the car.

Aura grabbed his arm. "Philip! You're not going to leave me by myself!"

"I'm only going to take a look," Gascon said. "If it is a child screaming out there, do you want me to sit and do nothing?"

"You said a moment ago it was an animal!"

"I hadn't heard it so clearly then," Gascon snapped.

"But if it is a child, it must be from the psion village—out here, it must be!" Aura's voice was ragged. "Philip, it's nothing to do with you—don't get out!"

He snapped on the flashlight and by its fierce beam looked at her as though he had never seen her before. In a curious tone, he said, "Psions are still people, and a child of theirs is a child, and if it's screaming like that, it needs help."

She folded her hands so that her nails dug into her palms. Her beautiful face was suddenly ugly. "Philip, if you get

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out of this car and leave me by myself, I'll never speak to you again."

A wave of anger rose in Gascon's mind, and he slammed the door shut. He said, "You're being completely unreasonable. Put the lights on if you want to keep me in sight. I'm only going to take a look, that's all."

He got to the ground, the brilliance of the flashlight dancing at random with his movements across the gravelly ground and up the sides of the Painted Rocks, revealing their abstract flow of color—white, ochre, green, orange. He hesitated a moment, feeling the oppressive weight of the empty night, and then walked forward slowly.

Behind him, the car's lamps came on, trebling the illumination, and he had to pause while his eyes adjusted to the glare.

That was why, when he heard the hum of the engine, he did not at first realize what was happening. When he did, it was too late.

He spun around, seeing the car rising to operating height, and caught a glimpse of Aura's white and angry face behind the driver's window; and then she was hauling at the steering control, the car was swinging around, and accelerating madly back the way it had come.

"Aural" he shouted, and ran futilely after the vehicle. He had taken no more than five paces when his foot found a rock that twisted under his weight and he lost his balance.

He threw out his hands to break the fall, and the flashlight switched off as it struck the ground. A fiery pain spread over his palms and knees.

By the time he was able to pick himself up, the car was out of sight on the twisting track that led to the highway.

For a minute he was too angry to do anything but curse. Then he mastered himself and started to take stock of his situation. He bent down and fumbled on the ground for the flashlight, but when he located it, he could not make it work—the impact had distorted the laser and probably broken a connection somewhere inside. He vented a little more of

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his rage by swinging the useless object over his head and hurling it away.

The crash of its landing among the rocks brought a renewal of the screams. In the act of dabbing at his palms with a handkerchief, he froze. Now that he was alone and stranded the sound was far more frightening—almost menacing.

Was it a child? Even if it was, were the screams really an appeal for help? It was one thing to be scornful of Aura's irrational reaction to the idea of encountering psions; it was another to find himself compelled to act without resources.

While he was still rooted to the spot, the character of the cries changed; the violence seemed to go out of them and they came nearer to a hysterical moan. He began to hear more background noises than before—of the same kind—the sound of feet in gravel and on rock, but from different points further away.

As his eyes adapted to the colorless starlight, he also discerned hints of movement ahead; something whitish, appearing from a shadow and then disappearing before he could focus on it. It was coming this way, very fast. From the brief glimpses he had, he judged he had been right to think of a child screaming. Whatever was driving it, it wasn't pain. It must be terror. No one seriously injured could leap and race across this sort of terrain.

He cast around him for a hiding-place—clearly, it was no use running. At best, he would turn an ankle. He hadn't even been able to run after the departing car without losing his footing.

But before he had had time to select a shelter, he glanced back to where he had seen the whitish form moving, and found that it was heading straight for him, head down, arms and legs driving now that it had come to a piece of ground smooth enough to run at top speed. A boy, naked and bare-foot, age about twelve or at most fifteen—a psion child.

It was absurd to think that he would run straight into Gascon. But that—a matter of seconds later—was what happened. The boy never raised his head. He merely charged at

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Gascon, who lifted his arms and tried to fend him off, then caught hold of him.

The boy's eyes, wide as they could go, seemed to recognize the presence of a human being for the first time. He struggled, but Gascon held him fast; though wiry, the boy was exhausted.

On finding it was useless to try and break free, he started to scream again.

Part of Gascon's mind had somehow remained aloof from what was happening, making a sort of explanatory comment. Psion children, supposedly, like their parents, were able to detect the thoughts of each other and of ordinary folk; indeed, it was the faculty of reading minds which compelled them to live apart in their isolated communities. Most of them could not endure the psychic battering caused by the population of a city.

Yet this boy had run full tilt into someone he apparently didn't know was there. Consequently, he presumably was not a psion; he must have come from the psion village, unclothed as he was, fleeing from some intolerable threat. . . .

Once more Gascon's scalp crawled. The running footsteps that had continued in the distance came closer and grew louder, and human silhouettes appeared following the trail of the boy. Desperately, Gascon tried to think of some way of escape for the boy as well as himself, but no possibility came to him.

If it was true that this was a normal boy and not a psion, and if it was something psions had done which had so terrified him, then it would be dreadful to make him go back. Though the boy might not be a psion, there was no doubt that those coming after him were. And it took deep hypnosis to hide deception from a psionic probe.

Then all Gascon's deductions were turned topsy-turvy.

First, the boy ceased to scream. His taut muscles relaxed, and he no longer tried to break away from Gascon. Then a shadowy figure—a bearded man, inches taller than Gascon, wearing homespun and homemade boots—slowed his pace from a lope to a fast walk, striding over the last twenty-five

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yards to where Gascon and the boy were standing. Not a word was said, but the boy nodded as though answering something, eased his arm from Gascon's grasp—which had now slackened—and walked calmly to meet the new arrival. The man threw his arm around the boy's shoulders as though to comfort him.

So the boy *was* a psion after all! Gascon was bewildered.

The bearded man, his arm still around the boy, spoke now in a voice which sounded rusty from lack of use. He said, "Thank you, friend. You're a miracle. My son didn't realize there was anyone here since the car went off, and nor did I." A pause; then he ended on a lower tone, "He might have gone running clear to the city, if you hadn't held him long enough for me to get close and call him."

Gascon said slowly, "But I thought—"

"Thought we could see into your mind?" The bearded man nodded, his head moving dark on dark shoulders. "Mostly we can. But you're a psinul—didn't you know? You have no psionic emanations at all. That was why my son was so scared when he saw you with his eyes. If you ran into an invisible man, you'd be pretty upset, I guess. I have to keep telling myself you're there, because we're psi-dominated the same way most folks are eye-dominated."

Other people were coming up now, slowly, a couple of them limping: about half a dozen in all, forming a group around the bearded man and his son. They looked towards Gascon with a curious intentness. Gascon licked his lips.

He said, "I'm a psinul? I've heard of such people, but I never knew . . ." His voice faded involuntarily, and he gave a nervous laugh.

"They're rare," the bearded man said. "I only ever met one other like you."

There was something astonishingly reassuring about this information. Gascon felt confidence flood into him. So he could think his own thoughts without these people eaves-dropping—that put this affair back on a much more level basis. He said challengingly, "Well, now, I guess you ought to tell me what it is that's scared this boy of yours out of his

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wits. I listened to his screams, and they were ugly. I shouldn't like to think that any of you did that to a child."

The grouped psions didn't say anything, but he guessed they were exchanging communications after their own fashion. After a few moments of silence, during which the boy seemed to recover and turned to look towards Gascon with the rest, the bearded man spoke again.

"No, it wasn't our doing. We can't hurt people, friend. We *daren't*. If one of us hurts someone else, he shares the pain."

"Then what scared the boy?" Gascon pressed. "Something did! Something horrible, I'm sure!"

In the same rusty tone as the bearded man, another of the psions answered him.

"As far as we can tell, friend, Elze's boy was running from the end of everything."

II

IT DIDN'T seem to make sense, no matter how Gascon looked at the words in his mind. After a while, he said so, thinking that the man who had spoken might have had difficulty putting his thoughts into words because it was a long while since he had needed to use them.

One of the psions sat down on the ground, and then they all did so, maintaining their distance of about five or six paces from Gascon. The effect was eerie—it gave Gascon the vague impression that he had watched not half a dozen individuals but an extended single organism composing itself to rest. It occurred to him that even if their talent didn't compel psions to segregate themselves, ordinary folk would probably avoid them, if they often did disquieting things like this.

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The bearded man, whose name would be Elze if Gascon had heard correctly, squatted crosslegged and put his hands on his knees.

"Our friend Hutton here wasn't deliberately exaggerating," he said wryly. He seemed to have gotten back very quickly into the habit of talking with words; it occurred to Gascon that possibly he was one of the psions capable of enduring the presence of ordinary people, who maintained the necessary links between his community and the rest of the world.

"But—the end of everything?" Gascon said.

"It seems like it." Elze hesitated. "I don't quite know how I can give you the picture; I wouldn't even try except that if we didn't explain, you'd maybe spread some inaccurate story around about how we torment and madden our kids." He raised a hand in a defensive gesture. "If I'm doing you wrong, I apologize, but I can't see into your thoughts, so I have to guess what you might do."

"Suppose you think of a shout, yes?" Elze continued. A shout that never stops, that you can't shut out, that you can't ignore. Like a couple quarreling on the other side of a wall thick enough to blur the words, but thin enough to let you hear they're mad at each other, and you're trying to go to sleep. That's what my boy was running from."

Gascon shook his head.

Patiently, Elze tried again. "It's not clear enough to communicate more than vague impressions, but it's *loud*. If you don't fix hard on something else, it gets you thinking about something—something terrible. A total and complete disaster. There's a sense of everything coming to a stop—of the cosmos grinding to a halt, or blowing up, or just vanishing. Permanently. And blended in with that, there's a suggestion of security, of salvation, but that's not so clear, and even if you concentrate all you get is the concept of heading back where you came from. My boy was lying in my house, trying to go to sleep against this shouting. We all know how tough it is." He glanced round at the group of his fellow psions, and received nods of confirmation. "He didn't make it. Maybe it

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gave him a bad dream—that's common enough. And he got this notion that he could escape by heading back where we came from, toward the city. Of course, if he'd made it, he'd have broken under the pressure when people started to wake up tomorrow morning. So I guess I owe you my kid's sanity."

Gascon said slowly, "Shouting, you call it. You mean it's a powerful psionic emission with these—these overtones you describe? Right?" On getting Elze's nod, he went on, "So where does it come from? What causes it? And can't you do anything about it? If you're telling me the truth, your kids must be in a bad way."

"I'm telling the truth," Elze said. "We get out of the habit of lying—between ourselves, we can't, and only a psinul like yourself could lie to one of us, so it doesn't make much sense to bother with anything except the truth. As to where it comes from—well, from the stars."

"I didn't know psions could beam over interstellar distances," Gascon said, feeling a shiver that wasn't only due to the chill of the desert night.

"We can't," Elze said. "Someone—or something—can—Now."

"Now? You mean this is new? When did it begin?"

"Roughly three weeks back," Elze said. "And ever since, it's been getting stronger."

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, and his son, who had recovered completely now he was in the presence of others of his own kind, hunched towards him worriedly.

"But you don't know where?" Gascon pressed him. The part of him which had earlier maintained its detached commentary on his encounter with the psion child had come to dominate his thinking now, and it seemed more important to find out about this extraordinary tale of Elze's than to worry about his own predicament.

For a moment, Elze didn't reply. Then he said in a tone of faint puzzlement, "Do you know anything about the Autonomy of Regnier?"

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Gascon frowned. "Of course. It's a moderately populated planet in Sagittarius somewhere, maintained by the Starfolk as a genetic pool and ruled by a puppet overlord whom they installed. About the only other thing I know about it is that there are Old Race relics there." He paused. "Is that where it's coming from?"

"I doubt it," Elze said heavily. "But the name sometimes comes into our minds when we aren't thinking about anything special. And that's all we can tell you. We can't do anything about it, because Regnier is in Starfolk space—and you must have heard how Starfolk treat us psions."

He shrugged, and started to get to his feet; so did the rest of the psions, exhibiting again that uncanny unison movement which had disturbed Gascon previously. Awareness of the situation in which he found himself flooded back into Gascon's mind, and he said, "Wait a minute! How about helping me find my way back to the highway, at least? You said you were obliged to me—"

"You won't need our help," Elze said. He waved at the sky. "There's a floater coming down this way. You can't see it—it's blacked out—but I can hear the crew thinking. Two men, officials of some kind. On your left, about a mile off."

Reflectively, Gascon looked up in the indicated direction. If there was a floater there, even if it was blacked out, he ought to be able to detect it when it transited a star. Fifteen seconds' hard staring showed him nothing, and he looked back at Elze.

"I don't see—" he began, and broke off. Elze was no longer there, nor were his companions. The instant they saw him turn his eyes away, they must have reached wordless agreement and sprinted for the cover of the shadows between the rocks. Indignantly, he set his hands on his hips and stared after them. So much for their being obliged for his help in enabling them to catch up with the boy. How was he to make his way to a road now, with neither light nor guidance?

Suddenly, there was light. Blinding, sun-bright light, pouring down from overhead and transfixing him with its

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beam as though with a spear. He threw his hands up to cover his eyes and cried out with the shock, and a giant voice spoke from the air near the source of the light.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

This was the floater Elze had promised him. Greatly relieved, Gascon cupped his hands around his mouth, squinting now against the glare, and shouted back.

"Gascon—Philip Gascon! I'm stranded here! My girl drove off in my car and left me! Can you take me to the city?" He hesitated, thinking maybe that was too much to ask, and added, "Or down to the nearest highway, maybe!"

There was no immediate answer; faintly, as though the microphone of the loudhailer system on the floater was picking up a discussion between the members of the crew, Gascon heard indistinct voices but could not make out what was being said. The light left him for a few seconds and swept over the nearby area, and his gaze automatically followed it, but there was no sign of the psions.

At last, the floater came down to hover a foot from the ground and about ten feet away from where Gascon was standing. The level of the outside light was dimmed until he could see the faces of the crew peering at him through the bubble. They scrutinized him thoroughly and exchanged glances. One of them shrugged and slid back the door of the vehicle. He got out.

In his hand he was holding a maser-focused energy gun, and it was pointed unwaveringly at Gascon.

"Hey!" Gascon said, taking half a pace backward. "What's that for? Who are you, anyway?"

The man with the gun didn't take his eyes from Gascon. He said, "I'm Sergeant Clew—Special Agency, assisting the Department of Psion Affairs. My colleague is Sergeant Warley. Come close slowly and you can see my ID card if you're not satisfied."

Gascon hesitated and then shook his head. "I'll take your word for it," he said. "But what's the *gun* for?"

"Check him over, Sid," the man still inside the floater said. "I'll cover you."

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Clew nodded, warily holstered his weapon, and came close enough to Gascon to pat him in all the places where he might have a gun of his own concealed.

"Clean," he grunted, stepping back.

"Right," Warley answered. Gascon could see him lean forward inside the bubble. "Now when we challenged you, mister, you said you were—uh—Philip Gascon. That right?"

"Yes." Gascon touched his sore palms and winced. "I'm doing postgraduate work at the university—cosmoarcheological department."

"I see. You have some evidence to prove that?"

"Why, of course—" Gascon broke off, an appalling thought striking him. "Hell, *no!* Everything was in my car!"

"And where *is* your car?" Warley's tone was silky. "You said something about your girl driving off in it, I think."

"That's exactly what she did, damn her." Gascon felt a constricting tightness in his throat.

The two sergeants exchanged another glance, and then Clew sighed. "All right, Gascon—if that is your name—get in the floater." He stepped aside and made an imperious gesture.

"Uh . . . well, okay," Gascon agreed. "But I assure you, all you'll have to do is to get in touch with somebody at the university, and—"

"It isn't up to us to decide that," Clew cut in.

"Now wait a minute! You can't detain me—you haven't any authority. I've done nothing illegal." Gascon tried to maintain a firm tone, but in fact he was not at all confident; it was the first time in his twenty-five years he had had any direct contact with officials in authority like these two.

Warley smiled. It wasn't at all a cynical smile, and it far from matched his answer.

"There's an old saying about ignorance of the law being no excuse. You ought to be aware that there's no human activity which isn't illegal under some regulation or another. Eating and sleeping are tough to tackle, but anything else . . . If you want the chapter and verse, you're held pending investigation of your presence in an area defined under Planetary

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Statute one-oh-eight, six-oh-four, subsection K, as an area designated for an official purpose. Oh, get in and sit down!" he finished on an irritated note. "It's better than huddling among the rocks till morning, anyway."

III

ERRIDA CAME into the hallway of her home and very quietly closed the front door behind her. She stood for a few moments, listening.

The first sound she heard was her brother moaning. That was why she had shut the door so gently. Franek had been ill for over a week now, and it seemed nothing could be done for him except to be very silent about the house and let him rest.

At least, that was what her parents told her. Ordinarily, she wouldn't have questioned their judgment—she was only fifteen, and she had been brought up to respect her parents as sensible people.

But sometimes she was tempted to think they might be wrong about Franek—or even, though she hated the idea, that they might be keeping something from her. After all, neither her father nor her mother was medically qualified, so how could they be sure nothing could be done to help Franek unless they called in a doctor? And they hadn't done so.

It hurt her to hear Franek's tormented moans.

Suddenly she stiffened. In addition to her brother, she could hear other voices, coming from the family-room at the end of the hall. She recognized her father and mother talking in low tones, but there was another voice—a man's—which was strange to her, and she caught the mention of Franek's name.

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They must finally have sent for a doctor, then. She gave a sigh of relief and hurried down the hallway.

As she opened the door of the family-room, there was instant silence, and all three turned their heads to look at her, tensing as though they were afraid. Errida looked from one to another of them, her heart sinking. She had never thought that she would find an atmosphere of near-terror in her own home.

In the calmest voice she could manage, Errida greeted her parents and then looked inquiringly at the man she didn't know.

"If you're busy, I'll leave you by yourselves," she offered.

The stranger, whose face was very pale, and whose hands were locked together in his lap as though to stop them shaking, glanced at her father. He said, "She doesn't know, Crowb?"

Her father shook his head, looking at Errida. He seemed to have grown older all of a sudden. He said, "But we're going to have to tell her. Sit down, Errida."

There was a sense of doom in her mind now. She obeyed, almost surprised at how calm she was. She tried to smile at her mother, who seemed unable to respond.

"Is it something to do with Franek?" she said.

"In a way." Her father licked his lips. "This is an old friend of ours, Errida—Jazey Hine. We haven't seen each other for a long time. I'm afraid he's brought bad news."

"Very bad news," Errida's mother said huskily.

"Leece, honey!" said her husband. She closed her eyes for a moment, hard, as though to squeeze back tears, and turned her head away.

"I can guess what it is, then," Errida said. She sat very straight on her chair, thinking: *I've often wondered how it would feel if it happened to me, Errida Crowb. Now I'm going to know.*

After a pause, she put it into words and spoke them. "The Starfolk want me," she said.

Her father glanced at the man he had named as Jazey Hine, who stirred uncomfortably, not looking directly at her.

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He said, "It's not definite yet, but—well, you see, I work in the government, and I get to see the lists of young people from whom the selections are made. You're on the latest list."

"What are we going to *do*?" Leece said.

"Well—there isn't anything to do, is there?" Errida answered. "Except hope, I guess. They don't take everyone, after all. They take a long time to choose, too."

"You stand the news very well, I must admit," Hine said. "But in this particular case, you're wrong. We were just discussing, before you got home, how we could get you and your family away from here and into hiding."

Errida, startled, looked at her parents. "But that's not fair!" she exclaimed. "It's selfish to do a thing like that! I mean—I mean this is just one of the facts of life, and it has to happen to somebody, and if we try and hide, the Starfolk will take it out of . . ." Her voice tailed away uncertainly, for Hine was shaking his head.

"All that is quite true, Errida," he agreed. "But it isn't as simple as that. You asked if my bad news had anything to do with Franek. And it has. Do you know what's wrong with your brother?"

