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Herds

Stephen Goldin

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*Dedicated to my mother, Frances Goldin,
who always did like mysteries*

Prologue

The planet Zarti was peaceful at one time. The most advanced race was a species of gentle, long-necked herbivores who had no greater ambitions than full bellies. These Zarticku banded together in herds for protection from predators and eventually devised simple methods of communication to exchange basic ideas among themselves.

Without warning, the Offasii came. This space-faring race arrived *en masse* at Zarti, hundreds of millions of them—conceivably the entire Offasii population—in ships that were each several miles in diameter. They swarmed down like locusts upon this idyllic planet and irrevocably changed the course of life there.

First they formed zoos, gathering up specimens of each major species of animal they could find. These specimens were tested, probed and prodded in every

conceivable manner for reasons too subtle to comprehend, The Zarticku passed the test and were kept, while the others were returned to their natural environments.

There was a planet-wide round-up. All the Zarticku that could be captured were placed in special pens; the ones who couldn't be captured were killed outright. Then the tortures began. Many Zarticku. were killed and dissected. Some others were not so lucky—they were cut open alive so that their systems could be observed in action. The screams of those poor creatures were allowed to filter down into the penned herds, panicking other animals and causing still more deaths.

No Zarticku were allowed to breed normally. Specially selected sperm and ova were matched by artificial insemination, while the Offasii calmly recorded the results of these breedings for three generations. When their computers had enough data, they began altering the DNA structure of the Zartic gametes. Genes they disliked were removed. New ones were substituted to see what effects they would have on the new generation. Some of these new genes also proved to be undesirable. They were eliminated in subsequent generations.

After twenty Zartic lifetimes, a generation was born that matched the Offasii ideal. When this generation had been raised to maturity all remaining members of preceding generations were put to death, leaving none but this new breed of Zarticku to inherit the world.

These new creatures were substantially different from their ancestors who had roamed free in the

forests of Zarti. They were bigger, stronger and healthier. Their eyesight was keener. The tough, matted hair that had been on their backs had become thin armor plating. The little appendages at the shoulders that had originally served to steady tree branches while eating had been developed into full-grown arms, ending in six-fingered bands with two opposable thumbs that could grasp and manipulate objects. Their average lifespan had been doubled. And, most importantly, they were far smarter than their ancestors had been. Their intelligence level had been quadrupled at the very least.

They also possessed a legacy from their predecessors. Stories of the Offasii tortures had been passed down over the years by word of mouth, with each generation adding its new tales of horror. Stories grew in the retelling, and the mythos of Offasii cruelty increased.

Now that they had apparently gotten what they wanted, the Offasii proceeded to use—and abuse—their subjects. The Zarticku became slaves to the older race, used in the most menial and routine of tasks. They were chained to watch machines that required no supervision, forced to take part in rituals that served no purpose, made to disassemble machines only so that other Zarticku could put them together again. They could be hunted and killed for sport by the Offasii. Sometimes they were pitted in arenas against wild animals or even others of their own species. Although copulation was permitted, the choice of mates was made by the Offasii, and followed no pattern that was discernible to the Zarticku.

The period of slavery lasted for about a century. During this time, the face of the planet changed. Every square inch of arable land was turned to good use by the brutally efficient Offasii. Cities arose, planned and engineered to perfection. Systems of transportation and communication were universal.

Then one day, the Offasii left. It was an orderly and well-planned exodus, without a word spoken to the startled Zarticku. One moment the Offasii had been running the world in their usual brisk fashion, the next they calmly walked into their enormous spaceships—which had sat dormant since the day of their landing—and took off into space. They left behind them all their works, their cities, their farms, their machines. Also abandoned was a race of very stunned, very perplexed former slaves.

The Zarticku could not at first believe that their masters had really departed. They huddled in fear that this might be some new and devious torture. But weeks passed, and there was no sign anywhere of the Offasii. Meanwhile, there were crops and machines that required tending. Almost by reflex, they went back to their accustomed tasks.

Several more centuries passed and the Zarticku turned their specially-bred intelligence to their own use. They examined the machines that the Offasii had left behind and discovered the principles of science; from there, they improved and adapted the machines to their own purposes. They developed a culture of their own. They used their intellect to build philosophies and abstract thought. They devised their own recreations and enjoyments. They began to live the comfortable life of an intelligent species that

has mastered its own planet.

But beneath the veneer of success was always fear—the fear of the Offasii. Centuries of cruel oppression had left their mark on the Zartic psyche. What if the Offasii should someday return? They would not take kindly to this usurpation of their equipment by upstart slaves. They would devise new and more horrible tortures and the Zarticku, as always, would suffer.

It was this atmosphere of fear and curiosity that nurtured the boldest step the Zartic race had ever taken—the Space Exploration Project.

Chapter 1

A two-lane stretch of California 1 ran along the coastline. To the west, sometimes only a couple of hundred feet from the road, was the Pacific Ocean, quietly lapping its waves over the sand and stone of San Marcos State Beach. To the east, a cliff of white, naked rock sprang upwards to a height of over two hundred feet. Beyond the cliff lay a string of mountains. They weren't very tall, the highest barely a thousand feet above sea level, but they were sufficient for the local residents. The mountains were covered with sparse forests of cypress trees and tangled underbrush, with a few other types of vegetation daring to make their presence known at scattered intervals.

At the top of the cliff, overlooking the highway and the ocean, was a small wooden cabin. It stood in the center of a cleared area, a simple understate-

ment of human presence in the midst of nature. A car was parked beside the cabin on the gravel that had been spread around the structure's perimeter. The gravel extended for about ten yards, then gave way to loose dry dirt atop hard rock until it entered the trees another six yards. farther on.

There was a narrow dirt road that led up from the highway to the cabin. It did not come straight up, but wound snake-like among the trees until it reached the clearing. A pair of headlights could currently be seen weaving along that road, alternately vanishing and reappearing as the car rounded various curves or passed behind groups of cypress trees.

Stella Stoneham stood in the darkness, watching those headlights approach. Her internal organs were trying valiantly to tie themselves into knots as the lights came nearer. She took a final long drag on her cigarette and ground it out nervously beneath her foot in the gravel. If there were any person she didn't want to see right now it was her husband, but it looked as though the choice was not hers to make. She frowned and looked up into the sky. The night was fairly clear, with only a few small patches of cloud obscuring the stars. She looked back down at the headlights. He would be here in a minute. Sighing, she went back inside the cabin.

The interior normally cheered her with its brightness and warmth, but tonight there was an ironic quality about it that only deepened her depression. The room was large and uncrowded, giving the illusion of space and freedom that Stella had wanted. There was a long brown sofa along one wall, with a small reading table and lamp beside it. In the next

corner, going clockwise, there was a sink and a small stove; a supply cupboard hung on the wall near them, elaborately carved out of hardwood, with scrollwork and little red gnomes in the corner holding it up. Also on the wall was a rack of assorted kitchen utensils, still shiny from lack of use. Continuing around the room there was a small white dinette set standing neatly in the third corner. The door to the back bedroom and bathroom stood half ajar, with light from the main room penetrating only slightly into the darkness beyond the threshold. Finally there was a writing desk with a typewriter and telephone and an old folding chair beside it in the corner nearest the door. The center of the room was bare except for a frayed brown carpet that covered the wooden floor. The place was not much to cling to, Stella knew, but if a fight were going to take place at all—as it now appeared it would—it would be better to handle it on her own territory.

She sat down on the sofa and stood up again immediately. She paced the length of the room, wondering what she would do with her hands while she was talking or listening. Men at least were lucky enough to have pockets. Outside she could hear the car crunch its way up the gravel to the very door of the cabin and stop. A car door opened and slammed shut. A man's footsteps clomped up the three front stairs. The door flew open and her husband walked in.

