

Alien From The Stars -- Jean and Jeff Sutton -- (1970)

(Version 2002.09.13 -- Done)

ONE

A VIOLENT WARNING light flashed furiously.

The strident voice of a horn blared through the audiocomms. Echoing throughout the lower decks and passageways and cavernous quarters of the big ship, the horn held the lonely muffled sound of a drum-beat rolling upward from a deep well -- a sound heavy with doom.

Barlo, the planetary archeologist, reacted swiftly. Empty-handed, he sprang toward the door of his small cabin. The long corridor, dimly lit during the sleep cycle, was deserted as he burst from his room.

A secondary buzzer signaled the beginning of transition from Q space -- a warning that the huge Zemm liner faced imminent disaster. The knowledge speeded his steps. Racing into an intersecting passageway, he hurriedly entered a launch well, slipped through a hatch into a small scout pod, pressed a button, and called the ops bridge.

"Pods away, pods away." The crisp response held a controlled tautness. Barlo didn't ask questions. Swiftly yet calmly he punched a button that sealed the pod's well from the ship, another that opened a disc door and left the well exposed to the awful emptiness of space. A lever caused a thick elastic mesh to enfold his slight body; a switch sent the pod shooting out into the black firmament. Although he knew the Zemm liner had completed its transition from Q space, the harsh glitter of stars, seen through the ports, was reassuring.

He moved another switch. Sledgehammer forces generated by the maximum acceleration crushed his short, thin body against the elastic meshing. His long, prehensile fingers grasped another control and turned it; a beam of electromagnetic energy leaped from the pod, tying it to the huge starliner. "Pods away, pods away..." A voice tolled sepulchrally from a speaker above him.

Barlo punched a button, and a screen glowed to life. Its light, amplified a thousand times, displayed the huge ship as a graceful needle poised against the fiercely burning stars. The sight filled him with sorrow. Rapidly diminishing in size, the liner suddenly erupted into a colossal ball of flame that for a brief moment held the awesome brilliance of a nova. The illumination of the screen was blinding. The harsh flare almost as quickly subsided, dwindling into a small, dull ember before winking into nothingness in the great black sea of space.

With the calm efficiency characteristic of his kind -- a cerebral activity unhampered by emotions -- Barlo activated the pod detectors and called into a transmitter, "Scout pod four three seven calling survivors. Scout pod four three seven..."

He repeated the call several times. Although the detector readouts covering the sector of the disaster were going wild, he realized they registered only debris; the silence on the call circuit told him he was alone.

Alone! Of more than thirteen thousand passengers and crew members, he alone had survived. But of course the crew couldn't have acted to effect an escape -- not while a single passenger remained aboard. That law was older than space travel itself. Only the late hours he had chosen to review tapes of the ancient Okra civilization had saved him.

Briefly, he wondered at the nature of the disaster. There had been scant warning, only moments. He surmised it had to do with the energy converters, perhaps the failure of a switch to prevent the accumulation of power. Not that

such disasters were unknown, but they were exceedingly rare. In his own life he had known of only a few.

Although not a crewman, Barlo was well acquainted with the small scout pods used both for the exploration of planetary surfaces and as lifeboats, should the latter need arise. Checking the supplies, he was momentarily disconcerted to discover that the oxygen units were nearly depleted. He had scant time to find a suitable planet.

He didn't bother to transmit a distress signal; such an attempt would be futile. The occasional ship that might pass through this lonely realm out near the edge of the galaxy would be in Q space, quite beyond the pod's limited communication facilities. But when the Zemm liner failed to reach its destination, the Unity's far-flung search and rescue units would comb the moons and planets of every sun in the vicinity of the liner's flight path. Rescue was certain -- if he lived. He had but to find an appropriate planet.

Although Barlo had never traveled this particular sector of the galaxy, he could roughly calculate his position from the ship's flight corridor and the time of the disaster. A lonely area out toward the rim, it was sparse of stars with habitable planets. Consequently, when he activated the visual telescanner, he was startled to see a brilliant yellow sun leap into view. Appearing to hang in splendid isolation, it dwarfed the sprinkle of stars around it. Instinctively he knew that the sun was within range of the small scout pod. He felt a stir of hope.

A grav detector locked on the yellow sun caused a transparent sphere on the instrument console to glow to life. The yellow sun appeared as a small dot at its center. Amplifying the power source by a factor of five thousand brought nine planets into view, each represented in the sphere as a small dot located according to its orbital position. His hopes rose. Of the seven outer dots, all but the farthest from the sun were accompanied by one or more minute white grains which represented moons.

Although Barlo's life rested on his findings, he studied the miniature replica of the planetary system with the detachment that came with long scientific training. The positions of the dots in the sphere indicated he was viewing the system from an angle of nearly 90 degrees from the plane of the ecliptic; that is, he was moving toward the sun's pole.

He returned his attention to the yellow sun. A medium-sized star of middle life, the spectrum of its photosphere revealed the presence of hydrogen and helium together with traces of calcium. That was favorable, for such suns quite often provided planetary environments rich in life. He would have preferred a red sun, of course, simply because its radiance was more pleasant to the eye. When viewed from afar his own sun, Zaree, gleamed like an ember amid the harsh light of its neighboring stars. How much lovelier it was! But now he had no alternative; his scout pod had not the range to reach another star.

Briefly he wondered if this particular system had ever been explored. He thought not, for he recalled nothing of it in the records. That was not surprising. In the billion-star island that was the galaxy, it was far more likely to have escaped observation entirely.

His perusal of the sun finished, he turned the instrument on the planets, starting with the outermost. Another thousand-fold amplification in power brought it into the telescanner as a moonless, oblate spheroid. Instrument analysis disclosed it to consist of a dense lithic core wrapped in a mantle of frozen ammonia, methane, and other gaseous compounds. But that had been expected; a planet that distant from a radiation source with the energy characteristics of the yellow sun couldn't possibly support his kind of life.

The next four planets proved equally inhospitable, nor had he expected more. He did, though, let his gaze linger on the sixth planet. Encircled by rings of meteoritic dust that caught and reflected the rays from the distant

yellow sun, it exemplified the wonders of a nature he long had sought to understand.

He pondered again the profligacy of nature, for the universe was rife with planets and moons incapable of sustaining more than the most elementary life-forms. Or was the ultimate design long-range? Perhaps one day such planets might bloom while present life-rich worlds sank into the obscurity of death. Could life as he knew it be but a test-bed for the future? The prospect intrigued him.

He eyed the fourth planet. It alone in this system gleamed redly in the sky. By his calculations it lay close to the outer border of the temperature biosphere required by his kind. Hopefully, he studied it through the telescanner. For a moment he reveled in the glory of its color, before gazing at the instrument readouts. To his disappointment, the planet's small mass indicated that any atmosphere it might possess would be far too tenuous to support any major life-form. He had to erase the red planet from his hopes.

He lingered a moment over its moons. Scarcely more than jagged chunks of rock, he reflected, they had been captured by the planet from a wide belt of similar flotsam that lay between it and the giant fifth planet.

As he turned the telescanner on the third planet, he felt a quickening excitement. He darted a glance at the instruments. Oxygen! The planet was rich with it! Exhaling slowly, he continued his investigation through a myriad of instruments. Finally satisfied, he lay back to sleep.

It was not until the end of the tenth sleep cycle that the third planet was large in the telescanner. Splashed with blues and greens and tans, and circled by a disproportionately large moon, it rode in majestic beauty through the solitude of its orbit. The instruments, and the large polar icecaps, indicated an abundance of water, a rarity on all but the most favored of worlds. He felt his excitement mount. A lovely planet, were it not for its brassy sun.

Another sleep cycle passed, and then another and another. He had long since adopted a minimum-breathing posture, but now his oxygen was low. By self-hypnosis he put himself into a timed sleep in which his oxygen intake would be more than halved.

When he awoke again, the planet was gigantic in the telescanner. Seas, mountains, unbelievably immense patches of verdure -- it fairly screamed of life. Sampling the planet's electromagnetic spectrum, he received a jumble of unintelligible but patterned sounds which were self-identifying as the outputs of electronic communication systems. He wasn't startled; such communication devices were fairly common in many emerging cultures.

He commenced a slow deceleration, at the same time activating a number of sensors to obtain the specific data he needed. One recorded the outputs of a vast number of heat sources; he translated the instrument analysis in terms of a neo-industrial culture -- cities, transportation complexes, centralized governments. Another instrument pinged, and a small blip crawling across the face of a grid identified the existence of a man-made satellite. In a short time he determined that a large number of such satellites circled the planet. This gave him pause for thought. A culture that possessed a satellite capability almost certainly also possessed the means for detecting and tracking such satellites; ergo, his arrival very likely would not go unobserved.

As the data flowed in, he began to etch a more complete picture of the planet's culture. Tentatively he placed it in the early stages of nuclear development. That could be either good or bad, for he was well aware that technical development and true civilization could be two quite different things.

Civilization, in his own culture, was defined as the rapport of life in a common cause dedicated to peace, equality, happiness, and intellectual

achievement, regardless of technical status. He had seen numerous highly civilized planets which had not yet achieved interstellar or even interplanetary travel but which had achieved a harmony of life. Conversely, galactic history overflowed with the records of uncivilized but technically oriented societies which had attained the nuclear stage of development, only to perish in their own nuclear ashes.

He continued to decelerate, coming down over the planet's pole almost directly above the dawn line. To his right the globe was caught in the web of night; to his left he saw the awesome gleam of ice mountains sparkling under a bright morning sun. As the ice cap fled to his rear, the land below became a splotched giant in shifting patterns of whites and deep greens. Here and there his vision was obscured by delicate filigrees of pale cloud. An irregular blue shape etched against the mosaic was recognized as a gigantic lake.

He knew he had to decide quickly where he would land. The polar and tropical regions were out. Although he could make but a rough estimate, he knew it would serve well enough. Programming a small capsule, he injected it into space. The capsule, remaining in orbit, would continually broadcast a distress message.

A change in velocity brought a rapid deceleration -- the familiar feel of a spacecraft tentatively dipping its nose into an air ocean. To his right, caught in the web of night, a huge city swept past, its existence recorded in terms of its energy sources. The land below, while nothing like that of Raamz, his own planet, held a wild beauty that captivated his senses.

Another vast megalopolis wheeled toward him. Extending from mountains to sea, it extended southward as far as he could see. Inasmuch as the coastline angled inward, he shifted course to keep from shooting out over what appeared to be unending sea. Beyond the smoke-blue ridges and peaks to his left, a tan desert rolled eastward into the rising sun. The desert was out, for Barlo's kind avoided direct sunlight whenever possible. Nocturnal, they preferred coolness and shade, but with night temperatures above the frost line.

Cognizant that he was moving toward ever more equatorial zones, he increased the rate of deceleration, felt some buffeting before the pod stabilized, and began to descend more evenly. Uncertain of the mountainous terrain, he guided the pod toward hill country that lay midway between another large coastal city to the west and the rugged range he'd followed.

Well down in the depths of the air ocean, he made a more critical analysis of its contents. It proved to be a nitrogen sea containing a rich 20 percent of oxygen, with argon, carbon dioxide, neon, hydrogen, and other trace gases constituting the remainder. All in all, its chemical composition was much like that of Raamz, his own planet. The reflection brought a twinge of nostalgia.

The pod came down over a hilly terrain that was twisted and bent in tortuous ways. It consisted mainly of rolling hills cut through with ravines, both alive with stunted trees and bushes. But it lacked the water of the northern land. Here and there small structures told of habitation, but they were few and far between. The brushlined ravines struck him as ideal for concealment of the pod while he explored the surrounding area.

Abruptly he glimpsed movement ahead and realized it was a ground vehicle on a flat roadway. Almost immediately a number of similar vehicles came into view down a grade from the west. He brought the pod around, then saw he had made the turn too late; he was circling almost directly over the wide road.

Completing the maneuver, he gazed into a screen that revealed the scene behind him. Five or six of the vehicles had stopped. He held scant doubt that this was the direct result of the sudden appearance of the pod. He debated returning to orbital altitude to try for another landing but decided against this on the basis that the damage already had been done. Besides, if the pod hadn't been tracked before, it certainly would be now. The realization brought

the imperative need to hide until he could assess the nature of this world and the kind of reception he might expect.

He reduced the pod's speed and let it drop just above the crests of the brush-covered hills. With the sun still low in the east, the rolling land appeared cool and inviting. He wasn't fooled; the parched nature of the ground and the physical appearance of the dwarfed trees and shrubs told him he was in a semi-desert. The sun, when it edged above the rim of the smoke-blue mountains, would be uncomfortably warm.

His attention was caught by a curving treelined ravine. Following its course, he discovered an opening through the growth that appeared sufficiently large to accommodate the pod. He anxiously scanned the area around him. No sign of habitation was visible. Also, the roadway was separated by a number of intervening hills and gullies. The pod should be safe for a few days at least. Hovering directly above the opening, he looked into the downward viewscreen. Aside from a few scattered boulders and bits of vegetation, the floor of the ravine appeared smooth and sandy.

Before letting the craft drop, he flipped a switch that amplified the acoustics from beyond the pod's shell. Rustling, whirring noises and occasional harsh chirpings filled the cabin. The former, he judged, were insect sounds, the latter probably those of the small feathered creatures he'd seen flitting among the bushes. Such life was common to almost all planets having a dense, oxygen-rich atmosphere. His own world was no exception. He considered the sounds reassuring, for there was no indication of larger, more formidable life-forms.

He let the pod descend slowly, watched the growth close around it. Finally it came to rest on the sandy floor. Conscious that the instruments emitted electromagnetic waves that could lead to the pod's detection, he shut them off. Next he armed the destruct package -- a standard procedure when landing on a strange planet -- and memorized its firing code. Gathering a few items he thought he might need, he dropped them into the pockets of the reddish, metallic material that covered his slight torso.

Silently, then, he opened the hatch and stepped out into the new world.

Barlo heard the soft rustling of the small feathered creatures in the brush, felt the coolness of the breeze against his face. He was thankful that the yellow sun had not yet topped the mountains, for his large, violet, light-sensitive eyes, better adapted to nocturnal vision, suffered when exposed to glare.

Filled with the wonder that he never failed to feel when landing on a new world, he let his senses drink in the new sights and sounds and odors that bombarded him from every side. The alien stimuli gave him intense pleasure.

A feathered creature hopped into view on a limb. Its head cocked, its small bright eyes watched the planetary archeologist warily. Chirping, it hopped closer. Barlo probed its mind with his own; there was no response. Neither had he expected there would be. Yet the telepathic ability to bridge two radically different life forms, while extremely rare, did occur. He had, on a ghostly planet beneath a dying red sun, exchanged thoughts with a small, furry creature that had adapted to deep underground burrows as protection against the encroaching cold. He remembered the creature wistfully; it had preferred to die with its world rather than move out into the universe.

He followed the ravine until he found a place where he could scale its steep walls. Picking his way upward through the thick brush with agile ease, he peered cautiously over the edge. The land swept downward, dotted with a profusion of trees, shrubs, and small knolls that greatly limited his vision. His mental probes returned nothing. The scene was quiet and peaceful, yet he knew that soon it would burn beneath the brassy sun.

A small animal with tan-colored fur, enormous ears, and

disproportionately long hind legs hopped into view, halting a short distance from him. Its sensitive nose quivered apprehensively as it regarded him through sad, pink-rimmed eyes. Its mind was blank -- a mere transfer point where incoming stimuli were converted to the appropriate motor responses without the intervention of even the slightest reasoning.

Barlo struck out from the ravine and crossed several low spurs and valleys before following the course of a gully. Now and then he paused to watch, listen, mentally probe the world around him. Occasionally he glimpsed small animals that didn't appear too greatly different from those he had seen on other planets. He reflected that given any particular environment, he could fairly accurately predict its life forms. Nature, with all its wonders, still clung to molds.

The gully intersected a valley which he crossed, ascending the far side. At the top of the ridge he followed the course of another ravine. The brush was thicker, taller, the animal life more abundant. He spotted a strange, legless creature that held its body in a coil before gliding noiselessly behind the shelter of a rock outcrop. Barlo reflected that to survive, such a creature must have a deadly defense; consequently, he gave the spot a wide berth.

Abruptly he halted, a warning screaming in his mind. He twisted to plunge back into the ravine and almost as instantly decided against it; the steep walls could prove to be a trap. Shrinking back into the underbrush, he scanned his surroundings while prowling with his mind. For the moment he detected nothing. A short distance away several of the feathered creatures rose from the bushes in evident alarm, winging to a distant tree. The sight sharpened his anxiety.

The warning came again, more persistently than before, yet gave no indication of its source. He interpreted a crackling in the distance as a heavy body smashing through the thick brush. As he scanned the slope in that direction, one of the long-eared animals darted into view, scampering wildly down into the ravine. The crashing came in its wake.

Barlo was trying to decide whether to retreat when a huge, dark-furred beast burst into view from a thicket. Its long pointed jaw suggested a carnivore. He was appalled at its size. Reaching into a pocket, he drew forth a small cylindrical tube that had one end fastened into a grip. Holding it negligently, he kept his gaze riveted on the animal as he probed its mind. Again there was no suggestion of intelligence.

A crackling came from the brush behind the animal, and a huge biped burst into view. Its clothed body and the long instrument it carried -- a weapon, Barlo decided -- marked it as probably the dominant life-form on this planet. Although not too greatly unlike himself, the newcomer was nearly twice as tall and more than twice as broad across the shoulders.

Barlo lightly touched the other's mind -- a quick touch in case the biped should prove telepathic. When the other showed no sign of alertness, he tapped more deeply, absorbing both the mind's conscious and its subconscious aspects. Although a brutal mind of low intelligence, it still sufficed to yield the knowledge and vocabulary that Barlo sought. He was glad that the creature hadn't proved telepathic, for a nontelepathic world would make his own detection far less likely.

Man! The biped was a man! Barlo's earlier surmise that the creature represented the dominant life species on the planet appeared certain; the sense of lordship over the domain of life was stamped too deeply for it to be otherwise.

Despite his uneasiness Barlo focused his attention on absorbing the contents of the mind in detail. At the conscious level it was quite shallow, nor were the wells of the subconscious much deeper. It was a mind that held little reasoning and almost nothing of abstraction, yet knew not that it knew

not.

He broke off his study as the dark-furred beast moved forward, pausing again with one forepaw raised. The beast was a dog. Although it had negligible intelligence, a strong bond existed between the two, a bond founded on...the hunt. Barlo shrank deeper into the underbrush as the man moved closer. He was uncomfortably aware of his own vulnerable position. The hunter kept advancing, his gaze roving back and forth along the edge of the gully.