Wordlessly, eyes wide, Errida shook her head.

"He's a psion," Hine said in a brittle voice. "What's happening to him—this state of intolerable misery and this lost moaning—is happening to all the psions on Regnier. Franek is only twelve; he can't hide it. It isn't easy for the rest of us, come to that."

Errida put her hand to her mouth. "You—you can't mean it," she whispered.

"It's perfectly true!" her father snapped.

Errida didn't turn to him; she was staring at Hine as if fascinated. "And you?" she said. "You're a psion?"

Hine gave a bitter laugh. "You're surprised to find I don't look any different from anyone else, aren't you? Well, I'm not very different. I'm one of the lucky ones, who aren't so sensitive that to be among ordinary people drives them crazy. I've made out for more than twenty-five years. Now do you

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begin to see why it's necessary to get you and your family out of the way? If they come to take you for the Starfolk, they'll check on your whole family. They'll find out about Franek—he's only twelve, and the way he's acting will make them suspect the truth. If you run off and hide, the worst that'll happen is a fine imposed on the community-group. But if they find out, they'll kill Franek, they may kill you, and they'll certainly separate and sterilize your parents." His forehead was glistening with sweat, and he paused to take a tissue and wipe it away.

"We were going to have to do something soon anyway," her father said in a brittle tone. "Whatever it is that's troubling Franek, we couldn't keep his condition secret much longer."

"I can tell you what's troubling your boy," Hine said. "A sense of ultimate disaster. A sense of total and absolute—*ending*. Only worse than words can indicate. It's a psionic signal, so loud that it shakes the brain in the skull if you let it. The kids are suffering worst of all, but I've seen some cases—well, that's irrelevant. You're not consciously aware of it, but it's certainly getting through to ordinary people. You can tell by the tension all over the place."

Crowb, staring at his friend, spoke in an undertone to Leece, and she obediently got up and went to fetch some cups and a container of liquor. As impassively as a machine, she poured for all of them, including Errida, who took hers and sat cradling it between her hands, wondering whether it would make her feel less faint if she plucked up the courage to swig it down.

"I thought it was just the—the—you know," Leece said, sitting down again.

Hine gulped his drink and set the cup down with a bang. He said, "It's hell's own situation facing us. Yes, some of the tension is rational after what happened, but what happened may have been connected with the tensions—we don't yet know. Thanks for the drink; I needed it. Now you know as much as I do, and I'll have to be on my way. I'll get word to

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you as soon as I possibly can about the time of your departure, okay?"

Rising to his feet, he put out his hand to Crowb, who gripped it fervently. He turned to Leece, and she did the same, but her face seemed to crumple and she had to put her hand to her eyes. Lastly, he turned to Errida and fixed her with a sharp gaze.

"As for you, young woman!" he said. "You're going to have to clear your mind of a lot of Starfolk-inspired nonsense. What's this piece about 'biologically disadvantageous sport' going through your head? Ah!" He scowled as Errida flinched away. "A chunk out of an official teacher-text, is it? I thought we'd eliminated that one from circulation. Biologically disadvantageous *nothing*. Take another look at me and think it over."

He strode to the door, waving aside Leece when she moved to go with him, and in a few moments the front door was heard to slam.

"I—I think I'll go and see to Franek," Leece said, breaking into the edgy silence that followed.

Crowb nodded. "Me," he said without relish, "I have to do as Jazey suggested—try and get Errida here accustomed to the truth." He poured himself another drink, and sat down facing his pale, trembling daughter.

"Do you remember—when you were about four or five years old—we moved from the city out here to the Plains-edge?" he said.

"Y-yes."

"That was just after we first met Jazey Hine. That was the first time he risked his life to help us. Don't interrupt!" he added as he saw words form on Errida's lips. "Franek was just beginning to talk then, and that's when they start to spot psions like him, the very sensitive kind. Understand that first, please. Jazey Hine came to us, not knowing that he could convince us, not knowing that if he told us what he was we wouldn't recoil in horror and turn him in. We didn't. I think your mother had already started to suspect—about Franek, I mean. You can't predict the birth of a psion.

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"Jazey Hine did everything he could for us. He arranged for us to move out here where Franek could be protected by distance from other people, at night, when the mind's defences are lowered by sleep. For almost two years we took turns—you'll remember this, because you were older by then—we took turns sitting up all night beside his cot, thinking of the need to keep his psionic ability secret. It was a hard struggle, but it worked. Even you didn't know."

"No, I didn't know," Errida whispered.

"I don't know how much longer it could have gone on," Crowb said, passing a hand over his face. "But there's no use speculating—it's a waste of time. I'll tell you some more of what Jazey passed on to us, so you'll see how urgent and desperate the situation is. You've noticed the atmosphere of tension everywhere these past few weeks, yes?"

"I guess so."

"As you heard, Jazey said it had something to do with this psionic warning of disaster that's making Franek ill. That's his view, but he also said that the government is in a state of total confusion. The Starfolk lost a ship—sometime over a month ago—commanded by their Zone Dominator, Angus Chalkind. They thought it might be sabotage, and they investigated. It was. And the reason seems to have been that there was a psion aboard."

"Oh," Errida made a long thin empty sound.

"You know how the Starfolk encourage the anti-psion feeling here on Regnier. Well, I guess they were trapped by their own actions in this. It must have been the act of a fanatic to destroy the ship because of one psion. But the Starfolk won't ever admit it was their own fault. The ship's last call was Regnier, and it was here that the psion managed to get on it. So the government has had an ultimatum: either they find those responsible—not just some scapegoats, but the real culprits—or the Starfolk will withdraw their services from this planet."

Errida thought of all the lessons she had had in school about the way in which the inhabitants of Regnier depended on the goodness of the Starfolk for their survival. True

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enough; they couldn't support more than half their population from their own local resources. Replenishing the genetic pools of the starships was the price they paid for the help they received.

She said slowly, "But—but that's going to be fatal for us!"

"Very likely," her father agreed, and emptied his cup.

"But if this is true, and they don't find the people who blew up the starship, then what good is it trying to hide anyway? The Starfolks are strict! They'll keep their word, and life just won't be worth living!"

"That's what Jazey said," her father confirmed somberly. "But there is some hope. Faint, but conceivable. You see, if the Starfolk abandon us, there is one other place we can turn for help, and from Jazey's information it'll be readily forthcoming."

"Where? Who would help us? Who *could*?"

"Earth," her father said. He got to his feet. "I don't have time to go into detail—we must plan our escape. Jazey says there's an idea circulating that we might find refuge in the ruins of the Old Race colony, and for want of any better suggestion, that's where we'll have to go."

IV

EXECUTIVE Harys Fold had never needed much sleep—some five hours a night was adequate for his tirelessly alert mind—and he was on the terrace of his home sipping coffee, watching the dawn stain the sky shell-pink, when a call came through.

"Sub-Executive Mallow is calling from the Department of Psion Affairs," said the melodious voice from the air. Reflexively, Fold checked his watch, though he knew what

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the time was—what an extraordinary hour it was for Mallow of all people to be wanting him.

“Connect,” he said. The air over the nearest floor-set communicator panel darkened and appeared to grow solid, and there was the image of Mallow—ruddy-cheeked, usually jovial in manner, but at present wearing a deep-etched frown.

“I didn’t wake you, I see, Harys,” he said, glancing up from a file-playback just included in the area of the image. “That puts you one up on me already. They got me from bed at a quarter of three.”

“I’m watching the dawn. I recommend it; it steadies the nerves by reminding one of the high probability that natural processes will continue.” Fold spoke in a light voice, but he was scrutinizing Mallow’s face as he did so, reading from his expression clues to the seriousness of his business. “What can I do for you, anyway?”

“I think I may be able to do something for you,” Mallow corrected. “What it is, I’m not sure. According to young Aimen, whose lap this affair was dropped in when it happened, you’ve been taking an interest in the Autonomy of Regnier lately. Is that so?”

Fold set down his cup with great care. He said, “Regnier—and the Department of Psion Affairs. The combination is an interesting one. Go on.”

“You mean you can’t tell me before I tell you?” A ghost of his normal self popped through Mallow’s aura of gloom. “All right, here’s the whole story so far.

“You know the psion community near here—the one about two miles into the desert, which they call Hopestown. Well, there’s a Special Agency watch on the area, of course. At about midnight, they caught some movement on the infrared scanners at the watchpost between the psion village and the highway. People coming out from the village. They sent a floater to look into it. It looked like a domestic matter, some kid running away and his folks going after him—which has happened several times lately. They weren’t going to take any further notice, except for the fact that when the psions caught

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the boy and headed for home, they left someone behind. Not a known psion. Since there's only one psion in Hopetown who can stand the company of ordinary people, a man called Elze who acts as their outside spokesman, they went down to investigate this stranger, who'd been talking to them." Mallow glanced up from the file-playback again, raising a thick finger.

"Significant point number one: this young man—his name is Philip Gascon—claimed that the reason the psions could stay and talk to him was that he is a psinul."

"Really!" Fold said, his eyebrows raising. "I make the odds against that approximately sixteen million to one."

"At least," Mallow agreed. He ran over the rest of what Gascon had said about himself. "Aimen, who took charge of Gascon when he was delivered, is a painstaking worker. He fetched me from bed for two reasons. First, nobody except a psion can say whether this Gascon is a psinul or not, and in view of the circumstances he wondered whether we might have chanced across the first undercover psion known on Earth."

Fold nodded thoughtfully. It was, after all, only an assumption that all Earth's psions were in isolated communities; on planets in Starfolk-dominated space, such as Regnier—a very high percentage of psions lived with their less-talented cousins.

"Second," Mallow pursued, "even if this weren't so, the explanation which the psions gave—according to Gascon's story—for the state of terror in which this kid ran away from home was full of provocative hints. Has anything come down to you about a psionic warning of the end of everything?"

Fold showed no reaction. He said, "Where does Regnier come into this?"

Mallow told him what Gascon had reported.

"I see. Thanks very much for getting hold of me." Fold frowned. "As a matter of fact, I ought to have thought of checking with you. You've given me a helpful lead."

Mallow tilted his round head to one side. He said with a rueful inflection, "I was hoping you'd do the same for me. As

far as I can tell, Aimen knows more about the importance of this than I do. What do you want done with Gascon, for example?"

"Oh, turn him loose. On what you've now told me, he's a psinul all right, not an undercover psion. Or even if he is, he's not doing any harm to anyone. What does he do, by the way? I think you said he was a postgraduate student at the university."

"He's studying cosmoarcheology."

"He's *what*?" Fold jerked forward in his chair.

Mallow repeated his last statement, blinking. "What's so extraordinary about that? I agree, it seems like a foolish choice to study the subject on Earth, where as far as we know the Old Race never came, but people do it."

"A cosmoarcheologist who's also a psinul," Fold muttered, to himself rather than to Mallow. "Much more of this, and I'm going to start believing in luck. Check up on this man Gascon, will you? I mean *thoroughly*. I want his entire life history. I want what he's told you doublechecked with—ah—Elze, I think you said was the name. The outside spokesman for Hopedown. No, wait a moment. Make your inquiries at some other psion settlement, the further away the better."

Mallow was silent for a long while. At last he stirred in his chair. He said dispiritedly, "Am I to take it that you consider this—this psionic warning seriously?"

"I'm not sure about that," Fold answered. "But about Regnier, I am sure. Be quick with what I've asked you, will you?"

"Damnation! What *is* it about Regnier? Or is it so crucial I'm not entitled to know?"

Fold told him. During the recital, Mallow's face went as nearly pale as his ruddy complexion would allow. Finally he raised a hand defensively.

"That's enough!" he said. "Much more, and you'll make me sorry I asked. I'll have that information for you by evening. And I hope they were courteous to Gascon when they

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took him in for questioning, because it sounds as though he may be the only person in a position to do anything."

That was probably an exaggeration, Fold thought when Mallow's image had faded, leaving an echo in his mind of Mallow's remark. There was almost always more than one way to tackle problems—even problems of the magnitude posed by Regnier at the moment—but the discovery of a psinul trained in this particular discipline suggested a course which had both simplicity and convenience to commend it.

Now he was going to have to wait until he could ask whether Gascon would co-operate.

Restlessly, he got up from his chair and began to pace the terrace. Background facts, un verbalized, ticked through his mind as he weighed the possible advantages of his idea.

When men went to the stars, they found evidence that somebody else had been there. Not on the first planets of other suns that they visited, but on the terra-type world of the third system, and the fifth, and the eighth, ninth, and tenth, and thereafter many more times. There had been extensive colonization and conversion; there were characteristic non-native plants and animals, traces of what human beings would call public works, and over a hundred thousand different artifacts.

At first it was expected that the two races would meet. Then some of the relics were dated with fair accuracy, and it began to be realized that the Old Race—the name was crude but handy—had flourished eighty to a hundred thousand years before men found their traces.

The fear of a head-on collision with superior aliens receded, to be replaced by a subtler one. The Old Race had *gone*, whether from plague, or racial decay, or defeat, or suicide. The question was: would the same mysterious fate overtake humanity too?

But by the time this question was properly formulated, there was a barrier across the path of further investigation, especially in the direction of Sagittarius and the galactic

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center, towards which Old Race relics became more numerous and the signs indicated longer-established colonies.

The barrier was—in the traditional sense—political.

In the early days of starflight, all starships were from Earth, the only human world capable of the immense technical effort required for their building and operation. That phase didn't last long. Colony-worlds invented short cuts under pressure of necessity, and put their own ships into the sky, beginning the network of trade and cultural exchanges that had later grown so rapidly.

Another phase followed. In the old and stable culture of Earth, there were superficial waves of fashion, but the underlying structure remained constant. It had to be the way. Change would engender friction, and that would hinder the smooth running of the painfully evolved society in which everyone was prosperous and content. Earth set a high price on contentment.

So the crowds of starships from Earth could make several voyages and each time return to the same environment they had left, without undue psychological disturbance.

But the crews of starships that were built on the rapidly evolving colony-worlds could make the same numbers of trips, touch down for furloughs on six worlds in six different stages of development, and go home to find that the environment they had started from had vanished forever. A ship might load its cargo from ox-carts on one planet, and unload with antigrav platforms on the next.

Cut off by the sheer speed of progress on their home planets from any secure cultural foundation, the crews of the ships began more and more to seek such a culture among themselves. The suggestion was made, and gratefully snatched at, that this might be the next stage of human evolution—one free from the confinement of a planetary surface. Armoured with this belief, the first of the Starfolk recognized themselves.

When it became known that matings between second-generation Starfolk often, and those between third-generation Starfolk always were sterile, the creed was shaken but not

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broken. Compare this to the amphibian stage, they said; we are land-animals who must return to the sea to breed. It's a transitional period for us.

They solved the problem by striking a bargain with the worlds which had become dependent during their early struggles on the Starfolk's services. They made such worlds into their genetic pools, recruiting fresh human heritage-lines from them and so ensuring the future of their culture.

As far as Earth was concerned, the evolutionary argument of the Starfolk was false. The spontaneous appearance of psions was far more significant. Earth—old and wise—tolerated psions. The Starfolk, seeing them as rival claimants, could not; they encouraged psion persecution and extended their distrust to Earth and its associated planets, where psions were permitted to exist openly.

Regnier was one of the oldest colonies to become fully subservient to the Starfolk. And something had gone wrong on Regnier. It was in Starfolk space, and it took much diplomatic argument to obtain permission for Earthborn visitors to go to such a planet. Earth consequently depended for most of its news of such worlds on second-hand data gathered by travelers from the planets on the tenuous borderline between the two spheres of influence.

Rumors that the Starfolk were going to abandon Regnier were multiplying, and if that happened, Earth could not watch and do nothing. But until it happened—if it did—Earth might well *have* to watch and do nothing.

The day had long gone when people of Earth were persistently reminded that they were members of a governed society. Generations of patient experiment had refined the exercise of authority to a subtle minimum. But insofar as government existed, it was conducted by people like Harys Fold, whose heredity and training had been combined to enable them to cope with the massive information-flow on which the human community relied.

The purpose of gathering so much information was naturally to use it as a guide for action. Until Mallow called him,

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Fold had been in possession of news which suggested no profitable action. If this man Gascon really was a psinul, though, and if he was willing to help, something constructive could now be done.

V

ALONE IN the huge echoing laboratory, Gascon bent over his workbench. In front of him was a row of Old Race artifacts of the type arbitrarily assigned to Category 829, brought to Earth from half a dozen different worlds. Each was a single crystal, immensely hard, in which a resonance pattern had been imprinted eighty or a hundred thousand years ago.

The Old Race must have had hundreds of techniques more advanced than those of humanity, but crystal resonance imprinting was the first, and so far the only, one which men had adapted for their own use. Not that the possible applications were limited—on the contrary, vibratory patterns based on the Old Race method of forming special crystalline structures were in use for many purposes—but the Old Race had thought in such a different way. . . .

"Gascon!"

Gascon slid his stool back on its runners and sighed as Scannell strode towards him between the racks of artifacts, fragments and microspools. The professor's image of what a scientific mentor should be like seemed to have a Renaissance source; he affected a short black cloak, which swung behind him with his haste. He had a sheet of paper in his hand.

Pausing beside his pupil, he glanced over the bench.

"Getting anywhere?" he demanded.

Gascon shrugged. "There's another entry for the culture-

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dispersion map, I guess—I've found parallel patterns here from Regnier and Fairhaven—but it would be a hell of a sight simpler if someone would discover the purpose of the things."

Scannell snorted. "I keep telling you, don't be anthropocentric about them! Suppose a non-human investigator tried to decipher the 'language' of a symphony recording, how far would he get? All we know is that these are records, but we don't know whether they're of language or of something as abstract as music. You know that perfectly well, and anyway I didn't come down to talk about that." He tapped the folded paper he held on the back of his other hand.

"You got into some trouble the night before last!"

Gascon winced. He said, "Yes, professor, I certainly did. What's more, I paid for it. I spent a night under paleolithic conditions in a Special Agency watchpost, I'll never be on speaking terms with my girl again, she rammed a rock with my car and did expensive damage—yes, I got into trouble!"

Scannell grunted. "In the modern world it's a considerable feat to get involved with the authorities. More than you could manage, I would have said. However, I have here a letter from one Harys Fold. *Executive* Harys Fold, no less. He seems to have interested himself in what you did."

Now what? Gascon felt a dull wash of dismay color his thoughts. He said, "Professor, they told me it was all over and done with—and anyway it was nothing serious."

Scannell didn't respond. He glanced around for another stool, found one, and hitched himself up on it, carefully disposing his cloak behind him. "I came to ask you a question, Gascon. An all-important question, in the circumstances. I want to know precisely why you're studying cosmoarcheology. Was it because it offered a soft option and the chance to indulge in a kind of fashionable hobby with a doctorate at the end of three years?"

Gascon was appalled. From the sharpness of Scannell's question, it appeared that there was a risk of something being done to stop him working at the university—at least, that was the first idea that sprang to mind to account for it. What

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on earth had he done? What fantastic suspicions had his misadventure aroused?

He was still struggling to find a satisfactory answer when Scannell grew tired of waiting and looked down at the paper he had in his hand. He opened it, but it was upside down from Gascon's point of view, and all he could clearly see was the heavy official inscription at the top. It said OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE MINISTRY OF ALL-HUMAN AFFAIRS.

"Well, your comment on this letter will tell me what you really feel about your work," Scannell said. "Listen!" He began to read in sonorous tones.

"Dear Professor Scannell, one of your students came to the attention of a department of this Ministry the other evening. The case was reported to me, and it reminded me of a matter which has for some time concerned me."

Gascon felt a stir of puzzlement. Scannell went on.

"It seems absurd that while we have known of the Old Race for so long we should still only have mastered one of their scientific techniques—crystal resonance imprinting—and, as I am advised, not have found out even yet what the Old Race themselves used it for.

