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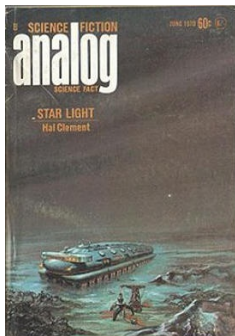
Compulsion



"Compulsion"

James Schmitz

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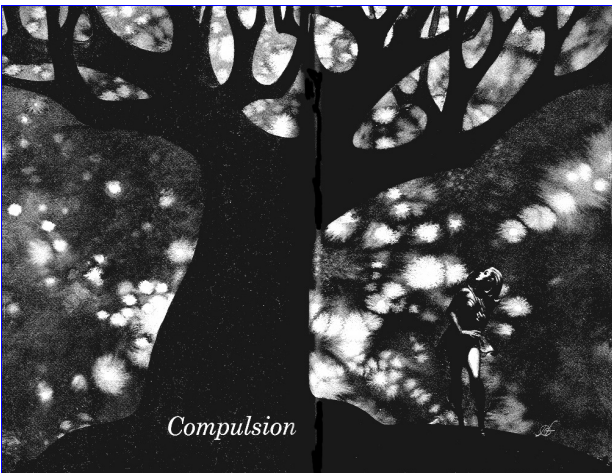


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There'd been a dinner party at the Amberdon town house in Orado City that night. Telzey was home for the weekend but hadn't attended the party. Graduation exams weren't far away, and she'd decided she preferred to get in additional study time. It was mainly a political dinner anyway; she'd been at enough of those.

Most of the guests had left by now. Four of them still sat in the room below her balcony alcove with Gilas and Jessamine, her parents. They'd all strolled in together a while ago for drinks and conversation, not knowing someone was on the balcony. The talk was about Overgovernment business, some of it, from the scraps Telzey absently picked up, fairly top-secret stuff. She wasn't interested until a man named Orsler started sounding off on something about which he was evidently very much annoyed. It had to do with the activities of a young woman named Argee.

Telzey started listening then because she disliked Orsler. He was an undersecretary in Conservation, head of a subdepartment dealing with uncolonized and unclaimed worlds and the life-forms native to them. Telzey had scouted around in his mind on another occasion and discovered that those remote, unsuspecting life-forms had a dubious champion in Orsler. He was using his position to help along major exploitation schemes, from which he would benefit substantially in roundabout ways. She'd decided that if nobody had done anything about it by the time the schemes ripened, she would. She gave the Overgovernment a little quiet assistance of that kind now and then. But the time in question was still several months away.

Meanwhile, anything that vexed Orsler should make enjoyable hearing. So she listened.

The group below evidently was familiar with the subject. There was a treelike creature, recently discovered somewhere, which was dangerous to human beings. Orsler's department had it tentatively

classified as "noxious vermin," which meant it could be dealt with in any manner short of complete extermination. Miss Argee, whose first name was Trigger, had learned about this; and though she lacked, as Orsler pointed out bitterly, official status of any kind, she'd succeeded in having the classification changed to "quarantined, pending investigation," which meant Orsler's department could do nothing about the pseudotrees until whatever investigations were involved had been concluded.

"The girl is simply impossible!" Orsler stated. "She doesn't seem to have the slightest understanding of the enormous expense involved in keeping a planet under dependable quarantine--let alone three of them!"

"She's aware of the expense factor," said another guest, whose voice Telzey recognized as that of a Federation Admiral who'd attended Amberdon dinners before. "In fact, she spent some time going over it with me. I found she had a good grasp of logistics. It seems she's served on a Precol world and has been on several long-range expeditions where that knowledge was put to use."

"So she's annoyed you, too!" said Orsler. "If any citizen who happens--"

"I wasn't annoyed," the Federation Admiral interrupted quietly. "I rather enjoyed her visit."

There was a pause. Then Orsler said, "It's amazing that such an insignificant matter could have been carried as far as the Hace Committee! But at least that will put a prompt end to Argee's fantastic notions. She's a Siren addict, of course, and should be institutionalized in her own interest."

Federation Councilwoman Jessamine Amberdon, who served on the Hace Ethics Committee, said pleasantly, "I'd prefer to think you're not being vindictive, Orsler."

"I?" Orsler laughed. "Of course not!"

"Then," said Jessamine, "you'll be pleased to know that the

Committee is handling this as it handles all matters properly brought before it. It will await the outcome of the current investigations before it forms a conclusion. And you needn't be concerned about Miss Argee's health. We have it on good authority that while she was at one time seriously addicted to the Sirens, she's now free of such problems. Her present interest in them, in other words, is not motivated by addiction."

Orsler evidently didn't choose to reply, and the talk turned to other subjects--regrettably, from Telzey's point of view. Orsler had found no support, and had been well squelched by Jessamine, which she liked. But now she was intrigued. Treelike Sirens which addicted people and rated a hearing in the Ethics Committee were something new.

She could ask Jessamine about it later, but she'd have to admit to eavesdropping then, which her mother would consider not quite the right thing to have done. Besides, one of the minds down there could tell her. And having been in Orsler's mind before, reentry would be a simple matter

Unless there happened to be a Guardian Angel around. Frequently enough, they hovered about people in upper government levels, for one reason or another. She'd picked up no trace of their presence tonight, but they were rather good at remaining unnoticed.

Well, she'd find out. She dropped an entry probe casually toward Orsler.

And right enough:

"Telzey Amberdon, you stop that!"

It was a brisk, prim thought-form, carrying distinct overtones of the personality producing it. She knew this particular Guardian Angel, or Psychology Service psi operator, who probably was in a parked aircar within a block or two of the Amberdon house--a hard-working, no-nonsense little man with whom she'd skirmished before. He was no match for her; but he could get assistance in a hurry. She didn't complete the probe.

"Why?" she asked innocently. "You're not interested in Orsler, are you?"

"He's precisely the one in whom I'm interested!"

"You surprise me," said Telzey. "Orsler's a perfect creep."

"I won't argue with that description of him. But it's beside the point."

"A little mental overhauling wouldn't hurt him," Telzey pointed out. "He's no asset to the Federation as he is."

"Undersecretary Orsler," the Angel told her sternly, "is not to be tampered with! He has a function to perform of which he isn't aware. What happens after he's performed it is another matter—but certainly no business of yours."

So they knew of Orsler's planetary exploitation plans and would handle it in their way. Good enough!

"All right," Telzey said amiably. "I have no intention of tampering with him, actually. I only wanted to find out what he knows about those Sirens they were talking about."

A pause. "Information about the pseudotrees is classified," said the Angel. "But I suppose that technicality means little to you."

"Very little," Telzey agreed.

"Then I suggest that your mother knows more about the subject than anyone else in the room."

Telzey shrugged mentally. "I don't snoop in Jessamine's mind. You know that."

A longer pause. "You're really interested only in the Sirens?" asked the Angel.

"And Trigger Argee."

"Very well. I can get you a report on the former."

"How soon?"

"It will be in your telewriter by the time you reach your room. As for Miss Argee, we might have a file on her, but you can hardly expect us to violate her privacy to satisfy your curiosity."

"I wouldn't ask you to violate anyone's privacy," Telzey said. "All I'd like is her background, what kind of person she is--the general sort of thing I could get from a good detective agency tomorrow."

"I'll have a scan extract made of her file," the Angel told her. "You'll receive it in a few minutes."

. . .

The blue reception button on the ComWeb was glowing when Telzey came into her room. She closed the door, pulled up the report on the Sirens, and sat down. The report began flowing up over the reading screen at her normal scanning rate.

An exploration group had discovered the Sirens on a terratype world previously covered only sketchily by mapping teams. They were the planet's principal life-form, blanketing the landmasses in giant forests. The explorers soon discovered that a kind of euphoria, a pleasurable feeling of being drawn to them, was experienced by anyone coming within a few hundred yards of the pseudotrees. So they began referring to this life-form as the Sirens.

It appeared that the Sirens induced other creatures to become dependent on them, and that even a highly evolved species then degenerated very rapidly to the point of becoming a true parasite, unable to survive away from its hosts. A space scan disclosed that two other worlds in that stellar area were also covered with Siren forests. On those worlds, too, there seemed to be no creatures left which hadn't become Siren parasites, and the indication was that their original human discoverers had introduced them to two

associated colonies. In effect, all three human groups then had been wiped out. Their modified descendants could no longer be regarded as human in any significant sense.

The discovery of the Sirens wasn't publicized. General curiosity might be dangerous; there was a chance that Sirens could be transplanted to a civilization which wouldn't recognize their strange qualities until it was virtually destroyed. Various Overgovernment departments began making preparations for the sterilization of the three worlds. It seemed the only reasonable solution to the problem.

But there was somebody who wouldn't accept that.

The report didn't give the name of the former expedition member who argued that it wasn't the Sirens but their dangerous potential which should be eliminated, that they had intelligence, though it was intelligence so different from humanity's that it had been impossible for them to recognize the harm they did other creatures.

That couldn't be proved, of course. Not on the basis of what was generally known.

But neither could it be disproved--and the Overgovernment had been systematically alerted to the fact all along the line. A stop order went out on the preparation of sterilization measures... .

Telzey's lips quirked approvingly. Unless it could be shown that there was no alternative, or that a present emergency existed, the extermination or near-extermination of a species, let alone that of a species possessing sentient intelligence, was inexcusable under Federation law. The former expedition member had made a very good move. Investigations were now being conducted at various levels, though progress was hampered by the fact that investigators, unless given special protection, also became liable to Siren addiction.

"At present," the report concluded, "no sufficiently definite results appear to have been obtained."

The ComWeb had emitted a single bright *ping*-note a minute or two

earlier, and the blue button was glowing again. Telzey erased the material on the Sirens and brought up the report on the determined former expedition member.

This extract was considerably shorter. Trigger Argee was twenty-six, had a high i.q., had been trained in communications, administration, basic science, survival techniques, and unarmed combat at the Colonial School on Maccadon, had served in Precol on the world of Manon, and been employed in an administrative capacity on three U-League space expeditions. She was twice a pistol medalist, responsible, honest, had a good credit rating, and maintained a fashionable on-and-off marriage with an Intelligence Colonel. She'd been recently issued a temporary Class Four Clearance because of volunteer activities in connection with a classified Overgovernment project. Previous activities, not detailed in the extract, qualified her for a Class One Clearance if the need for it should arise.