This was to be the eleventh solar system he had personally explored, which meant that, to Garnna iff-Almanic, the task of finding and examining plan-

ets had gotten as routine as a job that exotic could become. The Zartic had trained for years before even being allowed on the Project. There was, first of all, the rigorous mental training that would allow the combination of machines and drugs to project his mind away from his body and far out into the depths of space. But an Explorer had to have more training than just that. He would have to chart his course in the void, both in attempting to locate a new planet and in finding his way home again afterwards; that required an extensive knowledge of celestial navigation. He had to classify in an instant the general type of planet he was investigating, which called for up-to-the-minute expertise in the growing science of planetology. He would be called on to make a report on the life forms, if any, that the planet held; that necessitated a knowledge of biology. And, in the event that the planet harbored intelligent life, he had to be able to describe the level of their civilization from little more than a glance—and that required that he be made as free of personal prejudices and fears as possible, for alien societies had different ways of doing things that could send a normal Zartic into hysterical fits.

But most of all, he had had to overcome the instinctive Zartic fear of the Offasii, and that required the hardest training of the lot. His mind hovered above this new solar system, inspecting it for possibilities. It was the farthest Exploration made to date, well over a hundred parsecs from Zarti. The star was average, a yellow dwarf—the type frequently associated with having planetary systems. But as to whether this system had planets... Garnna made a

mental grimace. This was always the part he hated most.

He began to disperse himself through the space immediately surrounding the star. His mental fibers spread like a net, becoming thinner and thinner as he pushed his fragments of mind outward in all three dimensions in his quest for planets.

There! He touched one almost immediately, and discarded it just as quickly. It was nothing but an airless ball of rock, and not even within the star's zone of habitability for protoplasmic life. Although it was faintly conceivable that some sort of life might exist there, it did not bother him. He continued to spread his net outward.

Another planet. He was glad to find a second, because the three points that he now had—sun and two planets—would determine for him the ecliptic plane of the system. It had long since been discovered that planetary systems formed generally within a single plane, with only minor individual deviations from it. Now that he knew its orientation, he could stop his three-dimensional expansion and concentrate, instead, on exploring all the area within the ecliptic plane.

The second planet was also a disappointment. It was within the zone of habitability, but that was the only thing that could be said in its favor. The atmosphere was covered with clouds and filled with carbon dioxide, while the surface was so incredibly hot that oceans of aluminum and rivers of tin were commonplace. No protoplasmic life could exist here, either. Garnna continued on in his Exploration.

The next thing he encountered was a bit of a sur-

prise—a double planet. Two large, planet-sized objects circled the star in a common orbit. Upon closer inspection, one of the planets appeared far more massive than the other; Garnna began to think of that one as the primary and the other as a satellite.

He tried to focus as much attention as he could on this system while still maintaining the net he had spread through space. The satellite was another airless gray ball, smaller even than the first planet outward, and appeared quite lifeless, but the primary looked promising. From space it had a mottled blue and white appearance. The white was clouds and the blue, apparently, was liquid water. Large quantities of liquid water. That boded well for the existence of protoplasmic life there. He checked the atmosphere and was even more pleasantly surprised. There were large quantities of oxygen freely available for breathing. He made himself a mental note to investigate it more closely if nothing even better should turn up, and continued expanding outwards in his search for planets.

The next one he discovered was small and red. What little atmosphere there was seemed to consist mainly of carbon dioxide, with almost no detectable free oxygen. The surface temperature was acceptable to protoplasmic life, but there seemed to be little, if any, water available—a very dismal sign. Though this place had possibilities, the primary of the double planet had more. Garnna continued his expansion.

The net was becoming very thin, now, as the Zartic stretched himself farther and farther. Images were becoming blurry and his mind seemed to hold only a tenuous grip on its own identity. He encoun-

tered some tiny rocks floating in space, but declined to even consider them. The next world out was a gas giant. It was very difficult to make it out because his mentality was stretched so thin at this point, but that was not necessary. The search for planets was over in this system, he knew, for he had passed outside the zone of habitability once more. A gas giant like this could not exist within that zone, according to theory. There might be other planets beyond the orbit of this one, but they wouldn't matter, either. The Offasii would not be interested in them, and therefore Garnna wasn't interested in them.

He returned his attention to the double planet system. He felt enormous relief as he reeled in all the far-flung parts of his mind that had expanded through space. It was always a good feeling when the initial planetary survey was over, a feeling of bringing disparate elements together to form a cohesive whole once more. A feeling akin to making a Herd out of individuals, only on a smaller, more personal scale.

It was bad enough to be a lone Zartic out in space, cut off from the entire Herd not to mention the safety and security of his own iff-group. The job was necessary, of course, for the good of the Herd, but necessity did not make it any the more pleasant. And when an individual Zartic had to extend parts of himself until there was almost nothing left, that was almost unbearable. That was why Garnna hated that part of the mission the worst. But it was over, now, and he could concentrate on the real business of Exploration.

* * *

Wesley Stoneham was a big man, well over six feet, with broad, well-muscled shoulders and the face of a middle-aged hero. He still had all his hair, a thick black mane of it, cut so that it would even muss stylishly. The forehead beneath the hair was comparatively narrow and sported large, bushy eyebrows. His eyes were steel gray and determined, his nose prominent and straight. In his hand, he carried a medium-sized suitcase.

“I got your note,” was all he said as he took a folded piece of paper from his pocket and flipped it to the ground at his wife’s feet.

Stella exhaled softly. She recognized that tone all too well, and knew that this was going to be a long and bitter evening. “Why the suitcase?” she asked.

“As long as I was driving up here, I thought I might as well stay the night.” His voice was even and smooth, but there was an edge of command to it as he set the suitcase down on the floor.

“Don’t you even bother asking your hostess’s permission before moving in?”

“Why should I? This is my cabin, built with my money.” The emphasis on the “my” in both cases was slight but unmistakable.

She turned away from him. Even with her back to him, though, she could still feel his gaze piercing her soul. “Why not finish the thought, Wes? ‘My cabin, my money, my wife,’ isn’t that it?”

“You *are* my wife, you know.”

“Not any more.” Already she could feel the inside corners of her eyes starting to warm up, and she tried to check her emotions. Crying now would do no good, and might defeat her purpose. Besides, she had

learned from painful experience that Wesley Stoneham was not affected by tears.

“You are until the law says otherwise.” He strode across the room to her in two large steps, grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around. “And you *are* going to look at me when you talk to me.”

Stella tried to shake herself out of his grip, but his fingers just tightened all the more into her skin, one of them (did he do it intentionally?) hitting a nerve, so that a streak of pain raced across her shoulders. She stopped twisting and eventually he took his arms away again.

“That’s a little better,” he said. “The least a man can expect is a little civility from his own wife.”

“I’m sorry,” she said sweetly. There was a slight crack in her voice as she tried to force some gaiety into it. “I should go over to the stove and bake my big, strong mansy-wansy a welcome home cake.”

“Save the sarcasm for someone who likes that shit, Stella,” Stoneham growled. “I want to know why you want a divorce.”

“Why, my most precious one, it’s—” she began in the same saccharine tones. Stoneham gave her a hard slap against the cheek. “I told you to can that,” he said.

“I think my reasons should be more than apparent,” Stella said bitterly. There was a flush creeping slowly into the cheek where she’d been hit. She raised her hand to the spot, more out of self-consciousness than pain.

Stoneham’s nostrils flared, and his stare was supercold. Stella averted her eyes, but stubbornly stood her ground. There was ice on her husband’s words as

be asked, "Have you been having an affair with that overaged. hippie?"

It took a moment for her to realize who he meant. About a mile from the cabin, in Totido Canyon, a group of young people had moved into an abandoned summer camp and formed what they proudly called the "Totido Commune." Because of their unconventional behavior and dress, they were thought of by the surrounding residents as hippies and condemned accordingly. Their leader was an older man, at least in his late thirties, and he seemed to keep his group in order just this side of the law.