"The obstacle to further progress appears to be lack of access to Old Race sites in the Starfolk sphere of influence. It's time something was done to remedy this state of affairs.

"I am informed that on Regnier there are extensive Old Race relics which have not so far been studied by cosmoarcheologists from Earth. In the hope of setting a precedent for fuller exchange of data on this and similar sites, I am prepared to exercise my influence to secure for one of your students—I'd suggest Philip Gascon, to whom I referred at the beginning of this letter—permission to visit Regnier.

"If Mr. Gascon wishes to see me and discuss the matter, I'm at his service."

Scannell folded the letter violently, and looked up at his pupil. "I don't know what it was you said to them," he stated emphatically. "But I do know that I'd give an arm for this opportunity. There's material on Regnier that's never

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been touched by anyone except bumbling amateurs, because the Starfolk are so distrustful of visitors from Earth. Well?"

Dazed by the unexpected impact of the letter, Gascon shook his head. "But this is absurd," he said slowly. "There must be more to it than he says. If he's genuinely concerned to get experts to Regnier he ought to pick an expert."

"Of course it's absurd," Scannell agreed grimly. "I'm not saying you're the worst pupil I've ever had, but you're a long way from the most outstanding, and you know it. On the other hand, a man doesn't get to hold an Executive post if he's a fool. Fold has a reason for this offer, and I doubt if it's got much to do with scientific curiosity. That point is what stopped me from asking, 'Why him? Why not me?'"

He gave a sudden wry smile.

"I guess I'd better see him," Gascon said. "It's such a wonderful chance I'd hate to turn it down. But I'm very much afraid it has strings to it."

"You're an extremely shrewd young man, apparently," Fold said. He cocked his long head and gave Gascon a quizzical smile. "Of course I have an ulterior motive. Suppose you tell me what it is—after what you've already learned, it's conceivable you'll be able to work it out."

Gascon hesitated. He glanced about him. They were sitting on a kind of terrace outside Fold's home, on the top of a gentle hill whose green slopes ran towards an inlet of the sea. It was a pleasant place, and this had perhaps predisposed Gascon to like Fold on sight; whatever the cause, there was no doubt he felt drawn to this lean, nervous man in dull blue clothes. The word that sprang to mind was "capable"—but then, that went without saying. He was what he was.

"It has something to do with my being a psinul?" Gascon hazarded at last.

Fold inclined his head. "Very much so. Tell me, how did learning this about yourself affect you? Can you explain it for me? Be as accurate as you can."

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"Well, I think it hit me in three successive waves," Gascon answered, frowning. "First, because I was face to face with psions, it made me a bit more confident in talking with them. Then it came to seem rather neutral—a point which wasn't apt to affect my life one way or the other unless I came frequently into contact with psions, and that was improbable. But now . . ."

Fold raised an eyebrow, waiting.

"It seems that it must matter. Somehow." Gascon made a vague gesture. "Psinuls are even rarer than psions, they tell me—the incidence is one in sixteen or seventeen million people, while psions are one in two million or even commoner."

"But you have no idea what the real significance of this is?"

Gascon shook his head.

"Then I'll tell you," Fold asserted. He rose to his feet and began to pace with a sort of springy animal grace, back and forth along the terrace. "Not only that, but I'll tell you a lot of things you didn't know about yourself. It's already influenced your life, in the choice of a career."

"How?" Gascon demanded.

"Setting aside the fact that cosmoarcheology is currently fashionable for intellectuals, has it never struck you as a peculiar life's work for an intelligent young man on one of the worlds that the Old Race apparently never visited?" Fold quirked his lips. "Be honest, now!"

"I—yes, I guess it is, at bottom." Gascon paused. "But there's the chance of fieldwork on other planets if I do well, you know. Even without this wonderful offer you've made."

"It's a poor substitute. Most of the known Old Race relics on the local worlds have been thoroughly studied; the new ground will be broken in Starfolk space, not in ours. And you like lonely places, don't you? Like the edge of the desert, where you took your girl the other night."

Gascon nodded.

"It's all part of the same thing," Fold said. "A psinul like yourself not only has no psionic emanations for psions to perceive—he has no power of psionic perception either, not

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even the rudimentary talent which millennia of genetic selection has encouraged among the communities of socially-organized man. Other people are in a sense mysterious to you; you can't instinctively make the judgments they make, and you're compelled to resort to intellectual analysis, which is far more difficult. You feel this lack—you compensate somewhat by leaning over backwards, as for instance when you decided to go help the psion youth who was screaming despite your girl saying she would desert you if you did. You felt it more necessary to display social responsibility than to keep the girl. I must say I'd have done the same thing, but I would have immobilized the car."

Again Fold gave his wry smile. "So in selecting a career you found yourself drawn to one where there was a mystery offering you only a pure intellectual solution, or none at all: the study of the Old Race. Does it make sense to you?"

Gascon's face was pale, and he wasn't looking at Fold. He took his time answering, but when he did so his reply was a whispered, "Yes."

"I thought so. Now I understand that while you're not brilliant, you're an able worker in your chosen field, and doing a lot of sound, reliable research as far as research is possible on Earth. It so happens that we need to get someone to Regnier. I'll give you details later, but the survival of approximately half the planet's population will be at stake if the rumors we've been hearing are true. We have ways of obtaining intelligence reports by intermediaries, but we want a more direct approach. There's no foreseeable reason why we shouldn't persuade the Starfolk to allow a cosmoarcheologist to go there—a real one, who'll do real study, not faked. It may take time to arrange matters, but it'll be done. The Starfolk claim to be evolutionary superiors of the rest of us, and they're therefore that much closer to the doom that overtook the Old Race. So they're concerned, too.

"But a cosmoarcheologist who's a psinul would be *perfect*."

"So Elze was telling the truth," Gascon muttered.

"You're even shrewder than I'd thought," Fold exclaimed. "Yes, we've learned that psions on other worlds—

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especially those nearer the Starfolk sphere of influence—are suffering this unaccountable psionic derangement. Elze informed you that it had associations with Regnier. This would suggest that on Regnier this intangible bombardment of concepts of disaster may affect the whole population, not to mention the Starfolk who rule them. If so, only a psinul can assess the situation without psionic bias.”

“You want me to be a spy,” Gascon suggested. The archaic word had overtones of historical adventure-drama.

“If you like.” Fold ceased his pacing and turned to face the younger man. “To be still more candid, I’m offering you a bribe. You see, there are several possible explanations for this psionic ‘shout’. It may be the signal of agony endured in a psion pogrom on Regnier—the last we heard, such a pogrom was a strong possibility. Alternatively, it might be a signal from the future; there are theoretical grounds for believing psionic communication need not take place in present time. In that case, it may *really* be a warning of the end of everything, and we can’t do very much about it.

“But the most acceptable hypothesis is that it’s from the past, and that the Old Race left a psionic warning of their fate for those who might follow them, which has recently become meaningful to us because we’ve passed some crucial point on the same path they followed.

“So the bribe I’m offering is a tempting one—a chance to be the man who actually solves the mystery of the Old Race’s disappearance. What do you say?”

VI

FOR ERRIDA CROWB, the days following the visit of Jazey Hine stretched into a nightmare from which there was no hope of escape. At first she tried to convince herself that it

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would end—or at least be improved—when the date of their departure was settled; then she had to postpone it to the day of that departure; now, when it was imminent, she had to give up the pretense and face facts.

Short of the miracle which her father had referred to, life was going to be a bitter, evil, miserable experience for her from now on.

Before, though one could not say life out here on the Plains—edge was as comfortable and easy as in the city where she had been born and where she had friends of her own age whom she still visited, there had been so much to look forward to. The risk of being chosen to swell the Starfolk's genetic pool was the faintest of shadows across her days; almost half the young people of Regnier were considered for adoption into a starflying family group, but only a few score each year could be taken, and—whether through altruism or mere convenience—the Starfolk would always select those who seemed discontented with their old lot if there was otherwise nothing to choose between several possible candidates.

It was with these points in mind that Errida had been able to take Jazey Hine's bad news so calmly at first; she was content with her family and her probable future, and she was sure she had no specially attractive talent to mark her out for the Starfolk. The odds were in favor of her being passed over.

But the Starfolk were thorough, and they detested psions.

This was one of the hardest things to accept. Like all children brought up on Regnier, she had been taught to regard the Starfolk as a superior order of humans, to watch with excitement and respect when they made their rare appearances—braced against gravity and protected by elaborate filters from airborne infection. All around her there had always been examples of Starfolk generosity—for instance, she could remember how the Plains had been when the Crowb family first came here, an endless ocean of native weeds and mosses against which the fight was unceasing, and how the nature of the area had changed when the Starfolk, after long

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experiment and research, imported a species of insect from Nebo and turned it loose.

So the official lesson was easy to learn. Part of it involved the argument of which Jazey Hine had been so scornful, yet which seemed so logical. "Psions cannot be the next evolutionary stage, because their talent, so-called, is really a handicap. They have to hide from ordinary people; often they go insane or kill themselves. They're non-viable."

For the first time, on learning that her brother was one of these sports, Errida was trying to find an answer to the counter-question: "If the Starfolk are so sure about psions, why do they go to such lengths to eliminate them—if not to keep down a potential rival?"

There was an even more difficult problem. The Starfolk encouraged hatred of psions—true. The ship over which the trouble had started, had been sabotaged because a psion was aboard—true, on the Starfolk's own assertions. In that case, what right had they to threaten a whole planet with famine and sickness in retaliation?

This was the thing that her father labored over and over again when Errida talked to him about it, struggling to set her own opinions in perspective, to decide what was fact and what was propaganda among what she had been told. The anti-psion societies that flourished on Regnier had Starfolk support; she had seen their tracts and sometimes met people who subscribed to them. Surely it was the Starfolk's fault that a psion had ever got aboard one of their ships, and a Zone Dominator's command ship, at that.

They were acting out of spite—that was what it came down to. Reluctantly Errida was being driven to admit the truth.

"How's your girl taking it?" Hine said.

Crowb gave a ghost of a smile. "She's tough," he answered. "She's good Crowb stock. And I took the shock of finding that my son was a psion, didn't I?"

"You stood it pretty well," Hine nodded. He glanced around him at the family-room in which they sat talking,

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noting the handworked decoration and the solid but attractive furnishings. "You pulled yourself up a long way afterwards, too, which is more than some people can manage. It's an incidental advantage of our arranging to move people with psion children out to the sticks—you avoid the sensation of curious strangers staring at you all the time."

Crowb was quiet for a moment. Then he said, not looking at the psion, "It must be bad on worlds where the Starfolk had a tight grip before there was any—any undercover organization of psions to take care of kids like Franek."

Hine gave him a steady look. He said, "I note the way you phrase it."

"You note everything that goes on in my head," Crowb said. "I can't hide anything. I don't much care—it wasn't done for my sake, but I've had the benefit."

"Yes. Well, since you have everything to gain and nothing to lose, I'll clear up that point for you. Where do you think Hollur Starkness was going on that ship which was sabotaged?"

"Was that his name? You didn't tell me."

"What odds does it make?"

Crowb nodded. "Going somewhere where there isn't a psion organization yet. I see. You help your own kind somehow."

"Don't try and avoid thinking about the division between us," Hine said bitterly. "It exists. As for the question you have in mind to ask: no, we can't find out by psionic means who it was who blew up Angus Chalkind's ship. Or, if we do, it'll be blind chance that brings us to the culprit. Naturally it would delight us to be able to turn in a fanatical anti-psion cultist to the Starfolk who encourage hatred of us. But it means sifting through the minds which most repel us, where we find foul distorted images of psions mirrored wherever we look. I can't describe *that* to you, but you're getting a vague idea of it. Ugh!"

He shifted in his chair, and went on in a lighter tone.

"Errida's just come into the hallway; she heard my voice and she's standing there wondering if she can pluck up the

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courage to come and talk to us. She may be taking it well on the surface, Crowb, but I'm afraid the strain is beginning to tell underneath."

"That's supposed to surprise me?" Crowb said, curling his lip. "Errida!" he added loudly, and the door was slid back a moment later.

The tension of the past several days had left its mark on the girl's face, giving her an astonishing likeness to her mother—making her look older, with lines sketched on her forehead and around her mouth, and dark circles below her eyes suggesting little sleep and much worry. She was neglecting her appearance, too, and her shirt was crumpled, her sandals dusty.

She uttered no greeting, but walked across the floor to come to a stop facing Hine. She still said nothing, merely looked at him with no expression.

"Errida!" Crowb said. "Your manners!"

Neither Errida nor Hine took any notice. After a moment, Hine, gazing at the girl, said, "Yes, Errida, I *am* a psion. But remember I've lived most of my life among people who aren't, and I've been compelled to adjust—like a man with good hearing who's grown up among a whole townful of folk who are deaf. So I'm not quite sensitive enough to pick out details of all the questions you're thinking. They're jumbled together; you keep switching your attention."

Errida set her small chin in a determined manner, and Hine reacted.

"Your father and I were just talking about that," he said after a moment. "Of course it's only Franek who really concerns us directly. If this were Earth, or any world in Earth's sphere of influence, we would have asked to adopt your brother and brought him up in an isolated psion community where his mind could develop perfectly sanely. But it's no good thinking that we're going to cheat you, or harm you. We *can't* harm people—don't even the Starfolk say so? Isn't this another argument they advance to show that we're biologically handicapped by being so vulnerable?"

Errida nodded, biting down on her lower lip. As Hine

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said, the Starfolk considered that a psion's inability to defend himself against another's violence by retaliating in kind was a severe disadvantage.

"And—yes, we are going to try and establish a small psion community at the Old Race site. It seems to us that we may be safe there, for a while at any rate. We're going to have to get along with each other; there's no alternative. For you, it won't be for long. It'll be a point of honor with the Starfolk to keep their word and abandon this planet to its fate if they don't find the people who sabotaged Chalkind's ship. After that, it'll be a matter of only months before Earth steps in—assuming we can get news of our plight to Earth, and we're doing everything in our power to make sure they hear about us and react.

"You're thinking: what if the Starfolk do find the culprits?" A gleam of sweat showed on Hine's forehead, and he glanced at Crowb. "Your daughter is more astute than you are, did you know that? You and Leece must be carrying some interesting recessives."

"How do you mean?" Crowb demanded.

"A few minutes ago I was feeding you an answer to the question of whether we psions could locate and identify the criminals. I'm a psion in hiding, remember that. I've had to get into the habit of giving people the answers that will set their minds at rest, make them less hostile, less suspicious." A note of anxious self-justification was creeping into his voice; he wiped at his damp face. "So I told you that we'd dearly love to hand over those anti-psion cultists to the Starfolk for retribution. But Errida knows why in fact we wouldn't."

"I don't quite follow," Crowb muttered, and looked at his daughter.

"The psions want to get rid of the Starfolk," Errida said bluntly. "So long as they can prevent the criminals from falling into the government's hands and being surrendered to the Starfolk, there's an outside chance of them keeping their word—"

"A certainty!" Hine interrupted. "I've looked into the minds of Starfolk. I know their ideas of honor and principle."

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"That's as it may be," Errida answered. "But suppose your gamble doesn't work, and we lose both the Starfolk and the support of Earth, which never arrives, or comes too late. We're dependent! The Starfolk have made us parasites, incapable of surviving on our own."

"Why, that's so," Crowb agreed. "Jazey, how about that?"

Hine didn't answer, and Errida curled her lip. She said, "Not so pure and innocent, your psions, are they? But just as willing to gamble with the future of a whole planet as the Starfolk have proved to be."

"Don't hate us," Hine whispered. "It would be better for everyone, for you and your family, to be rid of the Starfolk and look to Earth instead."

"What do you know about Earth?" Errida challenged. "You've shown me how my ideas of the real universe have been colored by Starfolk propaganda. You've destroyed my faith in their honesty and superiority. Why should I take your word when you make promises about what Earth is going to do? How is it that you know more about Earth than I do? The Starfolk stand between you and the truth, too; all your hopes may be founded on legends and myths!"

Hine got stiffly to his feet. He had the expression of a man who has endured intense pain for a long time, but there was a kind of dignity about him. He said, "You're too young to know all this, Errida. Moreover, you're feeling the effects, as all of us are—psions and ordinary folk alike—of this continual exposure to a psionic shout of disaster. But the fact remains: it's better for a human being to have hopes, than to resign the struggle. Whether the hopes are well-founded or baseless, they count."

He turned to Crowb and put out his hand. "This is the last time I'll be able to see you before you go," he said. "You know all the arrangements now. Good luck. I'll see you when the time comes."

Crowb hesitated. Then he took Hine's hand doubtfully, and the psion gave a harsh laugh.

"I said your daughter was smarter than you. She doesn't trust me at all, but she can't think of a better course of action,

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and she admits she's got to fall in with my proposals. You've just been shown reasons for not trusting me, so you're doubting the usefulness of my plan even though you—ah, hell! That's what hope does. Where would we be without it? Goodbye, Errida," he finished, turning. "Think well of me. If you can."

"I'll try," Errida said, her face very white. "I will try."

VII

IN THE long moment after Fold had offered his proposition, Gascon heard nothing but the roar of blood in his ears. He felt as though he had been brought to the edge of a cliff, and there shown the whole pageant of his life, every scene of memory asking a single question: is it *for* anything? His vanity was still smarting a little under the assuredness with which Fold had argued from his nature as a psinul to his choice of career, to his lack of success in personal relationships, and to his seemingly empty future.

He said at last, hearing how shaky his voice was, "In other words, you're looking for a human tool."

"A tool?" Fold took the term, gravely considered it, and rejected it. "A weapon, Gascon. A weapon. In the modern world the name doesn't readily relate to anything, does it? But I assure you it's appropriate."

He dropped back into the chair facing Gascon, crossed his legs, set his elbows on the chair's arms and then laid the tips of his fingers together so that his arched hands made a sharp point opposing the sharp point of his chin.

"May I ask you one more question, to be answered with the same total honesty?" he went on. "Do you find life exciting?"

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"No, I guess not," Gascon muttered.

"I do. I find it tremendously exciting." Fold cocked his eyebrows as though suspecting a reaction of disbelief. "Maybe you find that hard to accept in our placid environment. But we are carrying on a struggle that may in the end prove as decisive for the future course of our race as any that has ever been fought. Are we stupid creatures, or the heirs to the cosmos? Both. Both. We have never found an enemy to oppose us so keenly as our own blockheaded obstinacy, our lazy-minded refusal to notice facts staring us in the face. Why, there has more than once been a time when we might have ended our progress for good by exterminating ourselves! You're familiar with the history of the Dark Ages, I presume."

"Yes, I made a special study of them, in the hope of finding some clue to the disappearance of the Old Race there."

Fold chuckled. "Without success, I imagine. War could scarcely have accounted for a race spread over forty-odd planets. But that's by the way. I'm seeking your agreement that our worst obstacle is human silliness."

Gascon nodded.

"I hear day in, day out, proof that this silliness still dominates our affairs. I don't think many people have much idea of what an Executive like myself actually does, so I'll explain. Picture the complexity of our society, on Earth, on all the planets in our sphere of influence in the local part of the galaxy. People travel; goods are transported; these are straightforward, and are supervised and co-ordinated automatically.

"But in addition to this, things happen. A man dies, a great work of art is created, a situation of political tension arises, events from the Starfolk sphere of influence—where we have no control—intrude on our smooth operations. We cannot leave those to machinery, although when you look at me you must picture the machines which I employ as well. Often, a pattern of events develops which seems to me significant, because I'm a human being. A problem. A potential crisis. Danger! At first, only an itch at the back of the mind,

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but later, either a skull-bursting headache or . . .” He hesitated, uncharacteristically. “A moment ago I mentioned a work of art. To me, the solution of a problem still barely formulated, before it becomes actively harmful, is like artistic creation. This is why I find life so exciting. There’s never any end to the challenges it presents.