The last was intriguing. Of the high-ranking people in the room below the balcony alcove, probably only Jessamine Amberdon held the Overgovernment's Class One Clearance. It might explain why Undersecretary Orsler and others had been unable to check the Siren crusade. Telzey erased this report also and made a mental note to check occasionally on the progress being made in the project.

When she got back down to the alcove, they were still talking in the room below, but it appeared that Orsler and his Guardian Angel had made their departure, the Angel presumably having provided Orsler with an unconscious motivation to leave. He believed in taking no chances with his charges.

Telzey grinned briefly, quietly gathered up her study materials and carried them back to her room.

The Regional Headquarters of the Psychology Service on Farnhart was housed in a tall structure of translucent green, towering in wilderness isolation above a northern ocean arm. Pilch stood in a gray Service uniform at a window of the office on the eightieth level which she'd taken over from the Regional Director that morning, gazing at the storm front moving in from the east. She was a slender woman, rather tall, with sable hair and ivory features, whose gray eyes had looked appraisingly on many worlds and their affairs.

"Trigger Argee," announced the communicator on the Director's desk behind her, "is on her way up here."



Pilch said, "Show her through to the office when she arrives." She went to the desk, placed a report file on it, turned to the side of the room where a large box stood on a table. Pilch touched one of the controls on the box. Its front wall became transparent. The lit interior

contained what appeared to be a miniature tree planted in a layer of pebbly brown material. It stood about fifteen inches high, had a curving trunk and three short branches with a velvety appearance to them, and a dozen or so relatively large leaves among which nestled two white flower cups. It was an exquisitely designed thing, and someone not knowing better might have believed it to be a talented artist's creation. But it was alive; it was a Siren. Three months before, it had been a seedling. Left to itself, it would have stood three times Pilch's height by now. But its growth had been restrained, limiting it still to a seedling's proportions.

The office door dilated, and a mahogany-maned young woman in a green and gold business suit came in. She smiled at Pilch.

"Glad to see you!" she said. "I didn't know you were on Farnhart until I got your message."

Pilch said, "I arrived yesterday to handle some Service business. I'll leave again tonight. Meanwhile, here's your specimen, and copies of our investigators' reports."

"I'm sorry no one found anything positive," Trigger said. "I was beginning to feel we were on the right track finally."

"We won't assume it's the wrong track," said Pilch. "The results aren't encouraging, but what they amount to is that the xenotelepaths we had available weren't able to solve the problem. Various nonhuman xenos were called in to help and did no better. Neither, I'll admit, did I, when I was checking out the reports on the way here."

Trigger moistened her lips. "What *is* the problem?"

"Part of it," Pilch said, "is the fact that the investigations produced no indication of sentient intelligence. The Sirens' activities appear to be directed by complex instinctual drives. And aside from that, your specimen is a powerhouse of psi. The euphoria it broadcasts is a minor manifestation, and we can assume that its ability to mutate other organisms is psi-based. But it remains an assumption. We haven't learned enough about it. Most of the xenos were unable to make out the psi patterns. They're very pronounced ones and highly

charged, but oddly difficult to locate. Those who did recognize them and attempted to probe them experienced severe reactions. A few got into more serious trouble and had to be helped."

"What kind of trouble?" Trigger asked uneasily.

"Assorted mental disturbances. They've been straightened out again."

"Our little friend here did all that?"

"Why not? It may be as formidable as any adult Siren in that respect. The euphoric effect it produces certainly is as definite as that of the older specimens."

"Yes, that's true." Trigger looked at the box. "You're keeping a permanent psi block around it?"

"Yes. It can be turned off when contact is wanted."

Trigger was silent a moment, watching the Siren. She shook her head then. "I still don't believe they don't have intelligence!"

Pilch shrugged. "I won't say you're wrong. But if you're right, it doesn't necessarily improve the situation. The psi qualities that were tapped appear to be those of a mechanism--a powerful mechanism normally inaccessible to alien psi contact. When contact is made, there is instant and violent reaction. If this is a reasoned response, the Siren seems to be an entity which regards any psi mind not of its own species as an enemy. There's no hesitation, no attempt to evaluate the contact."

"It may be a defensive reaction."

"True," Pilch said. "But it must be considered in conjunction with what else we know. The three Siren worlds appear sufficient evidence that the goal of the species is to take over all available space for itself. It has high mobility as a species, and evidently can cover any territory that becomes available to it with startling speed. As it spreads, all other life-forms present are converted to harmless

parasites. This again, whether it's an instinctive process or a deliberate one, suggests the Siren is a being which tolerates only its own kind. Its apparent hospitality is a trap. It isn't a predator; it makes no detectable use of other forms of life. But it interrupts their evolutionary development and, in effect, eliminates them from the environment."

Trigger nodded slowly. "It's not a good picture."

"It's a damning picture," said Pilch. "Translated to human terms, this is, by every evaluation, a totally selfish, paranoid, treacherous, indiscriminately destructive species, a deadly danger to any other species it encounters. What real argument for its preservation can be made?"

Trigger gave her a brief smile.

"I'll argue that the picture is wrong!" she said. "Or, anyway, it's incomplete. If the Sirens, or their instincts, simply wanted to eliminate other creatures, there'd be no need for that very complicated process of turning them into parasites. One good chromosomal error for each new species they came across, and there'd be no next generation of that species around to annoy them!"

"Yes," Pilch said. "That's one reason, perhaps the only substantial reason so far, for not being too hasty about the Sirens." She paused. "Have you been getting any encouraging reports on the physical side of the investigation?"

Trigger shook her head. "Not recently. The fact is, the labs are licked—though some of them won't admit it yet."

"What we've learned about the specimen," said Pilch, "indicates they'll be forced to admit it eventually. If it weren't basically a psi problem, all the talent you've rounded up and put to work should have defanged the Sirens before this. The problem presumably will have to be solved on the psi level, if it's to be solved at all."

"It does seem so," Trigger agreed. She hesitated. "I'm trying to keep the labs plugging away a while longer mainly to gain time. If it's

official that they've given up, the push to sterilize the Siren worlds will start again."

"It may be necessary to resort to that eventually," said Pilch. "They can't be left at large as they are. Even if the closest watch is maintained on those three worlds, something might go wrong."

"Yes, I know. It still would be a mistake, though," Trigger said. "Exterminating them might seem necessary because we hadn't been able to think of a good solution. But it would be a mistake, and wrong."

"You're convinced of it?"

"I am."

"Why?"

Trigger shook her head. "I don't know. Since I became unaddicted, I haven't even liked the Sirens much. It's not that I dislike them—I simply feel they're completely alien to me."

"How do you react now to the euphoria effect?" Pilch asked.

Trigger shrugged.

"It's an agreeable feeling. But I know it's an effect, and that makes it an agreeable feeling I'd sooner not have. It doesn't exactly bother me, but I certainly don't miss it when it's not there."

Pilch nodded. "There've been a few other occasions," she remarked, "when you've acted in a way that might have appeared dead wrong to any other rational human being. It turned out you were right."

"I know. You think I'm right about this?"

"I'm not saying that. But I feel your conviction is another reason for not coming to overly hurried conclusions about the Sirens." Pilch indicated the container. "What plans do you have for the specimen now?"

"I'm beginning to run a little short of plans," Trigger admitted. "But I'll try the Old Galactics next. They're a kind of psi creature themselves, and they're good at working with living things. So I'll take the specimen to them."

Pilch considered. "Not a bad idea. They're still on Maccadon?"

"Very probably. They were there six months ago, the last time I visited Mantelish's garden. They weren't planning to move."

"When are you leaving?"

"Next ship out. Some time this afternoon."

Pilch nodded. "I'll be passing by Maccadon four days from now. I'll drop in then and contact you. And don't look so glum. We're not at the end of our rope. If it seems the Old Galactics can't handle the Sirens, I'll still have a few suggestions to make."

"Very glad to hear it!"

"And while we're on Maccadon," Pilch continued, "I'll have you equipped with a mind shield."

"A mind shield?" Trigger looked dubious. "I know they're all using them in the labs, but ... well, I had to wear one for a while last year. I didn't like it much."

"This will be a special design," Pilch told her. "It won't inconvenience you. If you're going to start escorting the specimen around again, you should have a good solid shield, just in case. We know that now."

3

In the rolling green highlands south of the city of Ceyce on Maccadon, Trigger's friend Professor Mantelish maintained a private

botanical garden. It was his favorite retreat when he wanted to relax, though he didn't manage to get there often. Trigger herself would drop in now and then and stay for a week or two, sleeping in the room reserved for her use in the big white house which stood near the center of the garden.

The garden was where the Old Galactics lived. Only Trigger and Pilch knew they were there. Mantelish might have suspected it, though he'd never said so. Very few other people even knew of their existence. They'd had a great culture once, but it had been destroyed in a vast war which was fought and over with in the Milky Way before men learned how to dig mammoth pits. Not many Old Galactics survived that period, and they'd been widely scattered and out of contact, so that they had only recently begun to gather again. The garden appeared to be their reassembly area, and a whole little colony of them was there by now, arriving by mostly mysterious methods from various regions of the galaxy. That any at all of the fierce race which had attacked their culture still existed was improbable. The Old Galactics had formidable powers; and when they finally decided something needed to be eliminated, they were very thorough and patient about it.

Communication between them and humans was at best a laborious process. Trigger had done them a service some time before, and had learned how to conduct a conversation with Old Galactics on that occasion. They seemed to live on a different time scale. When you wanted to talk to them, you didn't try to hurry it.

So when she arrived at the garden with the Siren, she went first to her room in the house, steered the container on its gravity float to a table, settled it down on the tabletop and switched off the float. Then she unpacked, taking her time and putting everything away, arranging books she'd brought along on the shelves beside others she'd left here on her last visit. Afterward, Mantelish's housekeeper brought a lunch to the room, and Trigger ate that slowly and thoughtfully. Finally she selected a book and sat down with it.

All this time, she'd been letting the Old Galactic with whom she was best acquainted know she was here, and that she had a problem.