"Are you talking about Carl Polaski?" Stella asked incredulously.

"I don't mean Santa Claus."

Despite her nervousness, Stella laughed. "That's preposterous. And besides, he's not a hippie; he's a psychology professor doing research on the drop-out phenomenon."

"People tell me he's been hanging around this cabin a lot, Stell. I don't like that."

"There's nothing immoral about it. He runs some errands for me and does a few odd jobs. I pay him back by letting him use the cabin for writing. He types over here, because he can't get enough privacy to say what he really thinks at the commune. Sometimes we've talked. He's a very interesting man, Wes. But no, I haven't had any affairs with him, nor am I likely to."

"Then what's eating you? Why do you want a divorce?" He went to the sofa and sat down, never taking his eyes from her for an instant.

Stella paced back and forth in front of him a few

times. She folded and unfolded her hands, and finally let them hang at her sides. "I want to be able to have some self-respect," she said at last.

"You have that now. You can hold your head up to anyone in the country."

"That's not what I meant. I'd like, just once, to be able to sign my name 'Stella Stoneham' instead of 'Mrs. Wesley Stoneham.' Maybe give a party for the people *I* like, instead of your political cronies. Wes, I want to feel like I'm an equal partner in this marriage, not just another tasteful accessory to your home."

"I don't understand you. I've given you everything any woman could possibly want—"

"Except identity. As far as you're concerned, I'm not a human being, just a wife. I decorate your arm at hundred-dollar-a-plate dinners and make charming noises at the wives of other would-be politicians. I make a corporate lawyer socially respectable enough to think of running for office. And, when you're not using me, you forget about me, send me away to the little cabin by the sea or leave me to walk by myself around the fifteen rooms of the mansion, slowly rotting away. I can't live this way, Wes. I want out."

"What about a trial separation, maybe a month or so—"

"I said 'out,' O-U-T. A separation wouldn't do any good. The fault, dear husband, is not in our stars but in ourselves. I know you too well, and I know you'll never change into something that is acceptable to me. And I'll never be satisfied with being an ornament. So a separation would do us no good at all. I

want a divorce.”

Stoneham crossed his legs. “Have you told anyone about this yet?”

“No.” She shook her head. “No, I was planning to see Larry tomorrow, but I felt you should be told first.”

“Good,” Stoneham said in a barely audible whisper.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Stella asked sharply. Her hands were fidgeting, which was her cue to fumble through her purse on the writing desk for her pack of cigarettes. She needed one badly at this point.

But it wasn’t until she got a cigarette between her lips that she realized she was out of matches. “Got a light?”

“Sure.” Stoneham fished around in his coat pocket and pulled out a book of matches. “Keep them,” he said as he flipped them to his wife.

Stella caught them and examined them with interest. The outside of the book was smooth silver, with red and blue stars around the border. In the center were words that proclaimed:

WESLEY STONEHAM SUPERVISOR SAN MARCOS COUNTY

Inside, the paper matches alternated red, white and blue.

She looked quizzically up at her husband, who was grinning at her. “Like them?” he asked. “I just got them back from the printer’s this afternoon.”

“Isn’t it a bit premature?” she asked sarcastically.

“Only by a couple of days. Old man Chottman is resigning from the Board because of ill health at the end of the week, and they’re letting him name the man he wants as his successor to fill out his term. It won’t be official, of course, until the governor appoints the man, but I have it from very reliable sources that my name is the one being mentioned. If Chottman says he wants me to fill his term, the governor will listen. Chottman is seventy-three and has a lot of favors to call in.”

An idea began glimmering in Stella’s brain. “So this is why you don’t want a divorce, isn’t it?”

“Stell, you know as well as I do what a puritan that Chottman is,” Stoneham said. “The old guy is still firmly opposed to sin of any kind, and he thinks of divorce as a sin. God only knows why, but he does.” He rose from the couch and went to his wife again, holding her shoulders tenderly this time. “That’s why I’m asking you to wait. It would only be a week or two—”

Stella pulled away, a knowing, triumphant smile on her face. “So that’s it. Now we know why the big, strong Wesley Stoneham comes crawling. You won’t leave me even a vestige of self-respect, will you? You won’t even let me think that you came because you thought there was something in our marriage worth saving. No, you come right out with it. It’s a favor you want.”

She struck a match furiously and began to puff on her cigarette like a steam locomotive climbing a hill. She tossed the used match into the ashtray, and the matchbook down beside it. “Well, I’m sick of your

politics, Wesley. I'm tired of doing things so that it will make you look better or more concerned for the citizenry of San Marcos. The only person you ever consider is yourself. I suppose you'd even grant me the divorce uncontested if I were to wait, wouldn't you?"

"If that's what you want."

"Sure. The Great Compromiser. Make any deal, as long as it gets you what you want. Well, I've got a little surprise for you, Mister Supervisor. I do not make deals. I don't give a God damn whether you make it in politics or not. I intend to walk into our lawyer's office tomorrow and start the papers fluttering."

"Stella—"

"Maybe I'll even have a little talk with the press about all the milk of human kindness that flows in your veins, husband dear."

"I'm warning you, Stella—"

"That would be a big tragedy, wouldn't it, Wes, if you had to actually get elected..."

"STOP IT, STELLA!"

"...by the voters to get into office instead of being appointed all nice and neat by your buddies."

"STELLA!"

His hands were up to her throat as he screamed her name. He wanted her to stop, but she wouldn't. Her lips kept moving and moving, and the words were lost in a silencing mist that enveloped the cabin. Normal colorations vanished as the room took on a blood-red hue. He shook her and closed his huge hands tightly around her neck.

The cigarette dropped from her surprised fingers

at the unexpected attack, spilling some of its ashes on the floor. Stella raised her hands against her husband's chest and tried to push him away. For a moment she succeeded, but he kept coming, fighting off her flailing arms to grip her with all the strength at his disposal.

There was a numbness in his fingers as they closed around her throat. He did not feel the soft warmth of her skin yielding under his pressure, the pulsing of the arteries in her neck or the instinctive tightening of her tendons. All he felt was his own muscles, squeezing, squeezing, squeezing.

Gradually, her struggling subsided. Her facial coloring seemed funny, even through the red haze that clouded his vision. Her bulging eyes looked ready to leap from their sockets, opened wide and staring at him, staring, staring....

He let go. She fell to the ground, but slowly. Slow-motion slow, dream slow. Still there was no sound as she hit the floor. She crumpled, limp as a rag doll tossed aside for fancier toys. Except for that face, that purple, bloated face. Its tongue stuck out like a grotesquerie, the eyes glazed with horror. A tiny trickle of blood leaked from her nose, down her purpled lips and onto the faded brown carpet. A finger on her left hand twitched spasmodically two or three times, then became still.

The blue-white world was below him, awaiting the touch of his mind. Garnna dipped into the atmosphere and was overwhelmed by the abundance of life. There were creatures in the air, creatures on the land, creatures in the water. The first test, of course,

was the search for any Offasii that might be around, but it took only a quick scan to reveal that none were there. The Offasii had not been found on any of the planets yet explored by the Zarticku, but the search had to go on. The Zartic race could not feel truly safe until they discovered what had happened to their former masters.

The primary purpose of the Exploration had now been accomplished. There remained the secondary purpose: to determine what kind of life *did* inhabit this planet, whether it was intelligent, and whether it might conceivably pose any threat to Zarti.