“Currently, the challenge comes from an almost unparalleled example of human silliness; the self-appointment of the Starfolk as our evolutionary superiors. They need that belief as a psychological prop, but it’s founded on nothing better than an environmental accident. What does count in this respect is the appearance of psions. This ‘warning of the end of everything’ which Elze first described to you seems to me real and important. I know, from studies I’ve conducted, that human beings, like any other animal, respond to environmental pressure by non-conscious selection of valuable traits. This is not to say that some mysterious racial-will proposes goals and finds ways to meet them—nothing says, ‘we need a sense of perception; let us grow eyes!’ But it does mean that at the bottom of Earth’s atmosphere, with the particular kind of radiation available, eyes developed which responded to the most convenient octave of the spectrum. Some additional extension into the infrared would have been still better, but nonetheless—I’m sorry, I’m digressing again.

“The appearance of psions is a response to an environmental requirement, which has forced into the open a talent formerly latent. What did this? What acted on our minds as sunlight acted on the primal eye? I don’t know. But however I consider the question, I reach one conclusion: we’re going to be benefited by this new development.

“And as I told you, I’m inclined to the belief that there may be a connection between this psionic shout and the fate of the Old Race. We, the human species, need to destroy the artificial barrier which the conceit of the Starfolk has erected between two parts of us; we also desperately need to know what became of our predecessors. You—if you accept my offer—can become a double-edged weapon and we shall use you to attack both these problems at once.

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"Now—I mean *now!*—yes or no?"

All the time Fold had been speaking, Gascon had been paying attention with only half his mind. He had been comparing the intenseness Fold displayed, his obvious fascination with his existence, and his own half-hearted, none-engaged, apathetic acceptance of life. He realized that Fold had probably used skillful psychological and semantic tricks to emphasize the contrast, but he didn't care. The contrast was real, and it made him angry with himself.

He set his head back defiantly and looked Fold straight in the eyes.

"You know how to turn people's conceit to your own advantage, don't you?" he said with a trace of bitterness.

"Not conceit. Self-esteem," Fold corrected calmly. "If you refuse my offer now, you will feel extremely ashamed of yourself. And I say rightly! When a task as important as this one waits to be done, the only qualification is ability to do it, and the only motive is one of conscience."

"And you think I can do it?"

"If you can't at the moment," Fold shrugged, "before you actually go to Regnier, you'll be equipped with everything half a millennium of Earthly scientific progress can provide. In fact, that's an additional incentive I omitted to include in my bribe. The Starfolk would think it odd if we asked to send to Regnier anyone but the absolute cream of your profession, so our first step will be to make you the most knowledgeable cosmoarcheologist who ever lived."

There was no single symbol of Starfolk domination to mark the face of Regnier. But there was the starport, and sometimes in the disturbed brain of Jazey Hine it seemed that the starport served the purpose of a brand—as though a searing-hot iron had been plunged down through the planet's atmosphere and left a patch of fifty square miles of concrete scar-tissue as an indelible sign of ownership.

Waiting on the vantage platform of the communications tower with other government officials, he looked out over the gray, apparently boundless expanse, seeing with his eyes how

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the warm air distorted the rigid surface and made it waver like a pond with ripples.

But he wasn't concentrating on what he saw. He was a psion, even though he had masked the fact from almost everyone he knew, and psions were dominated by their new sense as other people were dominated by vision.

Suppose a sighted man were to find himself among a tribe of blind savages, Hine thought, and was compelled to pretend blindness; to stumble about their village, being consciously awkward except (and what a world of suffering was in that word "except"!) when it served his purpose to use his eyes in order that people should think he was astute.

Here, now, he stood with the most notable men of his planet: Overlord Irdus himself, the Starfolk's puppet, who danced on strings pulled from the other side of the sky; his consort, robed in dazzling chrome-plated garments, her hands heavy with rings, her lips heavy with paint; Chem, and Owitz, and Breckitt, the frightened ones, the men with the intelligence Irdus lacked, who had never quite understood how it was that Irdus remained the Overlord and the agent of the Starfolk, but who understood perfectly well that if the Starfolk kept their word and abandoned their planet to its fate, the hunger-maddened people would destroy first of all Chem, and Owitz, and Breckitt.

Irdus was too stupidly optimistic to comprehend this fact. Irdus was the Overlord because he had Jazey Hine as his personal confidant and adviser, and Jazey Hine could pick the brains of the other three and by dropping hints to Irdus could ensure that they were anticipated in their plottings.

The Overlord had to be a stupid man, or Hine would never have been able to maintain his position. Any one of the others would have exiled Hine—not realizing he was a psion, but simply recognizing that he was too subtle, too ingenious, too dangerous to tolerate so near the seats of power.

At the moment Breckitt, the member of the trio whom Hine regarded as the greediest for power, was taut with the same uneasiness that was assailing everyone on the planet, and to which psions were vibrating like sympathetic strings on

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a musical instrument. Breckitt responded strongly to it because he had staked much of his career on the anti-psion societies, hoping to impress the Starfolk by his diligence in keeping down their rivals; now, when anti-psion agitation had backfired, he was sensing the psionic warning of the absolute end, and applying it to his own career.

Breckitt was going to do something drastic, one day soon, but he had not yet formulated any plan. Hine, keeping his eyes carefully averted, made a mental note, and found it being washed from the slate of memory by a single repeating phrase: *I'm tired, I'm tired, I'm tired . . .*

That was in himself, not in one of the others, not even in one of the horde of hangers-on who crowded the vantage platform back to the opposite rail.

"Broaching atmosphere now!" someone called from below the communications room, and automatically their eyes moved upward, seeking in the blue vault of the sky the blinding light of the downcoming starship.

The Starfolk would ask what progress had been made in finding the criminals who destroyed Chalkind's ship. There was no progress, and that was why all the leaders of Regnier were assembled, to emphasize their diligence to their masters. None of them would trust another to speak for him.

Belatedly, Hine remembered to look upwards with the rest of them, although his mind was already feeling toward the presence of the crew. There was something—a grimness, a single purpose. . . .

Irdus was thinking about him, but not in any specific terms.

There was the sound, distant—of course; the ship slowed to less than sonic velocity when it was still many miles overhead—but sharp enough to make them wince. Their minds raced faster, so that Jazey Hine had to make a deliberate effort to mute his awareness of their thoughts and at the same time he strained up toward the ship. And—

No!

"Hinel!" Irdus was saying sharply. "Hinel!"

And the ship was dropping towards the starport, and the

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ground crews were assembling in their ranks like social insects, and the tower on which Hine stood seemed to be swaying in a gigantic gale. The ship, ovoidal, pulsing with power, black as its natural habitat of space, ticking like a timebomb with the news of a new and near disaster.

"Hine!" Irdus rasped, finally looking round, amazed to find his normally attentive aide so dilatory.

"I'm sorry," Hine choked out, his voice a blurred whisper. "I'm sorry! I—I think I'm a little ill, sir. It'll pass."

Irdus gave an "it had better" snort, and Breckitt noted Hine's weakness with a stir of interest, but Hine ignored him.

Old Race sites on Regnier—cosmoarcheologist from Earth—exhaustive study—precedent—wariness but indisputably important if Earth . . . first go over them ourselves, see what those subtle Earthmen think so important . . .

The Old Race site, where he was planning to send the Crowbs, and where so many of the psions on Regnier had been hoping to hide, was going to be invaded by the Starfolk—now!

VIII

LIKE THIEVES, like murderers, the Crowb family prepared for their sneaking night-time departure. Errida took part in the work without being part of it, committing nothing of herself but a passive shell, pale, worried, and unfailingly obedient. Jazey Hine had been right—she had every reason to suspect him of using her and her family for pro-psion purposes, but she had no alternative to offer.

So she worked, and suffered in silence. By turns she hated the Starfolk, herself, and Jazey Hine, but mostly the Star-

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folk, because it was after all true that Jazey Hine had saved her life; when a psion was located, it was customary to kill, or at least sterilize, the same-generation sibs of the family.

The time chosen for their escape was the night in which the Starfolk were landing to present the new Zone Dominator to Overlord Irdus. Hine had argued that although Breckitt would certainly be whipping up anti-psion feeling to impress the visitors, the enforced celebrations would occupy the minds of most people in the city, and few would give any thought to the family from the country. There was no reasonable alternative to going through the city; crossing the Plains was too conspicuous, and so was the idea of making their way up the river on which the Old Race site was located. A detour around the starport would be both long and dangerous.

So: the city. And that meant that they dared not take with them any more than a few necessities—some clothes, some provisions, and what tools they could muster.

The Old Race had chosen this area of the planet, this large island in the temperate zone, for the same reason that men had followed them in colonizing it before any other. It was of manageable size. But whereas men had settled near the flat Plains, the Old Race, who seemed to have outgrown the need of starports, and who always cultivated the seas of their colony-worlds, had preferred to concentrate at the place where the Plains sloped very gently into an expanse of tidal marshes. They had presumably used the marshes to acclimatize their own associated fauna and flora and to adapt the native types which were potentially useful.

Of course, the tides of nearly a hundred millennia had erased all the traces except those which were on high and dry land. The ruins were extensive, true, and they had been exhaustively studied by the earliest human visitors, so that now they were merely a seldom-visited curiosity, of a kind common to several planets. Errida recalled that at first she had wondered why Hine was so sure they offered refuge.

She was no longer so doubtful. She had no logical reason to have been reassured, but possibly her subconscious had

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arrived at a satisfactory conclusion. She was too busy to worry any longer.

Now at last it was time: a cloudy night, with half a moon showing occasionally over the Plains, and a wind blowing off the ocean with the pungent scent of the native life-forms that spawned out there in this early-summer season. This had been the background of Errida's conscious life, and airborne scent had run through her youth like a leitmotif, as the raw stink of native mosses on the Plains had been replaced by the scent of plants with Earthly ancestors, food-plants, timber stocks, and grasses.

While her parents were undertaking the last delicate job before leaving—bringing poor Franek from his bed with their minds concerned with the need for hiding his talent during the journey—Errida stood outside the house and stared about her, thinking of the memories the place held for her.

It *must* be true that one day the patient rule of Earth would replace the iron grip of the Starfolk. Hine *must* be speaking from certainty rather than mere hope!

"Erridal" her father was calling. "Errida, are you coming?" His voice was ragged-edged with suspense. She spun on her heel and hurried to the car. It was old—a perquisite of her father's job with the Plains Conversion Commission—but it was well maintained and ran smoothly. Her mother was already in the back, her arm around Franek, whose face was death-white and who stared ahead of him with lacklustre eyes opened wide, like two screaming mouths.

The car rose to operating height and began to hum down the track towards the city. Errida didn't look back. She had promised herself that she wouldn't. The old life was finished.

"Now let's just make sure everyone knows what we're doing," her father said when they had been traveling in silence for some minutes. "Leece, how's Franek?"

At the sound of his name the boy whimpered, and Leece did not answer, thinking that was enough. Crowb, his face almost as pale as his son's, said, "All right, Errida. Go over it."

"We're making for the Low Dam area," Errida recited

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tonelessly. "That's one and a half miles inside the site, north by north-west from the Stub Tower. There are tunnels there supposed to have been hydroelectric sluices, which are going to be shelter for us and where there's adequate water. We can't take the car into the site, because it can be traced if anyone spots it, so we'll abandon it in the marsh somewhere where it will sink quickly, on the far side from where we're hiding.

"When we get to the tunnels—"

"Errida!" her mother said sharply from the rear seats. "Do we have to go through it all again?"

Her husband glanced back at her. "Leece, our lives depend on our knowing exactly what we're doing!"

"Think of Franek!" Leece hissed, as though by lowering her voice she could hide her meaning from her psion child.

"Oh, of course!" Errida said brightly, her tone ringing as false as a lead coin. "We ought to be thinking clean, happy thoughts! I'll tell you something funny that happened in school last year—"

"I guess it would be best if we all shut up," her father said stiffly.

Franek gave a cry of pain, and they all stared at him. He had closed his eyes and was biting hard on his lower lip. Leece clutched him more tightly to her.

"I did that, I'm afraid," Crowb said bitterly after a moment. "I couldn't help it. I was thinking what a hell of a thing it is to have your thoughts wide open to someone like him. I—got angry, I guess."

"Then think of what it's going to be like when Earth takes over!" Errida heard herself say, the words cracking like a whip. "It's something to look forward to, anyway!"

Her father gave her a surprised and respectful look. He said eventually, "Yes. Yes, we should do that. A good idea."

Clouds swirled over the moon. Ahead, the death-trap of the city began to loom with a misty light.

At last, the tall buildings closed in on them like the walls

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of a prison in which a frenetic excitement reigned—a prison in which absolute license had been given to all the inmates because they were condemned to die. Even knowing that the Starfolk had come to present the new Zone Dominator, and that there was bound to be some compulsory merry-making, they had not expected this.

"Why didn't Hine warn us?" Crowb said between clenched teeth, as they turned into the avenue which formed the spine of the city and saw what stretched ahead of them. There was almost no traffic moving—there was no room for traffic, for the population had flooded out on the streets like ants from a broken hill. The commercial and public districts of the city met on this line, and the vast central square lay across it, so it was probable that the crowd had begun there, and had flooded out into the surrounding area when the square was full.

"There's no chance of getting through," Errida muttered, leaning forward in her seat and staring at the crowds. The lights were garish; here and there someone in the throng who wore chromed-clothing threw off light like a mirror turned at random. There was a raucous chanting, but the words were indistinct.

"Find a way around through the side-streets!" Leece hissed from the back seat. "You'll have to be quick—Franek's never been in the city like this before, and he's suffering dreadfully."

Errida glanced behind her, and found that her brother's teeth were chattering, and his forehead ran with sweat. With a cynicism that a month ago would have been unthinkable, she said, "Do you suppose Breckitt has been whipping up the crowds with anti-psion sentiment?"

"More than likely," her father agreed curtly, and swung the car down a street to the left. "But I don't see much hope of getting through quickly—we're going to have to cross the other main avenue anyway, and that's the one from the starport, so it may be even more crowded."

"At least we'll only have to cross it," Leece pointed out.

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"We won't have to work our way through the square as well."

The car turned right, and the road was clear for some distance, to the junction with the avenue from the starport; this was better than they had hoped. Errida, her fingers curled over, her nails digging into her palms, listened to the chanting as it grew louder with their approach.

"Do you know what they're singing?" she said at last, her voice thin and weak. "That's a hymn to the glory of the Starfolk which we had to learn in school. It's got a lot of bad things about psions in it."

"Quiet," her father warned. "There are police here. We'll have to stop."

He braked, and from the edge of the crowd which, lining the route from the starport, closed off the end of the road they had come down, a man in uniform came striding over. He was sweating and grinning as he rapped on the top of the car for it to be opened.

"Just in time for the fun!" he said. "Pull over and come on down with the rest of 'em!"

What "fun?" Errida stared up, trying to keep her face from showing any reaction. Her father cleared his throat.

"Uh—I guess we hadn't better leave the car, officer," he said. "My boy back there isn't well. A fever of some kind. I wouldn't want to take him among so many people in case it's contagious."

The policeman looked over at Franek, noting his air of suffering and Leece's taut concern for him. He shrugged. "I guess maybe you're right—we have worries enough. I hear the Starfolk aren't pleased that they didn't find the people who blew up that ship of theirs. But we're giving 'em a couple of psions as a consolation prize. You haven't any chance of getting across the avenue till the parade's finished, so you'd best sit here and wait."

"Uh—how long?" Crowb ventured.

"Quarter-hour, maybe twenty minutes." There was a loud yell from behind him, and the policeman turned; finding the crowd boiling with excitement, he strode back towards it.

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None of them said anything. For some moments, none of them moved.

And then Franek could bear it no longer. His voice came as though it were being torn out of him like his living heart, and he screamed.

"They're going to kill them! They're going to kill them!"

And he had fought free of Leece and was leaping from the car.

"Stop him!" Leece moaned. Her husband flung open his door and went after Franek; Errida went after him; Leece followed, overtaking her daughter almost at once, her feet winged by terror. But Franek was lost in the fringe of the crowd before they could catch him, and when they tried to plunge in after him there was a backwash of angry people jostling them away. Someone seized hold of Errida as she followed, and cursed her for bumping into him. Struggling to get loose, she missed the next things that happened.

But from what she saw, she could reconstruct them.

Franek, his young mind crammed past bursting-point with the sadistic, hate-filled images of the crowd, had eeled his way between the people to where the policeman, who had spoken to them in the car stood. At that same moment the captured psions were being marched past in the roadway—two miserable girl-children, younger even than Franek, followed by their parents and relatives, guarded by six ranks of marching men.

Franek beat at the policeman with clubbed fists, his face contorted with terror; even then, the policeman might have thought nothing of it, recognizing the boy's parents as they came to reclaim him; ready to plead fever and delirium.

But the two child-psions in the road sensed the presence of another of their kind, clutched at a straw, reacted, came to a stop and looked toward where Franek was struggling with the policeman. The onlookers' attention went with theirs.

The policeman bawled, his astonishment ringing in the words. "He's another of them! He's another psion—this kid here! And his folks!"

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He pointed dramatically. With a growl like a wild beast, with fists and feet for claws, the crowd moved in.
To kill.

IX

IN IRDUS's mind Hine could read—not dismay, exactly, for the Overlord was too stupid to know how greatly he depended on his confidential aide, but—irritation at the ordinary human weakness that had made him ill.

It was impossible to hide this sickness. Last night, all the city had been bathed in an aura of psion-hate, and even without the redness of blood-lust which had eventually colored it, Jazey Hine, like every other secret psion for fifty miles, would have been weary and distraught.

But the knowledge that the Crowb family had been lynched was an accusing brand. He was a fool, an incompetent, a murderer by stupidity.

And yet—what more could he have done? He had no way of knowing that the Starfolk were going to search the Old Race site until their ship landed yesterday! When he did know, he signaled to all the psions he could reach who would otherwise have come here believing they were safe. He could not reach the Crowbs. . . .

He checked himself. This was self-justifying rubbish. It was not the fact that he had failed to warn them that made him guilty; it was that he had failed to look into Breckitt's foul mind long and deep enough to assess the tremendous anti-psion hysteria he planned to arouse, so that the Starfolk should see and be impressed by Breckitt's loyalty.

Sending the Crowbs, with Franek, through the city then . . .

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He had failed through weakness. True, it was always hard to probe the mind of a maniacal anti-psion cultist such as Breckitt, but he should have done it. Now, of course, Breckitt was thinking with delight of Hine's obvious illness, and wondering whether it would render him so sick he could not manage Irdus's affairs any more.

If it were only possible to tell the smug power-hungry fool that the Starfolk were not impressed by what he had done; without revealing his talents, that is. . . .

Full of chopped-off thoughts today, Hine told himself. Why hadn't he chopped off the idea that the Old Race site was a good hiding-place? What had given him the idea in the first place? What was it that made him even now think this was a place of safety?

He leaned on the half-buried snag of one of the ivory-white spiral towers that the Old Race had built on Regnier, and stared around him. The hosts—Irdus, with Hine himself in attendance as usual, but without his consort, and the three rivals Chem, Owitz and Breckitt—were gathered here with their retainers in a small cluster, gaudy in the sunlight. Those who mattered, and those to whom they had turned for advice, were out there crossing and re-crossing the site on foot, in cars and in floaters, using metal-detectors, sonar probes, crystal recorders, and every now and then, pausing and coming together so that a question could be put to the portable computers they had brought from the ship in a cushion-truck.

How long would it take them to reach a decision? Hine's head swam with the strain of worry. How long would it take them to find out that Jazey Hine had helped the Crowbs to move to Plainsedge years ago, had spoken for Crowb when he applied for a job with the Plains Conversion Commission, had visited the Crowbs on two occasions recently? Who would inform on him?

And who would be told first—Breckitt?

Now, the never-ceasing flood of disaster that was engulfing the mind of every psion, battering at the whole race except

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the rare psinuls, was blending in Jazey Hine's thoughts with the anticipation of his own torment and death.