She didn't push it, but simply brought the idea up now and then and let it, so to speak, drift around for a moment. Shortly after she'd settled down with the book, she got an acknowledgment.

The form it took was the image of one of the big trees in the garden, which came floating up in her mind. It wasn't the tree the Old Galactic had been occupying when she was here last, but they changed quarters now and then. She sent him a greeting, slipped the book into her jacket pocket, and left the room, towing the Siren container behind her.

By then, it was well into the spring afternoon. Three Tainequa gardeners were working near the great tree as she approached, small brown-skinned men, members of a little clan Mantelish had coaxed into leaving its terraced valley on Tainequa and settling on Maccadon to look after his collection. Trigger smiled and said hello to them; and they smiled back and then stood watching thoughtfully as she went on toward the tree, selected a place where she could sit comfortably among its roots, grounded the container, and took the book from her pocket.

When she looked up, the three Tainequas were walking quietly off along the path she'd come, carrying their tools, and in a moment they'd disappeared behind some shrubbery. Trigger wasn't surprised. The Tainequa valley people were marvelously skilled and versatile gardeners—entirely too good at their craft, in fact, not to understand very well that Mantelish's botanical specimens flourished to an extent even their talented efforts didn't begin to explain. And while they knew nothing about Old Galactics, they did believe in spirits, good and evil.

If they'd thought the local spirits were evil, the outrageous salary Mantelish was obliged to pay the clan couldn't have kept it on Maccadon another hour. Benevolent spirits, however, are also best treated with respect by mortal man. The Tainequas worked diligently elsewhere in the garden, but they kept their distance from the great trees which obviously needed no care from them anyway. And when Trigger sat familiarly down beside one, any Tainequa in sight went elsewhere. She wasn't quite sure what they thought her relationship

with the spirits was, but she knew they were in some awe of her.

Under the circumstances, that was convenient. She didn't want anyone around to distract her. Actually, the Old Galactics did almost all the real work of carrying on the conversation, but she made it easier by remaining simultaneously relaxed and attentive and not letting her thoughts stray. So while she was looking down at the book on her knees, she wasn't reading. Her eyes, unfocused, blinked occasionally at nothing. She'd been invited to come; she'd come, and was waiting.

She waited, without impatience. Until presently:

Describe the problem.

She didn't sense it as words but as meaning, and sensed at the same time that there was more than one of them nearby, her old acquaintance among them. They liked the great trees of the garden as dwellings, their substance dispersed through the substance of the tree, flowing slowly through it like sap. They had their own natural solid shape when they chose to have it. And sometimes they took on other shapes for various purposes. Now a number of them had gathered near the base of the tree, still out of sight within it, to hear what she wanted.

She began thinking about the Sirens. The small one here in its container, and its giant relatives, mysterious and beautiful organisms, spread about three worlds in towering forests. She thought of how humans had encountered the Sirens and discovered how dangerous they were to other life, so dangerous that their complete extermination was beginning to look like the only logical way of dealing with them, and of her feeling that this would be totally wrong even if it seemed in the end to be inevitable. She didn't try to organize her thinking too much; what would get through to the Old Galactics were general impressions. They'd form their own concepts from that.

What do you want done?

She thought of the possibility that the Sirens had intelligence, and of

reaching that intelligence and coming to an understanding with them so they would stop being uselessly destructive. Or, if they were creatures capable only of acting out of instinct, then ways might be found to modify them until they were no longer dangerous. The Old Galactics were great scientists in their own manner, which wasn't too similar to the human manner. Perhaps, Trigger's thoughts suggested, they would be able to succeed with the Sirens where humans so far had failed. She thought about the difficulties Pilch's xenotelepaths had encountered in trying to contact her specimen on the mental level, and of the fact that most humans had to be protected by psi blocks or mind shields against Siren euphoria.

There was stillness for a while then. She knew she'd presented the matter sufficiently, so she simply waited again. About an hour and a half had passed since she first sat down under the tree, which meant that from the Old Galactics' point of view they'd been having a very brisk conversational exchange.

By and by, something was told her.

Trigger nodded. "All right," she said aloud. She switched on the container's gravity float, moved it so that it stood next to the base of the big tree, and there grounded it again. Then she shut off the psi block, turned the front side transparent, opened the top, and sat down on a root nearby from where she could watch the Siren.

. . .

The euphoric effect became noticeable in a few seconds, strengthened gradually, then remained at the same level. It was always pleasurable, though everybody seemed to experience it in an individual manner. For Trigger it usually had been a light, agreeable feeling, which seemed a perfectly natural way to feel when she had it--a sense of well-being and contentment, an awareness that it came from being around Sirens, and a corresponding feeling of liking for them. In the course of time, that had been quite enough to produce emotional addiction in her; and other people had been much more

directly and strongly affected. "That's it," she said now, for the Old Galactics' benefit.

There was no response from them; and time passed again, perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes. Then something began to emerge from the bark of the big tree above the container.

Trigger watched it. In its solid form, an Old Galactic looked something like a discolored sausage; and this was what now appeared to be moving out from the interior of the tree. It was a very slow process. It took a minute or two before Trigger could make out that this wasn't her acquaintance, who was sizable for his kind, but a much smaller Old Galactic, probably not weighing more than half a pound. It got clear of the tree at last, moved down a few inches until it was level with the top of the container, curved over to it, and started gliding down inside. Eventually then the sausage shape reached the base of the Siren, touched it, began melting into it.

Something else was said to Trigger. She hesitated questioningly a moment, then placed her wrist against the side of the root on which she was sitting and left it there. A minute or two afterward, a coolness touched the inside of her wrist. She couldn't see what caused it, but she knew. She also knew from experience that it harmed a human body no more than it harmed a tree to have an Old Galactic's substance dispersed through it; they were unnoticeable, and if there was anything wrong with the body when they entered, they would take care of it before they left, precisely as they tended to the botanical specimens in Mantelish's garden.

In this case, they weren't concerned about Trigger's health, which was excellent. But they evidently felt, as had Pilch, that if she was going to be involved with a Siren, she should have the protection of a mind shield; and an Old Galactic specialist was now to begin providing her with their equivalent of one. He should be finished with the job in a few days. Trigger asked some questions about it, was given explanations, and presently agreed to let the specialist go ahead.

The rest of the afternoon passed uneventfully, as far as she was

concerned. They'd told her after a while to restore the psi block and close the container. She was glad to do it. It was unlikely that a Tainequa would approach this section of the garden again today and get within range of the euphoria effect, but one never knew just what might happen if an area was exposed to the effect for any extended period of time. After that, the Old Galactics ignored her. She read in her book a while, stretched out in the grass near the tree for a nap, read some more. Eventually it was getting near evening, and there still had been no indication that the Old Galactics intended to interrupt whatever they were doing. Trigger went to the garden house, came back with her supper, a sleeping bag, and a few more books. She ate, read until dark, then opened the bag, got into it, and fell asleep.

She dreamed presently that she was back in a great Siren forest on a faraway world, swimming in the euphoria experience, but now frightened by it because she was aware she was becoming addicted. She made a violent effort to escape, and the effort brought her awake.

She knew where she was immediately then. A cloudbank covered the sky, with the starblaze gleaming through here and there; the garden lay quiet and shadowy around her. But the sense of Siren euphoria hadn't faded with the dream.

Trigger turned over, slipped partly out of the sleeping bag, and sat up. She couldn't make out the Siren container too well in the shade of the great tree, but she could see that it had been opened; and the psi block obviously was switched off. She had a moment of alarm. Then Old Galactic thought brushed slowly past her.

They weren't addressing her, and she couldn't make out any meaning. But she saw now that several dark sausage shapes of varying sizes were on the container. A vague thought pulse touched her mind again. It was ridiculous to think of Old Galactics becoming excited about anything; but Trigger had the impression that the little group on the container was as close to excitement as it could get. One of them evidently touched the psi block control then because the euphoria effect went out.

She sat there a while longer watching them and wondering what they were doing; but nothing much happened and she had no more thought impressions. Presently they began to move back to the big tree and into it. The last one shifted the control that closed the container before turning to follow his companions. Trigger got down into the bag again and went back to sleep. When she woke up next, it was cool dawn in the garden, everything looking pale and hazy. And the Old Galactics were speaking to her.

She gathered that the matter looked quite favorable, but that they couldn't give her definite information yet. One of them was still inside the Siren, analyzing it. She was to take the container back to her room now, and return with it in the evening. Then they would be able to tell her more.

4

"Well?" Pilch inquired, when they met two days later in Ceyce.

"They can do it," Trigger said. "They couldn't explain how—at least not in a way I understood."

"You hardly look overjoyed," Pilch observed. "What's the hitch?"

Trigger shrugged. "The time element. They live so long they never really seem to understand how important time is to us. Getting the Sirens tamed down would take them a while."

"How much of a while?"

"That was a little blurry. Anything having to do with time tends to be with them. But I'm afraid they meant something like a couple of centuries."

Pilch shook her head. "We can't wait that long!"

"I know," Trigger said. "What I told them was that I was in a little bit of a hurry with the Sirens, so I'd better shop around for faster results."

"How did they react?"

"They seemed to think it was a good idea. So—I'm on the move again." Trigger smiled soberly. "What are the other approaches you had in mind?"

"At the moment, I have two suggestions," said Pilch. "There are a few Service xenos in whom I'd have some confidence in the matter. They're among our best operators. However, they're on an assignment outside the Hub. Even if they were to interrupt what they're doing—which they shouldn't—it would take them well over a month to get here."

"I'll be glad to take the specimen to them," said Trigger.

Pilch nodded. "We may wind up having you do just that. On the other hand, you may need to go no farther than Orado. There's a psi there who's a very capable xenotelepath. She isn't in the Service and doesn't let it be generally known that she's a psi. But if she feels like it, it's quite possible she'll be able to determine whether the Sirens have intelligence, and whether it's a type and degree of intelligence that will permit communication with them. If that should turn out to be the case, of course, we'd be over the first great hurdle."

"We certainly would be!" Trigger agreed. "How do I get in touch with her?"

Pilch produced a card. "Here's her name and current address. Send her an outline of the situation, inquire whether she'd like to investigate the specimen for you, and so forth. If she'll do it, she's your best present bet."