As he drew closer, Barlo saw that he had an extremely large nose, eyes less than a third the size of his own, a face heavy at the jowls, which were shadowed by a growth of dark hair. A coarse face lacking sensitivity -- a face that went with the mind.

Despite the danger of detection, Barlo began to sift the knowledge he believed might prove most fruitful. The man had a curiously disorganized mind that reeked of a joyful violence. Barlo was both fascinated and repelled, for the violence had no direction. He had seen violence in many minds, but usually it had been directed toward a specific being or thing. This violence was centered only in the urge to kill; the victim would be quite incidental to the lust. The same applied to the dog, but the dog's motives were quite beyond its control. That, to Barlo, made the difference.

The dog suddenly yelped, darting toward a thicket at the edge of the ravine. Instantly one of the long-eared creatures Barlo had spotted earlier scurried from cover and twisted away through the underbrush. Yelping, the dog raced after it.

"Hey, Harry," the man shouted, one hand cupped to his lips. "Dude's scared up a rabbit!"

"Coming!" The answering shout from a distance was followed by another crashing through the underbrush. Barlo jerked to rapt attention, mentally assessing his situation now that there were two hunters. He decided to remain still. Waiting, he tested his new vocabulary at a whisper. The sounds came awkwardly, with uncertain pronunciation. He was certain it was a language he could quite easily master.

"Watch the opposite side of the ravine," the first hunter called. "It's going to pop up somewhere."

It's going to pop up somewhere. Barlo repeated the words mentally, then allowed them to issue from his lips. A new language always was interesting. Dog, rabbit, pop up: "D-d-ddd, b-b-b-b, p-p-p-p." The d's and b's and p's required quite different lip movements. He thought it a strangely unmusical language.

As the second hunter drew nearer, Barlo probed his mind. It too was fibbed with a formless violence. Could such creatures as these have built the immense cities he'd seen? Could they have hurled the metal satellites into the sky? If so, the race possessed a wide range of intelligence, for neither of the two men even remotely possessed such a capability. That indicated that the technical knowledge must be quite unevenly distributed.

Although he sensed he should retreat, he felt reluctant to leave until he'd gleaned every scrap of knowledge from the two minds. The linguistics really were quite simple -- a few thousand words, mainly general rather than specific, served as the basis for communication. Bodily gestures and facial expressions appeared to serve as supplements. All in all, the two beings were quite primitive. He had to find other knowledge sources. To Barlo's dismay the dog suddenly bounded toward him from a thicket, its ears erect. Staccato yelps filled the air.

"Dude's flushed one," the hunter named Harry shouted. He dashed in Barlo's direction. Barlo tried to slip through the thick brush but found his way blocked. Twisting, he darted through a narrow opening that led toward the ravine. Wham! A ripping noise came from the brush around him as the roar of the weapon reverberated through the hills.

"Hey, Tom, I saw a monkey!" Harry shouted disbelievingly.

"A monkey? You're nuts!"

"No, really, it was dressed in red."

"In red?" Tom hooted. "Man, you've flipped."

"I saw it," protested Harry. "Keep your eyes peeled. I almost knocked it off."

"Sure it wasn't a kid or sumpin'?"

"Naw, it was a monkey, all right. Great big eyes."

"Watch out for Dude!"

Barlo followed their conversation as he scurried through the brush. The hunters were no great threat; he could elude them easily enough. The dog was another matter. The yelping sounded almost at his heels. Aware that he was heading back toward the ship, he turned along the edge of an intersecting ravine. To his dismay he glimpsed one of the hunters race into sight ahead of him. In his mind Barlo clearly envisioned the path the hunter had taken, the way the ravine curved. Now the hunter was in front of him, the dog close behind. Where was the second hunter? He sent mind probes outward.

Without hesitancy he scrambled down to the floor of the ravine and raced over the soft sand. Yelping, the dog followed. Barlo heard it crash through the thick growth not far behind. He came to a place where the walls rose steeply -- too steeply, he knew, for the dog to follow. Grasping the limb of an overhanging tree, he pulled himself up until he was clear of the edge, then ran out along another limb and dropped to the ground. Wham! Wham! Wham! The thunder of a weapon echoed in his ears as small pellets tore the shrubbery to shreds close to one side.

"Hey, Harry, it was a monkey," a voice shouted. "I just saw it. Dude flushed it out of the gully."

"Where's it at now?"

"Headed back in your direction. Keep your eyes peeled."

"Man, I'd like to get that baby. Where's Dude?"

"In the gully."

With the shouting loud in his ears, Barlo took temporary sanctuary in a thick pile of brush while he assessed his situation. The hunters were near the edge of the ravine on either side of him. If he turned toward the higher ground, he was almost certain to be seen, but neither could he remain where he was. He heard the dog scrambling back along the floor of the gully.

"See anything, Tom?" The voice caused Barlo to crouch lower.

"Not yet. Keep watching."

"Think it really was a monkey?"

"Sure looked like one."

"I didn't see a tail. Call Dude, get him out of the gully."

"Here Dude, here Dude." A crackling came from the brush as the dog scrambled up the side of the ravine, popping into view but a short distance from Barlo. He was starting a cautious retreat when the animal spotted him and loosed a series of short, sharp yelps.

"Dude's flushed him out," a voice shouted. Barlo reluctantly raised the cylindrical tube, unlocked the safety, and pressed a button while moving the barrel back and forth in short arcs. An invisible ray fired the dry brush between him and the dog. The animal yelped frantically. A skein of smoke curled into the sky.

"Hey, Tom, there's a fire," shouted Harry.

"Man, there sure is. Here Dude, here Dude!"

"How'd it get started?"

"Dunno. Where's Dude?"

"Heard him a moment ago. Here Dude, here Dude!"

With the dog cut off by the leaping flames, Barlo edged through the thick underbrush along a course that lay at a right angle to the ravine. The

yelps and cries rapidly faded in the distance behind him. With the growth less thick, he hurried his steps toward the crest of a ridge. Finally he paused to look back. The two hunters were frantically attempting to stamp out the last of the fire.

A monkey! His thin lips curled in a smile at the image of a monkey he'd drawn from the hunters' minds. There was a certain similarity, of course, but the hunters fitted the description almost as well. Had that thought ever occurred to them? Probably not.

Topping the ridge, he started down the other side.

TWO

TOBY ADAM came down from the hills, a small brown and white dog at his side. Tall, with short-cropped dark hair and yellow-flecked brown eyes set in a deeply tanned face, Toby carried a geologist's rock hammer and a battered cold chisel. An old leather specimen bag was slung from one shoulder.

His thoughts were pleasant. It was summer, with school more than a month away, which gave him plenty of time to complete the chalcedony collection he was preparing for exhibit in the science fair. His particular quest this morning had been for chrysoprase, an apple-green variety of the mineral which Grandpa Jed said might be found in the area, although it was extremely rare.

He paused, listening to the echo of a distant gunshot. It seemed to have come from almost directly ahead. The dog halted, ears cocked, one forepaw raised as it peered intently along the trail. Several minutes later more gunfire rolled through the hills. The dog growled.

"Easy, Ruff." Toby reached down and patted the dog's head. His stubby tail wagged. Straightening, Toby studied the rolling scape ahead. Hunters who lived in the backcountry generally were careful, but those who came from the city often were not; he'd learned that long ago. Some opened fire at the slightest sound or movement, with no idea of the real nature of the target.

Failing to detect the source of the shots, he moved ahead uneasily, keeping the dog at his side with a restraining word. He would have felt better knowing where the hunters were. A covey of quail broke from his path and whirred away through the underbrush. Taking that as a sign that no one was in the immediate area, he quickened his pace.

Several times he halted to study rock formations and once to watch a young cottontail on the path ahead. The dog treated the rabbit with elegant disdain. Toby smiled, knowing that only his presence had kept the dog from yelping pursuit. A short time later he spotted two armed men hurrying down from an adjoining gully. A large black dog ran in a circular pattern ahead of them sniffing at the ground. Toby breathed more easily at having spotted the hunters.

The sun edged above the mountains, bringing a blast of heat. Toby called the dog and started up a hill to intersect the gully on the far side -- a saving of nearly a mile of rugged terrain. He'd almost reached the top when the dog suddenly stopped, a low growl rumbling from its throat.

"What is it, Ruff?" Toby stared fixedly ahead, trying to pinpoint the source of the dog's alarm. He heard no sign of the hunters. He was starting ahead when a slight figure came over the brow of the hill. Halting, he gazed incredulously at it. His first impression that it was a very small boy was quickly erased by the sight of the almost noseless face, the enormous violet eyes. The small, pointed ears were erect. Its garments appeared made of red mesh.

The creature -- for that was the way Toby first thought of it -- halted abruptly at almost the same instant, the large violet eyes fixed on Toby across the space of a dozen paces.

Don't be afraid. The words popped into Toby's mind. It took him an instant to realize that the words weren't his own but had come from the strange creature opposite him. There had been no sound, yet he had heard as plainly as if by voice! Unable to speak, he stared bewilderedly at the other - at the arms overly long for the slight body, at the long, prehensile fingers, at the strange reddish garment that held the slight gleam of a metallic material. The small, narrow feet were similarly clad.

Don't be afraid. The silent voice came into his mind again. This time he had no doubt that it had come from the creature; he also had no doubt that there had been no audible sound. No audible sound? A tremor ran through his body.

"I'm not afraid," he managed to say. At that instant the dog dashed forward, its stubby tail wagging. As the creature reached out to stroke it, the dog licked at the long, prehensile fingers.

I'm a stranger. The silent words came again. This time Toby was more wondering than alarmed. Ruff was a one-man dog; it wasn't like him to make friends so easily. That he did now was reassuring. Toby tried to stifle his swirling thoughts.

"Who are you?" he asked.

My name is Barlo.

"I'm Toby...Toby Adams," he blurted. Looking at the slight figure, he felt an enormous suspicion and with it felt a wild excitement. "You're not from Earth," he exclaimed.

No...The large violet eyes watched him gravely.

"You can't be from one of the planets," Toby rushed on. "None of them has a suitable atmosphere."

No, I'm not from one of your planets.

"The stars?" he whispered.

From the stars, acknowledged Barlo.

"How is it that I can hear you when you're not speaking?"

I'm speaking through my mind.

"Telepathy?"

What you call telepathy, yes.

"But how can I hear you?" Toby gazed awestruck at him. "Even if you're telepathic, I'm not."

I project my thoughts into your mind, explained Barlo.

"But how" -- Toby groped with his thoughts -- "how did you learn the language?"

From you...and others like you.

"You learned that from my mind?" he asked disbelievingly. Why, he'd only been talking with the creature for a moment. Others! The creature had said others! His thoughts jelled.

"The hunters?" he asked. Barlo briefly explained his earlier encounter. They thought I was a monkey, he finished.

"But you don't look like that at all," protested Toby. His face flamed. "Why didn't you tell them who you were when they started to shoot at you?"

I couldn't reach their minds.

"You couldn't?" He was startled. Something like a small smile touched Barlo's lips. He explained about innate differences in minds which determined the degree to which each could be reached. Some minds were like closed doors; others, a rare few, were opened totally. At least, it was that way on other worlds.

"Your world?" asked Toby.

Yes, and on others. Barlo glanced back at the rising sun. It's getting quite warm.

Afraid that the stranger might decide to leave, Toby quickly suggested that they sit in the shade. His brain spun with the thousand questions he had

to ask. Barlo patted the dog's head and, moving under the shade of a stunted mountain oak, sat on the dry leaves. Toby sat across from him.

"Can you talk using speech?" he asked.

"With difficulty," answered Barlo. His voice, high and reedy, while not unpleasant to Toby's ears, sounded strange. Later he was to think of it as a musical voice, like the high notes of a flute. Barlo added, "I'll do better before long."

Toby nodded his understanding. "How did you get here?"

Barlo described the disaster and how he had come to land in the nearby hills.

"Where's your ship now?" asked Toby eagerly.

"In one of the gullies." Barlo gestured toward the east. "It's hidden." He projected an image of the ship in the boy's mind, observing the latter's quick, startled expression followed almost as quickly by a look of understanding.

"How did you do that?" asked Toby.

"The same way I project ideas."

"Telepathic images..." Toby shook his head wonderingly. Or was it telepathy? Not really, for he couldn't read Barlo's mind but could only receive the words and pictures that Barlo projected into his. Yet when Barlo read his mind and projected the answers, it was the same as if he had read Barlo's mind. Yet it wasn't the same at all; Barlo could open and shut his mind at will, project not only imagery drawn from memory but imagery woven of imagination. In a sense, Barlo was the operator of a television station while he, Toby, was the viewer. But the telepathy did not seem nearly so startling as Barlo's ability to draw the contents from his mind instantly and understand what they meant. Equally magical was his ability to project thoughts.

"It's not a matter of the projecting mind so much as of the receiving mind," observed Barlo. He explained that the ability to receive such telepathic images was a function of intelligence, but it was also something more. Some minds, a few, were ready for nature's next step.

"What's that?" interrupted Toby. Barlo explained that most life-forms quite early found their niche and remained there. Insects and birds were typical. But in other forms the evolutionary process appeared unending. Such emerging cultures, if they didn't destroy themselves in the process, eventually reached the stars. But even that was an individual function rather than one of race. In most societies it was the few who led the many. And the next step he'd mentioned was the opening of the mind, its flowering, its receptivity and response to the universe rather than to only its immediate environment. The ability to receive telepathic projections, especially in the form of imagery, indicated the opening mind. As he spoke, Barlo's large violet eyes regarded the boy gravely.

Forgetful of the time, they talked. Toby thought it strange how quickly people could adapt to new situations. Sitting under the stunted oak with Barlo seemed quite natural. He marveled at how quickly his strange companion was adjusting to this world. He was speaking as if he'd known Toby for a long, long time. Toby wished he could meet Grandpa Jed.

Barlo revealed that the name of his planet was Raamz and that his sun was Zaree. As he spoke, he projected a vivid image of incredibly tall pink buildings jutting into a sky in which rode a dusky red sun. The air was alive with vehicles of almost every size and description. "My world and my sun," said Barlo. His voice held a touch of pride.

"It's beautiful," replied Toby. No, beautiful wasn't the word; it was fantastic. Fantastic and unbelievable. And yet it wasn't, for a man -- Toby mentally had translated "creature" into "man" -- from the stars sat opposite him now, telling of the wonders of the universe. But no one would believe him, Toby decided. Except Grandpa Jed. Gramp would believe him. So would Linda

Jansen, who went to school with him. Linda was awfully smart. Perhaps there were a lot of people who would believe him, but he wasn't too certain of that. He listened avidly as Barlo told him more about himself.

He was a planetary archeologist. But instead of concentrating on a single race he roved the known galaxy, searching out the artifacts, inscriptions, and sepulchers of the distant past, whatever their forms. He projected an image of the ruins of an ancient city on a bleak and shadowy plain. The sun above it was purplish red. "The past yields the key to the future," he explained.

Toby told him about his own dream of becoming a geologist. He opened his specimen bag and displayed several minerals he had found that morning. Barlo examined them interestedly as Toby described their physical and chemical characteristics. He explained that his interest was not solely with rocks but with all of nature; he wanted to know why things were as they were. Barlo could understand that; Toby could see it in the large violet eyes.

Barlo said, "I believe you will make a very fine geologist." He glanced toward the climbing sun. Suddenly Toby realized that his companion was beginning to suffer in the growing heat and that he kept his eyes averted from the harsher light.

"Come home with me," he urged.

Barlo shook his head, a gesture he'd learned from the boy. Toby suppressed his disappointment; he'd been looking forward to having Barlo meet his grandfather. "You can't stay here," he protested. Barlo explained that he would be rescued.

"When?"

"Eventually."

"How will they know where you are?" Toby argued. Barlo explained that a search would have been launched immediately when the big Zemm liner had failed to reach its destination. Even now rescue units would be combing every moon and planet along the big ship's flight path. He explained about the capsule he'd launched into orbit and added that he also could transmit a distress signal that would guide any nearby craft to him.

"But they might not come for a long time," protested Toby.

"It shouldn't be too long." The large violet eyes regarded him steadily. Toby felt a sudden suspicion.

"There's some other reason you won't come," he accused.

The faint smile that came contrasted strangely with Barlo's suddenly solemn demeanor. "I'm afraid," he admitted.

"Of my people?" Toby suppressed a start. "They're not all like the hunters."

Barlo asked quietly, "What do you believe might happen if word got around that a creature from the stars was staying with your family?"

"Yeah." Toby licked his lips drily. He could see that. The people would come flooding in from San Diego by the thousands. Even from Los Angeles, perhaps farther. There'd be reporters and TV cameramen all over the place. The flying-saucer stories came vividly to his mind. A lot of people would be scared. They might even think Barlo was an invader of some sort.

"It's bad enough that I flew over the highway," observed Barlo.

"They probably thought it was some kind of an experimental ship," Toby suggested hopefully. "There are a couple of Air Force bases on the other side of the mountains."

"It's possible." Barlo didn't appear convinced.

"Are you going to stay in your ship?"

"I can't." His eyes rested on Toby's face. "If the ship is discovered, I'll have to destroy it; and if I were in it, I would die. I don't prefer that."

"Why would you have to destroy it?" Toby didn't think it made sense.

Barlo regarded him thoughtfully. "It has secrets," he said finally.

"The propulsion system?" blurted Toby. "Is it a star drive?" He knew all about star drives from science fiction.

"Not the scout pod." Barlo shook his head. "But the principle is similar. It could lead to the development of such a drive."

"What's wrong with that?"

"The people from Earth might not be ready for the stars." Barlo stilled Toby's protest with a gesture. He explained that races which went to the stars too soon usually ended disastrously. How could a race that didn't fully understand itself understand an alien culture? How many wars had Earth had? There hadn't been an interstellar war for more than a million Earth years.

As Barlo spoke, Toby felt his protest weaken and finally vanish altogether. He could understand Barlo's fears, and he had to admit that they were founded on a firm basis. There was nearly always war someplace on Earth, and usually more than one. But the stars! He felt the keen edge of disappointment to think that the stars would be denied to Earth, even though the people of Earth were not yet ready for them. But some people were! He wanted to say that but realized it would do no good; a few people couldn't go to the stars without opening the door to everyone.

He finally asked, "Where will you stay?"

"In the hills."

"You can't. Besides, there are always hunters." Struck by an idea, he explained that there was a barn behind his house, that nobody but he ever went into the hayloft. It would be easy for him to bring Barlo food and water. "No one would ever know you were there," he finished.