The Old Race had not been quick and greedy, like humanity; they had been change-resistant, conservative, perhaps even cautious. Artifacts which to the casual eye looked as though they might have been made in the same batch sometimes dated out a thousand years apart. It was tempting to think that they used nothing perishable, but of course the soft or friable materials they left behind might have vanished more than fifty thousand years ago.

No one had ever found a skeleton or carapace to show their bodily form. Their associated animals had skeletons, so either they cremated their dead—or they did not die, which was ridiculous. In any case, they were a confident, capable species.

And they had left nothing, anywhere, more than what Jazey Hine could see now: the carefully-exposed stumps of spiral-fluted towers whose foundations were sunk all the way to the rock-layer, with non-native plants wreathing about them as on forty-odd other planets; traces of what men would call public works, like the mysterious cavern-tunnels in the rocks near the river, which might have been sluices for a power-plant; objects of indeterminate purpose which—if they ever “worked” in human terms—had long ago broken or worn out.

But they were here once! Jazey Hine shook his foggy head to clear it. Supposing the shout from the stars actually was a warning, how were those who heard it going to calm their minds enough to understand it before persecution drove them mad?

A mile and a half away, near the tide-mark and the edge of the salt-marshes where the Old Race had once experimented in their own counterpart of terraforming, the Starfolk had gathered in a group headed by Gustus Arraken, the new Zone Dominator, to put questions to Uner from the puppet government's Department of Archeology. Without shade, the nominal lords of Regnier shifted on their chairs all around

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Hine, and called on their attendants to fan them more assiduously. How it hurt them, these vainglorious fools, to be neglected by Arraken in favour of a mere scholar.

But Urner was an honest man within his limitations, and he knew about the Old Race on Regnier, and—since Earth had requested permission to send an expert of their own here—the Starfolk wanted hard facts. Hine could sense the balance in their minds between suspicion and acceptance. Despite their discomfort—far worse than Irdus's or Breckitt's—in their artificial supports clutching free-fall-weakened limbs, their hot-masks guarding against infection, the Starfolk were thinking coolly.

They too were afraid of going the way the Old Race went. Possibly the psionic shout was affecting them, too. Hine wondered when they would see the sense of employing psions rather than exterminating them as rivals, but fought the depressing divergence of his thoughts.

Now Arraken was moving toward a decision. It was possible that Earth had received word of the threat made to abandon Regnier, but unlikely, Regnier being completely dependent on the Starfolk for off-world communications. The request to send an expert here was high-order coincidence. The need to find out more about the Old Race was very real. The expert, when he arrived, could be watched closely enough to make sure he concentrated on his job and had no chance to pass on any news. The request had included facilities to send out material for examination and dating on Earth, but the material would travel in Starfolk ships to some frontier-zone planet and be trans-shipped. Care could be exercised . . .

Arraken rapped a question at Urner. "The Old Race must have had spaceships or something similar, yes? But nothing of the sort has ever been discovered?"

And the answer, colored by discomfort due to weak eyes and fierce sunlight: "No, we've never found any ships."

Suddenly, Arraken had reached his decision. Hine could not follow the process of intuition that led to it, he was too tired and ill. The expert from Earth was going to be al-

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lowed to come here and work with Urner. There was one more area of the site—that near the river, with the cavern-like tunnels—to be surveyed before the decision would be made public, but Arraken's mind was made up.

Hine's heart leapt. He had expected the Starfolk to do their investigating themselves, to try and find what had so much interested Earth. But this was wonderful! Somehow, during the Earthman's visit, he must find a chance to talk to him, appeal to him!

His mind was so full of possibilities that he barely noticed when Arraken's car returned to where Irdus and his party were waiting, a filter-screen darkening the air around the occupants. The Zone Dominator—a rangy man with the loose flesh characteristic of those who spent all their life in space—said something to a Regnier-born youth beside him, who repeated it over a loud-hailer.

"The Dominator is going to inspect the tunnels. He wishes you to accompany him."

Hine was jerked back to the present. Were there any traces over there of the intended occupancy by psion refugees? Had anyone misguidedly left supplies there in advance? He covered his agitation smoothly and stepped forward.

"We are honored that the Dominator desires our presence," he said, and caught a note of mental approval from Irdus, who was too fed up with waiting in the hot sun to have remembered to be equally polite. Grumbling in their minds, but keeping expressionless faces, the party of notables rose and moved in a straggling column behind Arraken's car. Other vehicles had proceeded direct to the mouth of the tunnels, and the computer-loaded cushion-truck was parked on the river's edge.

When the car stopped, the filter-screen was turned off, but Arraken did not get out. He was tired by the gravity, Hine noted with relief. He grunted at the youth beside him to call for Urner, who came hurrying over. Hine moved inconspicuously close, trying to peer into the dark tunnel-entry with eyes dazzled by the sunlight.

There *was* something lying in the mouth of the tunnel. He

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felt a pang of dismay. It looked like a shoe—a cheap shoe, torn on one side, and abandoned. Possibly it meant nothing. But then again, so many people had planned to hide here. . . .

Urner was saying something about how little he knew of the tunnels. "Featureless," he was explaining. "Simply burrows in the rock. Signs of the river having been diverted through them, and the diversions silted up over the millennia. We have never found anything of interest in them."

Arraken gave a nod. Eyes turned towards the tunnel. It was in Arraken's mind to walk through it, and if he did . . .

Hine was moving almost before he thought of it. He said, with a bow toward Arraken, "Tell the Dominator that the use to which the tunnel is currently put is uh—biological. It's a popular place for young couples to come to by night, because it's absolutely dark in there."

Arraken smiled patronizingly.

"Here's an example!" Hine said, and strode to the tunnel mouth. He bent to pick up the thing he had spotted—yes, a shoe, of the kind issued to schoolchildren, badly scuffed and torn and marked like all schoolchildren's property with the owner's name to distinguish it from a thousand identical ones.

When he read the name, he almost lost control of himself, but somehow he managed to turn, displaying the object so that Arraken could see what it was but could not see the name inside, and summoned all his energy to swing it at the end of his arm and send it arcing away toward the river.

It splashed into the water, and was gone.

"It's disgraceful that people should use this site as a rubbish-tip!" he said loudly. There was a pause, and he sought to probe Arraken's mind; Hine's relief was great as he sensed that the idea of investigating the tunnel no longer appealed to Arraken.

"Very well," the Dominator said abruptly. "The Earthman will be allowed to come here, but he will be carefully watched. We'll give you full instructions, Irdus, and you will see that you carry them out better than our instructions to find the criminals who destroyed my predecessor's ship!"

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His last words had the effect he wanted—they made the local lordlings squirm.

"You had better not try and talk with this Earthman about your plight," Arraken continued meditatively. "Don't plead for the charity of Earth if you force us to keep our word and withdraw our services from your planet.

"For if you *do*, we shall leave nothing but a smoking and barren desert for them to inherit from us, and the people of Regnier, including *you*," he stabbed his finger through the air toward Irdus, like a sword, "will be as irrevocably lost as the Old Race who once lived here."

He spoke to his driver, and his car spun around and was gone, leaving all of them visualizing the power that the Star-folk possessed in order to enforce their threat.

Except Hine.

He was wondering how—by what miracle—a shoe found here in the tunnel bore the name of Errida Crowb.

X

THE MAN who had delayed Errida by grasping her arm in order to complain about her bumping into him saved her life; it was because of him that when her parents caught up with Franek she was not close enough to be engulfed by the fury of the crowd.

She did not see what happened to her family, but the screams told her.

Her life was saved again, moments later, because among the bystanders there were a good many on whom Breckitt's hysterical anti-psion propaganda had not finished its poisonous work, and who were too squeamish to watch while three human beings were beaten and trampled to death. Several of those who tried to get away from the scene were young girls, and Errida was not noticed as she turned to flee.

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It was something for which she was going to be insanely ashamed of for the rest of her life—not staying to try and help. But the very nature of this journey she was making had focused her thoughts on self-preservation, and she recognized automatically that it was ridiculous to think of saving anyone from the rage of this mob . . . except herself. By staying, she might ensure her death as well; certainly she would witness the murder of her family.

And she thought, with horrible detachment, that that would break her mind forever.

There was one fixed idea in her mind overriding all else: the idea of getting through the city and making her way to the Old Race site. Now that Franek was dead, there was no selfish reason why the psions who were going there for refuge should take in a non-psion fugitive. Nonetheless, she might appeal to their pity, or if the worst came to the worst, she could blackmail them by threatening to expose Jazey Hine to the Starfolk. They were unable to kill or punish. They would have to take her in.

After that, thinking stopped. She remembered later only vague, separate images: a short street, corpse-white and ash-black, in which her shadow accompanied her on the walls of the buildings, falling behind and leaping ahead as she passed each standing lamp in turn; a group of three men all very drunk, who started to run after her uttering filthy invitations, until the drunkest of them fell down and they gave up the chase; a gathering of children abandoned by their parents in a residential area on the far side of the city, playing at psion-hunting with a stuffed doll as large as themselves.

The whole world had tilted lunatically on its axis, and the stars spun through idiot patterns in her personal sky.

She came through the alleys to the end of the city, and found herself on a track which she followed because it was there. It led her between wire fences, behind which surrealist stacks of baled goods and scrap for reclamation heaved up toward the moon. She passed an automatic factory where ignorant machines were humming to themselves, and came to the edge of the river. Animal-like snouts from the factory

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sucked in the water for cooling purposes, and she heard the suck-suck-thud-suck of a pump.

She turned the correct way by instinct. The track sloped up and down, and where it went down the ground was muddy; she tried not to leave prints there.

She went a long way on that narrow path beside the river.

At last her consciousness stirred again, and she realized that in fact the upper end of the tunnel she was seeking was now nowhere near the river; countless centuries of silting of old channels and eroding new ones had changed its course. She could not even remember how she had found the river—they had planned to approach the Old Race site from quite a different direction. The lower end of the tunnel, the entry on the side nearer the flat expanse of the salt-marshes, was on the riverside. She would have to locate her sanctuary by that.

Somehow, she managed it. Completely exhausted, her shoes in ribbons from the rocks and her feet burning-sore, her throat dry as a desert, she stumbled into the tunnel's mouth at last. She lost one of her shoes as she entered, and could not find the energy to turn back. When she was out of sight of the gray circle of dimness which hovered at the entrance, she fell face forward on the rock floor and began to weep.

Weeping, she fell into oblivion.

When the Starfolk came the next day to inspect the site and try and find what it was that had drawn Earth's attention, the noise of their vehicles and the sound of voices blended into the nightmares she was enduring. By sheer force of will, each time wakefulness threatened to deliver her from the horrors of imagination to the horrors of reality, she fought her way back; she could persuade herself that a dream was a dream, and knew on a level below consciousness that actuality would be worse.

But she had to waken eventually, and when she did, it was night again.

She was very cold, for a wind always blew in the tunnels, and she was thirstier than she had ever been before in her

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life. Carefully, not thinking of anything else, she got to her feet and limped back toward the tunnel mouth, remembering the river and wondering if the water would be safe to drink. She was going to drink anyway. She had to.

Without knowing why, she hesitated as she came to the entry. It was not so dark as the night before (*was* it so much later? that problem could wait), and when she was almost out of the tunnel she could see the ground before her.

Something should have been there . . .

Her shoe. Someone had found it. Someone had been here. Wildly she stared around, and sounds came to her—motors droning, men's voices calling in the distance, and irregular hammering. Also there were distant lights moving.

"Errida," a voice said, very low. "Errida, don't be afraid. I found your shoe. No one else knows you're here."

She shrank back against the rock wall. There was a noise of movement, and a dark figure came towards her; a man, carrying a large package.

"Yes, it's Jazey Hine," the voice said, colored by such weariness as Errida had never heard—but she had no pity for him now. "I know how you feel. I know about your family. I not only encouraged them to run into a trap. I suffered their deaths. I'm a psion, Errida. I've been punished for what I did."

There was a pause. Errida stared at the dark figure, her throat too dry to utter words to match the hate she felt. But of course words weren't necessary.

"I've brought food," Hine said pleadingly. He set down the case he was carrying. "Enough for several days. And drink, and a blanket and some new shoes—all here. Errida, they're going to let a cosmoarcheologist from Earth come to this site, and that's what all the noise is out there. I mean, they're putting up fences and alarms so that no one will trespass on the site any more. If they find me here, they'll kill me too, because I'm too weak to lie and twist and dodge their questions now. I've lied my way here because I know you were helpless, because I wanted to warn you what was going to happen. I'm going to try and get you away. But—"

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He broke off, and put his hands to his temples. He gulped once, as though punched in the belly, and spoke again in a tone of despair.

"Then don't trust me! I won't ask you to come away with me, ever! I'll leave you here to hide if you can! Just try not to hate me, even if I am a fool!"

He turned and stumbled blindly away. When he had melted into the darkness, Errida snatched up the package he had brought and retreated into the womb-like security of the tunnel.

As though the tunnel was focusing Errida's hatred on him, Hine reeled like a drunken man. He was trapped now. Errida's feelings towards him made it impossible to think of going back and persuading her to leave her hiding-place; any other psion would face the same wall of loathing, and probably be just as helpless. One could probe Breckitt's mind, at least a little, or the minds of the psion-hating Starfolk, because their conception of a psion was one stage removed from direct experience. In Errida's mind, though, there was personal disgust.

And he could trust no one to go to her in his place. Now that the Starfolk's threat had become common knowledge, there was a risk that any non-psion would let the urge to placate the masters override long-term hopes of being rescued by Earth.

Better the devil you know . . .

So he was doomed, sooner or later. They would come to rake over the Old Race site; they would find Errida, and her hate would drive her to name him.

I'm a dead man, Jazey Hine told himself. And, like a ghost, reading the minds of those who might have spotted him so that whenever they glanced in his direction he was out of sight, he slipped through the working-parties fencing off the area and made his hopeless way back to the city.

"They've agreed," Fold said. He glanced at Gascon in the chair facing him, noting how the young man's training had changed him externally as well as internally; he bore himself

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with impressive confidence, his gaze was steady, and when he spoke his voice rang with a new authority.

"That's very much quicker than we'd expected, isn't it?" Gascon noted.

Mallow, sitting a little aside from them, made a noise between a laugh and a wheeze. He said, "I guess I know why, as well."

Fold nodded. "They'll have wondered why we're so interested in Regnier, of all the Old Race planets. They may suspect that we know about their ultimatum, but they can't be sure, because our information—as you know—has come indirectly and is not much better than rumor. So they have realized the risk of abandoning the planet just as some crucial discovery is made there."

"The quick reply, then, you think," Gascon said, "is so that they'll have maximum time to pick my brains before their deadline expires."

Fold didn't smile. Looking straight at Gascon, he said, "After what's been done to you, *nobody* can pick your brains. Not even the Starfolk."

"Even psions," Mallow grunted, and shifted in his seat. "Not that that's connected with your training. . . . Harys, how are you going to get him to Regnier—is that settled?"

"Yes, they imposed conditions which suited me well enough." Fold used a switch on the arm of his chair to activate the nearest floor communicator panel, and a map of the systems between Earth and Regnier was projected above it. The others turned a little to look.

"One of our ships will take you to Mondelrey." Fold gestured at the map. "Logical. It's the only common trading-planet shared by us and the dependents of the Zone Dominator who services Regnier. One of their ships will be waiting, with—they were very frank about this—with an interrogation team headed by a man named Urner, supposed to be the leading expert on the Regnier sites. Did your instruction cover him?"

Gascon nodded. "He's a good classifier, but that's all. He was responsible for mapping the known sites on Regnier."

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"And if he passes this—this examination?" Mallow said.

"Passage to Regnier in one of their ships," Fold answered. "Alone. With a specified maximum quantity of chemical and radiological equipment, subject to inspection on Mondelrey by their people. They will provide manual laborers and earth-moving equipment as required."

"It seems like a very limited concession," Mallow frowned. "Will it be enough?"

Instead of answering, Fold cocked an eyebrow at Gascon, who replied with assurance. "Merely to visit an actual Old Race site, knowing what I do now, will be a mental stimulant. I expect to make some discovery of value even if they only let me walk about and scrabble with my bare hands."

"That may be so," Fold cut in. "But—no. You've got to tackle it with greater visible elaboration than that. I have the distinct impression that the Starfolk are jumpy. And I can only think of one reason."

"I was talking with Elze the other afternoon," Mallow said heavily. "Things are very bad in all the psions communities now. The impressions are getting stronger all the time; he said he's beginning to dream that he's dead. The connection between the psionic shout and Regnier seems to him more definite, and there's certainly some hint of a connection with the Old Race. But he can't explain what it is."

"Is there any known basis for believing that the Old Race had psionic gifts?" Fold demanded of Gascon, who hesitated.

"No basis for believing," he said at last. "Grounds for suspecting it. Even if they did, though, their gifts didn't save them."

"You know," Fold said thoughtfully, "it occurs to me to wonder. What *good* is a warning of the end of everything?" He slapped his thigh. "And what the hell can it *mean*?"

IX

IN SPITE of everything he had learned, in spite of his new self-confidence, Gascon was a little apprehensive as he was shown into the plain, concrete-walled hut. Those who were waiting for him looked up.

Starfolk.

Five black-clad man-shapes: tall, imposing, their torsos and limbs gleaming like forms of polished steel, their eyes burning above blank concealing masks; stern in attitude, secure in knowledge of power. Men of metal, whose minds must be machine-cool, incisive as diamond, swift as light.

Gascon paused in the doorway and drew a deep breath. He looked from the five Starfolk to the man who sat with them at the table, dressed in plain, drab garments, his maskless face revealing traces of nervousness. He seemed to fit in with this squalid world of Mondelrey, which so far Gascon had barely glimpsed. This would be Urner, the cosmoarcheologist from Regnier. He was here because the Starfolk were dependent on him; grubbing in ruins on the surface of a planet was a task beneath their self-esteem. They leaned on him, a middle aged, unimpressive, ordinary man.

This knowledge thrust them into perspective in Gascon's mind. The impassive masks were their shield against airborne bacteria; the sheaths covering their limbs were props, because they were unused to the pull of a planet's gravity.

Weaklings. They would retreat to their ships as to wombs, for protection from the crudeness of the cosmos.

Gascon glanced at the man who was waiting in the doorway behind him, the young spacecrew officer who had escorted him from the ship, and gave him a confident nod of dismissal. The door closed, and Gascon moved to take the chair which had been set in the middle of the dull room, facing the table where the five Starfolk and Urner were ranked together.

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He didn't say anything when he was seated, but let his eyes range along the top of the table, identifying file-playbacks, crystal recordings prepared for use, and a device set before each of the interrogators which he did not recognize—a monitor, perhaps, a scanner, a semantic analyzer, a lie-detector, anything.

It didn't matter to him now what it was.

The man seated next to Urner spoke abruptly. He said, "I am Zone Dominator Arraken."

"I'm Philip Gascon."

He made his voice match the other's exactly in tone and inflection, but looked at Urner as he spoke. The fact that the Starfolk were relying on an inferior for expert guidance was a potentially useful lever . . . or was it? With regret he saw signs of shock on Urner's face. Perhaps it was too much to hope that a government—and hence indirectly a Starfolk—appointee would have resisted indoctrination about his masters' superiority.

Arraken, on the other hand, showed no displeasure. He went on, "It's been represented to us that if you're permitted to visit the Old Race sites on Regnier you expect to make some crucial discoveries about their disappearance. It's a matter of common knowledge that there are comparatively few Old Race sites on planets in Earth's sphere of influence. So such a request is superficially reasonable. Why Regnier in particular?"

Not a man to waste time on irrelevancies, this Arraken! Gascon sat back in the chair and crossed his legs.