"I'll get at it immediately." Trigger studied the card, put it in her purse. "Telzey Amberdon. How much can I tell her?"

"Anything you like. Telzey's come by more information about the Federation's business than most members of the Council should

have. But she doesn't spill secrets. I'll give you a Class Four Clearance to send her, to keep it legitimate."

"What kind of fee will she want?" asked Trigger. "I might have to make arrangements."

"I doubt she'll want a fee. Her family has plenty of money. She'll work for you if the proposition catches her interest. Otherwise, she won't."

"I should be able to make it sound interesting enough," Trigger remarked. "Supposing she gets herself into trouble over this like some of your xenos?"

Pilch said, "Nobody's suffered permanent damage so far. If she winds up needing therapeutic help, she'll get it. I wouldn't worry too much. Telzey's a little monster in some respects. But I'll be around the area a while, and you can contact me through any Service center." She looked at her timepiece. "We'll go to the Ceyce lab now, and get you equipped with your mind shield."

"Well, as to *that*," said Trigger, "I already have one. Not quite, but very nearly."

"Eh?"

Trigger explained about her resident Old Galactic, and that he'd been doing something to her nervous system for the past two days. They went to the Service lab anyway; Pilch wanted to know just what was being done to Trigger's nervous system. Tests established then that she, indeed, had a shield. It permitted contact with her conscious thoughts but sealed off the rest of her mind with a block which stopped the heaviest probe Pilch tried against it. However, it was a block which became nonexistent when Trigger didn't want it there.

"Any time I decide to get rid of it permanently, it will start fading away," Trigger said.

Pilch nodded. "I noticed there'd been provision made for that." She reflected. "Well, you won't need the shield I'd intended for you. They're giving you something that seems more effective. So I'll be

running along."

. . .

She left. Around evening of that day, Trigger's Old Galactic let her know he'd finished his work. She went back to his home tree and held her wrist against it until he'd transferred again, thanked them all around for their trouble, and returned to her room. The report to Telzey Amberdon was already prepared. It didn't mention the Old Galactics but was candid about almost everything else, specifically the subject of risks. Trigger flew in to Ceyce and had the report dispatched to Orado at an interstellar transmitter station. Telzey Amberdon should receive it some six hours later.

That night, after the lights were out in the garden house and Trigger was asleep in her room, a visitor came to Mantelish's garden. Three Tainequas on their way to their quarters saw, but didn't notice, the cloaked shape moving toward them under the starblaze, went on talking in their soft voices, unaware of the shadow drifting across their minds, unaware of the visitor passing them a few feet away.

Pilch moved deeper into the garden and into the dimness under the great trees. Now and then she stopped and stood quietly, head turning this way and that, like a sensing animal, and went on in a new direction. At last, she halted before the tree where Trigger had conferred with the Old Galactics, and stayed there.

Awareness stirred in the tree, slowly focused on her. There was a long pause. An inquiry came.

Pilch identified herself. After a time, the identification was acknowledged. *Your purpose?*

She brought up assorted unhurried impressions of Trigger's Siren specimen, of the Siren worlds, of the effects produced by Sirens, of their inaccessibility to psi contact... .

Yes. The Hana species.

What did they know of it?

Pilch gathered presently that they'd never encountered a Hana before this. They'd had reports. Not recent ones. They'd believed the species was extinct.

Was it as dangerous as it appeared to be?

Yes. *Very dangerous.*

The slow exchange continued. In Pilch's mind, impressions formed. Time, space, and direction remained wavering, unstable concepts. But, by any human reckoning, it must have been very long ago, very far away in the galaxy's vastness, that a race of conquerors brought Hanas to many civilized worlds. Presently those worlds were destroyed. The Hanas had swifter weapons than their ability to produce euphoria and mindless dependency in other species. Pilch watched as psi death lanced out from them, and all other minds in a wide radius winked out of existence. She saw great psi machines brought up to control the Hanas, and then those machines shredded into uselessness as their own energies stormed wildly through them. On a planet, while a semblance of its surface remained, the Hana species seemed indestructible, spreading and proliferating like a shifting green flood, sweeping up into furious life here as it was annihilated there.

They died at last when distant space weapons seared all worlds, many hundreds of worlds by then, on which they were to be found until no life of any kind remained possible. Then the great race the Hana had fought hunted long and far, to make sure none remained alive in the universe.

But it appeared that one remote planet, at least, had been overlooked in that search.

• • •

Near daybreak, a small aircar lifted from a forested hillside a little to the north of Mantelish's garden and sped away toward Ceyce. Trigger awoke an hour later, had breakfast, watched a few Tainequas moving about the garden from the veranda of her room, settled down to read. Around noon, the ComWeb in Mantelish's office on the ground floor began ringing. Trigger hurried down, took a message from the receiver.

It appeared Telzey Amberdon's time next week would be mainly occupied with college graduation exams. However, she did want to see Miss Argee's Siren and discuss her plan with her, and would be pleased to meet her on Orado. If it happened to be convenient to Miss Argee, she had the coming weekend free—that being Days Seventy-one and Seventy-two of the standard year.

It was now Day Seventy. Trigger called the Psychology Service Center in Ceyce and left a message for Pilch. She packed quickly, loaded the Siren container into her aircar, and headed for Ceyce Port. Within the hour, she was on her way to Orado.

5

Trigger met Telzey Amberdon next morning in a room she'd taken in the Haplandia Hotel at the Orado City Space Terminal. She was startled for a moment by the fact that Telzey seemed to be at most seventeen years old. On reflection, she decided then that a capable young psi, one who knew more Federation secrets than most Council members, might mature rather rapidly.

"Ready to be euphorized?" she asked, by and by.

Telzey nodded. "Let's check it out."

Trigger switched off the psi block on the Siren container, and Siren euphoria began building up gradually in the room. Telzey leaned

forward in her chair, watching the Siren. Her expression grew absent as if she were listening to distant voices. Trigger, having seen a similar expression on Pilch now and then, remained silent. After a minute or two, Telzey straightened, looked over at her.

"You can shield it again," she said.

Trigger restored the psi block. "What was it like?"

"Very odd! There was a wisp of psi sense for a moment--just as you switched off the block."

Trigger looked interested and thoughtful. "No one else reported that."

"It was there. But it was gone at once, and I didn't get it again. The rest was nothing. Almost like a negation of psi! I felt as if I were reaching into a vacuum."

Trigger nodded. "That's more or less how the Service xenos described the sensation. I brought along a file of their reports. Like to see them?"

Telzey said she would. Trigger produced the file; and Telzey sat down at a table with it and began scanning through the reports. Trigger watched her. A likable sort of young person... . Strong-willed probably. Intelligent certainly. Capable of succeeding where Pilch's xenos had failed? Trigger wondered. Still, Pilch wouldn't have referred to her as a little monster without reason.

The little monster presently closed the file and glanced over at Trigger.

"That certainly *is* a different kind of psi creature!" she remarked. "Different from anything I've come across, anyway. I don't know if I can do anything with it. I'm not your last hope, am I?"

Trigger smiled briefly. "Not the last. But the next one's more than a month's travel time away."

"Do you want me to try? Now that you've seen me?"

Trigger hesitated. "It's not exactly a matter of wanting anyone to try."

"You're worried, aren't you?" Telzey asked.

"Yes, I'm worried," Trigger acknowledged. "I seem to be getting a little more worried all the time."

"What about?"

Trigger bit her lip gently. "I can't say specifically. It may be my imagination. But I don't think so. It's a feeling that we'd better get this business with the Sirens straightened out."

"Or something might happen?"

"That's about it. And that the situation might be getting more critical the longer it remains unsettled."

Telzey studied her quizzically. "Then why aren't you anxious to have me try the probe?"

Trigger said, "There hasn't been too much trouble so far. In the labs, where they've been trying to modify the Sirens biologically, there's been no trouble at all. Except, of course, that some people got addiction symptoms before they started using psi blocks and mind shields. But you see, all they've accomplished in the labs is to put some checks on the Sirens." She indicated the container. "Like stopping this one's growth, keeping the proliferation cycles from getting started, and so on. Meanwhile, there've been indications that the chromosomal changes involved have gradually begun to reverse-which, I've been told by quite a number of people, is impossible."

Telzey said, "The midget here might start to grow again?"

"Yes, it might. What it means is that the labs haven't really got anywhere. Now, the Psychology Service xenos didn't get too far either, but they did learn a few definite things about the Siren. They got into trouble immediately."

Telzey nodded.

"And you," Trigger said, "are supposed to be better than the Service xenos. You should be able to go further. If you do, it's quite possible you'll get into more serious trouble than they did."

Telzey said after a moment, "You think the Siren doesn't intend to change from what it is? Or let us find out what it really is?"

"It almost looks that way, doesn't it?"

"On the psi side it might look that way," Telzey agreed. She smiled. "You know, you're not trying very hard to push me into this!"

"No," Trigger said. "I'm not trying to push you into it. I don't feel I should. I feel I should tell you what I think before you decide."

Telzey looked reflective. "You told other people?"

Trigger shook her head. "If I started talking about it generally, it might turn us back to the extermination program. I think that's the last thing that should happen." She added, "Pilch probably knows. She's looked around in my mind now and then, for one reason and another. But she hasn't said anything."

"Pilch is the one who recommended me to you?" Telzey asked.

"Yes. Have you met?"

Telzey shook her head. "I've never heard of her. What's she like?"

Trigger considered.

"Pilch is Pilch," she said. "She has her ways. She's a very good psi. She seems to be one of the Service's top executives. She's a busy lady, and I don't think she'd bother herself for a minute with the Sirens if she thought they weren't important. She told me there was a definite possibility you'd be able to get into communication with our specimen—that's assuming, of course, there's something there that can communicate." Trigger thought again, shrugged. "I've known Pilch nearly two years, but that's almost all I can tell you about her."

Telzey was silent for over a minute now, dark-blue eyes fixed reflectively on Trigger.

"If I told you," she said suddenly, "that I didn't want to get involved in this, what would you do?"

"Get packed for a month's travel plus," Trigger said promptly. "I don't think it will be at all safe to push ahead on the psi side here, but I think it will be safer generally than not pushing ahead."