To his intense satisfaction Barlo agreed that it might be a suitable place. Toby sprang to his feet, walked to the brow of the hill, and looked around. The hunters were nowhere in sight, nor could he see a sign of anyone. He automatically plotted a course which would keep Barlo in the shade as much as possible, yet allow them to keep a good lookout. At his gesture, Barlo patted the dog's head and came out from beneath the overhanging branches. Toby noticed that he kept his eyes averted from the sun.

With Barlo close at his heels, Toby followed the dog down the hillside. Conscious of their exposed position, he moved swiftly toward lower terrain where the trees and shrubs grew more thickly. Once, glancing back, he was struck at how lightly and agilely Barlo moved. Barlo caught his look and explained that Earth's gravity was somewhat less than that on his own planet. He had been on worlds, he said, where the gravity was so great that it had been tiring to stand for even a few moments. Toby didn't think he'd like that.

Lower down he followed a treelined ravine, careful to keep in the shade as much as possible. Once they halted as an airliner passed overhead. High in the sky, it looked like a diminutive arrowhead a gleam in the sun. Toby speculated on the alien's thoughts as he watched it. It struck him that to a race which traveled among the stars the airliner would resemble a primitive toy. The reflection was not good for his ego. A low whine came from somewhere to their south. Barlo paused and cocked his head.

"A truck on the highway," explained Toby. A short while later they sighted a double concrete ribbon curving up the side of a distant hill. The trucks and cars that sped along it looked like minute bugs. Toby explained that the highway, called Interstate 8, provided the main surface route between the coastal city of San Diego and the big cities to the east.

The hills opened into a wide, fertile valley where cattle and horses grazed in fenced green fields. Scattered here and there were groves of eucalyptus, gnarled sycamores, and elms which drooped in the summer heat. Crossing the southern end of the valley, the highway twisted up the slopes to the east. Several structures placed amid widely separated groves of trees flanked the highway on either side.

Toby halted abruptly, apprehensive at the sight of several dozen cars parked around a stone and plank building that housed the general store. Although cars often stopped there, he'd seldom seen more than three or four at a time. Barlo's ship! The rumor was already spreading. He confided his suspicions.

"I suspect you're right," acknowledged Barlo. "I'm certain I flew over this valley."

Toby gazed indecisively at the highway. "It'll be safe in the barn," he finally declared. Sending the dog ahead, he led his companion into a shallow brush-lined wash that passed close behind his home. As they drew closer to the highway he heard the faint babble of voices. He signaled Barlo to halt while he edged up through the brush to peer over the edge. Although several large knots of men were visible in front of the general store, he saw none in the fields. But more and more cars coming down the grade from the west were stopping. He moved his eyes uneasily. The area around the corral and barn behind his house was deserted. He signaled Barlo and moved on. When he halted again, the barn lay a scant hundred feet away.

"Wait," he instructed tersely. Crossing to the barn, he entered it through a side door. The gloomy interior was heavy with the scent of hay. A horse stirred in the adjacent corral. From somewhere, faintly, came the bark of a dog. Ruff ran in, prancing playfully until Toby shushed him. He climbed a ladder to the loft, spread some fresh hay across the floor, then stepped back to view it ruefully. He didn't think it looked like a proper place for a visitor from the stars.

He peered out the front of the barn toward the house, reassured at the deserted yard. His mother would be somewhere inside sewing or cooking, and Grandpa Jed was probably sitting on the porch enjoying the excitement. Gramp would like Barlo; he had that kind of mind.

Caught by the imperative need to hurry, he returned to the wash and beckoned to Barlo. Toby led him to the barn and up the ladder to the loft. "It's not too clean, but it's safe," he explained. "I'll bring some blankets."

"That won't be necessary." Barlo glanced at the strewn hay and the odds and ends of junk piled against the walls. His violet eyes, in the gloom, caught and reflected shafts of sunlight that filtered through the warped siding. "This will be fine," he declared.

"What do you eat?" asked Toby. He was suddenly afraid that the alien's diet might be something not available.

"No need for food," answered Barlo.

"You have to eat," he protested.

Barlo chuckled and drew what appeared to be a small container of pills from a pocket. "This will do," he explained.

"Is that all?" asked Toby incredulously.

"Sufficient, but I could use some water."

"I'll bring some right away."

"No hurry, Toby."

Toby! The alien had used his name for the first time. Shy and pleased, he wondered if it would be all right to call the other Barlo. It would make conversation much easier.

"I'd prefer that you do use my name," proffered Barlo. Realizing that the alien had read his predicament, Toby flushed. The slight chuckle came again. "I'm somewhat used to it after more than ten thousand years."

"Ten thousand years?" Toby was aghast.

"As time is measured on your planet," explained Barlo. "I'm somewhat older on my own."

"Ten thousand years," he repeated. He gazed disbelievingly at his companion.

"It's an artificial life span," said Barlo. "My normal life span would

be perhaps one hundred Earth years, certainly not much longer."

"Transplants?"

"Only late in life. I'm not of that age yet."

"Then how?" he asked helplessly.

"It's more a case of controlling aging and disease."

"If you can live for that long, why not forever?"

"Life is governed by how long the brain lives," observed Barlo. "The body, in a manner of speaking, is a mechanical contrivance. Artificial systems can be used to replace the original ones when, eventually, they do wear out. But the brain is that house of the spark of awareness that tells you that you are you. You can't replace the house without replacing the 'you'; or if you did, you would be a different identity. Oh, we can regenerate brain tissue to some extent, nurse it along a bit; but when the inner corridors of that house of awareness die, then the owner of the house also dies. Is that bad? Death is as universal as life -- a one-to-one ratio, I would say. Suns, galaxies, and entire universes die; but new suns, galaxies, and entire universes are continually being born. That is the way of life...and death."

"But if you are ten thousand years old...?" Toby paused, thinking his question might appear indelicate.

"How much longer might I live? By your standards I'm approaching middle age. I have perhaps ten thousand years left."

"Twenty thousand years," Toby breathed. He regarded the alien with awe. "Do all of your people live that long?"

"More or less. Of course there are accidents, although they are quite rare."

"I can't imagine living that long."

"Would you care to?"

Toby considered it. "Yes," he finally acquiesced.

"Why?"

"Think of how much a person could learn."

Barlo nodded gravely. "That is an excellent reason."

"I would like to see other worlds," said Toby. He quickly added, "I would especially like to see your world. I can't imagine a dusky red sun." He tried to picture how it might look.

"You have a very fine sun," replied Barlo, "even though it is a trifle warm."

When Toby withdrew, Barlo sank down into the hay to contemplate his own situation. It was far more dangerous than the boy realized; he sensed that from what little he'd gleaned from the hunter's minds. Still, the Unity's search and rescue missions should already be fanning out along the starliner's flight path. A few days, as time was measured on this planet, should bring one within range of his simple transmitter.

Briefly he wondered if he shouldn't have remained with the pod. But that, too, could have been extremely dangerous. If the pod were discovered, it would certainly be recognized as from a culture beyond this sun's system. It had been all right to tell the boy, of course; Toby was completely trustworthy. But on a newborn technological world such as this, the knowledge could cause quite a stir. Particularly any suspicion of the existence of a star drive. Now, should the pod be discovered, he was free to destroy it.

Still, he didn't regret the necessity that had brought him to this world. The opportunity to view even a small section of this budding, emotional culture would pay invaluable intellectual dividends. Having thoroughly catalogued and indexed the contents of Toby's mind, he suspected that his knowledge of the planet's physical, cultural, and technological environments probably already exceeded that of the great majority of its inhabitants. He judged it as a world of strange contrasts -- primitive, yet quite advanced, surging with love, torn by hate: an egocentric world in which a few pondered

the stars and wondered.

But finding the boy had been fortunate. Toby was extremely intelligent, far more so than he would have suspected were he to judge solely by the planet's technological development. The boy possessed an extremely perceptive mind; more unusual, he had a well-developed capacity for receiving telepathic communications. He'd been quick to recognize the first communication as telepathic and equally quick to accept it; that alone was amazing. Strange, but he had complete confidence in the boy. He couldn't recall another being on another planet, other than his own, where his confidence had been given so easily. If Toby were representative of the youth of this race, the world was in good hands. But that was too much to hope for.

Weighing the evidence of what he'd gleaned from Toby's mind, he decided that the race probably had reached a point in its cerebral development where it was preparing for the next step; the forerunners were probably already walking the Earth.

The boy perhaps was one of them.

THREE

TOBY CAME AROUND from the rear of the house, halting abruptly as he saw Grandpa Jed picking his way along the road from Murdock's General Store. Tall and rail-thin, the old man wore a long black alpaca coat which, shiny from wear and age, made him somewhat resemble a television version of an old riverboat gambler.

Toby's eyes softened as he went to meet him. His own father had died so many years before that he scarcely remembered him. But Gramp, as everyone called him, was just like a real father. They talked about almost everything. At times he'd wondered how Gramp had learned so much, when he'd spent most of his life in San Diego's backcountry. Toby debated whether to tell him about Barlo but decided against it. He'd have to ask Barlo first.

"Hi, Gramp." He pretended nonchalance as the old man drew closer. Grandpa Jed hurried his pace.

"You missed all the excitement," he called.

"What happened?"

"Some durned fools saw a flying saucer." Gramp flipped his cane toward the sky. "Right up there, over the highway."

"Must have been some kind of experimental plane," suggested Toby. He felt a stab of guilt.

"That's what I told 'em. Murdock says it was some kind of Commie spacecraft that came down from orbit. Says he was just unlocking the store when he heard it and looked up, saw the Russian flag big as life painted on its side."

"That's crazy," exclaimed Toby.

"Sure it's crazy, but you ought to hear some of the other stories. A dozen people claimed to have seen it."

"The same thing?"

"Every version different. Most of 'em think it was some kind of flying saucer. They're all het up." The old man chuckled again as he picked his way to the porch and lowered his long body into his favorite rocker. "Find any chrysopruse?"

Toby sat on the rail opposite him. "Just plain old prase," he admitted.

"Green quartz, eh?"

Toby eyed the general store uneasily. "Why is everybody waiting around?" Gramp snorted derisively. "Murdock called the paper. They're sending a fellow out. They all want to get their names in print."

"Gosh, no one would believe that." He felt the guilt again and added,

"About it being a Russian spacecraft, I mean."

"They wouldn't, eh?" The old man's blue eyes fixed him keenly. "You'd be surprised at what people will believe. Do you ever read the letters column in the paper? Bunch of danged crackpots."

"Why would a Russian spacecraft come down from orbit in a place like this?" demanded Toby.

"To land spies or saboteurs." Gramp smirked. "That's what Murdock claims."

"Spies or saboteurs," Toby groaned. He wondered what they'd think if they could see Barlo. The wail of a distant siren sounded, and they fell silent, watching the highway. A dark car with a flashing red beacon on the roof sped down the grade from the east.

"Sheriff Washburn," Toby ventured.

"Dan, eh?" Gramp chuckled. "Never misses an opportunity."

Toby didn't answer. The sheriff, as everyone around knew, had been courting "the Adam widow," as Toby's mother was known, for more than a year. Toby was glad. He liked the sheriff. So did Gramp.

The sheriff's car crossed the valley flats, its siren giving a final wail as it turned in at the general store and parked. Several figures detached themselves from the crowd and went to meet him. Toby's mother came out on the porch, wiping her hands on her apron. Tall, she verged on the buxom side, and her widely spaced hazel eyes gave her face a calm expression. "What's happening?" she asked.

Gramp chuckled again. "Dan's gettin' himself a piece of the action."

"Now, Dad," she chided warmly.

"Everyone wants publicity," the old man insisted.

She looked at Toby. "You left awfully early." The statement held a question.

"Before dawn," he admitted.

"Did you have breakfast?"

"Not yet." He followed her back into the kitchen. While she busied herself over a griddle, he surreptitiously filled a canteen and carried it to the barn. Climbing the ladder to the loft, he whispered hoarsely, "I've brought water."

"Thank you," replied Barlo. He rose from the hay to take the canteen from the boy's hand. Glowing in the gloom, the violet eyes appeared more enormous than ever. Toby had the swift impression that they weren't reflecting light so much as radiating it from some deep inner source.

"Keep hidden," he cautioned. "A lot of people are gathering down at the store. Some of them saw your ship."

"I was afraid of that," acknowledged Barlo.

"Some of them think you're a Russian spy."

"Oh?" The alien eyed him intently, drawing the meaning from his mind. "Perhaps that's not as dangerous as coming from the stars," he observed.

"It is in San Diego," asserted Toby. "I'll let you know what happens." Scrambling back down the ladder, he threw some hay to the horse and returned to the kitchen. His mother served him pancakes and a glass of milk.

"What do you think of all the excitement?" she asked.

"Ah, it's crazy." He flushed, his eyes on the plate.

"It was on the eight thirty news."

"It was?" He was startled.

"A flying saucer, they said. The station was swamped with calls. Apparently a lot of other people saw it farther north."

"Gramp says Murdock claims to have seen a Russian flag on it. He thinks they're spies or saboteurs." He watched for her reaction.

"In Eklund Valley?" She laughed. "I'm afraid poor George is slipping."

"A lot of people will believe that," he stated darkly.

"The flying saucer bit is bad enough."

"Yeah." He lifted his head as another siren sounded, followed by the wail of a second one at a still greater distance. Hurriedly gulping his food, he returned to the porch in time to see a state highway patrol cruiser pull up in front of the general store. A second one was racing down the twisted highway from the west. He was shocked to see how many cars had arrived in the brief time that he'd been in the kitchen. Cars and people -- the area around the store was jammed.

"Goin' to be quite a day," Gramp chuckled. He was enjoying the activity.

"It'll die down," asserted Toby. The words sounded hollow in his ears.

"Not till they milk it dry."

"Why all the cops?"

"Publicity," retorted Gramp.

After a while the sheriff's car backed away from the store, rolled a short distance down the highway, and turned in along the road that led to Toby's house. The sheriff -- who was really a deputy but was accorded the higher title by the people in the area where he served -- drew up in the driveway and clambered from the car. Stocky and robust, he had short black hair, a square face weathered by the elements, dark eyes that could be deceptively mild.

"Jed...Toby." He gestured casually as he approached the porch. "See yuh got a ringside seat."

"Dull show," replied Gramp, "no action. Got time for a few hands of pinochle?"

"Not today, Jed." The sheriff eased himself onto the porch rail. "See anything?"

"No, but I heard plenty." Gramp chuckled again.

"A jillion rumors," asserted the sheriff, "but I got to check 'em out. Two hunters reported that a critter from the ship had attacked them."

"A Commie?" asked Gramp innocently.

"You know better than that, Jed. Murdock's been seein' Commies under rocks for years. No, this was really weird." He shook his head.

"What?" blurted Toby. He felt a sudden fear.

"A gorilla, I guess that's what you'd call it. Bigger than King Kong, they claimed. It came at 'em with a roar. They opened up on it point-blank with shot-guns, didn't even faze it. The critter yanked out a ray gun and set the brush afire."

"That's crazy," protested Toby. "I didn't see any smoke." He had visions of a gigantic search that would uncover Barlo's ship.

"It happened back in the hills." The sheriff gestured toward the east. "They stamped the fire out after the critter left."

"If it was that dangerous, how'd they escape?" he demanded. Stretching Barlo into King Kong was utterly ridiculous.

"They jumped into a gully that was too narrow for it to follow," explained the sheriff. "When its roars died away, they went back and fought the fire. Least-ways, that's what they claimed."

"You believe that hogwash?" demanded Gramp. His blue eyes sparkled.

"Of course not, but I've got to check it out. One of the boys is meeting the hunters. They're going to take him back to the spot, see if they can find anything."

"They won't," asserted Gramp.

The sheriff looked uncomfortable. "It's not that clear-cut," he countered. "We've had reports of some screwy-looking ship from way up the line. Half the people in the county must have seen it, to judge from the calls."

"Maybe something from Edwards Air Force Base over on the desert," suggested Toby. "They do lots of experimenting there."

"Could be." The sheriff was noncommittal. The radio in the prowl car crackled to life, and he walked over to tune it lower. He listened for a while before returning to the porch. He said, "The reports are still coming in. An avocado rancher over in Escondido just reported seem' a saucer zooming over the hills toward Julian. Another saucer -- or maybe it was the same one -- was spotted over Fallbrook."

"We're being invaded," crackled Gramp. He rubbed his hands gleefully.

Toby's mother came to the door. "Care for some coffee, Dan?"

"Well now, I could use some, Mary."

"We could play a hand of pinochle while you wait for news about the ape," suggested Gramp.

"Ape?" She arched her eyes.

"Dan's chasing an ape," he explained.

"What kind of joke is that?"

"A couple of hunters claimed they were attacked by a critter that looked like King Kong," the sheriff answered reluctantly.

"Got after 'em with a ray gun," Gramp put in.

"Hmph, they were probably doing more drinking than hunting," she observed.

"I suspect they were," the sheriff agreed.

"I'll get some coffee."

"Bring the cards," shouted Gramp as she turned away.

"Don't do it," yelled the sheriff. "I can't play during working hours."

"'Fraid of gettin' beat, eh?"

"I usually do," he admitted. While enjoying the coffee, they watched the activity. More and more cars came into view from the west, most of them pulling up into the empty fields which flanked the general store. A rotund figure carrying a placard pushed through the crowd. He nailed it to a telephone pole so that it faced the highway.

"Poor George, trying to stop the crowd," Toby's mother observed.

"Naw, it's for parking." The sheriff shook his head. "He's charging four bits. He was making the sign while I was there."

"That's George Murdock," commented Gramp.

"You have to scrounge for a livin' these days," asserted the sheriff.

A line of horsemen burst into view around the end of a eucalyptus grove at the rear of Linda Jansen's house. The sheriff tilted back his head, studying them from under the brim of his hat. One rider, obviously the leader, gestured, and the eight mounted men accompanying him fanned out on either flank to sweep the fields. "Carl Cleator and his vigilantes," he remarked drily.

A quick apprehension gripped Toby. "What are they doing?"

"Looking for Commies," growled Gramp.

"Now, Dad, watch your blood pressure," Mrs. Adam counseled.

"Danged idiots."

"Good for the horse business," said the sheriff. He'd bought land and was planning to raise saddle horses after his retirement. The leader of the troop spotted the sheriff's car and gestured, galloping toward them as the other riders swung into file behind him. "Nothing but trouble," the sheriff sighed.