"One of the few things we have been able to establish about the Old Race is an approximate date-chart for the founding of some of their colonies. Work on the subject on Earth, where we have to concentrate on the synthetic aspects as we have no on-planet sites, indicates a probable time-and-distance relationship which refers to a population movement outwards from a point in the neighborhood of Regnier. With respect to Urner here," he nodded at the cosmoarcheologist, who looked startled and then suddenly pleased at being recognized, "nobody with adequate general background data

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has yet tackled the Regnier sites. We want to see if they fit the pattern we're evolving, and if they do so confirm our hypothesis we may have an indication of their area of origin—"

"You're talking of origins?" cut in Arraken. "It was stated to us that their disappearance, not their origin, concerned you."

"We reason that an expanding culture will most likely have retreated to its starting-point on suffering a disaster of the kind that seems probable. I have all the data with me, and if you like I'll bring them in for your inspection." Gascon was looking forward to that; he, Scannell, and a team of experts in symbolic logic had spent much effort on doctoring the data, and he was certain it would pass any inspection.

Urner leaned forward. He didn't ask Arraken's permission to speak, Gascon noted. He said, "I've always inclined to the periodic-wave view myself. The anomalous short-occupation sites closer to Earth, where the Old Race had barely arrived before they took their leave, fit in well with the time-scale of the longer-established colonies."

"Not only that," Gascon agreed, "but we're getting indications of a succession of culture-keys in the shape of type artifacts. Have any blue-gray Class Thirteens been found on Regnier?"

"Not to my knowledge," Urner answered.

That was hardly surprising. These curious pear-like ceramics were only known from two planets, both very close to Earth. "There's a hypothesis that the replacement of Class 551 by Class 13 marked a new phase in Old Race culture, which up to now has appeared so incredibly conservative. We anticipate finding a series of similar replacements—"

He became deliberately technical, and within five minutes he had lost Urner completely. The cosmoarcheologist from Regnier simply sat there, eyes wide, nodding occasionally, while Gascon ranged over the entire complex of his subject: from the route of the Old Race's wave of expansion he passed to radiochemical analysis of artifacts of common provenance, which suggested a corresponding study of compara-

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tive anatomy in the Old Race's associated animal species and revealed that there must have been cross-communication because adaptations found valuable on one planet could be shown by documented evidence to have been bred into lines six systems or more distant. This would lead to tentative metabolic analysis and hence to a tentative specification for the element-distribution on their planet of origin, suggesting a modification of the periodic-wave picture of their expansion, in that the wave folded back occasionally as the Old Race became able to terraform planets that had previously been beyond their powers. Not only that, but it was possible to reverse the effects of age and exposure on many artifacts and to deduce a consistent range of color-perceptions which curiously enough omitted yellow and part of the green spectrum, leading to speculation about their possession of two or more sets of radiation sensors—the first well-grounded theory about the Old Race's bodily-form apart from a rough idea of their metabolism. . . .

Even to himself, Gascon was awe-inspiring. The promise Fold had made—that he would become the best-trained cosmoarcheologist ever—had not been made lightly. He had been the reason for applying to the study of what was known about the Old Race the combined computing-power of Earth. It was almost a century since such a gigantic study of a single subject had been made; a century and a half since so much had been done in cosmoarcheology. He remembered Fold muttering something about redoubling the computer capacity if evidence became freely available from Starfolk space, but that was not his concern.

He had said to Fold in his first flush excitement, "But I never imagined that we knew so *much* about the Old Race!"

And the Executive had answered absently, "It's been a problem for a dozen generations, trying to find out just what we do know."

And it had been done so quickly, in a matter of days.

He talked non-stop for almost four hours, with occasional questions from Urner, and the Starfolk sat like statues, listening. At last he paused, sensing a change in Urner's man-

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ner, and Arraken—whose attention had not wandered even when Gascon was talking of matters that he himself as a student could not have understood a short time before—looked at Urner. He said, "Is he what he claims to be?"

Urner flung up his hands. He said, "I've spent my life grubbing in a dirty corner, and I've just been shown the stars!"

He leapt to his feet, and with a violent motion swept aside the file play-backs and other equipment on the table. "Everything I have here is rubbish—out of date, or ignorant nonsense! And this man hasn't even *seen* an Old Race site!"

"Sit down," Arraken said coldly, and Urner remembered where he was. Suddenly frightened, he obeyed, and Gascon heard his teeth chatter in dismay at his own outburst.

Arraken's voice continued silkily, "The fact that what you have is rubbish: is that due to having been prevented from studying your subject properly?"

Urner licked his lips. Gascon had not moved, but he sensed the tension in the air and reacted to it in his mind, coming alert with all his sharpened faculties.

"Uh—no!" Urner whispered at last, having decided that to say the opposite would be an indirect complaint against the Starfolk as effective lords of Regnier.

"Then it's due to your own incompetence," Arraken snapped, and the anger that had been rising unperceived inside him boiled into his voice. "You might as well not have come here. I see no reason why we should trouble to take you back. Get out."

Urner's face turned gray. His mouth worked, and hissing noises that might have been a plea for mercy came out, but he had no voice to make them comprehensible. Arraken continued looking at him. Very slowly Urner got to his feet, pushed back his chair, never taking his eyes from the Zone Dominator, walked around the end of the table, still gazing like an obsessive at the masked face; suddenly broke, burst into tears, and ran through the door sobbing.

There was an itch of sweat on Gascon's body. He dared not to do or say anything. Urner's crime was unforgivable—

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he had made the Starfolk seem fools for relying on him, and if Arraken saw him again he was liable to die for his shortcomings.

"Now we are free of that ignoramus," Arraken said, turning to Gascon again, "we can get somewhere. We Starfolk have never been attracted by the idea of burrowing in the mud, and clearly one of the reasons why the Old Race decayed will have been because they clung to planets when they should have freed themselves of dependence on an uncontrolled environment as we have done. Consequently, I do not pretend to have followed all of what you said."

Gascon did not react.

"However, the fate of the Old Race is certainly something to be investigated, and since your tastes lie there we have no hesitation in taking you to Regnier. You'll be more productive than that moron Urner, obviously. You will of course share all your findings with us, and anything you wish to have examined on Earth will have to be crated and shipped by us."

Gascon was experiencing a curious blend of astonishment and relief. He had expected the process of establishing his authority to take several days. He said, "Yes, I understand that. You explained your conditions when agreeing to receive me here on Mondelrey."

Arraken's forehead, visible above his mask, drew together at the junction of the eyebrows in a deep-ridged frown. He gestured to his four companions, and they rose to their feet with a faint whirl from their motor-assisted supports. Two of them went to the door and took positions on either side of it, like guards, and the other two moved toward Gascon's chair. The one on his left drew something from a thigh-pouch: a mask, with a cylinder of anesthetic gas attached.

"What's the point of this?" Gascon said in sudden dismay.

"Another condition." Arraken seemed to have recovered the composure disturbed by his rage at Urner. "You are not so wrapped up in your professional work that you've overlooked the hostility your people feel against the Starfolk, I'm sure. It's almost without precedent for us to permit an Earth-born voyager aboard one of our ships; however, you've made

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a good case for yourself, and we're willing to accept you. As inert cargo, and under *no* other circumstances."

Gascon glanced from the mask and its bearer to Arraken again. He said, "But this is ridiculous! My equipment has to be—"

"You heard what I said!" Arraken's domineering voice cut through Gascon's words. "If you wish to go to Regnier, you go in my ship; if you travel in my ship, you accept my conditions. And I say I will not have an Earthman aboard except in a state of unconsciousness!"

Gascon made to get to his feet. Before the movement was completed, the man with the mask had slapped it over his face and the gas had hissed from the cylinder.

There was oblivion.

XII

FOR ALL their self-appointed superiority, Gascon reflected grimly, the Starfolk appeared to regard a single unarmed Earthman as more dangerous than a fusion bomb. Their precautions had been direct and thorough, and showed no signs of being diminished. He had no idea how the crew of the Earth ship, who had taken him to Mondelrey, liked the idea of the Starfolk moving him to Regnier in a drugged coma, but they hadn't stopped it happening—probably they had instructions from Fold not to object to any conditions the Starfolk imposed.

But the situation called for all his trained patience.

The only important Old Race site on Regnier was the one near the human capital city. That was standard-pattern. By temperament, or because rapid transportation—of an unknown kind—was available, the Old Race had favored small

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communities. They would found one-large "town" to begin with, where they undertook their equivalent of public works and adapted their imported flora and fauna, and grew accustomed to their new environment. Elsewhere, they would leave very few traces; they would rely presumably on solar or thermal-gradient power. They would choose to settle on coasts or islands rather than continental heartlands, and eventually—they would vanish.

The Starfolk had acted with brutal literalness. They had brought him to the main site, which they had fenced securely against intrusion. There was a small house for his headquarters—apparently built specially for that purpose. Every day, a gang of a hundred or more laborers marched out from the city to work on Gascon's instructions, headed by junior members of the languishing government department of which Urner had been in charge. The Starfolk had kept their word and abandoned Urner on Mondelrey, and that act had so terrified these underlings that they could barely bring themselves to look at Gascon.

There was adequate equipment: a small laboratory adjoined his living-quarters, and the Starfolk seemed able to meet his demands. Personal services were attended to. But there was no hiding the fact that his status approximated a prisoner's. Except when he was left alone for the night, he was watched—for a short time after his arrival, by one of the Starfolk, who clearly hated to be on a planet's surface, but thereafter by an ill-looking, nervous, but extremely intelligent native of the planet whom he understood to be Overlord Irdus's private aide. He had been missing the past two days, presumably ill.

He was not the only nervous person Gascon had met. The obvious explanation for the Starfolk's absurd precautions was that they were scared, and whereas one could account for the natives' tension brought on by the Starfolk's ultimatum, this did not apply to the Starfolk. The psionic shout, to which Gascon was immune, was taking its toll.

One evening, restless, he wandered out of the little house and strolled toward the river. He had been wondering about

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the chance of getting in and out of the site that way. He was going to have to see something of Regnier apart from these few square miles, and talk with a few more people before he made his next report. His first one was waiting to be delivered by the Starfolk now—although, of course, they had no idea of the fact. It was in a crate which the Starfolks themselves had supplied and had inspected minutely as the artifacts Gascon wanted to send to Earth were packed inside. It had passed the inspection and was sealed ready for dispatch.

The message, recorded on the crystal structure of an unimportant Class 75 artifact, by an improvement on an Old Race technique with which the Starfolk were unfamiliar, was largely an account of his difficulties. The next one would have to be somewhat better—still, even if he couldn't report on the present situation, he was doing valuable work on the archeological side.

He paused as he came in sight of the river, its surface glinting a little under the moon. A shiver passed down his spine. It was still awesome to think that he was standing where the Old Race had passed; to realize that from here, as the evidence already showed, they had moved restlessly on toward Earth; that but for their mysterious disappearance they might have encountered man's ape-like progenitors. . . .

Suddenly he froze. Ahead of him, a black silhouette was moving on the bank of the river. A man, moving cautiously, carrying something.

Softly, Gascon crept to intercept him.

Jazey Hine felt ahead ahead of him for the mental presence of Errida, hiding in her tunnel. It was a miracle how she had eluded discovery now that the site was daily alive with laborers, Starfolk, and archeologists. Still, more cunning than a wild beast, she had survived. Since she was the sister of a dead psion, they were looking for her, but not here.

It had taken Hine a long time to realize that his forebodings of doom were colored by the never-ceasing psionic shout of disaster that daily grew fiercer—now, it seemed to echo through the galaxy like a vast gong. The strain of fighting it

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was making him ill, and it was reported that undercover psions elsewhere on Regnier were going insane from it. He had found a last reserve of mental resistance, born of hatred of defeat, and he was still alive, still scheming.

When the Starfolk assigned to supervise the Earthman Gascon grew restive, Hine had seen his chance to lie and cheat his way into the responsibility of taking the job over. Arraken was no fool, but his assessment of Hine's relationship with Irdus made him believe that Hine was afraid of Regnier being abandoned, lest he should be destroyed by the mob with his master. It was ordered that Hine should watch Gascon, and Hine had almost sobbed with relief. Contact with the Earthman was his last hope.

But the Earthman proved to be a psinul.

Unable to read Gascon's mind and establish whether he was truly tolerant of psions, Hine had lacked the courage so far to make an overt approach to him. The dilemma was sapping his vitality; the past two days, he had had to hide, pleading illness—and he wasn't lying, the illness was in his mind.

Yet there remained Errida, skulking in darkness. He had contrived to pass close to the tunnel where she hid during the day, and knew that her first blind loathing of him was fading, so that his hope of getting her away had returned. He had also smuggled more food and drink to her, not seeing her, but leaving it where she would find it before the workers came in next morning. He was on another such errand now, keeping a psionic watch on the perimeter guards as he made his way up the riverbank, the only place where he could pass the fences. Anything to show he wanted to help Errida, anything to make her hatred lessen. . . . How paradoxically ridiculous it was that when the fate of at least one planet, and possibly of mankind, was at stake, he was reduced to currying the favor of a girl in a rock!

Errida must be asleep. He could barely sense—

"Why, it's you, Hine. What are you doing?"

The voice, low and level, struck Hine like a blackjack. Convulsively, he tossed the package into the river, and as the

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splash sounded he spun to look with his eyes where his psionic sense had reported nothing. Of course. Gascon. A psinul. And that oversight had trapped him.

Gascon was standing quite openly, where Hine might have seen him at any time, a look of puzzlement discernible on his face. He did not look at all menacing.

Hine drew a deep breath, and an ice-cold determination took hold of him. He was tired of waiting. He was tired of fighting the psionic cry of disaster that assailed him. He was tired of wondering whether Earth would help Regnier if the Starfolk abandoned it. He was never going to find out anything unless he asked.

He passed a weary hand across his face. Somewhere at the back of his mind he noted that Errida had been awakened by the splash in the river, but that was of no importance. Let her creep out if she wanted to, provided she didn't show herself.

He said, "Gascon, I want to talk to you. You're my only hope."

The Earthman hesitated for a moment. Then he shrugged and nodded, and glanced around for a place to sit down. "The house they supplied for me is full of spy devices," he said. "Here is probably as safe as anywhere." Choosing a flat rock, he sat down and leaned forward, elbows on knees. "What's it about? The threat of the Starfolk to stop servicing Regnier?"

"You know about that? Who told you?" Hine whispered.

"Then it's true. We had rumors. What's the reason—is it true that the Zone Dominator's ship was sabotaged because a psion got aboard? And how *did* a psion get aboard, anyway?"

Hine felt a dizzying surge of relief. Clearly Gascon knew infinitely more than he had dared hope. Perhaps his presence here was no coincidence, then. He let down all his barriers of caution and began to talk in a wild flood of words.

"Earth has got to help us! The Starfolk always keep their genetic-pool planets dependent—we're populated to twice the level our own resources would permit, because they sup-

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ply us with drugs, diet-supplements, agrobiological aids, most of our high-order technical requirements—you see, they've artificially limited our technical expansion. . . . Unless Earth steps in when they stop servicing us, half of us will starve and there'll be riots and war and who knows what! The Overlord is a puppet, Chem and Owitz are jealous and so is Breckitt, they're all capable men but the moment the Starfolk go they'll lose their hold on the people, the government will collapse, and they'll be destroyed.

"The roots of it are present already. Breckitt's been encouraging anti-psion feeling to raise his stock with the Starfolk, and it backfired when Hollur Starkness got aboard Chalkind's ship and—"

"Hollur Starkness?" Gascon cut in. "The psion we heard rumours about? What was he *doing* in the ship?"

Hine licked his lips. "Oh, this is so complicated—playing so many ends against the middle. Look, the Starfolk only accept spaceborn children into their own hierarchy. They take young people off their genetic-pool planets but they never class them as true Starfolk. They use them for menial tasks and breeding, and there's a fund of disaffection there. On Starfolk worlds, the only way psions can survive is by building up an undercover organization. On some worlds there aren't any—worlds like Fairhaven, where Starkness was making for, to help establish one and save the lives of children the Starfolk might discover and put to death. A very few crew members of starships hate the Starfolk so much they will help to smuggle psions, but it's a desperately dangerous job negotiating with them, and sometimes they let facts slip. That's what must have happened here—you see, they have no friends aboard the ships except their own kind, so these oppressed unaccepted menials, studs, broods, whatever you call them, seek the company of people on the planets they call at. The person arranging Starkness's trip talked with someone else on board, who talked with someone in the city, who decided to strike a blow against a psion and the Starfolk both, and sabotaged the ship. Who knows how? I don't."

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"So that was how I managed to sneak up on you without your noticing," Gascon mused.

"What?" Hine jerked upright.

"You're a psion, aren't you? How else would you know that the man's name was Hollur Starkness, or the details of the smuggling operation? And I'm a psinul, as you certainly know."

Hine sat sweating, hands clenched, terrified.

Gascon hardly noticed. A scheme was forming in his mind, revolving around the fact that a psion had managed to—not just survive on Regnier, but—establish himself at the very heart of the puppet government. It *might* be made to work.

"What do you make of this psionic shout?" he said abruptly.

Hine blinked at him. "What?"

"This—this warning signal all psions are sensing now. A warning that seems to portend the end of everything." Gascon stared. "You do sense it, don't you?"

"Yes," Hine said. "Yes, it's unendurable. End of everything describes it. It has something to do with Regnier, something to do with the Old Race, and it's all blended in with impossible concepts of going home, of sanctuary and security. . . ." He shook his head. "It's beginning to drive us insane."

Gascon was silent for a moment. Then, with apparent irrelevance, he said, "What would happen if you were to disappear?"

The strain of talking to a psinul, on top of his already exhausted state and the emotional catharsis of the disclosures he had made so blindly, had dazed Hine. He had to struggle to formulate his answer.

"I don't know. Irdus—I guess he'd fall, because I prop him up. And . . ." His voice tailed away. "How did you know I was thinking of going into hiding?" he said at last.

"I didn't, but it seems like a sensible idea," Gascon murmured. "Before you can let any of your fellow-psions know as much about me as you've learned."

XIII

HER DAYS and nights of skulking in the tunnel, desperate to escape notice, had trained Errida in animal arts; she could breathe so softly she barely heard herself, she could move with fear-inspired patience so that her footfalls were soundless. And she had learned to sleep briefly and lightly, alert for any unfamiliar noise.

The splash of something falling into the river outside brought her instantly awake. Her fear and hatred of Hine had faded over the past few days; her crazed determination to stay where she was forever had given way to rational thought. She knew Hine had come back, because she found provisions left for her. Next time he came here, she wanted to speak to him, and she crept out of the tunnel to see if he was there.

She did not hear everything that was said when he met and spoke to the stranger she found to be the cosmoarcheologist from Earth, but she heard a good deal, for the night was quiet and she managed to get quite near. She wondered if Hine—sensed her presence. He showed no sign of doing so, but that was to be expected. He seemed very tired and ill.

At the end of the conversation, when he collapsed, she almost cried out in horror. But she controlled herself. Later, when the Earthman moved off carrying Hine over his shoulders like a sack, she crept after him.

It was clever of the Starfolk to handle him like a fusion bomb, Gascon reflected with grim humor. Because he was at least as dangerous, and probably more so. The chance of sending an Earthman to a Starfolk-dominated world had been too good to miss, and Fold had given orders for every possible technique to be employed in creating a secret agent to

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exploit the opportunity. If it became necessary, Gascon—naked and empty-handed—could escape from any conceivable captivity, could mow down armies, could survive without food or drink in a secret hiding-place until the armadas of Earth came to Regnier after the departure of the Starfolk. If they didn't go after all, there were alternative schemes. So long as they did not simply propose to kill him, he would last.

He had never done anything like this before, had never imagined himself doing it. But now when it was necessary, he moved with precision and confidence. Under Fold's direction he had been trained in the analysis of situations, and had acquired an Executive's gift for extracting patterns of action.