Garnna established another net, a smaller one this time. He encompassed the entire planet with his mind, probing for signs of intelligence. His search was instantly successful. Lights gleamed in bright patterns on the night side, indicating cities of large size. A profusion of radio waves, artificially modulated, were bouncing all over the atmosphere. He followed them to their sources and found large towers and buildings. And he found the creatures themselves who were responsible for the radio waves and the buildings and the lights. They walked erect on two legs and their bodies were soft, without the armor plating of a Zartic. They were short, perhaps only half as tall as Zarticku, and their fur seemed to be mostly concentrated on their heads. He observed their eating habits and realized with distaste that they were omnivores. To a herbivorous race like the Zarticku, such creatures seemed to have cruel and malicious natures, posing potential threats to a gentler species. But at least they were better than the vicious carnivores. Garnna had seen a couple of car-

nivore societies, where killing and destruction were everyday occurrences, and the mere thought of them sent imaginary shudders through his mind. He found himself wishing that all life in the universe were herbivorous, then checked himself. He was not supposed to allow his personal prejudices to interfere with the performance of his duties. His task now was to observe these creatures in the short time he had left to him and make a report that would be filed for future study.

He did see one hopeful note about these creatures, namely that they seemed to have the herd instinct rather than acting solely as individuals. They congregated in large cities and seemed to do most things in crowds. They did have the potential for being alone, but they didn't utilize it much.

He gathered his mind together once again and prepared to make detailed observations. He zoomed down to the surface of the world to watch. The creatures were obviously diurnal or they wouldn't have needed lights for their cities, so at first he picked a spot on the daylight hemisphere to observe. He had no worries at all about being spotted by the natives; the Zartic method of space exploration took care of that.

Basically, this method called for a complete separation of body and mind. Drugs were taken to aid the dissociation, while the Explorer rested comfortably in a machine. When the separation occurred, the machine took over the mechanical aspects of the body function—heartbeat, respiration, nourishment and so on. The mind, meanwhile, was free to roam at will wherever it chose.

Few limits had thus far been found for a freed mind. The speed at which it could “travel”—if, indeed, it could be said to go anywhere—was so fast as to be unmeasurable; theoretically, it might even be infinite. A freed mind could narrow its concentration down to a single subatomic particle, or expand to cover vast areas of space. It could detect electromagnetic radiation at any portion of the spectrum. And best of all from the standpoint of the cautious Zarticku, it could not be detected by any of the physical senses. It was a phantom that could not be seen, heard, smelled, tasted or touched. All of which made it the ideal vehicle with which to explore the universe beyond Zarti’s atmosphere.

Garnna stopped at a place where the land was regularly laid out for growing crops. Farming varied but little throughout the societies he had investigated so far, probably because form followed function and the function was manifestly the same. These creatures were plowing with crude implements drawn by a subservient, two-horned herbivore. This primitive state of agriculture did not seem consistent with a civilization that could also produce so many radio waves. In order to resolve the apparent paradox, Garnna reached out with his mind and touched the mind of one of the natives.

This was another advantage of the freed mind. It seemed to have the ability to “listen in” on the thoughts of other minds. It was telepathy, but in a very restricted sense, for it worked only one way. Garnna would be able to hear the thoughts of others, but he himself would be undetectable.

The phenomenon was not nearly as helpful as it

might first appear, however. Intelligent individuals think partly in words of their own language, partly in abstract concepts and partly in visual images. The thoughts go by very quickly and then are gone forever. Different species had different patterns of thought based primarily on differences in their sensory inputs. And within a race each individual had his own private code of symbolism.

Mindreading, therefore, tended to be a painstaking and very frustrating business. Garnna would have to sift through mountains of meaningless impressions that were bombarding him at an unbelievable rate to arrive at even the kernel of an idea. With luck, he would read some generalized emotions and learn a few of the basic concepts that existed within the mind he contacted. But he was experienced at this procedure and not afraid of hard work if it were for the good of the Herd, so he dived right in.

After a good deal of probing and even more guesswork, Garnna was able to piece together a small picture of this world. There was only one intelligent race here, but it had fragmented into many individual cultures. Several constant patterns emerged in nearly all the cultures, though. The iff-groups here seemed generally to consist of only a few adults, usually related or mated, plus their offspring. The purpose of the iff-group was much more oriented towards the raising of the young than it was toward the providing of security for the individual. There seemed to be some individuals who survived entirely without iff-groups. The Herd was more an abstract concept here than an everyday reality as it was on

Zarti.

He learned, also, that some of the cultures on the planet were richer than others. The richest could be currently found on the nighttime side of the planet. In that particular culture, many of the things done by hand here were done by machine, and there was supposed to be plenty of food for all. The thought that one portion of the Herd could be overfed while another portion went hungry seemed callous to the Zartic. He reminded himself once more to stifle his emotions. He was here only to observe, and he had best concentrate on that.

He decided to investigate that ultra-rich culture. In evaluating these creatures as a potential threat to the Herd, his superiors would only be interested in their highest capabilities. It wouldn't matter at all what the poorer cultures did if the richer ones possessed a method of physical interstellar travel coupled with a warlike nature.

At the speed of thought, Garnna zipped across an enormous expanse of ocean and arrived in the darkened hemisphere. He immediately found several large coastal cities blazing their lights at him. These creatures might be diurnal, but they certainly didn't let the darkness affect their lives to any great extent. There were parts of the cities that were lit up as bright as daytime. There was one place in one of the cities where throngs of the creatures gathered in seats to view the action that was taking place between a smaller number of the creatures down on a specially laid-out field. The pattern was similar to what had been seen on numerous other worlds, particularly where omnivores and carnivores were domi-

nant—institutionalized competition. Instead of dividing what there was evenly for the good of the Herd, as would have been done on Zarti, these creatures felt compelled to compete, with the winners getting all and the losers nothing. Try as he would, Garnna could not fully comprehend what such competition would mean to these creatures.

He moved on. He observed the buildings of the natives and found them in many ways structurally superior to those on Zarti. The machines for transportation were also advanced, being both efficient and capable of traveling at great speeds. But he noticed, too, that they burned chemical fuels in order to propel themselves. That, for the moment, removed these beings from the threat list. They obviously would not use chemical fuels if they had discovered an efficient means of utilizing nuclear energy, and no race could hope to build a workable interstellar drive utilizing chemical fuels alone. These creatures might know of the existence of nuclear power—in fact, to judge from their very ample technology, Garnna would have been surprised if they didn't—but it was too large a jump from there to an interstellar drive; the Zarticku would not need to worry about this race posing a threat in the near future. Even the Zarticku hadn't perfected an interstellar drive yet—but of course, there had been extenuating circumstances.

He spent most of his time gathering the material he thought he would need for his report. As always, there was an overabundance of data, and he had to carefully eliminate some very interesting details to make room for trends which would help him build in

his own mind a cohesive picture of this civilization. Again, the whole took precedence over its parts.

He finished his investigation and realized he still had a little time to spare before he was required to return to his body. He might as well use it. He had a small hobby, a harmless one. Zarti, too, had sea-coasts, and Garnna had been born near one of them. He had spent his youth near the sea and had never tired of watching waves come in and break against the shore. So, whenever he found, himself with spare time on an alien world, he tried to fantasize back to his childhood at the edge of the ocean. It helped to make the alien seem familiar and caused no harm to anyone. So he glided gently along the seacoast of the enormous ocean on this strange world, watching and listening to the black, almost invisible water crashing along the darkened sands of this planet, a hundred parsecs from the place of his birth.

Something attracted his attention. Up on top of the cliffs that were overlooking the beach at this point, a light was shining. This must be an example of the solitary individual of the society, set out here far from the nearest large grouping of others of its race. Garnna. floated upwards.

The light came from a small building, poorly made in comparison with the buildings of the city but no doubt comfortable for a single creature to dwell in. There were two vehicles parked outside, both empty. Since the vehicles were not automatic, it implied that there must be at least two of the aliens inside.