They fell silent as the horsemen approached. Toby tried to stifle his nervousness. Carl Cleator's Vigilantes Against Communist Infiltration, usually known as the VACI, reportedly had guns and ammunition stashed away against the day when Communist infiltrators would rise in an attempt to seize the nation. Cleator enjoyed considerable support in the surrounding area. Now and then, when out rock hunting, Toby had seen the VACI galloping across the hills with the tall, thin Cleator in the lead.

"Whoa!" yelled Cleator. Signaling his men, he drew up a few paces from

the porch. His horse pranced nervously before quieting down. Cleator had a narrow face, dark eyes all but hidden under a jutting brow, a chin that came to a point beneath very thin, tight lips. Toby thought it a cruel face. Armed with rifles and holstered pistols, the horsemen wore black shirts, black trousers tucked into black riding boots, and flat-brimmed black hats. All except Cleator wore a white VACI shoulder patch. His was golden.

Cleator's eyes fastened on the sheriff. "Hear anything about those Russians?" he asked abruptly.

"Russians?" The sheriff's voice was flat, unemotional.

"A hundred people saw their ship, sheriff."

"Yeah, I know."

The vigilante leader leaned forward in his stirrups and said nastily, "You might not be concerned, sheriff, but we are, and we mean to find them."

"Let me know if you do, Cleator."

"Is the law really interested?"

"When someone breaks it, yes."

Cleator smiled frostily. "We're going to sweep these hills with bloodhounds. Colonel Jackman of Troop Two is bringing them up now."

"Colonel?" asked Gramp.

"Commanding officer of Troop Two of the VACI," the sheriff explained evenly. "His territory's farther up the line. Colonel Cleator and Colonel Jackman commissioned each other."

"At least we're not content to sit by and watch our country overrun with Commies," snapped Cleator.

"Haven't seen any around," the sheriff confessed.

"Oh, they're here. It's just a matter of looking."

"Catch many lately?" asked Gramp.

"Dad," Mrs. Adam exclaimed worriedly. Cleator gave the old man a venomous look.

"Let's go, Colonel," one of the riders called. "No use wasting time here."

"Forward!" yelled Cleator. He gestured with an outflung arm as he kicked back with his spurs. The animal under him wheeled, its nostrils flaring, before leaping ahead. The other riders followed in single file.

"Durn fools," snorted Gramp.

"They're not breaking any laws," the sheriff commented.

Toby's mother asked primly, "Isn't there a law against having an armed troop like that? I read there was."

"Right, Mary." The sheriff gazed at the black-clad figures. "But they're set up as a private hunting club. That makes it legal."

"That's an evasion of the law," she protested.

"Sure 'nuff." The sheriff scrunched forward and looked up past the eaves as a faint roaring came from the sky. Two helicopters appeared above the hills to the southwest. "Choppers from the naval air station," he said.

Toby felt a quick trepidation. The chopper pilots could snake along the gullies, look right down into them. Even if the brush had all but closed over the pod, as Barlo had said, it wouldn't take long to find it. He had a feeling of imminent disaster.

"Gotta be goin'." The sheriff drained his cup and slid off the railing, patting his holster. "Keep your eyes open, let me know if you hear anything."

"The gorilla?" asked Gramp slyly.

"Could be." The sheriff was unruffled.

"Dad's having fun," Mrs. Adam apologized.

"Can't say that I blame him." The sheriff looked back from the bottom of the stairs, waved, and clambered into his car. He drove back toward the general store.

"Shame on you, Dad," she chided. "Dan's just doing his job."

"Funny thing if there was an ape," Gramp chortled.

"Not for the ape, if Cleator's gang ever saw it," she replied. "That bunch could stir up a lot of trouble."

Toby watched the helicopters nervously. Looking like two gigantic dragonflies against the blue, their big blades whipped the air. They circled the valley several times before heading toward the eastern slopes. He was relieved when they remained at a rather high altitude.

He slipped from the porch and went around to the barn. Ruff greeted him with joyful barks. Admonishing the dog to silence, he went inside. Barlo rose to meet him as he clambered up into the loft. "The choppers are out," Toby said worriedly.

"Choppers?"

"Helicopters." He drew a mental picture of the craft hovering above a gully, at the same time struck by how much more quickly and vividly information could be transmitted by such means. "I'm afraid they'll find the pod," he finished.

"It's possible." Barlo didn't appear alarmed.

"Search parties are in the hills already," he warned.

"They haven't found the pod yet," reflected Barlo.

"How do you know?"

"I'm in contact with it."

"Contact?" Toby was startled. "Is someone else aboard?"

Barlo shook his head and explained that he could telepathically query a playback instrument in the ship. But if the hatch were opened or the pod disturbed in any way, the playback would cease to function. "Then I'd have to destroy the ship," he finished.

"How would you do that?"

"It carries a destruction device." Barlo caught Tony's puzzled look and explained, "It can be detonated telepathically."

"But to make the device do something..." Toby groped for words. "That's more than telepathy, isn't it?"

"Something more."

"We have a word for that. It's psychokinesis."

"Ah!"

"Can you really move things with your mind?"

"Only under special and extremely limited conditions," replied Barlo.

"In this instance the special condition is the unit built to respond to a telepathic command. That is also the limit of the power," he ended.

"Can anyone, any other race..."

"Use psychokinesis? Not yet, Toby. I suspect that ability still lies in the evolutionary upstream. Perhaps in another million years, or perhaps in another galaxy at another time..." The curious smile touched Barlo's lips again. "By the measure of what is possible, we still are quite primitive."

"I can't imagine that." Toby shook his head. "If you had to destroy the pod, how would you get back?"

"To the rescue ship? They'd send down another pod."

"How would they know where to land?"

"My transmitter would tell them exactly where I am."

"Wouldn't that be dangerous? I was thinking of them having to land."

"I don't believe so."

"I'm getting scared," confessed Toby.

"That I might be discovered?"

"There must be over a hundred cars by the general store," he explained. He told Barlo about the VACI. "I'm afraid they're getting ready to search the whole countryside."

"The barn?"

Toby licked his lips nervously. "They might try to."

"Perhaps I should leave."

"Oh, no," he remonstrated quickly, "I didn't mean that. I was just thinking you might be safer under the sheriff's protection. Dan Washburn's his name, a real swell fellow. I know you could trust him."

"Perhaps."

"But you could," he insisted. "You'd be safe until the rescue ship came."

"Your sheriff is just a peace officer, isn't he? Yes, I can see in your mind that he is. Do you believe others above him would leave me with him if they thought I knew the secrets of Q space propulsion? I'm afraid not." Barlo shook his head with a quick, birdlike motion.

"Q space propulsion, that's the star drive, isn't it? Do you think..." Toby cut the words short, realizing suddenly that he knew exactly what Barlo did think. The military men and the scientists and perhaps a lot of others would demand the knowledge. Other nations would fight to get it, too. Barlo wouldn't have a chance. He shivered.

"That's exactly the way I feel about it," acknowledged Barlo. "I'm certain your sheriff is an honorable man, but I'd rather take my chances hiding in the hills."

"But you can't," Toby protested. "They'd find you for sure."

"Would that be worse than surrendering to your sheriff?"

"I don't know." He regarded the other uneasily. "At least we should have some other place for you to hide in case they start searching around here."

"A sensible precaution."

"I wish you'd stay in our house," Toby exclaimed eagerly. "They'd never look for you there, and I know Gramp and Mom wouldn't mind. You'd really like them."

"I'm certain of that," assented Barlo. "But no, I can't."

"You think it might be dangerous?"

"For your family, yes."

"I can't imagine it," Toby said doubtfully. He searched his mind, recalling the various hiding places in the hills he'd known in years past. There were some caves, a couple of old mine shafts. But if the searchers had bloodhounds, like Cleator said, no place would be safe. Aside from that, he had to keep Barlo close enough to be able to help him if necessary. He discarded the Possibilities almost as quickly as they Occurred. One thing was certain: they'd have to trust someone else, especially if it became necessary for Barlo to move. Explaining his fears, he said tentatively, "I have a friend I can trust."

"If you trust him, so will I," asserted Barlo.

"It's a girl." Toby flushed. "Her name is Linda Jansen. We go to school together."

"Ah!"

"Her house is just up the road," Toby supplied quickly. He described the large eucalyptus groves that lay beyond it, one of which contained a deserted barn half hidden by the branches. Although he admitted that the barn probably was no safer than the present hiding place, he thought it might serve as an emergency shelter until they found something better. Linda could keep watch, warn him if the searchers started moving in that direction. He said, "But I don't think they will. They'll probably concentrate on the hills around where the hunters saw you."

"Possibly." Barlo's tone was noncommittal.

"Do you mind if I tell her about you? Just as a precaution," he added.

"I'll leave that up to you, Toby."

"You'd like her," Toby declared enthusiastically. "She's awfully nice."

"I'm certain of that."

Toby rose to leave. "Is there anything I can get for you?"

"Not at the moment, thank you."

"Stay out of sight," Toby urged. "I'll be back." Descending the ladder, he again became conscious of the roaring in the sky and recognized the pulsing beat as that of the helicopters. He spotted them moving slowly above a gully as they followed its course downward from the hills. Reaching the valley floor, they swung in a wide circle and started toward an adjacent gully. In the distance half a dozen small planes wheeled and dipped.

They resembled moths against the blue of the sky.

FOUR

TOBY SKIRTED THE GENERAL store while going to Linda's house. The fields on either side were jammed with cars, with more arriving every minute. The concrete ribbon winding down the grade from the west was alive with them. A press car and another from a television station were drawn up on the shoulder of the highway behind two police cruisers. Several men were photographing the scene.

The storekeeper's son, a gawky youth of about twenty, had cut through a wire fence to gain access to the green pasturage beyond and was now collecting parking fees on it from the newcomers. At the sight of Toby he grinned foolishly.

Toby estimated the crowd at more than three hundred. Many of the men were arguing vociferously. Some appeared angry or belligerent, emotions that he sensed masked their underlying fright. More than a few carried shotguns or rifles, and here and there he saw leashed dogs.

The crowd's ominous restlessness frightened him. For the first time he could appreciate Barlo's reluctance to place himself under the sheriff's protection. He'd heard of mobs storming jails. Yesterday he would have said that such a thing could never happen in a quiet place like this; now he wasn't so certain.

What of the men in high places? How would they react if they discovered that a being from a vastly more advanced civilization had landed on Earth? How would they react at the prospect of obtaining a star drive? Barlo hadn't been at all optimistic about that. If they ever allowed Barlo to return to his people, it would be only after they'd stripped him of every vestige of knowledge that he possessed. Perhaps under the guise of national security he'd simply vanish. He'd read of such things. Or was he letting his imagination run wild? Yet Barlo felt the same way.

Where would it all end? The question pinged at his mind. If the rescue craft came quickly enough, Barlo might yet leave as quietly as he had come. But that possibility was growing slimmer with every passing hour. With the helicopters searching the gullies, the pod's detection seemed all but inevitable. If they didn't find it, ground searchers would. And when that time came, Barlo's apprehension would quickly follow.

He couldn't allow that to happen, he thought fiercely. He had to keep Barlo hidden until his rescuers arrived. And it wasn't just Barlo; it was the star drive. The reflection surprised him. But it was true. Looking through Barlo's eyes, he could see that Earth wasn't ready for the stars.

There hadn't been an interstellar war for more than a million Earth years! Moreover, there were thousands of different races, often vastly different in both physical appearance and culture, yet they managed to live in peace and harmony. With but a single race on Earth, there were wars all the time. Small wonder Barlo was appalled. But when Earth was ready, it would go to the stars in glory. He hoped Barlo lived to see that day.

He increased his pace as he drew near the Jansen house, a two-story white frame dwelling set amid a fringe of eucalypti that gave it an air of

anonymity. Turning in along a path that led to the porch, he heard the raucous sound of Linda's television set coming from an upstairs room.

Linda's mother greeted him with a cheerful smile. "How do you like the excitement?" she asked. "Imagine, a flying saucer right above Murdock's store."

"Well, it's paying off." Toby grinned. "He's charging for the parking."

"That man!" She watched him brightly. "Did Cleator's vigilantes ride by your way? I saw them heading across the fields."

"Yeah, the sheriff was there."

"He stopped to warn me that I'd better arm myself, said that Russian spies had been landed in the valley. He's crazy."

"That's what Gramp says."

"A flying saucer sounds more plausible," she reflected. "Did you see those two hunters who were interviewed on television? The reporter talked to them in the field. According to them -- I forget their names, but they came from the city -- they were attacked by a gorilla at least fourteen feet tall. Imagine, a gorilla with a ray gun. They said it was wearing red armor and red shoes with spikes on the toes."

"That's crazy," he exclaimed.

"Of course it's crazy, but it shows the kind of nonsense that's going on. Linda!" She raised her voice. "Toby's here."

"If she's busy..."

"Just watching the excitement on the TV. She said it's almost as wild as some of the regular programs."

"Yeah." He heard movement overhead before Linda came down the stairs. A slender brunette, she had her mother's dark eyes and a rather plain face, but when she smiled, Toby believed her to be the most beautiful girl in the world.

"I've been following the men from Mars," she explained.

"Is that what they're saying?"

"Just about. It's either that or the Russians. A retired rear admiral from Coronado said that the description of the spacecraft fitted the test sleds the Russians have developed to carry their orbital bombs. He's demanding to know how it got through our detection system."

"I never thought of that." Toby suddenly was appalled. If Barlo's ship had been tracked by radar, which seemed a logical assumption, the Air Force might know just about where it came down. The big radar unit in the Laguna Mountains, just to the east, must certainly have been following it.

"What hadn't you thought of?" asked Linda.

"Tracking the ship." He groped for words.

"You sound as if you believe there was one."

"I don't believe it was a Russian bomb carrier."

"A flying saucer?"

"It's possible," he answered uneasily.

"I suppose." She didn't look convinced.

He caught her eyes. "Want to walk over to the general store, listen in?"

"I was there a while ago, couldn't even get in for groceries," Mrs. Jansen complained.

"Let's go," exclaimed Linda. "It could be interesting."

"Murdock will probably charge you for standing room," her mother warned.

"Oh, I've got a cake in the oven!" She turned and hurried from the room.

When they went outside, Linda said, "You have something in mind."

"Not really." He felt flustered. "I just wanted to talk."

"About what's happening?"

"Well, yes."

"What is it?" she asked quickly.

He glanced sideways at her and said, "When I was in the hills this morning, I saw the alien."

"The ship?" she asked incredulously. When he shook his head, she demanded, "What did you see?"

"The alien from the ship."

"Toby Adam!"

"Honest," he blurted.

She paused, her face quizzical. "Are you certain?"

"Yeah, sure." He wondered how to proceed.

"Tell me about it," she insisted.

"He's from the stars."

"Ohhhh!" She drew out the word softly.

"The hunters were trying to kill him."

"Then their story is true?"

"Not exactly." He forced a smile. "His name is Barlo. I talked with him."

"How could you do that?" she demanded.

"Telepathically."

"Toby?" Her gaze sharpened.

"Honestly," he exclaimed. He told her about the encounter on the hilltop and how the alien had projected his thoughts telepathically. As he talked, he felt anew the wonder of it all. Seeing the disbelief vanish from her face, he related the story of the disaster that had brought the alien to Earth.

"People up there," she murmured. Inadvertently she glanced at the sky. She shuddered when he told her of Barlo's narrow escape from the hunters.

"That's dreadful," she exclaimed.

"Now he's afraid of people."

"Not of you," she commented.

"Probably because he could read my mind."

"Is he as big as they say?"

"He's just a little bitty fellow, about so high." He gestured outward from his waist.

"Like a monkey?"

"Not a bit." He shook his head forcefully. "You should see his eyes. They're violet, about three or four times as large as mine. He has a real small nose something like a cat's but a real wide mouth and pointed ears." He described Barlo's strange reddish garments, his reedy voice, the difficulty he'd had in using speech.

When he finished, she asked quietly, "How do you know he isn't dangerous?"

"Gosh, you sound just like Carl Cleator."

"Not really," she interrupted. "I'm not saying he is dangerous, but I'm asking how you know that he isn't. That's not the same thing. From what you say, he must have come from a vastly superior civilization. How do you know his intent? How do you know that he came here as the result of an accident?"

"He let me look into his mind," he protested.

"Telepathically? How could you do that?"

"He projected his thoughts into my mind."

"Then he could project what he wanted to project, isn't that right? How do you know what actually was in his mind? You couldn't tell, Toby."

"Not if you put it that way," he replied uneasily.

"I'm not saying that anything is wrong," she explained. "I'm just citing possibilities."

"You'd know he's all right if you ever talked to him," he protested. "It isn't just what he told me; it's everything about him. He's just gentle," he added.

"That's difficult to imagine," she reflected.

"His being gentle?"

"The telepathy bit -- the idea of someone from the stars."

"You get used to it," he declared. "I couldn't have imagined it yesterday; now it doesn't seem strange at all. Even his looks seem natural."

"I wish I could have seen him," she said wistfully.

"Would you like to?" he asked eagerly.

"You know where he is?"

"In my barn."

"Toby!"

"Honest, it's the truth."

"Do your folks know?"

"Gosh, no."

"What are you going to do?" she whispered.

"Keep him hidden until someone comes to rescue him."

"From his world? Did he say they would?"

"He says it won't be long." He related what Barlo had told him about the rescue operation and the reason he hadn't remained with the landing pod. He also told her why Barlo might have to destroy the pod.

"Could we build one, even if we knew about the drive?" she asked.

"I think so." He reflected on it. "Look at Apollo."

"That's far from a starship, Toby."

"Sure, but I was thinking about how we could build."

"I suppose, in time." She glanced at him. "He must think of us as Neanderthals."

"I don't think he feels that way at all," he protested.

"His experience with the hunters couldn't have been very reassuring."

"Well, they scared him." He gazed toward the general store, shuddering at what might happen if word got out that Barlo was in his barn. Although he didn't like to think of it, he knew he had to. They had to find some other place to hide him.

"He must have seen our cities," she reflected.

"I imagine they looked primitive to him." He described the vivid pictures that Barlo had projected into his mind -- the cool pink towers that jutted tremendous distances into the sky, the strange vehicles that darted through the air, the sense of peace and calm and remote beauty he'd felt at the time.

"His world?" she breathed.

He nodded. "A planet called Raamz that goes around a dusky reddish sun named Zaree," he told her.

"A reddish sun. How lovely."

"The length of his life is twenty thousand or more of our years."

"Toby, that's frightening."

"To live twenty thousand years?"