Jazey Hine was going to disappear, like a conjuring trick, in so barefaced and obvious a fashion that it would be weeks or months before anyone seriously considered the possibility; by then, he would be on Earth. And what Fold would be able to do with first-hand information from a psion who had eluded the Starfolk so cleverly that he had become aide to the Overlord beggared imagining. This was why a psinul was essential as an agent on Regnier—because a psion from Regnier was wanted on Earth, and not even other psions could be allowed to know what had become of him. Had Fold told him that and left the memory as a post-hypnotic injunction? Or had he deduced it for himself? He didn't know and didn't care.

But the psionic warning had something to do with Regnier, and a psion from that planet was going to Earth.

No overt physical changes had been made in Gascon's body. The risk of the Starfolk making a radiological examination was too great. But the freezing-in of crystalline resonances left no conspicuous traces, and that was something the scientists of Earth had brought to a fine art. To impress his report on that insignificant artifact now awaiting shipment, he had needed only to handle the object and wait, pressing in coded patterns with his fingertips.

He picked up a piece of slate-like stone from the ground

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near him. Any flat, rigid material would do. He held it between his hands, and faced it toward Hine.

It took him about half a minute to get the frequencies right, and then the blended sub- and ultrasonics resonating out of the bones of his hands began to dephase Hine's cortical rhythms. An increase in the sleep-associated component, and he was collapsing sideways.

Gascon put the piece of slate down and lifted the unconscious psion. He was quite light, wasted by nervous tension. His metabolic rate would be high, as with all psions. Walking quickly but quietly over the rough ground, Gascon did some mental calculations.

As he had told Hine, the house the Starfolk had provided for him was full of spy devices. He had not told Hine that he had immediately taken steps to neutralize them, using some recording crystals and a few yards of invisibly-fine wire. If he wanted to go about some business undisturbed, he could tread on a buried contact outside or inside the house and switch in highly convincing recordings to report innocuous movements.

It was quite dark near the house. The Starfolk dared not be too open in their spying on him, because they doubtless hoped to lull him into betraying himself if he was not what he pretended. Confidently, Gascon carried Hine into the house, setting the misleading recordings to play as he did so.

He spent a quarter-hour working with some of the chemical supplies he had brought with him, and another ten minutes with Hine. Then he left the house, carrying not only Hine but a good deal of equipment.

The fact that the guards around the site were there to prevent the local people getting in rather than to stop Gascon getting out simplified his next step. Presumably, the Starfolk envisaged the natives going to Gascon, and begging him to invoke Earth's help against their overlords; the Starfolk had no illusions about their dependent peoples' love for them. Hine had managed to get in because he could sense psionically when the coast was clear, but no ordinary man would have managed it so easily.

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Awaiting delivery to the starport in the morning, the crates of artifacts were piled close to the main gate through which the laborers filed in daily. There were two watchposts nearby, equipped only with searchlights and rather ineffective infrared equipment—as Hine had pointed out earlier, the Starfolk artificially depressed the technical level of their genetic-pool worlds.

There were two guards in each watchpost, idly talking as Gascon came up. He set Hine down behind a shrubby bush and selected from what he had brought with him a parabolic mirror that formed part of a small laboratory arc-melter. He would have to directionalize the vibrations with which he attacked the guards; though they were looking away from him, he could not hope to come close enough otherwise.

They were seated, which saved them from falling down noisily when they became unconscious. With luck, they would not even realize they had missed the five or ten minutes it would take Gascon to complete his work.

Directly, when the guards were asleep, he went to the stack of crates close by. He had assessed Hine's weight while carrying him, and knew that one of the crates contained roughly the same total mass. He found it on the end of a line, which was a further fortunate break. Picking it up, he hurried with it to the shelter of the bush where he had left Hine.

Maybe the Starfolk had given him this idea. If so, he was duly grateful.

The crate was welded and sealed with a simple crystal resonance pattern. He could have duplicated it to within one percent with his bare hands, but he wanted to be more cautious than that. He recorded the original pattern on an empty crystal he had brought for the purpose, and then fatigue-fractured the welds around the lid of the crate with ultrasounds.

Out with the artifacts. A list and complete description was fastened inside the lid—Fold would have the wit to get Scannell to fake replacements if necessary when the time came for the consignment to be returned. And in with Hine, folded over like an unborn child.

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A small power-source; an oxygenator-nutrefier which Gascon had been given in case he had to go into hiding after detection by the Starfolk; a mass-stimulator intended for use in the event that he wanted to conceal a heavy object inside a lightweight Old Race artifact, which was not really intended to cope with an object the size of a man, but which would do the job for a while at any rate; lastly, a metabolic-rate reducer, fastened to the nape of Hine's neck with a piece of tape and using subsonics to flatten out the master rhythms of the medulla. That also was for use if Gascon had to hide. All these items had been openly revealed to the Starfolk, because they were equally usable for the study of Old Race artifacts.

The crate was thickly insulated. The chance of the faint, faint vibrations emitted by the metabolic-rate reducer being detected was minuscule. Gascon nodded, satisfied. He had had to guess at Hine's actual metabolic rate, but he had erred on the safe side, and the psion would certainly not return to normal wakefulness until he was either aboard the ship between Mondelrey and Earth, or on Earth itself.

He closed the lid and picked up his arc-melter to replace the mirror. He glanced around cautiously before putting on the power, because there was bound to be some stray light no matter how carefully he controlled the beam. The guards were still limp, and no one else was in view as far as could be seen.

Rapidly he re-welded the lid of the crate, waited for the metal to cool, and then restored the original vibration pattern from the recording. He took the precaution of wiping the crystal afterwards. The Starfolk might wonder why he had a copy of that particular pattern.

Then he carried the crate back to its original place at the end of the line.

He woke the guards up as fast as possible, so that it would seem to them as though they had let their attention wander and nothing more, and stole silently through the night back to his house. There, he put away his equipment, copying exactly the former layout, except where he had to conceal the

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missing items now in the crate with Hine, and went to bed. The misleading recordings were interconnected to provide a consistent blend of fact and fiction; once safely lying down, he could wait until they reached this point and switch them off.

When he had done so, he went peacefully to sleep.

It was not yet dawn when there were slamming noises all around him. He jerked awake at the same moment as the door of his bedroom was opened and the lights came on. Two armed policemen strode into the room, with others visible behind them. From the sounds outside, the house was surrounded.

"Get your clothes on and come with us," one of the policemen instructed him.

"What the hell is this about?" Gascon demanded.

"Don't argue—just move."

There was nothing to do but obey. Wondering whether he was having a nightmare, Gascon dressed hastily. Then he was roughly urged outside, into an official car, and the driver started in the direction of the main gate.

They *couldn't* have discovered Hine!

They hadn't. Not yet. But at the gate, which was open, there was a flood of brilliant light and many people. Standing near the rows of crates was a man Gascon recognized: Breckitt, whom Hine had named as chief rival of Overlord Irdus. A white-faced girl, who could scarcely be more than fifteen, her eyes swollen with crying and clothes filthy with long wearing, stood next to him; her wrists were chained and the other end of the chain was held by a gross pudding-faced woman in uniform. They were watching intently as a gang of four men armed with power-saws methodically cut open the lids of the crates, one by one.

In pure astonishment, Gascon wondered once more if he was dreaming. He could not conceive of any way in which he could have been so swiftly found out.

He was forced out of the car and urged toward Breckitt, his escorts announcing volubly that they had brought him.

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Breckitt answered brusquely that he had eyes in his head, and that they had better wait for Arraken's arrival—or for proof of the girl's accusations.

The girl? Gascon, standing numbly between the policemen, stared at her. How could she be connected with this? She was barely more than a child.

There was a cry from the men working on the crates, and they put aside their saws. The lid of the crate in which Hine was hidden was thrown back, and Breckitt strode forward to stare down with satisfaction at what was revealed. After a moment, he called for Gascon to be brought.

"Well?" he said. "How do you explain this Old Race relic?"

The surprise and disbelief which Gascon showed was so transparently genuine that for a moment Breckitt hesitated, and in that moment a car came screaming up the road from the direction of the spaceport, bringing a sleepy and angry group of Starfolk, ill-tempered because of the time they were having to spend on-planet.

Fawning, Breckitt went to meet them, and as they heard what he had to say Gascon, also listening, chilled with dismay.

The girl had watched everything, and had told all she knew.

XIV

WITH PART of his mind he pieced together the facts; with another part, he cast wildly around for a course of action. The girl was a friend of Jazey Hine's. She had been hiding here on the Old Race site, for what seemed like a fantastically long time. She had followed when Gascon was taking Hine to hide

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him in the crate. The guards had found her trying to identify the crate, and had beaten the story out of her. She had no love for Breckitt or the Starfolk, and none for any Earthman either. She had been trying to rescue Hine, no more.

And she must have moved like a shadow, because Gascon had had no inkling of her presence.

Will ill-concealed joy, that Gascon interpreted as delight at seeing Irdus's right-hand man involved in what appeared to be an attempt to deceive the Starfolk, Breckitt explained, gestured, and amplified the girl's story. Sour-faced, the four Starfolk listened for a while; then with abrupt impatience they cut short his flow of words. The one who appeared to be the leader—a man named Pathue, whom Gascon had met while the crates were being prepared and sealed for shipment—barked at him.

"It sounds too stupid for the Earthman to have had a hand in it! The crate was tamper-proof—I put a vibration seal on the lid myself, and if it had been opened we'd have spotted it before it was put aboard the ship. Why didn't you wait till we got here? Now your idiots have sawed it open, we can't check on the seal, can we? You didn't think of that, did you? Like all you planet-side idiots, you rushed straight ahead without stopping to figure things out first. Get that girl over here!"

Breckitt blanched, but obeyed. Gascon felt his hopes rise again slightly.

Questioning the girl turned out to be useless—she stared numbly at Pathue for a while, and at last burst into tears. Pathue gave a grunt of disgust, told the uniformed woman to take the girl away, and turned to Gascon.

"Well? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Gascon had been going over in his mind a number of possible lies. The flaw in most of them was the fact that his interference with the spy devices in his house might be discovered—still, that was a chance he had to take. These Starfolk were badly shaken by the barefaced attempt to smuggle Hine off the planet, especially since it was pure accident the plan had failed.

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He said, "I don't know who the girl is—"

Breckitt interrupted. "She's the sister of the psion who was lynched the night Arraken first arrived here as Dominator!"

"Then she's probably lying," Pathue said coldly, for the pleasure of seeing Breckitt react. To Gascon he added, "Go on."

"Of course she's lying," Gascon said shortly. "So far I haven't got a clear idea of what's supposed to have happened, but apparently Hine wanted to get off Regnier—he tried to sound me out once or twice about my helping him, but it's not part of my job to interfere in local politics, and it was stupid for me to risk my chance of working here. He seemed to be scared of something."

Glancing at Breckitt, he went on, "Maybe you could suggest why he seemed scared of staying here?"

Breckitt didn't answer. Pathue, however, apparently jumped to the conclusion Gascon was hoping for—the idea that Hine was afraid of being dragged down if the Starfolk withdrew support from Regnier's puppet overlord.

"You said the girl was supposed to be a friend of Hine's?" he challenged Breckitt.

Breckitt bit his lips. "She claims to be," he agreed. "That, if anything, is likely to be a lie, though."

One of the men who had brought Hine out of the crate came over to him, carrying the life-sustaining equipment Gascon had put in. "We found all this," he muttered to Breckitt.

Before anyone else could comment, Gascon spoke up. He said, "Some of that looks like mine. I've mislaid a few items of apparatus since Hine was given the job of liaison with me."

"We're not going to get anywhere," Pathue said harshly. "Not till we wake up Hine. You!" He addressed the man holding Gascon's equipment. "Is Hine asleep, or in a coma, or what?"

"Why—uh—he's dead, isn't he?" the man replied blankly. "His heart isn't beating and he doesn't seem to be breathing."

In the background the girl sobbed loudly. The uniformed woman she was chained to snapped at her to be quiet.

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"Dead?" Pathue echoed. "Then what killed him?"

The other looked at Breckitt as though asking guidance, and shrugged. Pathue waited for an answer; when none came, he went over to where Hine had been stretched out on the ground, followed by the other three Starfolk. They moved with ragged nervousness, and Gascon wondered whether there had perhaps been an increase in the intensity of the psionic shout he would never be able to hear. It would take something of that nature to make Starfolk so edgy—that, or a deep-rooted sense of the subtlety of Earthmen.

He was speculating on the value of a psychological weapon of such a kind when Pathue, after staring at Hine's motionless body for a while, grunted and rolled it over with a shove of one foot.

"What's that thing taped to his neck?" he said. "Get it off and have a look at it."

The man with the life-sustaining equipment thrust his burden into the hands of someone else nearby and dropped to one knee beside Hine. Gascon watched closely as the metabolic-rate reducer was handed to him, but once it was removed Hine would recover rapidly, his present undetectably slow heartbeat and respiration picking up their natural rhythm.

If he were not a psinul, he could communicate to Hine an awareness of what had happened—if Hine wasn't too dazed to comprehend it. . . .

"It's buzzing," Pathue said sharply, dropping the reducer as though it had bitten him. "I felt it by bone-conduction. Take another look at Hine. I think that gadget was meant to keep him in his coma, so now it's off him he may wake up."

Alertly, men moved to obey. They rolled Hine over on his back again and set crudely to work to revive him, chafing his limbs and pressing on his diaphragm while others fetched a medikit.

There was an air of extreme tension. No one spoke. Even the sobbing girl was silent, and the distant noise of the river became incredibly loud by contrast. Gascon, maintaining deliberate calm, waited for the moment when Hine woke up. On

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his reaction would hinge the decision whether to try and go on bluffing, or to account his mission an effective failure and make his escape, which would be a disastrous blow after the planning and care which had gone into bringing him here.

He felt angry with himself—he had allowed himself to be lulled into thinking that because he had been given so much training, so many secret weapons, he was infallible.

"He's waking up," Breckitt said loudly and unnecessarily, and Pathue and the other Starfolk moved a little closer to Hine.

First the unconscious psion stirred; the guard who had brought the medikit thought to move it out of reach.

Then, so quickly afterwards that it seemed there had been a gap in the flow of time, Hine came to, hurled himself to his feet, and began screaming.

It touched something in Gascon's memory, and he knew even before Hine shrieked his agony into words what it was that he was going to hear. Hine was crying out from the same intolerable torment that had driven Elze's son into the desert night on Earth, infinitely long ago, infinitely far away.

The scream was so shocking that it froze the men surrounding Hine, preventing them from leaping on him and pinioning him. Moreover, Hine did not open his eyes, but stretched his hands out before him like a blind man, as though groping in an invisible maze, and his hands shook with all-consuming terror.

Colored with hysteria because words could not match the feelings he endured, his voice rained mad promise of doom on their ears.

"Fools bastards torturers animals why are you just standing there don't you *hear* it don't you hear him telling you telling you it's the end damn you why don't you understand me sick smug stupid crippled deaf damn you why can't you hear him shouting it's the end of EVERYTHING stars planets US you me damn you it's the end of you he's telling you the end of EVERYTHING what shall I do where shall I hide what's the USE—"

Pathue lifted his gauntleted right hand and his power-

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assisted limbs whirled with a noise like an insect flying. He slapped Hine twice, across his cheeks, and the mad outpouring of the psion's terror broke off like a dry stick. For a moment Hine gaped, wide-eyed, wide-mouthed; then his face seemed to shrivel and wither and he collapsed forward on his knees, hammering the earth with his fists like a child.

Nobody spoke. They exchanged uneasy glances. At last Breckitt said with forced assurance, "He's gone out of his mind."

"No."

Gascon's voice slashed through their indecision with a bite of authority. He strode forward. No one tried to hinder him as he dropped on one knee beside Hine and spoke softly.

"Who's 'he', Jazey? Who is it that's shouting at us? Who is it who's trying to warn us all?"

Hine showed no response. Gascon hesitated—was he wrong in attaching so much significance to this curious turn of phrase? Was it accidental, a crazy mental slip? He tried again patiently, wearing down Hine's barriers against answering, until finally he was rewarded by a hate-filled cry.

"Hollur Starkness, damn you!" Why can't you *hear* him?"

Like an electric shock, Gascon felt the jolting rightness of his spur-of-the-moment guess.

"Where is he, Jazey? Can you tell us where he is? Jazey!"

But he got nothing further. At length he rose to his feet, to find Pathue facing him and the other Starfolk grouped silent at one side. The focus of events had closed in. No one else of all the many persons present mattered any more: only Gascon, Hine, and these four men braced and masked against the natural environment.

"You've been lying," Pathue said without violence. "You're no dispassionate scientist. You know something. What is it?"

"Why did you say Hine wasn't crazy?" one of his companions cut in. "This wild talk of the end of everything is simple raving!"

"Quiet!" Pathue snapped, and to Gascon again, "Well?"

"Yes, I do know something," Gascon said after a pause. "I know that the psion who was aboard Angus Chalkind's

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ship is still alive, and if he's alive, Chalkind himself or others of his crew may be."

Stunned, Pathue recoiled. "How can you know this?"

"Because this man Hine is a psion!" Gascon rapped. "And before you think any further, he's under the protection of Earth as of now and on my authority. What matters at the moment is that he's a human being, and humanity is being warned of a cosmic cataclysm, so if you have brains to match your vaunted superiority you'll listen to what I have to say!"

Rapidly he outlined the reasons for his coming to Regnier.

"It's a lie!" Breckitt cried when he had finished. He turned beseechingly to Pathue. "Don't you see? This story was started by psions—he said so! It's a psion trick to—to —"

"Shut up!" Gascon said brutally. "You've built your career on the deaths of psions, and decent people are sick of listening to you. I'm talking to the Starfolk and not you. Pathue, I just told you that Dominator Chalkind may still be alive, because Hollur Starkness is alive. You claim to set a pretty high price on the lives of your people—for the sake of Chalkind and his crew, you said you were prepared to abandon Regnier to famine and death. If this wasn't just petty cruelty, you'd better prove it, by acting on what I tell you."

"This is a matter for the Zone Dominator," Pathue said abruptly.

"Take me to him in his ship, then!" Gascon exclaimed.

He watched the reaction closely; it was as he had expected. Whether they knew it or not, they too were affected by the psionic shout, by its dual components of fearful warning tempered by concepts of home and security. To them, the idea of returning aboard ship was both a compliance with a psionic suggestion and an escape from the stress of terror, a retreat to the comfort of a space-going womb.

Pathue pointed at Hine. "Bring him with us!" he barked, and spun and marched with his companions back to the vehicle that had brought them. Unbidden, Gascon climbed up beside them, and none of them said anything as they accelerated down the road toward the starport.

XV

THE SHIP that had brought Gascon from Earth to Mondelrey had been luxurious and spacious. His first reaction on finding that Arraken's vessel, though the flagship of a Zone Dominator, was cramped, drab, and unimpressive was veiled amusement; then he realized the reason, and was more than ever confident that he could recoup his near-failure back on Regnier.

There was a curious paradox operating here. The Starfolk had developed their culture as a psychologically stable background at a time when rapid development on their old home planets had made them maladjusted and rootless. Accordingly, these ships were probably essentially unchanged since the earliest days of colonial starfleets. Hence their alleged evolutionary progress was set against environmental conservatism. That was a trap to be caught in! Still worse, they were compelled to hold back development on their genetic-pool worlds for fear they might become self-sufficient and reject Starfolk aid.

He remembered what Fold had said about combating stupidity, and resolved to keep the point in the forefront of his mind.

Whatever else might be wrong with Starfolk society, though, there was nothing wrong with their medical science. Hine—who had come blubbing aboard between two brawny men—had been dosed by the staff of the ship's infirmary, and within minutes recovered his self-possession, until now he was seated on a bench next to Gascon, pale, but calm and capable of rational speech.