Telzey nodded.

"Well, I am getting involved," she said. "So that's settled. We'll see if Pilch is right, and it's something I can handle--and whether you're right, and it's something that has to be handled. I can't quite imagine the Sirens as a menace to the Federation, but we'll try to find out more about them. If I don't accomplish anything, you can still pack up for that month's trip. How much time can you spend on Orado now?"

Trigger said, "As much time as it takes, or you're willing to put in on it."

Telzey asked, "Where will you stay? We can't very well work in the Haplandia."

"We certainly can't," Trigger agreed. "We'd have half the hotel in euphoria if we left the Siren unshielded for ten minutes. I haven't made arrangements yet. The labs where they work on Sirens are all a good distance away from population centers, even though the structures are psi-blocked. So I'll be looking for a place that's well out in the country, but still convenient for you."

"I know a place like that."

"Yes?"

"My family has a summer house up in the hills," Telzey said. "Nobody will be using it the next couple of months. There's Ezd Malion, the caretaker; but he and his wife have their own house a quarter of a mile away."

Trigger nodded. "They'll be safe there. Unless there are special developments. The Siren euphoria couldn't do more than give them sunny dispositions at that distance."

"That's what I thought from the reports," said Telzey. "And we can keep the Malions away from the house while we're working. There's nobody else around for miles. It's convenient for me—I can get there from college in twenty minutes... . If there isn't something you want to do, why don't we move you and the Siren in this afternoon?"

6

The Hana dwarf dreamed in its own way occasionally. Its life of the moment had been a short one and might not be extended significantly; but its ancestral memory went back for a number of generations before it began to fade, and beyond that was a kind of memory to which it came only when it withdrew its attention wholly from the life of the moment and its requirements. It had taken to doing it frequently since realizing it was on a Veen world and no longer in contact with its kind.

That form of memory went back a long way to the world on which the Hanas originated, and even to the early period of that world when they gained supremacy after dangerous and protracted struggles with savage species as formidable as they. They came at last to the long time in which the world remained in harmony and they kept it so, living the placid and thoughtful plant existence they preferred, but not unaware of what went on outside. Disruptions occurred occasionally when some form of scurrying mobile life, nervously active, eternally eating or being eaten, began to become a nuisance, to crowd out others, or attempt to molest the Hanas. Then the Hanas would beckon that overly excitable species to them and start it on the path which led it eventually to the quietly satisfactory existence of the plant.

It was a good time, and the Hana dwarf now lived there often for a while before returning, strengthened, to the life of the moment and the knowledge of being among the Veen. There was little else to do. The Veen held it enclosed in a cage of energy, difficult to penetrate and opened only when they came with their prying minds and mind machines to seek out and enslave the captured Hana mind, precisely as they had done in other days. They'd learned much in the interval, if not greater wisdom and less arrogance. The Hana dwarf was aware of the manipulations which stopped its growth and prevented it from developing and distributing its seed. But such things were of no significance. They could be undone. The question was whether the Veen could reach its mind.

It hadn't believed they could. It was more formidably armed than any Hana had been in the times of the Veen War; if its defenses failed, the touch of its thought would kill other minds in moments. But it was less sure now. The Veen's first probes barely reached its defenses, broke there; and a brief period of quiet followed. But they were persistent. Indications came that another attempt was being carefully prepared, with mind qualities involved which had not been noticeable before.

It would warn them, though Veen had not yet been known to respond sensibly to a warning. They were the race which knew no equals, which could tolerate only slaves. If they persisted and succeeded, the Hana would emerge to kill, and presently to die. A single pulse would be enough to notify the Three Worlds, long since alerted, and waiting now with a massed power never before encountered by Veen, that the Veen War had been resumed.

The Hana shaped its warnings and set them aside, to be released as seemed required. Then, with its several deaths prepared, it, too, waited, and sometimes dreamed.

. . .

Toward evening, four days after Trigger and the Siren specimen

moved into the Amberdon summerhouse, Telzey was on her way there by aircar. It had been a demanding day at college, but she was doing very well in the exams. When she left Pehanron, she'd felt comfortably relaxed.

Some five minutes ago then, her mood shifted abruptly. An uneasy alertness awoke in her. It wasn't the first time she'd felt that way during the past few days.

The Siren? From behind a psi block and over all these miles? Not likely, but perhaps not impossible either. She hadn't made much headway in the investigation over the weekend and the last two evenings, and hadn't tried to. That was a strange being! Under the mechanical euphoric effect seemed to lie only the empty negation which had met her first probe. The Service's translating machines had reported nothing at all, but most of the Service xenotelepaths also had sensed the void, the emptiness, the vacuum. Some of them eventually found something in the vacuum. They weren't sure of what they'd found; but they'd stirred up a violence and power difficult to associate with the midget Siren. Mind shields had been hard tested. Some shields weren't tight enough or resistant enough; and as a result, the Service had a few lunatic xenos around for a while.

Even without Trigger's forebodings, it wouldn't have looked like a matter to rush into. When the exams were over, Telzey could settle down to serious work on the Siren. All she'd intended during the week was to become acquainted with it.

In doing even that much, had she allowed it to become acquainted with her? She wasn't sure. Something or other, at any rate, seemed to have developed an awareness of her. Otherwise, she'd had no problems. The addictive effect didn't bother her; that could be dampened or screened out, and whatever lingered after a period of contact was wiped from her mind in seconds.

The something-or-other did bother her.

Telzey turned the aircar into the mouth of a wide valley. It was between winter and spring in the hills, windy and wet. Snow still lay in the gullies and along the mountain slopes, but the green things were

coming awake everywhere. The Amberdon house stood forty miles to the north above the banks of a little lake... .

There was this restlessness, a frequent inclination to check the car's view screens, though there was almost no air traffic here. Simply a feeling of something around! Something unseen.

When it happened before, she'd suspected there might be a psi prowling in her mental neighborhood, somebody who was taking an interest in her. Since such uninvited interest wasn't always healthy, she'd long since established automatic sensors which picked up the beginnings of a scanning probe and simultaneously concealed and alerted her. The sensors hadn't gone into action.

So it shouldn't be a human psi hanging around. Unless it was a psi with a good deal defter touch than she'd encountered previously. Under the circumstances, that, too, wasn't impossible.

If it wasn't a human psi, it almost had to be a Siren manifestation.

. . .

The feeling faded before she reached the house and brought her Cloudsplitter down to the carport. Another aircar stood there, the one Trigger had rented for her stay on Orado.

During the past two evenings, they'd established a routine. When Telzey arrived from college, she and Trigger had dinner, then settled down in the room Gilas Amberdon used as a study when he was in the house. Its main attraction was a fine fireplace. They'd talk about this and that; meanwhile the Siren's unshielded container stood on a table in a corner of the room, and Telzey's thoughts drifted about the alien strangeness, not probing in any way but picking up whatever was to be learned easily. She soon stopped getting anything new in that manner; what was to be learned easily about the Siren remained limited. Some time before midnight, they'd restore the psi block, and Telzey went off to Pehanron.

But before she left, they turned on the lights in the grounds outside for a while. The very first night, the day Trigger and the Siren moved in, they'd had a rather startling experience. They were in the study when they began to hear sounds outside. It might have been tree branches beating against the wall in the wind, except that no tree grew so close to the house there. It might even have been an unseasonable, irregular spattering of hail. The study had no window, but the adjoining room had two, so they went in, opened a window and looked out.

At once, something came up over the sill with a great wet flap of wings and tail and drove into the room between them, bowling Telzey over. Trigger yelped and slammed the window shut as another pair of wings boomed in from the windy dusk with more shadowy shapes behind it. When she looked around, Telzey was getting to her feet and the intruder had disappeared into the house. They could hear it flapping about somewhere.

"Are you hurt, Telzey?"

"No."

"What in the world is that thing? There's a whole mess of them outside!"

"Eveers. They're on spring migration. A flock was probably settling to the lake and got in range of the Siren."

"Good Lord, yes! The Siren! We should have realized--what'll we do with the one in the house?"

"The first thing we'd better do is get the Siren shielded," said Telzey.

Trigger cocked her head, listening. "The, uh, eveer is in the study!"

Telzey laughed. "They're not very dangerous. Come on!"

The eveer might not have been a vicious creature normally, but it had strong objections to being evicted from the study and put up a determined fight. They both collected beak nips and scratches, were

knocked about by solid wing strokes and thoroughly muddled by the eveer's wet hide, before they finally got it pinned down under a blanket. Then Trigger crouched on the blanket, panting, while Telzey restored the psi block. After that, the eveer seemed mainly interested in getting away from them. They carried it to the front door between them, bundled in the blanket, and opened the door. There they recoiled.

A sizable collection of Orado's local walking and flying fauna had gathered along the wall of the house. But the creatures were already beginning to disperse, now that the Siren's magic had faded; and at the appearance of the two humans, most of them took off quickly. Trigger and Telzey shook the eveer out of the blanket, and it went flapping away heavily into the night.

It took them most of an hour to tend to their injuries and clean up behind it. After that, they ignored unusual sounds outside the house when the container's psi block was off.

Other things were less easy to ignore.

. . .

The night Telzey started back to Pehanron after the weekend was the time she first got the impression that something unseen was riding along with her. Psi company, she suspected, though her sensors reported nothing. She waited a while, relaxed her mind screens gradually, sent a sudden quick, wide search-thought about, with something less friendly held in readiness, in case it was company she didn't like. The search-thought should have caught at least a trace of whoever or whatever was there. It didn't.

She remained behind her screens then, waiting. The feeling grew no stronger; sometimes it seemed to weaken. But it was a good five minutes before it faded completely.

It came back twice in the next two days. Once in the house while she was in the study with Trigger, once on the way to the house. She

didn't mention it to Trigger; but that night, when it was getting time for her to leave, she said, "I think I'll sleep here tonight and start back early in the morning."

"Be my guest," Trigger said affably. She hesitated, added, "The fact is I'll be rather glad to know you're around."

Telzey looked at her. "You get lonesome at night in this big old house?"

"Not exactly lonesome," Trigger said. "I've never minded being by myself." She smiled. "Has your house ever had the reputation of being haunted?"