"It is and it isn't." She wet her lips thoughtfully. "I'm not certain I'd want to live that long," she finished.

"How can we know?" He gazed at her. "Perhaps if we could travel among the stars..." Caught with wonder, he let the words trail off.

"When you talk like that, I do feel like a primitive."

"He won't make you feel that way," he promised. He glanced toward the general store, dismayed at how fast the crowd was increasing. All the fields now were jammed with parked cars, and other vehicles lined the shoulders of the highway for a quarter of a mile in either direction.

"The television broadcast," murmured Linda.

"I guess so," he answered uneasily.

"Can he read their minds?"

"I don't know," he confessed. It struck him that he'd never asked Barlo the extent of his telepathic range or what its limitations might be. But if he could sense the mood of the crowd...The thought was perturbing.

"He might be frightened half to death," she whispered.

"We'd better hurry."

"Gramp is on the porch," she observed. As they drew closer to the house, she waved. Ruff ran out to meet them, wagging his stubby tail.

"Looking for the gorilla fellow?" called Gramp. His seamed face held a sly look.

"Martians," Linda laughed. "Any little green men around?"

"Not recently," Gramp chortled. He lifted his eyes to the general store. "Mighty exciting if there was one."

"Yeah," agreed Toby. Flushing guiltily, he looked away.

All at once he shivered.

Ruff barked, his hackles rising. Running to the end of the porch, Toby saw a large black-and-tan hound with pendulous ears scramble up from the wash that ran behind the barn. A file of horsemen followed. He recognized Carl Cleator's thin figure. Linda hurried to his side.

"The vigilantes," she whispered.

"What is it?" demanded Gramp.

"The VACI," Toby blurted.

"Danged idiots."

Toby nodded violently, suddenly aware that the hound was sniffing its way toward the barn. Cleator signaled his followers and spurred his horse after it. The black-clad riders fanned out, close behind the hound.

"Wait here," cried Toby. Dashing toward the barn to intercept the animal, he felt the tumultuous taste of fear. If the vigilantes discovered the alien, they might raise a hue and cry that would bring the whole mob storming over from the general store. Desperately he wished the sheriff had remained. The hound caught sight of him and paused, its head lifted alertly.

Toby reached the barn and halted to face the oncoming riders. His arms and legs felt tremulous, and tiny fingers of ice raced up and down his spine. He fought to stifle his nervousness. Ruff pranced in front of him, barking at the strange dog. Cleator reined up sharply a dozen yards away and signaled his men to halt. His horse pawed at the ground before growing quiet.

"What do you want?" demanded Toby. His voice sounded shaky. At the same time he became aware that Linda had followed him, was now standing at his side.

"Those Commies came this way," rasped Cleator. "The hound picked up their tracks in the gully."

"That's crazy," he exclaimed. "It was tracking me. I came that way this morning."

"Is that so?"

"I was rock hunting in the hills."

Cleator smiled sardonically. "I think they're hiding in your barn. The hound was headed directly toward it."

"No one's in the barn," he protested. "I was just there."

"We'll play safe, take a look," Cleator decided.

"You will not," he flared. "This is private property."

Cleator asked nastily, "Are you trying to shield those people?"

"You have no right on this land," Linda broke in angrily.

"Don't let 'em stop you, Colonel," one of the black-clad riders shouted. "Let's take a look."

"You will not," Toby said tightly.

"What have you got to hide?" demanded Cleator.

"Not a thing, except that this is private property." A door at the rear of the house slammed and Toby glanced back. Grandpa Jed, flourishing a shotgun, was limping rapidly toward them. Cleator's lips curled at the sight.

"What's all this about?" Gramp roared irately.

"We've tracked those Commies to your barn," snapped Cleator. "This boy

is trying to shield them."

"Get off my property, yuh danged crackpots," shouted Gramp. He waved the shotgun menacingly.

"We want to look in the barn."

"You'll do no lookin' in my barn," declared Gramp. "Get off my property before I get riled."

"Are you threatening us?"

"Danged tootin' I am."

Cleator stiffened, then swung around in his saddle to look at his followers. "We're sure learning who the Commie sympathizers are, aren't we, men?"

"We sure are, Colonel," one of them called.

"Get out of here," Gramp shouted again.

"Don't get excited," Toby cautioned worriedly.

"Who's excited?" The old man snorted. "I won't have no danged crackpots running over my land."

"Crackpots?" asked Cleator stonily.

"You're the crackpot," a voice from the troop shouted.

"Say that again and you'll eat buckshot," yelled Gramp. He lifted the barrel of the shotgun.

Cleator raised an arm for silence, his eyes resting coldly on the old man. "We'll be around," he said. "You've been warned."

"Is that a threat?"

"Take it however you want."

"You're the one who's been warned," shrilled Gramp. "My finger's gettin' itchy."

"Come on, men." Cleator raised an arm, let it drop, wheeled his mount, and started back toward the wash. Sniffing at the ground, the lop-eared hound ran ahead of him. Toby caught mumbled threats from the other riders as they followed. He watched them cross the wash, circle the barn to the other side.

"They frightened me," Linda confessed. Her voice plainly expressed her relief.

"Idiots," snorted Gramp.

"Dad?" Mrs. Adam's voice rang sharply from the rear porch. "What's going on out there?"

"Nothing, Mary." Gramp gazed at her, his face bland with innocence.

"Why are you carrying that shotgun?" she demanded.

"That gorilla fellow is supposed to be hanging around."

"Hmph. Ill believe it when I see it." When she returned inside, Gramp gazed at Toby, his blue eyes searching. Toby flushed.

"What's in the barn?" asked Gramp.

"Barn?"

"You were in a mighty big hurry to head those fellows off," he observed drily.

"Well, gee." Toby wrestled with his thoughts.

"Toby," Gramp said sharply.

Tell him, a small voice in Toby's mind urged. Startled, he jerked erect, at the same time realizing that the speaker had been Barlo. Barlo had been reading their minds! Then he realized the danger from the vigilantes. He saw his grandfather's waiting expression. Linda was clasping her hands nervously.

"It's just a friend," he answered desperately.

"A friend, eh? Do you generally keep your friends in the barn?"

"Well, gosh," he sputtered.

Gramp cocked his head quizzically. "I don't suppose he would happen to be that fellow they're looking for?"

It's all right, Barlo said silently. Tell him.

"I guess he is," Toby admitted.

"From the ship Murdock claimed he saw?"

"Well, yes."

"Russian?" Gramp peered at him.

"Heck, no!" Toby exploded.

"What kind of a critter is he?"

"He's just a little fellow," he blurted. "He's real nice. I met him in the hills after the hunters tried to kill him."

"He's trying to find a safe place to stay," Linda broke in.

Gramp asked sharply, "Where's he from?"

"The stars," Toby whispered.

"The stars, eh? Well, well." Gramp lifted his face toward the sky. "I always held there had to be someone smarter than us in this universe."

"His name is Barlo," Toby rushed on. "You'd like him."

"I would, eh? How come you know his name?"

"Well, he knows our language."

"He does?" Gramp's voice sharpened.

"He reads our minds," admitted Toby.

"Looks inside our heads, is that what you're saying?"

"You might put it that way. He's a telepath."

"Sounds like a right smart critter," observed Gramp. "How long does he plan on being around?"

"Only a few days." Toby explained about the disaster in space that had brought the alien to the valley and the rescue operations which were certain to follow.

"We have to keep him hidden until then," Linda broke in.

"I suspect so." Gramp gazed at the throng surging around the general store. "But the barn's no place to hide him. You'd better talk to your mother about keeping him in the house."

Toby shook his head. "He won't go in."

"Why not?"

"He's afraid he'd cause us trouble." He explained the alien's fear of what might happen if someone found out where he was.

"He's probably right." Gramp frowned at his shotgun. "But we can't leave him in the barn with those crackpots around. Besides, that danged hound tracked him; they know where he is."

Toby asked worriedly, "Think they'll come back?"

"I suspect they will. Where's his ship?"

"Hidden in a gully."

Gramp shook his head dolefully. "They'll sure enough find it. When they do, the whole countryside will be here."

"We could hide him in my barn," offered Linda.

"How could we get him there without being seen?" demanded Toby. The complications seemed flowering on every side. He looked to Gramp for guidance.

"You'd have to wait until after dark."

"I could take him there tonight," he urged.

Gramp shook his head. "Tomorrow night, maybe. Cleator's gang will be watching this place tonight. It's just the kind of a move they'd suspect." He peered at Linda. "What would your folks say about it?"

"I don't know," she confessed. "I don't believe they'd mind, not if I explained the whole situation."

"Could cause them a lot of grief," Gramp observed. "You wouldn't want to do that."

"We have to do something," she insisted.

"Why don't we leave him where he is?" suggested Toby. "They don't know for certain that he's there. If they come back, we won't let them on the land."

"And if they stir up a mob?" asked Gramp.

"I thought of that, but I don't believe they will. The vigilantes want the credit, want to catch him themselves."

"Probably." The old man gazed toward the wash. "We ought to tell Dan. He'd keep those varmints away."

"We can't," Toby countered. "I suggested that, but Barlo doesn't want him to know."

"Doesn't trust the sheriff, eh?" The old man peered sharply at him.

"It isn't that, it's the people above the sheriff." Toby explained about the star drive and what might happen if the people of Earth suddenly realized that an alien was among them who held the key to the stars.

"I can see that," admitted Gramp. "Sure wouldn't want some of these varmints goin' to the stars."

"I'd feel better if the sheriff did know," said Linda. "He'd keep a watch."

Gramp shook his head. "Dan would have to make a report on it, do whatever the law required him to do." He gazed thoughtfully at the barn. "Think that critter could learn to play two-handed pinochle?"

"I believe he could," said Toby.

"Well, well." A smile creased Gramp's face. "Think I'll mosey in and get the cards."

FIVE

San Diego Union
San Diego, California, July 27, 1974

FLYING SAUCER, RUSSIAN SPACECRAFT OR HOAX?

REPORTS OF THE SIGHTING of a strange spacecraft in Eklund Valley, nine miles east of El Cajon, yesterday sent thousands of motorists flocking to the scene. The state highway patrol and the sheriff's department dispatched units to control the heavy flow of traffic that for more than eight hours clogged the eastbound lanes.

George Murdock, a valley storekeeper, told the press that the spacecraft bore Russian markings. "I could see it as plain as a hand before my face," Murdock said. At least a dozen eyewitness accounts labeled the vehicle a flying saucer.

Bernard Olson, a valley resident, described it as "discus-shaped, with small circular portholes around the perimeter." He gave its color as "an odd shade of green." Olson said he believed it landed in the nearby hills. He told reporters that he had spotted similar vessels in the area on other occasions.

Rear Admiral Carson M. Turlow, USN (Ret.)' Coronado, told newsmen that "except for the circular shape and the portholes, the description of the vessel fitted that of the sky sleds the Russians have developed to deliver their fractional orbit nuclear warhead" (FONW). Turlow warned that this might be an even more advanced design.

A high-ranking officer of the Eleventh Naval District refused to comment on the report that helicopters from the Imperial Beach Naval Air Station had been rushed to the scene. Reports from Eklund Valley indicated that at least two helicopters were scouring the nearby gullies and brush-covered hills. At least a dozen private planes were in the vicinity.

Two hunters, Thomas Carley and Harry Weaver, both city residents, told reporters that they had been fired at by a giant gorilla with a ray gun when they attempted to approach it. Carley said that when the flames burst out around them, they escaped by fleeing through a ravine too narrow for the gorilla to follow. He estimated its height at 14 feet.

Carley and Weaver led a search party back to the scene of the alleged encounter. A reporter with the group said that while an area of recently burned brush had been located, the searchers were unable to find any footprints in the area aside from those probably made by the hunters.

An Air Force spokesman has denied any knowledge...

Another flying saucer!

Major General John J. Parman, USAF, let the report flutter to his desk. The file cabinets already overflowed with such nonsense. Yet, uneasily, he had to admit a difference. This flying saucer -- if he could call it that -- had been tracked from the Pole down to a final destination in the foothills a dozen or so miles to the east of San Diego. Moreover, it had changed both course and altitude several times, thus eliminating the possibility that it might have been the reentering debris from some space shot or other. But a flying saucer? He smiled skeptically. He was just thankful that no one had panicked, pushed the button.

Still, an investigation would have to be made. The numerous eyewitness accounts, sensationalized by the news media, demanded official action, if for no other reason than to still the growing hysteria. If it wasn't Russians, it was Martians. As always, the onus would lie with the Air Force.

He drummed his fingers against the desk. Although he was certain that a good 99 percent of the clamor represented either hysteria or opportunists seeking to break into public print, there was still that remaining 1 percent, or perhaps just a shade of that amount. Yet however small, it had to be explained. But the marsh gas phenomenon was out -- the arid region wasn't the spot for that.

A shade of 1 percent. Parman contemplated the figure thoughtfully. Despite his skepticism, he had to admit that something had come down from the Pole -- had landed in the general vicinity from which the majority of eyewitness accounts had originated. But a spaceship with a Russian flag bearing a fourteen-foot-tall gorilla with a ray gun! That's what it amounted to. That topped everything!

Parman leaned back and gazed moodily at the ceiling. What had come down from the Pole? Were it not for the radar trackings, he would assign the whole thing to mass hysteria; but there had been trackings. Was it possible that each station had tracked a different object, thus giving the illusion of shifts in course and altitude? He didn't believe it likely, in view of the sophisticated tracking techniques now employed. Where did that leave him? If he assumed a shift in course and altitude, he also had to assume a manned spacecraft, or at least an unmanned vehicle following a programmed course. Also, he was positive that it was neither an Air Force nor a NASA experimental vehicle; that determination had been made and noted in the report.

Russian? Yet why would Russia attempt to land a spaceship within the continental limits of the United States? Even if such a landing had been of an emergency nature, the Russians would have been quick to inform them, if for no other reason than that it couldn't have escaped their detection. The whole idea seemed highly improbable. As improbable as a giant gorilla with a ray gun, he reflected. Well, he'd send over a few choppers, get a few investigators on the scene. Then he'd wait for the blast from upstairs. And it would come; he felt certain of that. Let some Senator or other get wind of the trackings, and the well-known cat would be out of the bag.

He read the report again before moodily reaching toward a buzzer.

Early the next morning an Air Force reconnaissance plane came over the mountains from the east. High up, a mote against the blue, it sent its thunder crashing throughout the hills.

Toby guessed what kind of plane it was from its flight pattern -- a long

back-and-forth plowing of the sky into even furrows which eventually would grid the entire valley and the surrounding hills into an air photo mosaic of such clarity that each individual bush could be discerned. He'd read all about it in Popular Mechanics.

When he'd awakened that morning, he'd had hopes that the excitement was past, but they'd quickly vanished. Now the highway was as cluttered as before, and more people than ever were gathered around the general store. He'd counted at least a score of search parties moving into the hills. And while the two Navy helicopters remained away, four of the same type of Air Force vehicle had come to take their place. Moving like giant bumblebees under an umbrella of private aircraft, they'd begun a systematic search of the terrain below.

"They're bound to find Barlo's ship," he told Linda. The anxiety gnawed at his mind.

"If they do, he'll destroy it," she murmured.

"But they'll still know what kind of ship it was from the wreckage." He gazed perplexedly at her. "When they do, they'll search every inch of the country."

"Did you mention that to Barlo?"

"About identifying the ship from the wreckage?" He nodded gloomily.

"There's nothing he can do about that."

"Perhaps they won't find it."

"They will," he asserted. He'd accepted the fact, now was trying to look beyond it.

"He's not afraid," she reflected.

"No, but I wonder if he really knows what might happen."

"The vigilantes?"

"It's more than that. I've thought a lot about it. The navy planes were here yesterday, and now the Air Force planes. The government knows, they must have tracked Barlo's ship by radar, know that it's somewhere close by. And Barlo's right. If the people high up suspect he might know the secret of the star drive, they'll tear the country apart to find him."

"The government?"

He nodded. "It's more than the star drive. Don't you see what it means? A race we don't know anything about can come to Earth at will, or at least they might think so. That would sure scare the military. They'd try to get the drive in self-defense."

"The government wouldn't hurt him," she remonstrated.

"No, but they'd do everything they could to get the drive."

"Is that bad, Toby?"

"Barlo thinks so. He doesn't believe Earth is ready for it."

"Did he say that?"

"Just about." He scanned the hills. Here and there small figures moved on the slopes and along the edges of ravines that snaked up into the higher hills. He was thankful that Barlo had landed as far away as he had. But the search would grow, extend outward.

"I'd better tell Barlo what's happening," he decided. "You stay here in case Mom comes out." He listened for sounds from the kitchen before going around to the barn. Ruff ran to join him, wagging his stubby tail.

The door creaked harshly as he swung it open.

"Toby?" Gramp's voice came down from the loft.

"Coming," he called softly. Scrambling up the ladder, he saw the garish light of a lantern dancing along the warped beams. Gramp and the alien were sitting on the hay playing pinochle. "Is he catching on?" asked Toby.

"Catching on?" Gramp snorted. "I'd sure like to turn him loose on Dan." He chuckled at the prospect.

"Beginner's luck," replied Barlo. His small face crinkled in the lamplight. "I believe that's what you call it."

Gramp melded four kings before lowering his hand. "Something happening?" "The search is growing." Toby told them about the Air Force photo reconnaissance plane and the four new helicopters. "They must have tracked you by radar," he finished.

"That appears quite probable," assented Barlo.

"If they did, they'll search the whole countryside."

"Ah, yes."

"You should be able to look into the future," observed Gramp. "I've heard tell of that."

"That lies in the evolutionary upstream," responded Barlo. "I won't live to see that day."

"Don't know that I'd want to." Gramp smacked his lips and peered sharply at his grandson. "Think those Air Force people might come around?"

"The Air Force or the Army or someone, especially if they find the ship. Gosh, they might even send the FBI."

"Might, at that," Gramp reflected.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Barlo interjected. "My people have a saying that the tide of fate is irresistible."

"We have to plan," protested Toby. "If they find the ship and you have to destroy it, then they'll know for certain you're somewhere around. They'd search the houses, barns, everywhere."

"Not my house and barn," declared Gramp.

"If the Army or Air Force came?"

Barlo's head came up, his violet eyes a gleam in the lamplight. "If I destroy the ship, I'll leave. I won't expose you to danger."

"I wasn't thinking of us." Toby's face flamed. "Do you know what the vigilantes might do if they caught you? They might even shoot you. They're probably watching this place right now."

"They'll eat buckshot," interrupted Gramp.

"That would bring the whole mob."