Being a pure mentality Garnna went through the walls of the cabin as though they didn't exist. Inside

were two of the creatures, talking to one another. The incident did not seem very interesting. Garnna made a brief note of the furnishings of the room and was about to leave when one of the creatures suddenly attacked the other one. It grabbed at the neck of its companion and began strangling it. Without even extending himself, Garnna could feel the rage that was emanating from the attacking creature. He froze. Normally the instincts of his species would have caused him to flee the vicinity at top speed—in this case, the speed of thought. But Garnna had undergone extensive training in order to conquer his instincts. He had been trained to be first, last, and always an observer. He observed.

Reality returned slowly to Stoneham. It started with sound, a rapid *ka-thud, ka-thud, ka-thud* that he recognized belatedly as his own heart. He had never heard it so loud before. It seemed to drown out the universe with its thumping. Stoneham put his hands to his ears to hold out the noise, but it only made the situation worse. A ringing started, too—a high-pitched tingling like a soprano alarm clock going off inside his brain.

Then came smell. There seemed to be a queer odor in the air, a sickly, bathroomy odor. Stains were growing at the front and back of Stella's dress.

Taste. There was blood in his mouth, salty and tepid, and Stoneham realized he had bitten down on his own lips.

Touch. The tips of his fingers were tingling, there was a trembling in his wrists, his biceps relaxed after having been superhumanly taut.

Sight. Color returned to the normal world, and speed became as usual. But there was nothing to watch that moved. Just the body of his wife lying lifeless in the middle of the floor.

Stoneham stood there, for how many minutes he didn't know. His eyes roamed the room, seeking out the commonplace things it held, avoiding the body at his feet. But not for very long. There was a certain gruesome fascination about Stella's body that compelled his gaze, drawing it back from wherever in the room it had wandered.

He began to think again. He knelt belatedly at his wife's side and felt for a pulse that he knew would not be there. Her hand already felt slightly cold to his touch (or was that only his imagination?), and all pretense of life had gone. He quickly drew back his hand and stood up once more.

Walking over to the sofa, he sat down and stared for long minutes at the opposite wall. Headlines shrieked at him:

**PROMINENT LOCAL LAWYER
HELD IN WIFE'S DEATH.**

The years of carefully planning his political career, of doing favors for people so that they, in turn, might someday do favors for him, of going to endless boring parties and dinners... all this he saw sinking beneath the surface in a great vortex of calamity. And he saw long, empty years stretching ahead of him, gray walls and steel bars.

"No!" he cried. He looked down accusingly at the lifeless body of his wife. "No, you'd like that, wouldn't you? But I'm not going to let it happen, not to me. I've got too many important things I want to do be-

fore I go.”

A surprising calm settled over his mind and he saw clearly what had to be done. He crushed out the still smoldering cigarette his wife had dropped. Then he walked to the utensil rack and took a carving knife from the wall, holding his pocket handkerchief around the handle so that he wouldn't leave any fingerprints. He went outside and cut off a large section of clothesline. Back inside the cabin, he tied his wife's hands behind her and bent her body backward so that he could tie her feet to her neck. ,

Taking up the knife again, he proceeded to make a neat slash across Stella's throat. Blood oozed out rather than spurting because it was no longer being pumped by the heart. He hacked roughly at her breasts and made an obscene gouge through her dress at her crotch. For good measure he slashed ruthlessly at her abdomen, face and arms. He cut her eyes out of their sockets and tried to cut off her nose, too, but it was too tough for his knife.

Next, he dipped the knife in her blood and wrote "Death to Pigs" on one wall. As a final gesture, he severed the telephone line with a decisive slash. Then he placed the knife down on the floor beside her body, at the same time picking up the note she had written him about her divorce intentions. He put the note in his pants pocket.

He stood up and looked himself over. His hands and clothes were liberally smeared with blood. That would never do. He would have to get rid of it somehow.

He scrubbed his hands well in the sink until he'd removed all traces of the blood. He looked around the

room and spotted something that caught his breath: his personally printed matchbook sitting on the table by the ashtray. He strode over to it, thinking that it would be very foolish to leave a clue like that lying around for the police to find. He slipped the matchbook neatly into his pocket.

Then he went to his suitcase and took out a fresh suit of clothes. He quickly changed into them, thinking as he did so that he could bury his old clothes someplace a mile away so that they'd never be found. Then he could come back here and pretend to have discovered the body as it was. Since the phone wires were cut, he would have to drive somewhere else to call the police. The nearest neighbor with a phone, he recalled, was about two miles away.

Stoneham turned and surveyed his handiwork. Blood was smeared all over the floor and on some of the furniture, the body was dismembered in particularly gruesome fashion, the radical message was inscribed on the wall in plain view. It was a scene out of a surrealistic nightmare. No sensible killer would have performed a butchery like that. Blame would instantly fall on that hippie commune, maybe on Polaski himself. It would serve two purposes: cover up his guilt and rid San Marcos once and for all of those damned hippies.

There was a shovel in a small toolbox outside the cabin. Stoneham took it and walked off into the woods to bury his clothes. Since there had been no rain for months, the ground was dry and hard-packed; he left no footprints as he walked.

* * *

It did not take long for the bigger creature to kill

the smaller. But after it was done, the killer seemed immobilized by its own actions. Gingerly, Garnna reached out a mental feeler and touched the killer's mind. The thoughts were a jumble of confusion. There were still swirling traces of anger, but they seemed to be fading slowly. Other feelings were increasing. Guilt, sorrow, fear of punishment; these were all things that Garnna knew as well. He pushed a little deeper into the mind and learned that the dead creature had been of the same iff-group as the survivor; in fact, it had been its mate. Garnna's horror at this was so strong that he raced out of the mind and curled himself up into a mental ball. Intellectually he could accept the idea of killing, possibly even of one's mate. But emotionally the shock of the direct experience set his mind quivering.

He existed there for minutes, waiting for the shock and disgust to pass. Finally, his training reasserted itself and he started observing his surroundings once more. The big creature was now hacking at the carcass of the little one with a knife. Was this some sort of ghastly custom? If so, these omnivores might have to be reevaluated with regard to their threat potential. Even the carnivores Garnna had observed had not behaved this obscenely.

It took all the self-control he had to enable him to make contact with the alien's brain once more. What he saw confused and disturbed him. For the first time, he witnessed directly an individual planning to perform an action that would run counter to the good of its Herd. There was guilt and shame in the mind, which led Garnna to believe that this killing was far from a customary practice. The herd instinct was

still functioning, though quite suppressed. And overriding everything was the fear of punishment. The creature knew that what it had done was wrong, and its present horrible course of action was an attempt to evade—by what means, Garnna could not say—the punishment that would otherwise naturally come.

This was a unique situation. Never before, to Garnna's knowledge, had an Explorer ever become involved in an individual situation to this extent. It was always the big picture that mattered. But perhaps some insights could be gained by watching this situation develop. Even as he thought this, he "heard" a bell go off in his mind. This was the first warning that his time for Exploration was almost up. There would be one more in six minutes and then he would have to go back home. But he resolved to stay and watch the drama play out as much as possible before that happened.

He probed a little deeper into the alien's mind and witnessed the deceit within. The creature was going to attempt to avoid its just punishment by blaming the crime on some other innocent being. If the original crime had been hideous to Garnna, this compounding of it was unspeakable. It was one thing to let a moment of passion cause one to violate the rules of the Herd, but it was quite another to consciously and deliberately mislead others so that a different individual would be harmed. The creature was not only placing its welfare above that of the Herd, but above that of other individuals as well.

Garnna could no longer remain neutral and unconcerned. This creature must be a deviant. Even al-

lowing for differences in customs, no viable society could last long if these standards were the norm. It would fall apart under mutual hatred and distrust.

The creature had left the cabin now, and was walking slowly into the trees. Garnna followed it. The creature was carrying the clothes it had worn inside the room, as well as a tool it had taken from the cabin. When the creature had gone a mile from the building, it put down the clothes and started using the tool to dig a hole. When the hole was deep enough, the alien buried the old clothes in it and filled it up again, brushing the dirt around carefully so that the ground looked undisturbed.