"Haunted? Not for around a hundred years. You've had the impression there's a spook flitting about?"

"Just an odd feeling occasionally," Trigger said. She paused, added in a changed voice, "And by coincidence, I'm beginning to get that feeling again now!"

They stood silent then, looking at each other. The feeling grew. It swelled into a sensation of bone-chilling cold, of oppressive dread. It seemed to circle slowly about them, drawing closer. Telzey passed her tongue over her lips. Psi slashed out twice. The sensation blurred, was gone.

She turned toward the Siren container. Trigger shook her head. "The psi block's on," she said. "It was on the other times, too. I checked."

And the psi block was on. Telzey asked, "How often has it happened?"

Trigger shrugged. "Four or five times. I'll come awake at night. It'll last a minute or two and go away."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to disturb you," Trigger said. "It wasn't as strong as this before. I didn't know what it was, but it didn't seem to have anything

to do with the Siren." She smiled, a trifle shakily. "An Amberdon ghost I could stand."

"Let's sit down," Telzey said. "It wasn't an Amberdon ghost, but it was a ghost of sorts."

They sat down. "What do you mean?" Trigger asked.

Telzey said, "A psi structure. Something with some independent duration. A fear ghost. A psi mind made it, planted it. It was due to be sensed when we sensed it."

Trigger glanced at the container. "The Siren?"

"Yes, the little Siren." Telzey blinked absently, fingering her chin. "There was nothing human about that structure. So the Siren put it out while the block was off. It's telling us not to fool around with it... . But now we *will* have to fool around with it!"

Trigger looked questioningly at her.

"It means you were right," Telzey said. "The Siren has intelligence. It knows there's somebody around who's trying to probe it, and it doesn't want to be probed. It's tried to use fear to drive us away. Any psi mind that can put out a structure like that is very good! Dangerously good." She shook her head. "I don't think anyone could say exactly what a whole world of creatures who can do that mightn't be able to do otherwise!"

"Three worlds," said Trigger.

"Yes, three worlds. So the Siren operation can't just stop. They don't know enough about us. They might think we're very dangerous to them, and, of course, we are dangerous. The three worlds are there, and sooner or later somebody's going to do something stupid about them. And something will get started--if it hasn't started already." She glanced at Trigger, smiled briefly. "Until now, I was thinking it might be only your imagination! But it isn't. This is a really bad matter."

Trigger said after a moment, "I wish it had been only my

imagination!" She looked at the Siren container. "You still think you can handle it?"

Telzey shrugged. "I wouldn't know by myself. But I'm sure Pilch gave that careful consideration."

Trigger reflected, tongue tip between lips, nodded. "Yes, she must have. It seems you've been pushed into something, Telzey."

"We've both been pushed into something," Telzey said.

Trigger sighed. "Well, I can't blame her too much! It has to be done, and the Service couldn't do it—at least not quickly enough. But I won't blame you at all if you want to pull out."

"I might want to pull out," Telzey admitted. "It's more than I'd counted on. But I'd be going around worrying about the Sirens then, like you've been doing. We know more now to be worried about."

"So you're staying?"

"Yes."

Trigger smiled. "I can't say I'm sorry! Look. It's getting late, and you'll have to be off to college early. Let's talk about strictly non-eerie things for a little, and turn in."

So they talked about non-eerie matters, and soon went to bed, and slept undisturbed until morning, when Telzey flew off to Pehanron College.

That evening, she slipped a probe lightly into the psi-emptiness of the Siren—an area she'd kept away from since her first contact with it. She thought presently it didn't seem quite as empty as it had. There might be something there. Something perhaps like a vague, distant shadow, only occasionally and briefly discernible.

She withdrew the probe carefully.

"Let's leave the psi block on until I've finished with the exams," she

told Trigger later. "I've picked up as much as I can use for a start." She wasn't so sure now of the psi block's absolute dependability when it came to the Siren. But it should act as a temporary restraint.

Trigger didn't comment. Telzey slept in the house the rest of the week, and nothing of much significance happened. What remained of the exams wasn't too significant either; she went breezing through it all with only half her attention. Then the end of the week came, and she moved into the summerhouse. In three weeks, she'd be attending graduation ceremonies at Pehanron College. Until then, her time was her own.

7

It was early on the first morning after the exams then that Telzey had her first serious session with the Siren. She'd closed the door to the study and moved an armchair to a point from where she could observe the container. Trigger wasn't present; she'd stay out in the house to avoid distracting Telzey, and to handle interruptions like ComWeb calls. Ezd Malion, the caretaker, usually checked in before noon to get shopping instructions.

Telzey settled herself in the chair, relaxed physically. Mentally there'd be no relaxing. If the Siren entity followed the reaction pattern described in the Service reports, she shouldn't be running into immediate problems. But it might not stay with the pattern.

Her probe moved cautiously into the psi-emptiness. After a time, she gained again the impression of a few days before: it wasn't as empty as it had appeared at first contact. Something shadowy, distant, seemed to be there.

She began to work with the impression. What did she feel about it? A vague thing--and large. Cold perhaps. Yes. Cold and dark... .

It was what she felt, no more than that. But her feelings were all she had to work with at this stage. Out of them other things could develop. There was this vague, dark, cold largeness then, connected with the Siren on the study table. She tried to gain some impression of the relationship.

An impression came suddenly, a negative one. The relationship had been denied. Afterward, the darkness seemed to have become a little colder. Telzey's nerves tingled. There was no change otherwise, but she'd had a response. Her psi sensors reached toward the fringes of the darkness, seemed to touch it, still found nothing that allowed a probe. She had a symbol of what was there, not yet its reality. But the search had moved on a step.

Then there was an interruption. She knew suddenly she wasn't alone in the study. This was much more definite than any previous feeling that there might be someone or something about. She still sensed nothing specific, but the hair at the nape of her neck was trying to lift, and the skin of her back prickled with awareness of another's presence in the room.

Telzey didn't look around, knowing she'd see no one if she did. Instead, she flicked a search probe out suddenly. As suddenly the presence was gone.

She sat quiet a moment, returned her attention to the symbol. Nothing there had changed. She withdrew from it, stood up, turned the container's psi block back on, and looked at her watch. About an hour had passed since she'd entered the study.

. . .

She found Trigger in the conservatory, tending to the plants under the indoor sun. "Trigger," she said, "did you happen to be thinking about me a few minutes ago?"

"Probably," Trigger said. "I've been thinking about you right along, wondering how you were doing. Why?"

"Has there ever been anything to indicate you might be a psi?"

Trigger looked surprised.

"Well," she said, "I understand everybody's a bit of a psi. So I suppose I'm that. I've never done anything out of the ordinary, though. Except perhaps--" She hesitated.

"Except perhaps what?" Telzey asked.

Trigger told her about the Old Galactics and her contacts with them.

"Great day in the morning!" Telzey said, astounded, when Trigger concluded. "You certainly have unusual acquaintances!"

"Of course, no one's to know they're there," Trigger remarked.

"Well, I won't tell."

"I know you won't. You think it might mean I'm a kind of telepath?"

"It might," Telzey said. "It wouldn't have to. They may simply have themselves tuned in on you." She stood a moment, reflecting. "I ran into a heavy-duty psi once who didn't have the faintest idea he was one," she said. "It was a problem because all sorts of extraordinary things kept happening to him and around him. Right now, anything like that could be disturbing."

Trigger looked concerned. "Have there been disturbances?"

"I haven't noticed anything definite," Telzey said untruthfully. "But I've been wondering."

"Could you find out about me if I undid that mind shield they gave me?"

Telzey sat down. "Let's try."

Trigger wished the shield out of existence. Some little time passed. Then Telzey said, "You can put the shield back."

"Well?" Trigger asked. "Am I?"

"You are," Telzey said absently. "I thought you might be, from the way you've been worrying about the Sirens." She shook her head. "Trigger, that's the most disorganized psi mind I've ever contacted! I wonder why Pilch never mentioned it."

Trigger hesitated. "Now that *you've* mentioned it," she said, "I believe Pilch did suggest something of the kind on one occasion. I thought I'd misunderstood her. She didn't refer to it again."

"Well, if you like," said Telzey, "we can take a week off after we're through with the Siren, and see if we can't make you operational."

Trigger rubbed her nose tip. "Frankly, I doubt that I'd want to be operational."

"Why?"

"You and Pilch seem to thrive on it," Trigger said, "but I've met other psis who weren't cheery people. I suppose you can pick up a whole new parcel of problems when you have abilities like that."

"You pick up problems, all right," Telzey acknowledged.

"That's what I thought. And I," Trigger said, "seem to find all the problems I can handle without adding complications. Could that disorganized psi mind of mine do anything to disturb you when you're trying to work with the Siren?"

Telzey shook her head. Trigger, psi-latent, hadn't been unconsciously responsible for those manifestations, couldn't have been. Neither was the Siren. This time, there'd been, for a moment, a decidedly human quality about the immaterial presence.

So the Psychology Service was keeping an eye on proceedings here. She'd half expected it. And they'd assigned an operator of exceptional quality to the job--*she* couldn't have prowled about an alerted telepath and remained as well concealed.

Nor, Telzey thought, was that the only concealed high-quality psi around. While Trigger was talking about the Old Galactics, she'd recalled that flick of mind-stuff she caught the moment the Siren container came unshielded in the Haplandia Hotel.

It seemed the Old Galactics, too, had an interest in the Siren specimen, and were represented in the summerhouse... .

Did either of them know about the other? Did the Siren entity know about either of them, or suspect it had an occupant? It was nothing she could mention to Trigger--there was too much psi involved all around, and Trigger's surface thoughts were accessible to any telepath who wanted to follow them.

She'd have to await developments--and meanwhile push ahead toward the probe. Around that point, everything should start falling into place. It would have to.

She told Trigger what she'd accomplished so far, added, "I've probably got the contact process started. This afternoon I'll pick the symbol up again and see." She yawned, stretched slowly. "How about we go for a long walk before lunch? This is great hiking country."

. . .

They went down to the end of the grounds, past the house where Ezd Malion and his wife lived, and on to the banks of the lake. The sun was out that morning; it was chilly, blustery, refreshing. They followed narrow trails used more often by animals than by people. It was over an hour before they turned back for lunch.