"Any ideas?"

"None," Toby confessed, "except I wish Barlo would come into the house. It would be safer."

Barlo suggested gently, "Perhaps we are borrowing trouble."

"Maybe." Toby wasn't convinced. He had the feeling of an impending storm about to break around him and wondered why Barlo didn't feel the same. Or did he? If so, nothing in his demeanor portrayed it. Did he actually believe that fate was irresistible? He couldn't believe that. An aircraft engine sounded in the stillness, grew louder, and then began to fade away. Barlo's only reaction was a movement of his small, pointed ears.

"Perhaps you'd better listen to the radio, tell us if anything happens," suggested Gramp. He regarded the alien under the glare of the lamp. "I'd sure hate to lose a good pinochle player like you."

Toby said worriedly, "You ought to go back to the house. Mom might wonder where you are."

"Not till I win a game." Gramp shook his head stubbornly. "Now scoot, keep your ear to the radio."

Toby returned outside, his thoughts sporadic. While it was dangerous for Barlo to remain in the barn, it would be more dangerous for him to leave, especially with the hordes of searchers in the hills. And what if the vigilantes were watching? They'd certainly wonder at all his trips to the barn. And Gramp's. He hadn't thought of that. But where could Barlo hide? What could they do if the searchers discovered the ship? Gramp hadn't answered that, and neither had Barlo. Strange how fast his world had changed. Only a day had passed since he'd first met the alien on the brow of the hill, yet it seemed forever. Since then his peaceful valley had become a center of turmoil, its repercussions extended by the press and television to every part of the

nation, if not the world. Since then, too, he'd learned that the human race was not alone in the universe, was not even one of the significant races of the universe. But it could be; that was the thing. It could go to the stars, just as Barlo's race had gone to the stars. In time it could become very great.

He looked fretfully out over the valley. He couldn't think of that now. He had to think of Barlo, of the searchers, of the Air Force plane that plowed the sky, of the helicopters creeping along the gullies. Of the vigilantes. Of a safe place to hide Barlo.

When he reached the porch, Linda asked worriedly, "What did he say?"

"He's not worried. Neither is Gramp."

"That's no answer, Toby."

"Is there an answer?" he challenged.

"We ought to have a plan. What are he and Gramp doing?"

"Playing pinochle."

"Doesn't sound as if he expects anything to happen," she reflected.

"Or else he's hiding it." Toby looked at her. "Maybe he doesn't think like us. Perhaps the same things don't worry him."

"That's not it." She gazed at the crowd around the general store. "Under the same circumstances I'd be horribly afraid."

"So would I," he confessed.

"I feel sorry for him, Toby."

"So do I, but it's more than that. I like him. So does Gramp. I have the feeling of having known him for a long time."

"I felt the same way," she admitted. "At first I was kind of jittery at the thought that he was reading my mind, then I forgot about it. Now it's just as if he doesn't do it."

"He probably doesn't," replied Toby.

"Why do you say that?"

"Just a feeling. I tried thinking a few startling things and watching him for a reaction. There was none." He glanced toward the house. "Gramp wants me to listen to the radio, find out what's happening."

Linda glanced at her watch. "I have to help Mom, but I'll listen too. I'll make the loft of our barn comfortable, just in case."

"I was thinking of the old Jackson barn." He conjured up a picture of the dilapidated structure, all but hidden under the thick branches at the edge of a eucalyptus grove. "If he had to run, he could hide in the trees."

"Can he climb a tree?"

"Like a monkey." He flushed, hoping Barlo wasn't reading his mind.

When she left, he went to his room and turned on the radio. Garbled reports of flying saucers were coming in from all over the southwest. Strange gorilla-like creatures had been reported from as far away as New Mexico. But for every person who reported a flying saucer, another saw a vehicle adorned with the hammer and sickle. A few claimed to have seen spacecraft flying the flag of Communist China. The rear admiral from Coronado was more certain than ever that the vehicles were Russian orbital bomb carriers. About the only point of agreement seemed the demand that an investigation be made.

As the afternoon waned, he was gratified to see that the crowd around the general store was growing smaller. Neither could he detect any sign of the helicopters. Perhaps it was over, he thought. He fervently hoped so.

Just before supper Gramp joined him on the porch. Filling and lighting his pipe, he asked, "Anything on the radio?"

"Nothing new." Toby shook his head.

"I found out one thing about him."

"You did?" Toby eyed him interestedly.

"He sure can play pinochle," Gramp said.

Dusk came in, forming dark pools in the valleys and hollows before slowly ascending the hills to envelope the world in the cloak of night. The last of the cars had departed from in front of the general store; now it stood dark and deserted alongside the highway. The sound of insects filled the still air, and from somewhere came the cry of a distant night bird.

The embers of Gramp's pipe glowed briefly as he sucked at the scarred stem. To Toby he looked exactly the same as he had last week, the week before -- all the weeks of his life that he could remember him. Gramp never seemed to change. Toby had to marvel at him. Gramp had met a man from the stars, yet took it as matter-of-factly as if Barlo had come from San Diego. Whoever said that old people couldn't adjust? He felt proud of Gramp.

Stranger yet, he had the feeling that Gramp and Barlo understood each other completely. Watching them play pinochle under the harsh glare of the lamp, he'd sensed the rapport between them. It lay in their eyes, in the quiet words that passed between them; and with it was a mutual recognition of equality. A planetary archeologist from the stars and an old man from the backcountry -- that made it more remarkable yet. Vast differences between people, even between radically different races, could be bridged, he reflected. He'd seen it. With it he'd obtained a better understanding of how Barlo's vast and diverse interstellar society had managed to live for more than a million years without serious conflict. People had but to understand one another.

He stirred restlessly. "Think I'll check on Barlo," he said.

"The lamp will show through the cracks in the barn," warned Gramp.

"I can find my way." Toby grinned. "Barlo's nocturnal."

"Can see in the dark, eh?"

"The sun hurts his eyes."

"It's like midnight under that red sun of his."

"Did he show it to you, a mental picture?"

Gramp nodded. "A smart-lookin' planet, but a mite dark for my eyes. He showed me other worlds, too. As a matter of fact, he took me on a tour of the universe. Quite an amazing place."

"It's that," Toby agreed. The harsh jangle of the telephone brought him from the porch railing. He heard the creak of a chair as his mother rose to answer it.

"I'll get it," he cried. He ran inside and lifted the receiver to his ear.

"Toby?" Linda's voice tinkled worriedly in the earpiece.

"Yeah." He glanced at his mother, trying to appear nonchalant. "Linda," he explained.

"They've found the spaceship," Linda rushed on. "They just put out a news bulletin on it. A searcher spotted it in a gully. He described it as oval-shaped at each end, about twenty feet long."

"That's it," Toby interrupted. He felt a flare of excitement.

"They're organizing a party to go out there. The fellow who found it is going to lead them."

"Tonight?"

"They didn't say, but they could use lights."

"Yeah." He glanced nervously at his mother. The way she was holding her paper told him she had one ear cocked to the conversation.

When he hung up, she asked, "What was that all about?"

"Someone claims to have spotted the spaceship," he explained. "Linda just heard it on the news."

"In Eklund Valley?"

"Somewhere around. She didn't say."

"I doubt there is one." She returned to her reading. Gramp arched his eyes inquiringly when Toby came back to the porch.

"They found Barlo's ship," Toby said hoarsely.

"You sure?"

He jerked his head. "The description fits. They're organizing a party to go out there now. I'd better warn Barlo."

"Reckon you'd better," agreed Gramp. "Could be quite a night."

Toby paused at the rear of the house to scan the hills. Except for the lights of a few scattered houses and of cars winding down the grade from the east, they appeared dark and lifeless. In the heat of the summer night the stars glimmered mistily. The planes had gone, leaving a stillness broken only by the chirrup of crickets and the hum of insect wings.

He opened the barn door, wincing at the creak of the hinges. Looking up toward the dark loft, he croaked, "It's Toby."

Like two violet lamps in the night, Barlo's eyes peered down through the opening. Toby scrambled up the ladder. "They've found the ship," he whispered. "Someone spotted it in the gully. They described it, so I guess it's true."

"All but inevitable," observed Barlo. "Would anyone be at the ship now?"

"Apparently not, but they're organizing a party to go out there."

"I'll have to destroy it."

"Then they'll really know you're somewhere a- round."

"There's no escape from that." Barlo shifted his body, gazing at the warped siding with an intentness that gave Toby the impression that he was seeing something that lay at a vast distance. In the silence he heard the hum of tires on Interstate 8. He fidgeted nervously, conscious of the passing time.

"What are you doing?" he finally exclaimed.

"Trying to discern if anyone is in the vicinity of the pod," explained Barlo. "I'm certain there's not."

"There will be pretty quick," he warned.

Barlo concentrated again. Suddenly, through the cracks between the board siding, Toby saw a lurid flash of light in the eastern sky. "The ship?" he gasped. He felt both startled and alarmed. Barlo nodded, his head cocked in a listening attitude.

Moments later a roar swept down from the hills, striking the barn with an impact that caused the loose machinery to rattle. The horse in the corral neighed nervously. Reverberating among the twisting gullies and slopes, the sound slowly died away.

"That explosion will bring a million people," exclaimed Toby.

"That, too, is inevitable."

"We'd better do something."

"Sleep tonight," counseled Barlo. "Tomorrow is another day."

"Mom will wonder what happened. I'd better get back."

"She'll know soon enough," replied Barlo. "The whole world will."

"Sure," he croaked. Running back toward the porch, he had a feeling of impending doom, as if the blast that had destroyed the alien's ship had been the starting gun that would launch ten thousand men into the peaceful valley. What would happen to Barlo then?

He was afraid to guess.

SIX

THE HOUNDS awoke him.

Toby's eyes flipped open. For a moment, struggling back to full consciousness, he wondered what it was that had dragged him from his sleep. Memory of the late newscasts reporting the explosion flooded his mind. There had been the wail of sirens and the flurry of excitement before the valley had subsided back into its aura of peace.

He pushed himself to a sitting position, then he heard it -- a baying in the distance, followed by a series of sharp yelps. The vigilantes! A suffocating fear gathered in his throat. He scrambled from the bed, switched on a night lamp, saw that it was after midnight.

Hurriedly dressing, he sneaked through the kitchen to the rear yard. Ruff yipped and raced to meet him, dancing at his feet in the darkness. Toby shushed him, trying to locate the hounds. Trees and bushes, scarcely touched by the starlight, appeared as jet black blobs set in a scarcely less black night. Linda's house was dark. A flashlight bobbed in the distance; almost immediately he detected the dull thud of hooves. The vigilantes were coming!

He raced to the barn and swung open the creaking door just as Barlo's slight figure dropped from the loft. His violet eyes gleamed in the darkness. "The vigilantes are coming," croaked Toby. "You have to get away from here."

"Go back to the house." The alien's high-pitched voice held a new sharpness.

Toby shook his head stubbornly. "I know where you can hide. Follow me." He ran outside Without waiting for an answer. Flashlights in the distance slashed the night with silver ribbons; the thudding hooves were more audible.

His eyes fell on his mother's old car, and he felt a swift regret that he hadn't thought to get the keys. And there was the horse! He'd forgotten that, too. Now there was no time for anything but flight. Gesturing Barlo to follow, he raced toward the distant eucalyptus grove where the Jackson barn was located. If the vigilantes followed, they could hide among the trees. Yipping, Ruff scurried alongside him.

Toby, go home! Barlo's silent command broke into his mind.

"No!" He threw the word back over his shoulder, forgetful that the alien could read his mind.

Toby...

"They won't shoot if I'm with you," he cried. Barlo didn't answer. Shouts came from behind, and the pounding hooves grew louder. Toby felt they were shaking the earth. Suddenly he realized they had no chance of reaching the eucalyptus grove before the hounds and horsemen overtook them. Veering, he plunged toward the wash that split the valley floor. It was deeper here, wider, its edges heavier with brush.

He pushed through the thick growth and leaped blindly down to the sandy bottom. Ruff yelped and came sailing down beside him, followed by the alien. Toby gestured and raced back in the general direction from which they had come.

They might think we're going the other way! He let the thought flare in his mind, not really concerned about whether Barlo was tuned to him or not. The main thing was to elude the vigilantes, find a safe place to hide. Or was that possible since the violent explosion that had destroyed the pod? He didn't want to think about that.

Sharp yelps and a crashing in the underbrush from behind told him the hounds had reached the edge of the wash. Distant shouts floated to his ears. He jerked his gaze upward as the beam of a flashlight splayed the brush above him; it filtered eerily through the tangle of leaves and branches before moving ahead.

He forced himself to assess their situation calmly. The wash could prove either an avenue of escape or a trap, depending on Cleator's grasp of the situation. If the vigilante leader dispersed his men in both directions, they'd be effectively blocked from flight. And there were the hounds! They had to find an avenue where the hounds couldn't follow.

He resurrected the area's topography in his mind. Only a few hundred yards distant lay a steep hill, the slopes of which consisted mainly of huge, weathered boulders impassable to either horses or dogs. If they could reach it, Cleator's men would have to follow them on foot.

Something clanged against a rock behind him. Barlo, his head cocked, was a small, thin shadow in the gloom. Were it not for the huge violet eyes, glowing eerily as if by self-contained lanterns, Toby scarcely would have seen him.

They have entered the wash, said Barlo. The telepathic message held a calm that belied their situation. Toby jerked his head in acknowledgment, at the same time aware that the distant shouts were growing widely separated. He realized that the vigilantes were ranging the wash in both directions. Calling Barlo silently, he resurrected a mental image to show the tangle of boulders and rock outcrops of the hill that was his destination.

The hounds are in the gully, warned Barlo.

Toby had a frightening vision of the droopy-eared animals racing toward him over the sandy floor. As he glanced frantically at the black brush hemming them in, it occurred to him that the alien was nocturnal. You lead the way, he urged.

It's quite clear. A small chuckle escaped Barlo's lips as he moved forward a few paces, pulled aside some branches, and started up the steep slope. His slight figure melted into the background. Toby scooped up Ruff and followed, working his way with one hand while the other held the dog. Bits of foliage, springing back, whipped and stung his face. Barlo paused near the top. There's someone on the opposite bank.

Toby twisted to peer through the screen of shrubbery, saw only the black blobs of trees and bushes silhouetted against the misty star field. The only sounds were those of insects. Where?

Directly behind you, Barlo warned. Abruptly, one of the blobs moved, followed by the whinny of a horse. Ruff growled. Toby clapped a hand over his muzzle to silence him.

"They're here in the gully," the rider shouted. Answering cries came from either side. A flashlight beam cut the darkness, swept downward to probe the thick underbrush. Below him Toby glimpsed a hound darting from side to side while sniffing the sandy wash. For a few sickening seconds the beam paused on the bush.

Hurry, he urged. He pushed Ruff up the slope ahead of him, joined Barlo, and started swiftly toward the rocky hill. Looming in the night, it appeared farther than he'd remembered. Despite the alien's small stature, his curiously graceful lope produced a speed that Toby could scarcely equal. His own breath was a harsh whistle in his throat. Another beam swept the field ahead of them, moved back to pin them in its light.

"There they are!" The shout was taken up along the line, followed by the sound of horses crashing through the thick brush. The sharp yelps of hounds sounded alarmingly near. Toby realized the distance was too great for them to cover before being overtaken.

"We won't make it," he gasped. Barlo halted, whirled, and extended an arm. The dry grass behind them crackled into flames. He swept the ray back and forth to create long crescents of fire between them and their pursuers. The hounds halted short of the blaze, then ran back and forth sniffing at the ground as if seeking a new trail. The horsemen pulled up sharply beyond the flames. A voice shouted for them to halt.

Hurry, commanded Barlo. With the sharp yelps of the hounds and the riders' oaths filling the air, they raced toward the distant rocky slopes. Toby knew that the sparse grass would burn for only a moment. The knowledge bent desperation to his speed. Flashlight beams caught and held them. Something whizzed past his ear, followed by a high cracking sound that reverberated throughout the hills.

"They're shooting!" He shouted the warning almost before he realized what had happened. Barlo veered in a zigzag course, and Toby followed suit. Ruff raced at his side. The flashlights moved to keep them in their glare.

Several more shots zipped past them. He heard their angry splats against the rocks ahead. The weaving and bobbing of the flashlight beams told him the horsemen had crossed the fire lanes, were now thundering toward them.

The rocks loomed ahead. The alien slowed slightly as he sought an opening in the all but impenetrable thicket that grew at the base of the hill. Caught again in the glare of the light beams, Toby had the sick feeling of being trapped.

Here, Barlo commanded suddenly. Toby scooped up Ruff and followed the alien through a maze of mesquite and cactus to the barren granite boulders that lay in jumbled heaps on the side of the slope. The light beams splayed the rocks in an effort to locate them.

Barlo moved nimbly along the base of the hill before angling upward between the giant outcrops. Toby marveled at how quickly and gracefully he moved. Glancing back, he saw the light beams probing the slopes where they had passed but moments before. Farther in the distance a faint crescent of glowing embers marked where the flames had consumed the sparse grass.

Toby suddenly realized he was moving through the maze of twisted and jumbled rock almost as easily as the lithe figure ahead. But the night no longer was black! Instead, it held a curious dusk in which every detail in his visual field stood out with startling clarity. With it he had the eerie feeling of knowing just what did lie ahead. Puzzled, he pondered it, then suddenly grinned. He was seeing what lay ahead through Barlo's nocturnal vision! The alien was projecting what he saw into Toby's mind!

Barlo paused at the top of the slope to look back. The flashlight beams still poked at the rocks far below, but the vigilantes apparently hadn't penetrated the thicket. Conscious that he was still holding Ruff, Toby put him down and sat on a rock to catch his breath. Barlo selected a small boulder and sat near him.

"It was nip and tuck," he commented. "I believe that's what you call it."

Toby's quick grin vanished. "They were trying to shoot us!"

"Or frighten us into stopping."

"Couldn't you read their minds?"

"I didn't take the time to try," admitted Barlo.

"It's a good thing you started that fire. If you hadn't, they'd have caught us for sure."

"Ah, yes, a handy device."

Toby leaned toward him. "It was wonderful seeing through your nocturnal vision. Everything was so clear. It took me a while to figure out why I wasn't stumbling all over myself."

"Wonderful at night; not so wonderful at day," observed Barlo.

"Because of our sun?"

"I find the reddish hue more pleasant." He gestured toward the rocky shoulder of the hill. "I believe your grove lies in that direction."

"It will be easier to go over the top of the hill. There's a ridge that runs toward it."