Garnna caught flashes from the creature's mind. There was satisfaction at having done something successfully. There was an easing of fear now, since steps had been taken to avoid the punishment. And there was the feeling of triumph, of having somehow defeated or outwitted the Herd. The latter gave Garnna a mental shudder. What kind of creature was this, that could actually revel in causing harm to the rest of its Herd? This was wrong by any standards, it had to be. Something would have to be done to see that this deviant was discovered despite its deception. But....

The second alarm sounded within his mind. *No!* he thought. *I don't want to go back. I must stay and do something about this situation.*

But there was no choice. It was not known how long a mind could remain outside its body without dire consequences to one or the other. If he were to stay away too long his body might die, and it was problematical whether his mind could outlive it. It

would accomplish no good at all if his mind were to be destroyed through carelessness.

Reluctantly, then, Garnna iff-Almanic's mind pulled itself away from the scene of the tragedy on the blue-white third planet of the yellow star and raced back to its body more than a hundred parsecs away.

As he walked back to the cabin Stoneham felt a certain satisfaction at having coped successfully with a bad situation. Even if the police didn't blame the hippies, there was no real evidence left with which to blame him, he thought. No motives, no evidence, no witnesses.

About a mile away, a girl named Deborah Bauer woke up from a nightmare, screaming.

Chapter 2

This was not going to be a good day, John Maschen decided as he drove up the coast to his office in the town of San Marcos. To his right, the sky was beginning to turn from dark to light blue as the sun had just begun to make its uphill climb over the horizon; but it was still hidden from Maschen's view by the sea cliffs that reared up on the eastern side of the road. In the west, the stars had vanished into the fading blue velvet that was all that remained of the night.

No day that starts with having to go to work at five thirty in the morning can be any good, Maschen continued. Most particularly when there's a murder connected with it.

He drove up to his office building feeling particularly scruffy. Deputy Whitmore had called and told him it was urgent, and Maschen hadn't even taken

the time to shave. He hadn't wanted to disturb his still-sleeping wife, and, in the darkness, had taken the wrong uniform, the one he'd worn yesterday. It smelled as though he'd played a full game of basketball in it. He'd taken about fifteen seconds to run a brush through his partially balding hair, but that had been his only concession to neatness.

No day that starts out like this, he reiterated, can be anything but messed up.

His watch read five forty-eight as he walked through the door to the Sheriff's Station. "All right, Tom, what's the story?"

Deputy Whitmore looked up as his boss came in. He was a boyish-looking fellow, on the force for only half a year so far, and his lack of seniority made him a natural for the post of night dispatcher. His long blond hair was neat, his uniform pressed and spotless. Maschen felt a temporary surge of hatred for anyone who could look that immaculate at this hour, even though he knew the feeling was unreasonable. It was part of Whitmore's job to look efficient this early, and Maschen would have had to bawl him out if he'd looked any different.

"There was a murder in a private cabin along the coast halfway between here and Bellington," Whitmore said. "The victim was Mrs. Wesley Stoneham."

Maschen's eyes widened. True to his expectations, the day had already become immeasurably worse. And it wasn't even six o'clock yet. He sighed. "Who's handling it?"

"Acker made the initial report. He's staying at the scene, gathering what information he can. Mostly, he's making sure that nothing gets disturbed un-

til you get a look at it.”

Maschen nodded. “He’s a good man. Do you have a copy of his report?”

“In a minute, sir. He radioed it in, and I’ve had to type it up myself. I’ve just got a couple more sentences to do.”

“Fine. I’m going to get myself a cup of coffee. I want that report on my desk when I get back.”

There was always a pot of coffee brewing in the office, but it was invariably terrible and Maschen never drank it. Instead, he walked across the street to the all-night diner and went inside. Joe, the counterman, looked up at him from behind legs propped up against one of the tables. He put down the newspaper he was reading. “Rather early for you, isn’t it, Sheriff?”

Maschen ignored the friendliness that masked polite inquiry. “Coffee, Joe, and I want it black.” He pulled some coins from his pocket and banged them down on the counter top. The counterman took his cue from the sheriff’s attitude and proceeded to pour a cup of coffee in silence.

Maschen drank his coffee in large gulps. In between gulps, he would spend long periods staring intently at the wall opposite him. He seemed to recall having met Mrs. Stoneham—he couldn’t remember her first name—once or twice at some parties or dinners. He remembered thinking of her at the time as one of the few women who had turned their approaching middle age into an asset rather than a liability by cultivating a certain mature grace about her. She had seemed like a nice person, and he was sorry that she was dead.

But he was even sorrier that she happened to be the wife of Wesley Stoneham. That would cause complications beyond number. Stoneham was a man who had discovered his own importance and was waiting for the world to catch up with him. Not only was he rich, he made his money count in terms of influence. He knew all the right people, and most of them owed him favors of one sort or another. The rumor was spreading that he was even being considered for the seat on the Board that Chottman would be resigning in a few days. If Stoneham liked you, doors opened as if by magic; if he should frown, they would slam shut in your face.

Maschen had been in police work for thirty-seven years, and sheriff for the last eleven. He would be running for reelection next year. Perhaps it would be wise to stay on the good side of Stoneham, whichever side that was. He didn't know any of the details of the case yet, but already he had a feeling in the pit of his ulcer that it was going to be a nasty one. He muttered something under his breath about the policeman's lot.

"Beg pardon, Sheriff?" Joe asked.

"Nothing," Maschen growled. He finished his coffee in one gulp, slammed the cup down on the counter and stalked out of the diner.

Back in his office, the report was waiting on his desk just as he had requested. There wasn't much in it. A call had come in at three-oh-seven a.m. reporting a murder. The caller was Mr. Wesley Stoneham, calling from the residence of Mr. Abraham Whyte. Stoneham said that his wife had been murdered by party or parties unknown while she had been stay-

ing alone at their seaside cabin. Stoneham had arrived on the scene at about two-thirty and discovered her body but, because the phone lines at the cabin had been cut, he had had to call from his neighbor's. A car was dispatched to investigate.

Mr. Stoneham met the investigating officer at the door to the cabin. Inside, the deputy found the body, tentatively identified as Stoneham's wife, bound hands and feet, her throat slashed, her eyes removed, and chest and arms brutally hacked. There was a possibility of sexual assault, as the pubic region had been cut open. Facial discolorations and marks on her throat indicated strangulation, but there were no other signs of a struggle of any sort about the cabin. Beside the body lay a kitchen knife that had apparently been used to do the hacking—it was from the utensils set that was hanging on the wall. The carpet was stained with blood, presumably the victim's, and a message had been written in blood on the wall: "Death to Pigs." A stamped out cigarette that had been only partially smoked was on the floor, and a used paper match was in one of the ashtrays. The bedroom appeared untouched.

Maschen put down the report, closed his eyes and rubbed the backs of his knuckles against his eyelids. It couldn't be just a simple rape-murder, could it? This one had all the makings of a psychotic vendetta, the type that attracted wide publicity. He reread the description of the body and shuddered. He had seen a lot of gory sights in his thirty-seven years of police work, but never one that sounded as gory as this. He did not think he was going to like this case at all. He half dreaded having to go out to the spot and viewing

the corpse for himself. But he knew he'd have to. In a case like this, with tons of publicity—and with Stoneham looking over his shoulder—he'd have to handle the investigation personally. San Marcos County was not big enough to be able to afford—or require—a full-time homicide squad.

He punched at the intercom button. “Tom?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Get me Acker on the radio.” He took a deep breath and got up from his chair. He had to stifle a yawn as he went through the door and down the stairs to the front desk.

“I’ve got him, sir,” the young deputy said as he handed the radio microphone to the sheriff.