Early in the afternoon then, Telzey went into the study and closed the door. She emerged four hours later. Trigger regarded her with some concern. "You look pretty worn out!"

"I am pretty worn out," Telzey acknowledged. "It was hard work. Let's go have some coffee, and I'll tell you."

She'd picked up her symbol with no trouble--a good sign. She settled her attention on it, and waited. There'd been changes, she decided presently. It was as if a kind of life were seeping into the symbol, accumulating there. Another good sign. No need to push it now; she was moving in the right direction.

That might have gone on about an hour. Physically Telzey was feeling a little uncomfortable by then, which again could be counted, technically, a good sign, though she didn't like it. There was a frequent shivering in her skin, moments when breathing seemed difficult, other manifestations of apprehension. What it meant was that she was getting close.

Then there was an instant when she wasn't close, but there. Or *it* was there. The symbol faded as what had been behind it came slowly through. This was no visualization, but reality as sensed by psi. It was the darkness, the cold, in the false emptiness. It simmered with silent power. It was eminently forbidding.

It was there--then it wasn't there. It seemed to have become nonexistent.

But she needed no symbols to return to it now. What she had contacted, she could contact again. It was in her memory; and memory was a link. She could draw herself back to it.

She did, quickly lost it once more. Now there were two links. All she needed was patience.

Any feeling of passing time, all awareness of the room about her, of the chair in which she sat, even of her body, was gone. She was mind, in the universe of mind where she moved and searched, tracing the thing she had contacted, finding it, establishing new connections between herself and it. She lost it again and again, but each time it was easier to find, less difficult to hold. It was a great fish, and she a tiny fisherman, not fastening the fish to herself, but herself to the fish. Finally, the connection was stable, unchanging. When she was sure of that, she broke it. She could resume it whenever she chose.

At that point, she became conscious of the other reality, of her physical self and her surroundings.

And—once more—of having uninvited company.

This time, she ignored the presence. It faded quietly from her awareness as she opened her eyes, sat up in the armchair... .

"I think we're almost there," she told Trigger. "The thing's a structure, a psi structure. It's what the Service xenos found and tried to probe. And I can believe it bounced them—it's really charged up!"

"You're going to try to probe it?" Trigger asked.

Telzey nodded. "I'll have to. There's been no mind trace of the Siren, so that structure must act as its shield. I'll have to try to work through it. How, I won't know till I find out what it's like." She was silent a moment. "If it bounces me, too, I don't know what else we can do," she said. "But we'll start worrying about that then. I do have very good shields. And if I can get one solid contact with the Siren mind, we may have the problem solved. Unless they're basically murderous, of course. But I agree with you that they don't really seem to be that."

There were other factors involved. But that was still nothing to talk to Trigger about. "So everything's set up for the probe now," Telzey concluded. "Next time I'll try it. But I want to be a lot fresher for that, so it won't be tonight. We'll see how I feel tomorrow."

. . .

They turned in early. Telzey fell into sleep at once like drifting deep, deep down through a cool dark quiet sea... . Some time later then, she found herself standing in the Siren's container.

It wasn't exactly the container, though there was a shadowy indication of its walls in the distance. A kind of cold desert stretched out about her, and she stood at the base of the Siren. A Siren which twisted

enormously up into an icy sky, gigantic, higher than a mountain, huge limbs writhing. A noise like growing thunder was in the air; the desert sand shook under her, and her feet were rooted immovably in the sand. Then she saw that the Siren was tilting, falling toward her, would crush her. She heard herself screaming in terror.

She awoke.

She sat up in bed, breathing in quick short gasps. She looked around the dark room, reached for the light switch. As she touched it, light blazed in the hall beyond the door. "Trigger?" she called.

From the direction of Trigger's room came a shaky, "Yes?"

"Wait a moment!" Telzey climbed out of bed, started toward the door. Trigger met her there, robe wrapped around her, face pale, hair disheveled. "What's the matter?" Telzey asked.

Trigger tried to smile. "Had a dream--a nightmare. *Whew!* Going down to the kitchen for some hot milk to settle myself." She laughed unsteadily.

"A nightmare?" Telzey stared at her. "Wait--I'll come along."

They'd had the same dream. A dream apparently identical in all respects, except that in Trigger's dream, it was Trigger who was about to be crushed by the toppling monster Siren. Sitting in the kitchen, sipping their hot milk, they discussed it, looking at each other with uncertain eyes. Something had come into their minds as they slept

"That Old Galactic shield of yours," Telzey pointed out, "is supposed to keep anything from reaching your subconscious mind processes--which includes the dream mechanisms."

Trigger gave her a startled glance.

"Unless I allow it!" she said. "And I think I did allow it."

"What?"

Trigger nodded, frowned, trying to remember. "I was half asleep," she said slowly. "Something seemed to be telling me to dissolve the shield. So I did."

"Why?"

Trigger shrugged helplessly. "It *seemed* perfectly all right! I wasn't surprised or alarmed—not until I started dreaming." She reflected, shook her head. "That's all I remember. I suppose there was another of those ghost structures floating around?"

Telzey nodded. "Probably." She couldn't recall anything that had happened before she started dreaming. "Some general impression—warning, threat," she said. "With a heavy fear charge."

"How could we have turned that into the same dream?"

Telzey said, "We didn't. Your mind was wide open. I'm a telepath." A dream could be manufactured in a flash, from whatever material seemed to match the impulse that induced it. "One of us whipped up the dream," she said. "The other shared it. We came awake almost at once then."

"That Siren," said Trigger after a moment, "really doesn't want to be probed."

"No, not at all. And it may be aware that I've got as far as its shield."

Two other psi minds around here, Telzey thought, should also be aware of that fact. The Psychology Service would hardly be trying to discourage her from the probe. But the observer the Old Galactics had left planted in the Siren might have some reason for doing it—and might have the ability to induce a warning nightmare. She wished she had some clue to the interest that ancient race was taking in the Sirens.

They finished their milk, sat talking a few minutes longer, decided there was no sense sitting up the rest of the night, and went back to bed. They left the light on in the hall outside their rooms. Somewhat to Telzey's surprise, she felt herself fall asleep again almost as soon

as her head touched the pillow.

8

They awoke to a disagreeable day. The sky was gloomy; a wind blew in cold gusts about the house; and there were intermittent falls of rain. Breakfast was a silent affair, as each was withdrawn into her own thoughts. When they'd finished, Trigger went to a window and looked out. Telzey joined her. "Gruesome weather!" Trigger remarked darkly. "I feel depressed."

"So do I," said Telzey.

Trigger glanced at her. "You don't think it's the weather, do you?"

"No."

"It's in the house all around us," Trigger said, nodding. "I've felt it since I woke up. As if there were something unpleasant about that I might see or hear at any moment. More of that ghost stuff, isn't it?"

"Yes. It may wear off." But Telzey wasn't so sure it would wear off, and whether the entity behind the psi block wasn't reaching them now through the block. This was a subtler assault on their nerves, the darkening of mood, uneasiness, a prodding of anxieties—all too diffused to counter.

An hour later, it didn't seem to be wearing off. "You shouldn't try the probe while you're feeling like this, should you?" Trigger asked.

Telzey shook her head. "Not if I can help it—but I don't think I should put it off too long either."

They were vulnerable, and they'd stirred something up. Even left alone, it wouldn't necessarily settle down. It might keep undermining their defenses for hours, or shift to a more definite attack. The probe

must be attempted, and soon. The Sirens existed, were an unpredictable factor; something had to be done. If she waited, she might be reduced to incapability. That could be the intention.

"Let's go outside and tramp around a while," Trigger said. "Maybe it will cheer us up. I usually like a good rainy day, really."

They donned rain capes and boots, went down to the lake. But the walk didn't cheer them up. The wind stirred the cold lake surface, soughed through the trees about them. The sky seemed to be growing darker; and the notion came to Telzey that if she looked closely enough, she'd be able to make out the giant Siren of their dream writhing among distant clouds. She stopped short, caught Trigger by the arm.

"This isn't doing any good!" she said. "It's focused on us, and we're dragging it around with us here. Let's go back, pick up swim gear, and clear out! I know a beach where it won't be rainy and cold. We can be there in an hour."

They sped south in the Cloudsplitter, came down on a beach lying golden and hot under a nearly cloudless sky. The wind that swept it was a fresh and happy one. They swam and tumbled in the surf, spirits lifting by the minute. They came out and sunned, talked and laughed, swam again, collected a troop of bronzed males, let themselves be taken to lunch, shook off the troop, fled fifty miles east along the beach, went back to the water for a final dip where breakers rose high, and emerged exhausted and laughing ten minutes later. "Now let's go tackle that Siren!"

They flew north again, dropping down at a town en route to buy two tickets to the currently most popular live show in Orado City. Just what would happen when the probe began seemed a rather good question. Enough had happened, at any rate, to make them feel the Malions shouldn't be anywhere in the area at the time. They stopped off at the caretaker's house, explained they'd intended taking in the show that night, but found they couldn't make it; so there were two expensive tickets on hand which shouldn't go to waste... . Ezd and wife were on their way to Orado City thirty minutes later.

. . .

Parked at the northern end of the grounds, Telzey and Trigger watched the caretakers leave. The Cloudsplitter lifted then, slid down into the carport of the summerhouse. They went in by a side entrance.

The house was quiet. If anything had taken note of their return, it gave no indication. They got arranged quickly in the study. Trigger would be sitting in on this session. The finicky part of the work was done; someone else's presence, the subtle whisper of half-caught surface thoughts and emotional flickerings nearby when her sensors were tuned fine, could no longer be a distraction to Telzey. And company would be welcome to both of them now. Trigger took a chair to the right of the one Telzey had been using, a dozen feet away. "Ready?" Telzey asked from beside the Siren container.

Trigger settled herself. "When you are."

Telzey switched off the psi block. Something came into the study then. Telzey glanced at Trigger. No, Trigger hadn't noticed. Telzey went slowly to her chair, sat down.

The presence was back. *That* didn't surprise her.

But Trigger... .