Barlo gazed around. "You have a quite mountainous planet."

"These are just hills. Don't you have mountains?"

"Raamz is a very old planet. The forces of gradation have come nearly into balance. Aside from the structures that we ourselves have built, it is nearly flat." As Barlo spoke, Toby experienced a mental image of an enormous level plain covered by the awesome pink-tinted buildings. He remarked on the prevalence of the color.

"Pink is quite pleasing to our eye," explained Barlo. "Most of our color variations lie in the red spectrum."

Toby looked at the sky. "Can you see Zaree from here?"

"Ah, you remember the name." Barlo looked pleased.

"Can you?" he persisted.

"Yes, it can be seen, although it's not now above the horizon." Barlo hesitated. "I couldn't identify it unless you knew the name of the star."

"I know some."

Barlo eyed him intently. "You tend to locate them in groups, in what you call constellations."

"Don't you?"

"I'm afraid we code them differently, but your memory of the constellation you call Andromeda appears to fit." He described Zaree as reddish and very old, with the beauty that so often comes with age.

"But each race is partial to its own sun," he admitted, "for each sun shapes the life of its planets."

"How is that?" asked Toby. He thought he knew but asked anyway. Barlo explained that each life form was the result of its environment, which in turn was largely determined by the proximity of its sun, by the characteristics of the sun's radiation and temperature, by the gravitational pulls and stresses it levied on each planet.

"The sun sculpts its planets, and each planet sculpts its life," he said, "but in the end everything goes back to the sun." He told Toby of planets that had two, three, and even four suns in their skies, but in such cases only one sun usually was dominant. Lost in contemplation, he spoke of the universe, occasionally projecting mental pictures into Toby's mind. There were green suns, blue suns, yellow suns, red suns -- suns of all sizes and colors. And beneath them on untold millions of planets were billions upon billions of life-forms, many unlike anything ever imagined on Earth. And of those billions of life-forms, only a few emerged into greatness; only a few climbed to the glittering stars. The races that succeeded were those that had adapted their bodies to the tool-making processes, their minds to abstract thought. But in the end, Barlo said, each race was responsible for its own destiny. The sun, the environment, and the processes of adaptation were but the tools, and many races with such tools had crumbled back into the recordless dust of their beginnings.

"What of my race?" asked Toby humbly. His gaze fixed on a sweep of stars, Barlo was silent for a long moment. Toby had the uneasy feeling that the human race was being weighed in the balance.

"There are those among you who possess the seeds of greatness," Barlo finally said.

"How can you make that judgment?" he protested. "You've only seen a few of us."

"I've also viewed your world through your mind and others," reminded Barlo, "and I've seen something of your cities. Your people have a saying that men are known by their works; there is much of magnificence in what I have seen."

"We can go to the stars!" He spoke defiantly to conceal the fear that Barlo might think otherwise.

Barlo merely said, "All things are possible for a race such as yours."

They paused at the top of the hill to rest again. Far below, flashlights stabbed their beams among the canted boulders, and an occasional shout drifted up through the silent night. Toby reflected that Barlo's use of the ray gun probably had deterred the vigilantes from storming the slope. Whatever the reason, he saw no indication of pursuit.

He focused his eyes on the dark pool that marked his home, gratified that no light showed. He had worried that the gunfire might have awakened his mother or Gramp and that he might have been missed. His mother would have called the sheriff for sure. He let his gaze wander. Aside from the headlights of an occasional car and the vigilantes below, there was no sign of activity of any kind.

But there would be in the morning. Word of the tremendous explosion that had wrecked the alien's ship would bring a bigger mob than ever, perhaps even the FBI. What would happen if enough of the ship remained to identify it as alien to Earth? He dreaded to think of that.

He followed Barlo down the dark ridge, again following the nocturnal guidance projected into his mind. Now curiously subdued since the gunfire, Ruff followed at his side. Or did the dog sense the need for silence? There were so many things he didn't know. In view of all there was to be learned, he could envy Barlo his twenty thousand years.

The eucalyptus grove loomed before them, a dark blotch jugged against the faint starlight. Toby's uneasiness swept back. "Do you believe the barn will be safe?" he asked.

"Don't worry," counseled Barlo. "If anyone comes, I can hide among the trees." Despite his reassurance, Toby did worry. Now that the alien ship had been found and destroyed, the search would grow bigger than ever. And after tonight neither Cleator nor his vigilantes would ever rest. He wondered what they thought of the slight figure they'd caught in the flashlight beams.

A dilapidated structure edged against the tall trees, the barn was all but lost in a welter of overhanging branches. "There used to be a lot of hay in the loft," said Toby.

Barlo studied the ramshackle building. "It will be fine," he said.

"I'll bring you some water in the morning."

"Thank you." Barlo regarded him, his enormous violet eyes fixed and quiet. "You took an awful chance tonight."

Toby returned his gaze. "Wouldn't you, under the same circumstances?"

"I believe I would."

"Lots of people would," declared Toby. "Gramp and the sheriff both would. Not everyone is like Cleator."

"Your grandfather is a fine man." Barlo's gaze grew thoughtful. "Will you be safe?"

Toby grinned. "Don't worry, I'll stick to the ditches."

"Be careful." Barlo opened the creaking door and went inside. Ruff whimpered and wagged his tail.

"Come on, boy," called Toby. "We have to get home."

He was sneaking through the yard when he discerned movement near the back door and halted, startled. His hands were suddenly cold and clammy.

"Toby?" Gramp's rail-thin figure detached itself from the deeper shadows and moved toward him. Toby's dark-adapted eyes saw that he was carrying his shotgun.

"The vigilantes came," Toby whispered.

"Thought so. What about the shootin'? It woke me up."

"I think they were trying to scare us into giving ourselves up," explained Toby. "None of the bullets came very close."

"I'm going to sic Dan on those birds."

"You can't." He felt a quick alarm.

"I'm not goin' to have 'em shootin' around here," declared Gramp. "If there's any shootin', I'll do it. Where's Barlo?"

"In the old Jackson shed."

"Reckon it's safe?"

"He can hide in the trees if anyone comes," explained Toby.

"Where's the varmint now?"

"Cleator? I'm not sure." Toby related the events of the night and added, "Barlo can't stay there very long. They'll find him for sure."

"I wouldn't fret," advised Gramp. "He's a resourceful young fellow, even if he is ten thousand years old." Despite himself, Toby had to grin. Gramp was right, Barlo didn't seem at all old. But he did seem extremely resourceful.

When he returned to bed, his thoughts were not of the alien or of

Cleator but of the stars: of blue, green, yellow, orange, and red stars, and of the millions of planets that whirled around them, and of the billions and billions of different kinds of life scattered throughout the universe. But of that total, only a mere handful had ever seen other suns. It would be wonderful to visit some of the planets Barlo had told him about. And he would; he knew he would. A small voice inside his mind promised him he would just before he fell asleep.

Or was that a dream?

To the casual observer, there was little out of the ordinary about George Maxwell, which was the way Maxwell wanted it. Of middle height, fortyish, with neatly trimmed dark hair tinged with gray and a face unmarked by any distinguishing characteristic, he roomed in a small transients' hotel in downtown San Diego and patronized the nearby shops for his few needs. He also worked as a cook's helper in one of the palatial restaurants that overlooked San Diego Bay and the North Island Naval Air Station on the opposite shore.

Yet in a way, George Maxwell was unusual. He was, in fact, Boris Drosdov, an agent of GRU -- Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie -- Russia's vast global military-intelligence/espionage apparatus.

In the secluded hinterlands several hundred kilometers from Moscow, where he had been trained in an "American village" replete with supermarkets, dime stores, hamburger joints, motion-picture houses, and streets lined with Fords, Chevrolets, and other American-made cars, he had learned to speak English "the way Americans speak it in the West." He'd also acquired considerable knowledge of American dress, customs, habits, and the capitalistic system which in time, he was told, would fall with a resounding crash. It was there that the transformation from Boris Drosdov to George Maxwell had taken place; but it was purely a transformation of identity, not of political belief. To the contrary, the latter had been impregnated more firmly than ever in the new George Maxwell's mind.

Sent to Mexico, in time he had been spirited across the border to San Diego with instructions to get a job as near the waterfront as possible. His records were impeccable; his birth certificate and other vital documents were those of another George Maxwell who had died unmourned many years earlier in an out-of-the-way place.

While at work, Maxwell watched the ships enter and leave the bay by way of the narrow channel that connected it with the ocean. He often wandered the waterfront and, at night, frequented bars to strike up conversations with sailors. He was particularly interested in the arrivals and departures of the huge aircraft carriers and in the occasional submarines that slumbered in the bay. He jotted numerous notes in a small pad that he always kept with him.

Once a week, in the secrecy of his room, he reduced the information to an orderly listing which he put in a small magnetic container. Later, when certain he was unobserved, he would walk under the ramp of the San Diego-Coronado bridge and attach the container to a certain steel girder, then explore the dark recess with his fingers to determine if another container with new instructions had been left for him. Occasionally one was, but Maxwell never saw the man who left it there or who picked up the container which he himself had deposited.

George Maxwell didn't know David Harper, which was an alias for another member of the apparatus.

Dispatched to the United States by way of Canada to report activities at the naval shipyard at Groton, Connecticut, Harper later had been transferred to Los Angeles. His new beat concerned the huge aircraft plants in the vicinity.

Like George Maxwell, Harper was an innocuous- appearing man, the kind

you would scarcely notice in an elevator. Once a week he passed his information to another GRU agent by way of a dead drop located, ironically, in a graveyard. He did not know the name of the man who received the information, or who occasionally left him instructions through the same drop.

There was one major respect in which David Harper differed from George Maxwell. Several years earlier, while still at Groton, the FBI had tapped into his path and had converted him into a double agent. It had been either that or...It had been the "or" that had made him decide to cooperate. When he had been ordered to the Los Angeles area, he had gone with the FBI's knowledge. There the FBI had ordered him to carry out his duties as ordered by his superior. Since the information he placed in the dead drop wasn't monitored, Harper knew that the FBI had another tap still higher up the line.

Consequently, he lived in a state of fear. Should the GRU discover that he was a double agent, he was as good as dead. And if he fled, the FBI would make certain that the GRU did know. That left him, in fact, a prisoner in the land of the free.

The small apparat of which Harper was a member was headed by Igor Kuznetsov, alias William Clayton, who was the man who picked up George Maxwell's magnetic containers and Harper's information from the dead drop in the graveyard. He also gathered data supplied by two men named Conrad and Easterbrook, the remaining members of the apparat.

As chief of the apparat, William Clayton was the only one in the group who knew the names of the other four members and where they might be reached on short notice. Of those above him he knew no one save a Mr. Luce, who had been no more than a voice which occasionally contacted him by telephone. He did suspect, though, that Luce was the man who gathered the information which he in turn deposited in still another dead drop.

William Clayton's dream was that he would climb the ladder in his own particular profession -- that one day he would be returned to Moscow to serve in the GRU headquarters. Because any recognition that he might receive would be through Luce, he awaited the latter's rare calls impatiently.

Then one night Luce did call. To Clayton's amazement he was instructed to go immediately to a certain place in a certain park; he would recognize Luce by the straw hat with the green band and the Herald-Examiner carried in the left hand.

Later, walking with Luce through the park, William Clayton learned of the dire emergency that had drawn Luce from hiding and which within a few hours was to send Clayton and the other four members of his apparat on their most ticklish mission yet. Their destination was a small valley in the hills east of San Diego. William Clayton was jubilant.

The road to Moscow had finally opened.

SEVEN

San Diego Union
San Diego, California, July 19, 1974

MYSTERY EXPLOSION ROCKS S.D. AS VALLEY SPACECRAFT "FOUND"

THE ALLEGED SIGHTING last night of a grounded spacecraft near Eklund Valley, nine miles east of El Cajon, was followed shortly by a tremendous explosion that rocked large parts of the county. Scattered damage was reported.

Valley residents described the explosion, which occurred at the site where the reported sighting was made, as of "nuclear proportions."

Earlier a man who identified himself as Johan Ketterman, an aeronautical

engineer who resides in the city, reported spotting the strange vehicle in a gully while conducting a search of the area in a private aircraft.

"I could look right down, see it clearly," Ketterman told reporters. He described the vehicle as "oval-shaped at each end and about 20 feet long." He placed its location a few miles from the area where a flying saucer had been reported two days earlier.

Following the explosion Ketterman led a search party to the gully where the sighting had been made. Numerous twisted parts of a metallic structure were found. Ketterman described them as "undoubtedly parts of the spacecraft."

A squad of sheriff's deputies hurriedly sealed off the area to preserve any clues which might...

En route to the White House General Cranford Brenner, Army Chief of Staff, felt distinctly uneasy. His instructions from Dale Wharton, Secretary of Defense, had been to report to the Cabinet Room immediately. Nothing more. But following flurries of rumors throughout the Pentagon, the late-evening call held definite overtones of emergency. He held scant doubt that it related to the mysterious space vehicle reportedly destroyed in the hills east of San Diego the previous night -- the object of the wild rumors that had been assailing him all day.

The ride gave him a few moments in which to think. Early editions shouted that the strange spacecraft apparently had been destroyed by its crew -- "to mask its secrets," according to several reports. The lurid nonsense poured out by radio and television had been even more appalling. Some described the vehicle as "definitely Russian," others as a "flying saucer"; both versions were documented by dozens of eyewitness reports. Giant gorillas, ray guns, and Russian spies had been thrown in to give color. And, oh yes, the description of the vehicle as an orbital bomb carrier.

If there were a spacecraft, he reflected. That was a hard fact to swallow. Somehow, ever since the first reports, he'd had the feeling that the whole thing was an elaborate hoax, perhaps perpetrated to herald the advent of a new book or film or commercial product. Except for the radar trackings. That was the single hard fact visible. And the evidence of the explosion.

He was met by a waiting assistant who led him directly to the Cabinet Room. The President sat with nine or ten men at a long table. The littered ash trays and scribbled scratch pads were ample evidence that the conference had been going on a long time.

Balding, with horn-rimmed glasses that he invariably removed before being photographed, the President appeared far older than his years. And tired. His bony face held the ash-gray mask of fatigue.

"Good evening, Cranford," he greeted the general informally. "I felt we should have you with us for this round."

"Thank you, Mr. President." A quick glance around told Brenner that this was a meeting of ExComm, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council; almost all the right men were there. He was, in fact, the only outsider. Intuitively he knew that whatever the reason for the occasion, the Army would be involved to the hilt. He drew some satisfaction from that. He nodded to Defense Secretary Dale Wharton and sat across from Air Force General LeRoy Kalmer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Kalmer inclined his head in acknowledgment.

"I'll fill you in," the President said briefly. "The strange space vehicle destroyed in San Diego County left a nuclear footprint; the first fragments of metal that were retrieved were heavily radiated. Also" -- he hunched forward in his chair and lowered his voice -- "the vessel appears to have come from beyond the solar system."

Brenner felt a slight shock that he attempted to subdue. He wanted to ask a score of questions but waited. The President continued, "Apparently the

crew, some at least, escaped into the surrounding countryside. That leaves us with many problems." A stir ran around the table.

"Yes, sir, it does," Brenner concurred. His first shock past, he could appreciate the dilemma posed by the President's words. He said tentatively, "According to the news reports, the ship was approximately twenty feet long."

The President nodded. "Scarcely sounds like a starship, does it? It could, of course, be a lander from a mother ship, except that we're positive no such ship is in Earth orbit. Dale" -- he inclined his head toward the Defense Secretary -- "has suggested that the mother ship might have landed on the back side of the moon."

"Possibly," Brenner murmured. Oblivious of the others, he kept his eyes on the President. "What leads us to believe it had a crew? Couldn't it have been unmanned, a programmed probe of some sort?"

"We've considered that. Eldon?" The President glanced at Dr. Riordan, his science adviser.

Riordan lifted his pale, hollow-cheeked face and looked at Brenner. "The area burned by the fire allegedly started by one of the, ah, crewmen of the space vehicle was slightly radioactive."

"What does that indicate?" asked Brenner bluntly. "The fire must have been started by some radioactive means," explained Riordan.

"An atomic ray, is that what you mean?"

"Something of that nature, yes. Aside from that, if we assume the vehicle to be interstellar in origin, which appears extremely plausible, I can scarcely imagine it to have been unmanned."

"Why not?"

"I can't envision guidance and controls of such accuracy as to pinpoint a single planet across interstellar space, let alone effect the return of that information," Riordan said flatly.

"We've allocated money toward that same end," the President's security aide observed.

"For research," returned Riordan.

"Doesn't research imply the possibility of success?"

"Not always." Riordan flushed. "But invariably it pays for itself in spin-offs."

"We're safer to assume a manned vehicle," interrupted the President. "There have been numerous eyewitness reports to support the probability that the crew, or part of it, is still in the area."

"I've heard the news reports," admitted Brenner. Personally, he couldn't see how a fourteen-foot-tall, apelike creature could fit into a twenty-foot spaceship, but he didn't say so.

The President must have discerned his doubts, for he said, "We can appreciate your skepticism, and we also realize that the large majority of reports are either false or greatly exaggerated, but we still have to cope with the evidence we do have. The radar trackings, the explosion, radioactive ash, metal fragments that are not of Earth -- all that is evidence we can't disregard."

"Mr. President?" Carl Barrett, the CIA director, spoke sharply from the far end of the table. The President glanced inquiringly at him. Barrett hunched forward and said, "We have to assume that it was a starship and that some of its crew, at least, are at large in the surrounding hills. Whoever or whatever they are, we have to locate them as quickly as possible. A starship means a star drive, and if the secret gets out, the entire world will want it. We can't risk that."

Star drive! For the second time in the few moments he'd been present General Brenner felt a distinct sense of shock. Even the hint of such a thing would bring every nation scrambling into the act. My God, the H-bomb was puny in comparison.

He jerked back his attention as Barrett continued, "We have to assume that this is a purposeful alien contact. It could be either peaceful or otherwise. Who knows their intent? If such a drive exists, we have to get it and get it first. We might need such a defense very badly."

"We've discussed all that, Carl," the President reproved.

"We have to seal off that entire area before it's too late."

"Granting the existence of aliens, how can we be certain they're still in the area?" demanded the Treasury Secretary. "We might be sealing off a vacuum."

"Quite unlikely," observed Riordan. "Their physical appearance, whatever it is, would make them too highly visible to move around. If they're there, they're hiding -- probably trying to figure how they ever got into the mess. I agree that the area should be sealed off immediately."