“Thanks.” He took the mike and pressed the transmitting button. “Come in.”

“This is Acker reporting, sir. I’m still at the Stoneham cabin. Mr. Stoneham has gone back to his home in San Marcos to try and get some sleep. I got his address—”

“Never mind that, Harry. I’ve got it somewhere in my files. Are there any new developments since you made your first report?”

“I checked the grounds around the cabin for possible footprints, but I think we’re out of luck there, sir. It hasn’t rained for months, you know, and the ground here is awfully hard and dry. A lot of it is just rock covered by a thin layer of loose dirt and gravel. I wasn’t able to find anything.”

“How about cars? Were there any tire tracks?”

“Mrs. Stoneham’s car is parked beside the cabin. There are two sets of tracks from Stoneham’s car and one from my own. But the killer wouldn’t have

had to come by car. There are a number of places within easy walking distance of here.”

“A person would have to know their way fairly well, though, wouldn’t you think, if they weren’t to get lost in the dark?”

“Probably, sir.”

“Harry, just off the record, how does this thing look to you?”

The voice at the other end paused for a moment. “Well, to tell you the truth, sir, this is the most sickening thing I’ve ever seen. I damn near threw up when I saw what had been done to that poor woman’s body. There couldn’t possibly have been any reason why the killer did what he did. I would guess that we’re dealing with a lunatic, a dangerous one.”

“All right, Harry,” Maschen soothed. “You wait there. I’m going to round up Simpson and then we’ll be out to relieve you. Out.” He clicked off the radio and handed the mike back to Whitmore.

Simpson was the deputy best trained in the scientific aspects of criminology. Whenever a case of more than ordinary complexity occurred, the department tended to rely on him more than any of the other members. Normally, Simpson wouldn’t have come on duty until ten o’clock, but Maschen gave him a special call, informed him of the urgency of the situation, and told him that he would pick him up. He took the deputy’s fingerprint kit and a camera out to his car, then drove to Simpson’s place.

The deputy was waiting on the porch of his somewhat weatherbeaten house. Together, he and the sheriff drove off to the Stoneham cabin. Very little was said during the drive; Simpson was a thin, very

quiet man who generally kept his brilliance within him, while the sheriff had more than enough to think about in considering the different aspects of the crime.

When they arrived, Maschen dismissed Acker and told him to go home and try to get some sleep. Simpson went quietly about his business, first photographing the room and the body from all angles, then collecting small bits of things, anything that was loose, in little plastic bags, and finally dusting the room for fingerprints. Maschen called for an ambulance, then just sat back and watched his deputy work. He felt very helpless, somehow. Simpson was the one who was best trained for this job, and there was little the sheriff could add to his deputy's prowess. *Maybe*, Maschen thought bitterly, *after all this time I find I'm really destined to be a bureaucrat and not a policeman at all.* And wouldn't that be a sad commentary on his life, he wondered.

Simpson finished his job almost simultaneously with the arrival of the ambulance. When Mrs. Stoneham's body had been taken away to the morgue, Maschen locked up the cabin and he and Simpson headed back into town. It was now nearly eight-thirty, and Maschen's stomach was beginning to remind him that all he had had for breakfast so far was a cup of coffee.

"What do you think about the murder?" he asked the stony Simpson.

"It's unusual."

"Well, yes, that much is obvious. No normal person... let me correct that, no normal *killer* would chop a body up like that."

“That’s not what I meant. The murder was done backwards.”

“How do you mean?”

“The killer killed the woman first, *then* tied her up.”

Maschen took his eyes off the road for a moment to eye his deputy. “How do you know that?”

“There was no cut-off of the circulation when the hands were tied, and those ropes were awfully tight. Therefore, the heart had stopped pumping blood before they were tied. Also, she was killed before those cuts were made on her body, or else a lot more blood would have spurted out.”

“In other words, this is not the traditional sadist who would tie a girl up, torture her and then kill her. You’re saying that this man killed her first, *then* tied her up and dismembered her?”

“Yes.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“That’s why I said it’s unusual.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence, each man contemplating in his own way the unusual circumstances of the case.

When they arrived back at the station, Simpson proceeded straight to the small laboratory to analyze his findings. Maschen had started up the stairs to his own office when Carroll, his secretary, came down to meet him halfway. “Careful,” she whispered. “There’s a whole gang of reporters waiting to ambush you up there.”

How quickly the vultures gather, Maschen mused. I wonder whether anyone tipped them off, or whether they can just smell the death and sensationalism and

come running to it. He hadn't really expected them this soon, and he had nothing prepared to say. His stomach was making him all too acutely aware that he hadn't eaten anything solid in about fourteen hours. He wondered if there was still time to duck out the back way for a quick breakfast before they spotted him.

There wasn't. Some unknown face appeared at the head of the stairs. "Here's the sheriff now," the man said. Maschen sighed and continued up the steps behind Carroll. He'd known it wasn't going to be a good day.

Even he was surprised, though, when he reached the top and glanced around. He had expected maybe a handful of reporters from a couple of county newspapers. But here the room was jammed with people, and the only one he recognized was Dave Grailly of the San Marcos *Clarion*. Everyone else was unfamiliar. And not only were there people, there were machines as well. Television cameras, microphones and other broadcasting equipment lay carefully scattered about, with call letters on them from the three major networks as well as local stations from the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas. He was overwhelmed with the thought that this case was attracting much greater publicity than even he had anticipated.

The instant he appeared, a loud yammering began as twenty different people started asking him twenty different questions at the same time. Dazed, Maschen could only stand there for a moment under the barrage of questioning, but finally he regained his composure. He walked up to the area where they had set up the microphones and announced, "Gentle-

men, if you will all be patient, I plan to issue a statement in a few minutes. Carroll, get your steno pad and come into my office, will you?"

He went into his office and shut the door, leaning his back against it. He closed his eyes, trying to regulate his breathing and perhaps calm his nerves. Events were piling one on top of the other too fast for his comfort. He was just a small-county sheriff, used to a relaxed pace and easy atmosphere. Suddenly, the world seemed to be going out of control, upsetting the humdrum normality to which he was accustomed. Again, the thought crossed his mind that maybe he shouldn't be a policeman. There must be hundreds of other jobs in the world that were better paid and less taxing.

There was a knock on the door behind him. He moved away and opened it and Carroll came in, pad in hand. Maschen suddenly realized that he hadn't the faintest idea of what to say. Each word would be critically important because he was speaking, not just to Dave Grailly of the *Clarion*, but to the wire services and the TV networks, which meant potentially every person in the United States. His mouth went suddenly dry with stage fright.

He decided, finally, to stick to just the facts as he knew them. Let the newspapers draw their own conclusions; they would, anyway. He paced around the room as he dictated to his secretary, stopping frequently to have her read back what he'd said and correct some phrasing that sounded awkward. When he was finished, he had her read it aloud to him twice, just to make sure of its accuracy. Then he let her go out to type it up.

While she was doing that, he sat down behind his desk and willed his hands to stop shaking. The thought that he was unfit for his job would not leave his mind. He'd been a fine cop thirty years ago, but things had been a lot simpler then. Had time passed him by permanently, leaving him in this backwater with only a pretense left to him? Was the only reason he'd been able to succeed as a sheriff because there really wasn't anything challenging to do in this small coastal county? And, now that the present seemed to be catching up with him at last, would he be able to face it as he should?

Carroll came in with a typed copy and a carbon for his approval before she made duplicates. Maschen fussed over it, taking an inordinate amount of time to read the entire document. When he could postpone the inevitable no longer, he initialed it and gave her back the carbon to make copies. Clearing his throat several times, he emerged from his office.