Across the room—cabin, office, bridge, whatever it might

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be called—Arraken sat in a chair that was far more than a chair. Above it was a communications helmet poised to be pulled down; behind and on either side of it were banks of information-presenting equipment, which Arraken would face by swivelling the chair. Pathue stood to one side of the Dominator, and there were two guards. But Gascon doubted if they were necessary. Here in a starship Arraken was in his natural habitat. Even though it was a matter of environmental conditioning rather than evolutionary selection, one felt he was at home between the stars.

The quarter-gravity disturbed Gascon, but it was natural to Arraken and Pathue; the faces revealed by the removal of their masks were strong and showed personality; while now—against the risk of their importing germs from Regnier—Hine and Gascon were now masked.

Yet Gascon still felt he had the upper hand. Every embryo decision Arraken took was colored by the nagging tone of the psionic shout, and only a psinul could think unhampered by it.

"All right," Arraken said grudgingly, addressing Hine. "Assume I accept the story you and Gascon have told—how is it that until now you didn't realize any connection with this psion Starkness, and with the loss of my predecessor's ship?"

"It's grown louder and clearer," Hine said, licking his lips. "Also I think the slowing down of metabolic rate which I underwent made me more sensitive to detail in the signal."

"But you didn't get any clearer picture of the disaster itself," Gascon suggested. Hine glanced at him and away again.

"Oh yes," he said. "Unequivocally, the obliteration of everything."

"This is ridiculous!" Arraken snapped. "You say the source is in present time, yet you talk of the end of the universe—this is nonsense! We have some idea of the universe's time-scale—"

"Please, Dominator!" Hine held up a hand defensively. "I know what you're going to say, and I appreciate your

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doubts, but I can't make it any clearer in words. I—I'm not responsible for what the signal says. I'm just interpreting to you."

Arraken, reminded of the fact that Hine was a psion and that he had only by an effort of will mastered his revulsion enough to allow him aboard the ship, was silent for a moment, and there was a feeling in the room as though the presence of death passed over them.

Absently Hine turned his head a little, following his eyes, to look up at a spot on the wall where there was nothing to draw his attention.

"Well, I don't believe it," Arraken said finally. "And I don't propose to act—"

"Just a moment." Gascon interrupted coolly, watching Hine. "Hine, what are you looking at?"

The psion seemed to come back to the present. He said, "Uh? Oh! I—uh—I—"

And he realized. He was on his feet, pointing to where he had been staring, shaking all over with excitement. "There!" he said. "That's where it's coming from—I know now!"

Abruptly he let his arm fall, and spoke in a voice of dejection. "No, you'll never listen. You're thinking, 'This psion is very quick to invent new stories when I begin to see through his old ones.' Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm crazy."

He sank back on the bench and buried his face in his hands.

"People are going to say," Gascon murmured, addressing Arraken, "that you're unwilling to listen to Hine, not because he's a psion, but because if Chalkind is alive after all, you'll have to relinquish the post of Zone Dominator."

Arraken flushed and tensed. He said, "I've a mind to have you put into space, you foulmouthed Earthling! When you have no more to say you turn to crude insults, which is what's to be expected, I guess."

"Dominator," Pathue said diffidently; he had been glancing over the data-presenting instruments ranked behind Arraken's chair. "Dominator, there's an odd coincidence here."

Hine raised his head, and all attention turned on Pathue

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as he operated a control and panels rolled back along the walls, revealing the majesty of naked space beyond pressure-tempered windows. It was not a sight that even Starfolk could accept indefinitely. Gascon felt a stir of excitement. The pattern of stars revealed was one which was familiar to him from maps. By a very strange coincidence, as Pathue had said, this was the most likely direction from which the Old Race might have approached Earth's corner of the galaxy.

But that wasn't what had surprised Pathue.

"Hine hadn't any knowledge of the ship's attitude in space," Pathue was saying. "So how did he know that the Fairhaven system lay this way? It's the line-of-sight for a Regnier-Fairhaven voyage."

"But Chalkind's ship was bound for Fairhaven, and never reached there," Arraken said slowly.

"Suppose the saboteurs didn't use a bomb, as we imagined," Pathue went on. "Suppose they used an oscillator and muddled the impulses of the subspace navigation controls, or piped gas into the ventilating system, thinking to lose the ship by putting the crew to sleep."

"Overshoot," Arraken nodded. "A long overshoot—we've combed the whole of explored space in that direction." He glanced at Hine and licked his lips.

"But your point's valid, Pathue. How he knew the ship's orientation. Very well, I'm convinced. I don't know anything about cosmic disasters, but"—and he glared at Gascon—"I'll not give anyone grounds for saying I did less than my utmost to find Angus Chalkind's ship."

He spun the chair in which he was seated and drew down the communications helmet over his head.

"Navigation! Engines! All stations alert!"

He was the only Earthman ever to have a chance to study Starfolk culture at first-hand, Gascon reflected. He should have been memorizing, analyzing, questioning those of the crew who were willing to talk to him—but somehow he could not find the will to do so. It didn't seem worth it. When a

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disaster of impossible magnitude was impending, to probe this sterile, enclosed, drab culture seemed too petty.

Fold was right. The struggle to get rid of the Starfolk, whose barren influence formed an impenetrable wall around human originality and the restless need to explore, was a foe to match any in Earth's history. Here they were driven out beyond the explored systems, and they had only been in flight for a matter of days, so swift was a voyage in subspace. How many new systems had been opened since the Starfolk were established? How long before stability turned to decadence?

The ship dipped into the other-dimensional universe in which velocities were infinite, snapped back into normal space and swung into one planet-endowed system after another, and each successive time Hine, called from the stupor in which the ship's doctors kept him to preserve his mind from the waves of psion-hate surrounding him, insisted that the source of the emanations was yet further ahead of them. Tension climbed till it could almost be clawed out of the air, weighed, tasted.

It made Gascon nervous to read the expressions and manner of the Starfolk. He could not feel the psionic battering which Hine endured in its fullest force, but they, who were not psinuls or psions, were daily showing more of its effects. The Dominator himself, face gleaming with sweat, would shout at Hine that their trip was useless, that it was dangerous, that he was being deceived; when he was in this state it took all Gascon's persuasion to keep him to his promise.

What could be the *meaning* of a warning of the end of everything? No amount of argument could shake Hine's certainty that that was what he was being told, and that Hollur Starkness was telling it to him.

Once Arraken challenged him: "You're a psion! Can you communicate between the stars?"

Sickly, Hine swallowed and shook his head.

"Then how do you expect me to believe that Starkness does?"

"I can't explain!" Hine moaned. "I simply *know*!"

And now they were due to enter yet another system, the

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tenth—twelfth—Gascon had lost count. They were assembled in the Dominator's room, the panels shut over the ports because subspace was an unpleasant place to see, and the sourness of unformulated fear lay thick upon them. Hine was almost at the end of his resources, for all the doctors could do, and sat on the bench beside Gascon trembling from head to foot.

Psions couldn't beam between the stars.

Who could?

That was the question which now seemed to Gascon to be the crucial one.

"Now," Arraken said gruffly. "It had better be the right system this time—I'm weary of this lunatic hunting!" He bit off the last word just as the ship returned to normal space.

Suddenly, he became chalk-white and seized the arms of his chair.

Pathue, who was standing, choked and gasped and clutched at the nearest support.

Hine fell forward off the bench and lay, still as a corpse, on the floor, his fall under the light gravity having a nightmare quality.

From the inship communicators there came nothing but gasps and groans.

Gascon, who had felt only the usual discomfort resulting from the switch between the universes, leapt to his feet with a cry of dismay. Neither Pathue nor Arraken could answer when he demanded what was wrong. In desperation he cast around him; his eye fell on the switch that would roll back the walls and reveal what lay beyond the ship, and he jabbed at it.

And everything fell into place in his mind.

There was a yellow sun, which seemed darker in color than the sun of Earth. There was a planet below—as the ship was oriented—with air and clouds and glimpses of dazzling-bright ocean. And there were . . .

How to describe them? Like veils, filmy, indistinct, of multiple soft colors, drifting in from the distant stars toward this planet of all planets, mere patterns of organized non-

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physical energy and awareness and being. Yes: they were beings.

As a man born deaf, standing in the presence of a vast noise, vaguely senses the vibration and shock and violence, Gascon was sensing the merest trace of what had battered Hine into catatonia and everyone else aboard the ship into a state of illimitable despair.

The arrogance! Damn them! The arrogance of them, whatever they were! What right had they to claim that the universe was at an end, to shake the sanity of man?

Gascon hammered at the windows, dizzy with a rage which almost choked him. He screamed at the beings beyond, knowing what they were and what they had done, and trapped in his own impotence.

"I'll show you!" he mouthed. "I'll show you!"

He dragged Arraken out of his chair; the starman could not resist, but slumped to the floor. Gascon took his place, and did as he had once seen Arraken do—bring into circuit an overriding control allowing him to operate the ship's engines from his chair.

Slowly he turned the ship. When the nose was aligned toward the nearby planet, he closed his eyes and engaged the power of the normal drive.

XVI

"HAVE YOU come to take them away?"

Gascon's eyes snapped open and his hand left the power-switch as though burnt. Hine's voice!

The psion still lay awkwardly on the floor, where he had fallen. But it had been his voice.

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Gascon's momentary madness left him, and his mind was cool and calm. He said, "Is that Hine talking? Or is it—someone else?"

"I cannot reach you directly," Hine said. Like a jointed doll his body began to jerk upright. "It is lucky you are crippled. This one is not crippled. Another is not crippled. Have you come to take him away?"

"Yes!" Gascon said fiercely. "Yes! All of them! Can you bring them here?"

Now Hine was getting to his feet. His face was quite slack, like an idiot's, and his eyes were closed. He stood, swaying a little. "I will show you where they are," he said after a pause.

"What good is that?" Gascon countered. "I can't control the ship—I don't know how, and anyway I doubt if it can be landed on a planet by one man. Bring them here—or kill them! They can't be sane after what you've done to them."

"They are all crippled except one," Hine said. "And the one who is not crippled is no longer sane. They did not know as much as you do. They did not understand."

Gascon gave a bitter laugh. "What's wrong with them? Has your arrogance convinced them that the universe is going to end?"

There was silence from Hine for a long moment. Then his voice was heard anew.

"You imagine the universe differently. Death is the end of the universe. We will bring them all to you—they are so affected that we do not know if you can accept them."

"I suppose you can bring them into the ship without killing them?" Gascon said sarcastically. "Without their suffocating on the way, without my having to open the locks to let them in?"

"Yes," Hine said.

He collapsed, like a marionette when the operator lets the strings go, and Gascon clenched his fingers on the arms of the chair. A gust of wind made him blink, and they were there, and the wind was from their arrival in the room, and they must have been transported through some non-spatial

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pathway because there was no other route for them to have come by.

Before him, there were four people: two men, two women, all naked, pipestem-thin from starvation, dirty, their hair unkempt, their skins marked with cuts, bruises and mud. The women had the flabby breasts and ugly bellies characteristic of Starfolk breeding-stock, accentuated by having spent a long time under full planetary gravity without artificial aids.

They were completely dazed by what had happened to them, and since they were not, even now, out of range of the terrible psionic shout that had bludgeoned their minds towards mania, they could not think about it. They gasped and moaned and huddled together away from the walls, and seemed not to hear Gascon when he shouted at them.

One of the men had his eyes closed; he was tall and had been well-built before starvation. That one would be Hollur Starkness.

Gascon got slowly out of his chair. If he had understood correctly, there was only one thing to be done.

He would have to kill Hollur Starkness and Jazey Hine, and with their deaths he could obtain for all men the knowledge that otherwise would be locked up, here, in an alien star-system, forever.

He looked about him for a weapon, and his eye fell on nothing he could use.

His hands, then. He moved to where Hine lay, dropped on one knee, and convulsively tilted back the psion's head so that his throat was exposed. He thought of what had been said with Hine's voice: that death is the end of the universe.

When he had killed Starkness as well, it was as though a great silence had fallen. Nothing had changed outside the ship—the sun, the planet, floated in space—but the beings seemed not to be there any more. They *were* there; it was simply that there was no longer anything human at all to modulate the tremendous blast of psionic emanations which had made them perceptible even to the worse-than-cripple—the psinul Philip Gascon.

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Arraken stirred. His eyes opened. They fell first on the surviving man who had been brought from the planet below, and they widened with astonishment. He licked his lips and spoke, in a voice ringing with disbelief.

"Angus . . . Chalkind . . . !"

"Get up," Gascon said. "Take command of your ship. Don't ask questions. Wait until we are safely on the way to Regnier again, and I will tell you all I know."

Under his breath he added, "If I can . . ."

Fold said, "So the Old Race haven't gone completely, after all."

"No." Gascon stared out from the terrace of Fold's home toward the horizon; the sound of the sea came faint and distant to his ears. "They have become so nearly immortal that when one of them is old and knows it—*he*, they're persons, after all—knows he must die, he makes his way back from the uttermost reaches of the cosmos towards the planet on which their race began. There is only one reason for dying when they are so totally released from their physical limitations as they now are: satiety of experience. Literally, they have learned the universe, memorized it, explored it, accepted it. Death is the end of the universe."

"This isn't a concept unique to them," Fold said gently. "A mystic called Angelus Silesius preached that God died when his worshippers died, and many religious schools have said the same."

Gascon shrugged. His whole body expressed an ineffable weariness, and he seemed past caring about such matters. "Maybe it's the same," he said. "I doubt it."

"Never mind." Fold made a gesture of dismissal. "Well, when they gather together like this, is it out of—sympathy?"

"Not sympathy. Oh, what am I doing trying to explain it?" Gascon said with sudden anger. "I, who am not just a cripple but a—a cypher! A zero, a null, a negative!"

"Not necessarily," Fold shrugged. "We don't *have* to follow the same path as the Old Race."

"That's so, I guess. All right, I'll try and make it plain. It's

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not sympathy. More, it's that they take this concept of the death of the universe so literally they return to be with the one who dies as a proof that the universe is still . . . being perceived." He hesitated. "Is that right? Nearly. To them, existence consists in being perceived by an awareness. So the dying one announces his plight by a psionic call, and the call is amplified by the whole planet, which resonates and booms and echoes through who knows how much of space."

"It must take time for them all to assemble," Fold suggested.

"Surely! The call may have been going out for centuries—how can we say?"

"Perhaps we know how long. Perhaps it was under the impact of this signal that we began to select for psionic awareness—after all, it makes sound biological sense to respond to a subconscious warning of disaster."

Faintly surprised, Gascon nodded. "A point I hadn't thought of," he admitted. "Still, we can look into that now that we know the nature of the stress-patterns impressed on the artifacts they left for us to find. Physical analogues of psionic emanations! No wonder they baffled us!"

He leaned forward, not looking at Fold. "A planet resonating like a gong, though—isn't it a hell of a thing to grasp?"

"Suppose we gave some of these artifacts to—oh, to Elze, say," Fold mused. "Would he understand the impressions?"

"No, absolutely not." Gascon gave a harsh laugh. "Absurd having a psinul explain psionic questions, isn't it? When I can never know anything about them! Well, as I follow it, the intelligibility of a psionic emanation is a function of the whole personality behind it. We couldn't comprehend the Old Race's signal, though it was loud as doom's own knell, until Angus Chalkind's ship was sabotaged and overshot its goal. Even so, Chalkind said, they would have survived and got home, except that the presence of Hollur Starkness made the psionic shout—what's the word I want?"

"Modulated it," Fold said.

"Exactly. Modulated it, imposing a human component. Once that happened, the whole crew was so overwhelmed

they let the ship crash into the planet's atmosphere, and the fact that Starkness wasn't killed meant that the whole of humanity was bound to hear the signal eventually. Except psionics like me, of course." He grimaced.

"Once the signal was available, a kind of echo effect built up. It was reflected from one psion to another, and became more and more and *more* intense. And since human beings have so little in common with Old Race mentality, the concepts were interpreted in human terms. End of everything—literally! That's what they said, when the Old Race meant: death of an individual. I was so insanely angry when I realized the truth, I lost my head, and screamed at them for their arrogance in telling humanity that the universe was doomed.

"The fact of death was the kind of large simple concept suitable for broadcasting through the cosmos. There were overtones to it. One suggested the idea of returning home, because that was what the Old Race had to do; others conveyed the idea of comfort and security, because they offer something of the kind to the dying one when they assemble together. And there were traces of Hollur Starkness as it were coloring the signal with ideas of Regnier, like dye tinting a river, but no more than that—powerless to affect the flow or change its direction or stop it."

"You stopped it," Fold said in a low voice.

"Yes." Gascon turned his hands over, curling the fingers like talons. "Yes, I ended the universe with these hands. What am I doing thinking that you and I still exist?" He laughed, and this time there was a suggestion of hysteria in the sound.

"Anyway," he resumed after a pause, "the struggle to make sense of what was being emitted led to some strange confusions. As when Jazey Hine, not realizing that he had blended the impressions of the Old Race, conveyed by the signal, with the concept of refuge and security in trying to tackle his own problems, fixed on the notion that he could hide psions at the Old Race site on Regnier and that they'd be safe there. The girl Errida Crowb spoke of something similar—said she'd doubted Hine's suggestion about a hid-

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ing-place, but without realizing they were lured into accepting the plan by the associated sense of security.

"Elze's boy, too, right at the start, was running back to where his family had come from. And Elze was perceptive enough to detect an association with Regnier long before we knew that a psion had been aboard Chalkind's lost ship. All these bits of information fell together at once and showed me what must have happened, and because I'd made sense out of apparently lunatic events the Starfolk obeyed me like whipped curs when I took charge. This has broken the Starfolk, Harys—did you realize that?"

"I suspected it might have. When you declared Hine 'under Earth's protection', you had no authority to compel them to accept this, yet they did, without a murmur. They didn't even object when you decided to bring the girl to Earth and save her from the same fate as her family. As you see it, what made them so tractable?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Gascon countered. "Chalkind and Araken have seen the Old Race—I don't mean seen, I mean something else, but anyway—they've experienced this, and they've seen that the Old Race achieved its grandeur and magnificence on a path foreshadowed for us not by Starfolk, but by psions."

"I think you're right," Fold said. He got to his feet and walked across the terrace to stand gazing up at the clear blue of the sky. "I'm not quite sure what will happen on Regnier—though it's almost certain the Starfolk will seize on Chalkind's survival as an excuse for withdrawing their ultimatum and continuing to service the planet."

"And I expect they'll throw out the existing puppet government," put in Gascon.

"Yes, very likely. Breckitt first, then the rest. There's going to be chaos, but not disaster. Anyway, Regnier is only a symbol of a change that may take a generation or two, but which is long overdue. We'll get the Starfolk down off their dignity, and when that happens we shall really begin to go places. Let's face it—by artificially stabilizing the level of development on their dependent worlds, they've already re-

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moved the prime psychological reason for maintaining their shipborne culture, and now it, in turn, has become insecure and frightening.

"Do you remember my saying to you that one of our perennial problems is finding out how much we actually know?"

"Yes," Gascon muttered.

"This was a fine example, wasn't it? We should have known all along that the power of the Starfolk was ripe to be broken. More than ripe—rotten." Fold shook his head wonderingly.

"Will we never be able to find out how much we know?"

"I hope not," Gascon said grimly. "A member of the Old Race decides to die when he knows that he knows everything. We'd better not fall into the same trap."

"That's not quite true," Fold corrected, turning to face the other. "The cosmos is infinite, and you can't know infinity. Weren't you closer to it when you called the Old Race arrogant? Don't you think that their deaths are a grandiose gesture, a monstrous act of conceit? By it, as they think of the matter, they kill the universe. That's the trap I'd be afraid of. A dangerous decadence—like a suicide undertaken for the petty motive of making others feel guilty.

"Luckily, it doesn't impress us." He gestured at the blue arch of sky above him. "There's the universe—as big as ever, as challenging as ever. Do you find life exciting?"

Very slowly, Gascon nodded. "Yes," he said after a while. "Yes, I do."

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