She looked over at Trigger. Trigger gave her a sober smile. There was alert intelligence in her expression, along with concern she wasn't trying to hide. Trigger, undeniably, was in that chair, aware and awake. But in a sense she'd vanished a moment ago. The normal tiny stirrings of mind, of individuality, had ceased. There was stillness now, undisturbed.

Telzey slid a probe toward the stillness. It didn't seem to touch anything, but it was stopped. She drew it back.

A shield of totally unfamiliar type. Trigger evidently didn't realize it

was there. But it sealed her off from outside influences like undetectable heavy armor.

Things had begun to add up... .

Telzey checked her own safeguards briefly. Mind screens which might be the lightest of veils, meant only to obscure her from psi senses while she peered out, so to speak, between them. Or, on other occasions, tough and resilient shields which had turned the sharpest probe she'd ever encountered and held up under ponderous onslaughts of psi energy. They could shift in an instant from one extreme to the other. Sometimes, though rarely now, they disappeared completely.

She restored contact--and it was back at once before her: the cold darkness, the emptiness that wasn't empty, the sense of forbidding, repelling power. She scanned cautiously along the impression but could make out no more about it than before.

So then the initial probe! A sensing psi needle reached, touched, drove in, withdrew. As it withdrew, something wrenched briefly and violently at Telzey.

She waited. The xenotelepathic faculty was an automatic one, operating in subconscious depths beyond her reach. She didn't know why it did what it did. But when she touched an alien mind, it began transforming alien concepts to concepts sufficiently human in kind so that she understood them; and if she wanted to talk to that mind, it turned her concepts into ones the alien grasped. Usually the process was swift; within a minute or two there might be the beginnings of understanding.

No understanding came here. Her screens had gone tight as something gripped and twisted her. When she relaxed them deliberately again, nothing else happened.

A deeper probe then. She launched it, braced for the mental distortion.

It came. The shields stiffened, damping it, but she had giddy feelings

of being dragged sideways, stretched, compressed. And the probe was being blocked. She drew it back. Strangeness writhed for a moment among her thoughts and was gone. Echo, at last, of alien mind--of the mind that wanted no contact!

The sense of violent distortion ended almost as soon as her probe withdrew. The dark lay before her again, sullen and repelling. A psi device, assembled by mind. A shield, a barrier. A formidable one. But she'd touched for a moment the fringes of the alien mind concealed by the barrier, and now contact with it, whether it wanted contact or not, might be very close. She'd have to do more than she'd done. She decided to trust her shields.

She paused then, at a new awareness.

She wasn't alone. The presence had followed. More than a presence now. Mind, human mind, behind heavy shielding.

"What do you want?" Telzey asked.

Thought replied. "After you make the contact, you may need support."

She would. "Can you give it?"

"I believe so. Be ready!" The impression ended.

Telzey moved in her shields toward the dark barrier, reached it. The barrier awoke like a rousing beast. Her probe stabbed out, hard and solid. The barrier shook at her savagely, and mind-strangeness flickered again through her thoughts. She caught it, tagged it, felt incomprehensibility and an icy deadliness in the instant before it was gone. Now there had been contact--a thread of psi remained drawn between herself and the alien mind, a thin taut line which led through the barrier. Following the line, she moved forward into the barrier, felt a madness of power surge up about her.

"Link with me quickly before--"

Vast pressures clamped down. Telzey and the other spun together

through the thunders of chaos.

She'd joined defenses before the barrier struck. With whom, she didn't know, and there was no time just now to find out. But she'd felt new strength blend with hers in that moment, and the strength was very, very useful. For here was pounding confusion, a blurring and blackening of thought, a hideous distorting and twisting of emotion. The barrier was trying to eject her, force her back, batter her into helplessness. It was like moving upstream through raging and shifting currents.

But the double shield absorbed it. And her psi line held. For a time she wasn't sure she was moving at all through the psi barrier's frenzies. Then she knew again that she was—

9

She was lying in bed in a darkened room and didn't have to open her eyes to know it was her bedroom in the summerhouse. She could sense its familiar walls and furnishings about her. How she'd got there, she didn't know. Her mind screens were closed; not drawn into a tight shield, but closed. Automatic precautionary procedure.

Precaution against what?

She didn't know that either.

Something evidently had happened. She felt very unpleasantly weak; and it wasn't the weakness of fatigued muscles. Most of her strength seemed simply absent. There were no indications of physical damage otherwise. But her mental condition was deplorable! What had knocked out her memory?

The answer came slowly.

The Hana had knocked out her memory.

With that, it was all back. Telzey lay quiet, reflecting. That incredible species! Waiting on the three worlds they'd filled wherever they could grow, worlds transformed into deadly psi forts--waiting for the return of an enemy they'd fought, how long ago? Fifty thousand human years? A hundred thousand?

They'd been convinced the Veen would be back and attempt again to enslave or destroy them. And they'd been ready to receive the Veen. What giant powers of attack and defense they'd developed in that long waiting while their minds lay deeply hidden! When an occasional psi entity began to search them out, it was hurled back by the reef of monstrous energies they'd drawn about themselves. None had ever succeeded in passing that barrier.

Until we did, Telzey thought.

They had; and the Hana mind, nakedly open, immensely powerful, believing they were Veen who had penetrated its defenses, began killing them. They'd lasted a while, under that double shield. They couldn't have lasted very long even so, because life was being drained from them into the Hana mind in spite of the shield; but there was time enough for Telzey's concept transforming process to get into operation. Then the Hana realized they weren't Veen, weren't enemies, didn't intend to attack it; and it stopped killing them.

Things had begun to get rather blurred for Telzey around then. But she'd picked up some additional details--mostly about the other who'd come through the barrier with her.

She relaxed her screens gradually. As she'd suspected, that other one was in the room. She opened her eyes, sat up unsteadily in bed, turned on the room lights.

Pilch sat in a chair halfway across the room, watching her. "I thought you'd come awake," she remarked.

Telzey settled back on the bed. "How's Trigger?"

"Perfectly all right. Asleep at present. She was behind a rather

formidable shield at the time of contact."

"The Old Galactic's," said Telzey.

"Yes."

"What was *it* doing here--in the Hana?"

"A precaution the Old Galactics decided on after they realized what the Hana was," Pilch said. "If our psi investigations failed and the Hana began to cut loose, it would have died on the physical side. They have fast methods."

Telzey was silent a moment. "As I remember it," she said then, "you weren't in much better shape than I was when I passed out."

"True enough," agreed Pilch. "We were both in miserable shape, more than half dead. Fortunately, I'm good at restoring myself. At that, it took me several days to get back to par."

"Several days?"

"It's been ten days since you made the contact," Pilch told her.

"Ten days!" Startled, Telzey struggled back up to a sitting position.

"Relax," said Pilch. "No one's missed you. Your family is under the impression you're vacationing around, and it won't occur to the caretakers to come near the house until we're ready to let them resume their duties. Which will be quite soon. I know you still feel wrung out, but you've been gaining ground very rapidly tonight. A few more hours will see you back to normal health. That was no ordinary weakness."

Telzey studied her thoughtfully.

"You use anyone about any way you like, don't you?" she said.

"You, too, have been known to use people, Telzey Amberdon!" Pilch remarked. "You and Trigger, in your various ways, share the quality of being most effective when thrown on your own resources. It

seemed our best chance, and it was. None of our xenos could have done precisely what you did at the critical moment, and I'm not at all sure the contact could have been made in any other manner."

She glanced at the watch on her wrist, stood up and came over to the bed.

"Now you're awake and I'm no longer needed here. I'll be running along," she said. "Trigger can fill you in. If there's some specific question you'd like me to answer, go ahead."

"There's one question," Telzey said. "How old are you, Pilch?"

Pilch smiled. "Never you mind how old I am."

"You were there before they founded the Federation," Telzey said reflectively.

"If you saw that," said Pilch, "you've also seen that I helped found the Federation. And that I help maintain it. You might keep it in mind. Any time a snip of a psi genius can be useful in one of my projects, I'll use her."

Telzey shook her head slightly. "I don't think you'll use me again."

Pilch's knowing gray eyes regarded her a moment. Then Pilch's hand reached down and touched her cheek. Something like a surge of power flowed through Telzey and was absorbed. She blinked, startled.

Pilch smiled.

"We'll see, little sister! We'll see!" she said.

Then she was gone.

• • •

"Are you angry with her?" Triqger asked, an hour later, perched on

the edge of Telzey's bed while they both took cautious sips from cups of very hot broth. It was early morning now, and they were alone in the house. The Hana and the Old Galactic had left with Pilch's people days ago, and Trigger had gathered they were going first to bring the news that the Veen War was over to the other Hanas currently in Hub laboratories. Afterward, they'd all be off together to the Hana planets to make arrangements which would avoid further problems.

Telzey shook her head.

"I'll forgive her this time," she said. "She took a chance on her own life helping me get through the Hana shield, and she knew it. Then she seems to have spent around a week of her time here, to make sure I'd recover."

Trigger nodded. "Yes, she did. You were looking pretty dead for a while, Telzey! They said you'd be all right, but I wasn't at all certain. Then Pilch appeared and took over, and you started to pick right up." She sighed. "Pilch has her ways!"

Telzey sipped her broth meditatively. The Hanas hadn't been the only ones who'd had trouble with the Veen. It appeared that conflict wasn't much more than a minor skirmish on the fringes of the ancient war which blazed through the empire of the Old Galactics and destroyed it, before the survivors of those slow-moving entities brought their own weapons into full play and wiped out the Veen. "The Old Galactics weren't too candid with you either, were they?" she said.

"No, they weren't," said Trigger. She regarded Telzey soberly. "It looks as though we got a bit involved in galactic politics for a while!"

Telzey nodded. "And I personally plan to keep out of galactic politics in the future!"

"Same here," Trigger agreed. "It doesn't--" She raised her head quickly as the ComWeb chimed in the hall. "Well, well! We seem to have been restored to the world! Wonder who it is... ."

She hurried from the room, came back shortly, smiling. "That Pilch!"

"Who was it?"

"Ezd Malion. Calling to say he was going to town early and did we want any groceries."

"No idea that it's been ten days since he talked to us last?" asked Telzey.

"None whatever! He's just picking up where he was told to leave off."

Telzey nodded.

"That's about what we'll be doing," she said. "But at least we know we're doing it."