He was greeted by the popping of flashbulbs, which blinded him temporarily as he tried to reach the microphones. He groped his way along until he found them. "I have an official statement to make at this time," he said. He looked at the paper in his hands and could hardly see the words because of all the blue dots that seemed fixed in front of his eyes. Hesitatingly, he made his way through the speech. He described the circumstances of the body's discovery and the rather grisly state of the body itself. He mentioned the phrase written on the wall, but did not mention Simpson's hypothesis about the murderer's timetable. He concluded by saying, "Copies of this statement will be made available to anyone who

wants one.”

“Do you have any suspects yet?” one reporter shot at him.

“Why, uh, no, it’s too soon to know, we’re still assimilating the data.”

“In view of the fact that your office is so small, do you plan to ask for state or federal help in solving this case?” That question from a different part of the room.

Maschen suddenly felt the pressure on him. The TV cameras were staring at him with one large, unblinking eye apiece. He was acutely aware that he was wearing a dirty, unpresed uniform and that he hadn’t shaved that morning. Was that the type of image that was going to go out across the country? A slovenly, unkempt hick who can’t handle his own county when something really bad happens? “So far,” he said deliberately, “the indications are that the solution to this crime is well within the capabilities of my office. I do not plan to ask for outside help at this time, no.”

“Do you think it’s possible that the murder could have been politically motivated?”

“I really couldn’t say—”

“Considering the importance of the case and the unusualness of its nature, who is going to be put in charge?”

When the question was phrased that way, there was only one answer he could give. “I am making myself personally responsible for the investigation.”

“Will you be putting out an all points bulletin?”

“When I have some faint idea of the type of person we’re looking for, yes. If we haven’t caught him

by that time, of course.”

“What kind of person do you think could have committed such a terrible crime?”

At that moment, Maschen saw Howard Willsey, the district attorney, enter the room towards the back, and his mind wandered from the question for a moment. “Why, um, uh, he appears to me to have been, uh, somewhat disturbed. If, uh, you gentlemen will excuse me now, I believe the district attorney wishes to have a talk with me.”

There was some mumbling of routine thank-you’s as the reporters began grabbing for copies of the statement and the cameramen started dismounting their equipment. The DA politely pushed his way through the crowd of newsmen to get to the sheriff’s side. Howard Willsey was a tall man, thin and insubstantial with a bleak, hawk-like nose and watery eyes that always appeared on the verge of tears. He was a prosecutor largely because he had been unable to succeed in private practice.

“Let’s go into your office,” he said when he reached the sheriff.

Back in the comparative calm of his office, Maschen felt much more at ease. It was as though the wildcat that had leapt on his back had suddenly turned out to be a stuffed toy, after all. The removal of pressure was a positive blessing. Willsey, on the other hand, was nervous. He had a cigarette in his mouth before Maschen could even offer him a chair. “Well, Howard,” the sheriff said with forced cheerfulness, “need I ask what’s brought you around here so early in the morning?”

Willsey either missed the question or ignored it.

“I don’t like the idea of all those reporters,” he said. “I wish you hadn’t talked to them. It’s so hard, nowadays, to know the right things to say. One wrong word and the Supreme Court will reverse the entire decision.”

“I think you may be exaggerating a little.”

“Don’t be too sure. And in any case, the more you say, the more you prejudice prospective jurors.”

“Maybe. But even so, what else could I have done?”

“You could have refused to comment at all. Just said, ‘We’re working on it and we’ll let you fellows know when we’re done.’ Kept quiet until everything was socked away.”

The idea had never occurred to Maschen. He’d reacted spontaneously to having a microphone shoved in front of his mouth: he talked. The whole ordeal could have been easily avoided with the words “no comment,” only he didn’t think of them. He wondered how many people would have under similar circumstances. That was one big thing that TV and the press had going for them—people who otherwise wouldn’t utter a word felt it was their responsibility to others to help the spread of news.

He shrugged. “Well, it’s too late to do anything about it now. Let’s hope I didn’t wreck our cause too badly. Now, what did you want to talk about?”

“I got a call a few minutes ago from Wesley Stoneham.” The way he said those words, it sounded to Maschen as though the call had come via a burning bush. The district attorney was a man who knew his limitations in life and realized that, without this public job, he was a failure. Consequently, retaining

his job was of uppermost consideration in his mind at all times—especially when he received calls from a man whose power in the county was rising so rapidly.

“What did he have to say for himself?” Maschen asked.

“He wanted to know if any arrests had been made in his wife’s murder yet.”

“Good God. I just found out about it myself a couple of hours ago, and nobody has been considerate enough to walk in here and confess to it. What does he expect of us, anyhow?”

“Take it easy, John. We’re all under a lot of stress. Imagine how he feels—he arrives at the cabin late at night and finds... well, literally, a bloody mess. His wife hacked to pieces. Naturally, he’s going to be a little distraught and unreasonable.”

“Did he have any suggestions as to who he thought did it?” Maschen realized that that was the type of question he should more properly be asking Stoneham, but the DA seemed to be acting as a Stoneham-surrogate anyway

“Yes, as a matter of fact he did. He mentioned those hippies who have been living out in Totido Canyon. You know, that commune group.”

Maschen did indeed know about “that commune group.” His office received an average of a dozen calls a week about them, and had ever since they moved into an otherwise deserted area three months ago. San Marcos was a very conservative community, consisting of a lot of older, retired couples who had little or no tolerance for the markedly different life style affected by the young members of the Totido

commune. Whenever anything turned up missing, suspicion was always laid first on the commune members.

A man named Carl Polaski was in charge of the group. Maschen knew him only vaguely, but he seemed to be an intelligent and reasonable man. A bit old to be carrying on in this manner, in the sheriff's opinion, but on the other hand he lent maturity to the youths of the commune. He kept them in line. To date, none of the charges brought against any of the hippie members had ever been substantiated. Maschen had developed a grudging respect for Polaski, even if the man's chosen life style was counter to the sheriff's own.

"What makes him think they had anything to do with it?"

"Do you think normal people would have chopped up the body that way? These hippies live only a mile away from the Stoneham cabin. One or a group of them could have gotten together and gone over there —"

"Is this your theory, or Stoneham's?"

"What does it matter?" Willsey asked, his tone becoming very defensive. "The point is, these people are weird. They think the standards of the normal world don't apply to them. Who knows what they're capable of? We've been trying to get rid of them ever since they moved in; nothing but troublemakers, that crowd."

"Howard, you know as well as I do that nothing's ever been proved against them—"

"That doesn't make them innocent, does it? Where there's smoke, I smell arson."

Maschen cocked his head sideways and narrowed his eyes as he looked the DA over. “Stoneham really stepped on you, didn’t he?”

Willsey bristled. “What if he did? You may forget it sometimes, John, but we’re little fishes in this pool. Stoneham is a big fish. You and I both have to run for our offices again next year, remember? And Stoneham’s help will be more than welcome in my campaign, I assure you.”

The sheriff sighed. “All right, for your sake I’ll go and have a talk with Polaski—”

“Not just a talk.” Willsey pulled some papers out of his coat pocket. “I’ve taken the trouble to get a warrant sworn out for his arrest.” He flung the papers on the desk.

The sheriff just looked at them, stunned. “Did you ever stop to consider the possibility that you might be wrong?”

Willsey shrugged. “In that case, we let him go and apologize. But if we’re going to maintain the public’s trust, we *have* to act fast on something this big.”

“Howard, I know it might sound selfish, but I could be sued for false arrest.”

“Believe me, it’s not going to come to that. Besides, I’m the one directing you to make the arrest, and I think there’s sufficient evidence.”

“What evidence?”

“That writing on the wall—‘Death to Pigs.’ That’s a hippie slogan, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so.”

Willsey stood up to leave. “Now trust me, John. You just go out there and arrest that Polaski, and I

promise you that everything will work out fine.”

For nearly five minutes after Willsey left, Maschen remained seated, wondering how much worse the day was going to get before it ended. He stared for a long time at the arrest warrant before he finally arose and picked it up off the desk.