Nelson Chadwick III, Secretary of State, gestured in protest. Brenner shifted his gaze to the aging Secretary's pink face. Chadwick said, "Such a move would alarm the nation. It also would indicate the extent of the stakes, or the possible extent, if I might put it that way." He was clearly dubious about the whole matter. So were several others.

"We've agreed to pass it off as a war game," Barrett shot back.

"The majority has, yes." Chadwick hesitated. "I'm also concerned about the press reaction."

"What do you believe might happen if the press caught on to what the stakes really are?" demanded Barrett. "We're already letting too much time pass. Don't you agree, Dale?" He looked at the Defense Secretary.

"Absolutely," Wharton acknowledged.

"Mr. President?" Attorney General Robert Whitefield broke his silence. When the President looked his way, he continued, "While we have no definite proof that such visitors exist, we have to assume that they do. And we have to assume the responsibility of action. We should seal the area off immediately."

The President gazed reflectively at the ceiling. Brenner felt a tightening of his scalp as the full impact of the possibilities struck home. Such a ship would imply a vastly superior civilization, at least in a technical sense. What weapons might such a civilization have developed? Who was to say that this landing was by chance or that the intent was peaceful? The destruction of their ship, perhaps to conceal its weaponry as well as its propulsion system, indicated a need for secrecy that didn't quite jibe with the purpose of a peaceful contact. Barrett and Wharton were right; they had to get on with the job. He became aware that the President was watching him and switched back his attention.

"How soon could such war games be launched?" asked the President.

"Immediately." Brenner looked at the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. "With an Air Force assist."

General Kalmer said, "The Air Force is ready."

"We'd better prepare a press release," someone murmured.

"It is a war game." The President's tired gaze traveled slowly around the table. "In the deepest sense, that is true. Perhaps they will be the most significant exercises ever held; only history will tell. As you know, I've always leveled with the press. Now it appears that we must be somewhat less than forthright, at least for the time being."

In the silence that followed, Brenner sensed the reluctance that had underlain the President's words. And he understood. The President had always called his shots clearly and honestly; now it hurt to have to deviate from that policy. Yet he had no choice.

"Mr. President?" Dr. Riordan's cultivated voice broke the stillness.

"Go ahead, Eldon."

"Suppose that such beings exist and we do manage to, ah, locate them? We haven't discussed that."

"No, we haven't." The President smiled faintly. "What do you have in mind?"

"It would be necessary to hold them absolutely incommunicado."

"That would be an unfriendly act," protested the Secretary of State.

"But necessary," CIA director Barrett interposed.

"I was thinking in terms of possible alien diseases, things like that," explained Riordan. "Look how we isolate our own astronauts, and there we're just dealing with the moon."

"The word 'incommunicado' didn't imply that intent," the Secretary of State remarked.

Riordan flushed. "An unfortunate choice," he admitted. "I should have said 'isolation.'"

"Aside from that, you couldn't keep such information from the troops for a minute. It would spread like wildfire," asserted Chadwick. "The entire world would know the truth within hours, then where would our credibility be? I shudder to think of the diplomatic repercussions that would follow."

"The world is full of risks," snapped Barrett.

"Unfortunately."

"Could we even establish communication with such creatures, assuming they exist?" asked the Treasury Secretary. He directed the question to the President's science adviser.

"In time, certainly." Riordan's smile held poignancy. "Any technical difficulties undoubtedly would be ours, not theirs."

"Explain that, please."

"An interstellar civilization?" Riordan gestured helplessly. "Who would be the savages?"

"I don't regard us in that light," the Treasury Secretary retorted stiffly.

"We can't afford a one-way mirror," murmured Secretary Chadwick.

"Gentlemen!" The President rapped the table lightly. When the silence returned, he continued, "It's time to put our decisions into action."

The big choppers came in the night.

Toby awoke to the deep whooshing sound they sent reverberating throughout the valley and surrounding hills. He sat up in bed listening. Why were they coming at night? The question filled him with chill apprehension. Dressing hurriedly, he ran outside to peer at the sky. Dark shapes, like monstrous bugs against the star field, flew in from the east. Dropping into the dark bowl of the valley, their thunder crashed against his ears.

He glanced anxiously around. Lights had come on in Linda's house and in several other dwellings scattered here and there. The headlights of a car coming down the grade from the west suddenly seemed to slow to a crawl, as if the driver were trying to discern what was happening in the valley.

He heard movement behind him and whirled nervously. It was Gramp. Wearing a bathrobe over his pajamas, he was carrying his shotgun. "What's happening?" he asked.

"Helicopters." Toby gestured toward the east.

"Reckon Barlo will have to scramble some."

"We can't leave him at the Jackson barn much longer," Toby blurted anxiously. "We have to find a better place for him to hide."

"Hide? There's no place for him to hide." Gramp gazed at the shadowy choppers. "The world's too small for that now." Toby started to protest but fell silent with the realization that Gramp probably was right. The FBI or CIA or some military agency undoubtedly had already inspected the site of the blast, had determined that Barlo's ship had come from the stars. That would account for the big helicopters swooping down. They were probably carrying soldiers or Marines. They'd fling a net over the whole valley and the hills

for miles beyond, search every inch. This was the prelude. He had the sense of time speeding up, running out.

He wondered what Barlo was feeling. Fear? He couldn't quite imagine that. Despite Barlo's predicament of being trapped on a strange and seemingly hostile world, he didn't strike Toby as one who would scare easily. He suppressed the desire to visit him; crossing the fields to the Jackson barn at night could be dangerous, if Cleator had someone watching. Still, he had to help him find another place to hide. Torn by indecision, he watched the shadowy forms in the sky. The helicopters scarcely seemed to touch down before they lifted again. Their engines rising to a high whine and their big blades sending their pulsing beats through the air, they rose in the starlight one by one and headed back into the east.

As the sound of their passage diminished, Gramp said, "We'd better catch some sleep."

"Shouldn't we do something now?" Toby licked his dry lips.

"We'd better see what they do first. No use runnin' off half-cocked."

"Think they'll search the houses?" he persisted.

"Could be." Gramp scanned the sky. "Reckon there'll be plenty of activity in the morning."

Gramp was right.

Toby was awakened at dawn by the sound of trucks. Scrambling to the window, he looked out. A long line of the vehicles was turning into the valley from Interstate 8. Their headlights were baleful yellow eyes in the dawn hour. Led by a jeep, they bounced along the rutted road that skirted the eastern edge of the valley. Although the light was too dim for him to discern any insignia, he felt certain they were Army trucks.

He dressed and went outside to watch. Ruff greeted him with a bark. As the light grew stronger, he saw a cluster of pyramidal tents near the head of the valley, where the convoy had gone earlier. Beyond, on the lower slopes, small figures were visible working upward along a fire trail.

The seven o'clock newscast reported the valley to be the site of Army war games. An announcement was made that the entire area had been restricted to the public for the duration of the exercises. The only exceptions were through traffic on Interstate 8 and travel to and from private dwellings and ranches. An Army spokesman had declined to comment when asked if the unexpected maneuvers were related to the earlier destruction of the strange spacecraft. The announcer left scant doubt that he believed that such a connection did exist.

"War games, hmph," Toby's mother snorted as she served breakfast. "You'd think they'd find something better to do."

Gramp said slyly, "Maybe they're looking for that gorilla fellow." He winked at Toby.

Another roaring came that shook the windows. "More helicopters," said Toby. He gulped his food hurriedly and went outside to watch. The lead chopper was settling toward the floor of the valley in the vicinity of the pyramidal tents. He looked toward the old Jackson barn. Set against the eucalyptus trees, it was scarcely discernible. Although there was no sign of life in the neighboring fields, a sizable crowd was already gathering around the general store. Estimating there must be forty or fifty vehicles there, he wondered what the Army might do about it.

He should have sneaked over to see Barlo during the night, he reflected. Now he was barred by daylight. Even looking in the direction of the barn could be dangerous. At least he could hope that the presence of the Army would keep the vigilantes away.

He switched his attention to a jeep coming slowly down the grade from the east. Pulling off to the side of the road every hundred yards or so, it waited while the figure next to the driver hopped out to do something. As the

jeep came closer, he saw the man was tacking signs to the bordering trees and fence posts. He ran to the edge of the highway. The sign read:

RESTRICTED AREA
KEEP OUT
U.S. ARMY

Toby studied the crowd as he passed the general store. A car parked off to one side caught his attention. Three men in the rear and a fourth in the front seat were sitting as immobile as if carved from blocks of wood. Leaning against the fender, a fifth man was scrutinizing the valley in the direction of the Army encampment. Dark-haired and stocky, with neatly pressed tan slacks and a brown sport shirt, he appeared quite dapper. The FBI? His heart thumped at the thought. He had the feeling that the dapper man's gaze followed him every step of the way home.

He was sitting on the porch with Gramp when the sheriff's car turned off from the highway and came toward them. Gramp laid aside his newspaper as the sheriff heaved his bulk from the car.

"Mary, the coffee," he yelled. "Dan's here."

"I can't stay but a moment," the sheriff protested. He nodded to Toby and leaned against the porch rail. "Plenty of excitement," he observed.

"That ape fellow," said Gramp.

"Could be." The sheriff was noncommittal.

"Seems strange they'd hold war games right here at this time." Gramp was fishing, and the sheriff knew it. "Why do you suppose that is?" persisted Gramp.

"Couldn't say, Jed."

"Don't they cut you fellows in on what's happenin'?"

"Not the Army."

"At least it'll keep Cleator and his gang away."

"Not necessarily," answered the sheriff. "Several of them live nearby. The rest of them can gather at their places or claim they're going there. The restrictions don't apply to that; at least, I don't believe they do."

"They'd better not come around here."

The sheriff looked at Toby. "There's talk going around that Cleator's bunch jumped one of the critters from the ship the other night. Cleator claims he was a Russky -- some kind of a midget. Seems the fellow stopped them with a ray gun -- started a grass fire." His eyes were questioning.

"A midget Russian spy with a ray gun," cackled Gramp. "That beats the gorilla yarn. What'll they think up next?"

"I don't know," admitted the sheriff. He kept his gaze on Toby.

"Sounds goofy," said Toby. He squirmed uneasily, thinking the sheriff knew far more than he'd said. Cleator had probably identified him. But he couldn't know about Barlo! The thought that he might shook him.

The momentary tableau was broken as Toby's mother brought the coffee. Glad for the opportunity to get away, he hastily excused himself and went around to the rear of the house. Gazing toward the Jackson barn, his thoughts were tumultuous. He really didn't mind if the sheriff suspected the truth, or even knew, but if the word was getting around, the Army would hear of it. Perhaps they'd search the house. They would, if they really believed he knew anything about it. And they must know that the ship had come from the stars, else why the war games? He had the feeling of an immense net being cast over the entire valley and wondered if, for Barlo, there was any escape.

The question rang hollowly in his mind.

Los Angeles Times
Los Angeles, California, July 30, 1974

MYSTERIOUS EXPLOSION TIED TO SPACECRAFT; WAR GAMES LINK DENIED

WASHINGTON, JULY 29 (AP) -- A high government official who refused to allow his name to be used told reporters today that the mysterious explosion that rocked large parts of San Diego County two nights ago "definitely was connected to the landing of a strange spacecraft." He stated that the spacecraft had been destroyed by internal explosions following its discovery. He declined to comment further.

A Pentagon spokesman, also unidentified, stated categorically that the war games called in San Diego's Eklund Valley, where the spacecraft allegedly landed, "was in no way connected with the alleged spaceship." He said such surprise maneuvers were not uncommon. He denied the rumor that the vehicle had been identified as Russian.

Congressman Leonard Wheelhart (Rep. Cal.) told reporters that "the nation is alarmed." Wheelhart hinted that the vessel was of Russian origin. He referred to it as "a possible bomb carrier."

Wheelhart later told reporters that he was unable to comment further "because grave problems of national security are involved." He said that any additional statements might lead to widespread hysteria.

A Congressional committee headed by...

Major General Norland T. Brockler, U.S. Army, glanced up inquiringly as his aide entered the big pyramidal tent that served as his field headquarters. The aide clicked his heels together, snapped a salute, and said, "Sir, Lieutenant Benton's patrol has returned with an armed troop in custody. Nine mounted men apprehended inside the restricted area," he added.

"Civilians?" The general frowned. "The orders were to warn them the first time, escort them outside the area."

"Sir, the troop leader identified himself as Colonel Cleator."

The general's head came up. "What organization?"

"He won't say. He won't speak to anyone except the commanding general."

"Have him brought in," the general instructed. He wondered what to expect. If this job held even a small part of the importance indicated by his secret orders, the government might throw all kinds of forces into the field, perhaps many of them unknown to him. The FBI and CIA would certainly be somewhere in the picture. Cleator possibly fitted into one of those categories, but he doubted it.

The aide returned, accompanied by a thin, narrow-faced man garbed in black. A gold-colored VACI insignia adorned one shoulder. The aide snapped his heels together smartly and said, "General Brockler, Sir...Colonel Cleator."

The general nodded dismissal to the aide. He didn't offer to shake hands or even rise. Instead he regarded his visitor through cerulean-blue eyes that had taken on a frosty look. He asked brittlely, "What is your organization, Colonel?"

"The Vigilantes Against Communist Infiltration, sir." Cleator tapped his shoulder patch. "We're known as the VACI."

"You are aware that you are in a restricted area?"

Cleator's lips curled slightly. "We're tracking Russian spies, General. There was no time to request a special clearance."

"Russian spies?"

"From their spaceship -- the one they destroyed."

"I've heard those stories," the general replied coldly.

"We've seen them."

"Seen them?"

"Almost caught one, as a matter of fact." Cleator relaxed. "We just about had him, when he used some kind of a ray gun to start a grass fire. As it is, we know just about where he's hiding, who's shielding him. We expect to nab them both before the night's out."

Up to that point the general had been on the point of summoning his aide to have Cleator and his men escorted outside the restricted area; now he hesitated. The ray gun angle, although mentioned in the news, had been classified TOP SECRET. Crackpot or not, the fellow might possibly know something. He asked, "Did you actually see the weapon?"

"The ray gun? I told you, he used it to start a grass fire. I had my light right on him. He's small, a midget."

"What leads you to believe he's Russian?"

"The insignia on the spaceship," declared Cleator.

"Did you see the insignia?"

"Not personally, but a lot of people did. Solid citizens."

"You know where this man is?"

"Where he was," corrected Cleator. "But he's close around, we're certain of that."

"And the person shielding him?"

"The Adam boy." Cleator jerked his head in gesture. "He lives down the road."

"How old is he?"

"Sixteen or so."

"A teen-age boy shielding a Russian spy with a ray gun?" The general's wintry smile returned.

"These kids don't know any better," argued Cleator. "Neither do most adults. Most of them couldn't identify a Russian in Moscow. That's the reason for the VACI."

"What would the boy be doing with a Russian spy?"

"You tell me, General. They brainwash 'em in the schools, I can tell you that."

"Thank you for your information. I'll have you and your men escorted outside the restricted area. And it is restricted; you'll find a posting to that effect."

Cleator's face clouded. "You can't keep us out of here, General. Some of us live around here."

"Do you?"

"No, but I visit."

"Not with an armed troop on horseback," the general snapped. He summoned his aide, gave curt instructions, and looked back at his reports. When Cleator had departed, he sat back musingly. Crackpot or not, the man's story tended to substantiate the belief that members of the alien crew had escaped into the hills, probably were still hiding in the vicinity. Certainly no evidence of bodies had been found in the wreckage. Cleator's story of the ray gun, if nothing else, held a ring of truth that he couldn't afford to disregard.

Was it possible that an alien from another star could be so human in appearance as to be mistaken for a human? While the question intrigued him, what knowledge of evolution he possessed told him how slim such chances were. But whatever the true story, it was a good thing the VACI thought the creature -- if there was one! -- to be Russian. All hell would break loose if the real truth ever got out.

A boy shielding whatever it was! The Adam boy, Cleator had said. And he lived just down the road. He could check that angle easily enough. Or could he? His first impulse to have the boy questioned gave way to the realization that he could scarcely pursue that course without revealing what they really were after. If the boy talked, the rumor of the interrogation could sweep like

wildfire. The news media would make a circus of it, which was the last thing he wanted. A better course was to have the boy watched. He would know quickly enough if the boy made any contacts and with whom.

He smiled cynically. He couldn't openly admit it, of course, but the entire affair held an air of total unreality -- the kind of thing he would expect to be hatched by the CIA. Yet he had to admit that the unreality held a hard core of substance that he couldn't laugh away. The metal that couldn't have originated on this planet, for example. And the ground scorched by a radioactive flame. Those things held the verity of laboratory tests. Neither could he deny that something had been tracked down from the Pole. But he couldn't buy that ape bit or even the spacecraft with the Russian insignia. They were simply too farfetched.

He walked outside to gaze over the valley and surrounding hills. His practiced eye told him that every inch within view could be combed easily enough; and if the land refused to yield a clue, the barns and dwellings would have to follow. But they would be last, for that would raise the greatest cry of all. He only hoped Washington came up with a plausible excuse for such an action.

Figures moving along a distant ridge caught his eye. Beyond them, far beyond them, another ring of steel was being forged to cut off every possible escape route. The inner ring would work outward, the outer ring inward, and the valley itself would be combed by still other troops. Were it not for the necessity of secrecy, he could probably complete the entire job within a few days. But secrecy was paramount. A star drive!

He had to admit that it was one helluva big secret.

Igor Kuznetsov, alias William Clayton, was a dedicated Communist. He was also courageous, imaginative, ambitious, and possessed of the cunning of those who survive for any long period in his particular trade. When his superior had first informed him of the emergency nature of his assignment -- "the terrible urgency of which could allow no failure" -- he'd been struck by the knowledge that fate had thrust upon him probably the most crucial task ever levied on a single agent, at least as far as the stakes were concerned. His determination not to fail glowed constantly. He couldn't fail! The thought lived with him every hour.

A spacecraft from another stellar system! Clayton didn't question the fact. Questions could lead to doubt, indecision, and such things could be fatal. The assumption always had to be that his superiors were right; that was the practical way, for it both put him on the side of his superiors and allowed a positive blueprint for action.

In the present instance, such a spacecraft spelled multiple dangers -- and a golden opportunity. The spacecraft implied a civilization technically far in advance of any on earth, hence far more powerful. If war-bent -- always a safe assumption -- such a civilization could emerge as the new masters of Earth. That was one danger. Another was that the United States, through some knavery or other, might secure the technical knowledge necessary to duplicate the alien vessel's propulsion and astrogation systems or might ally itself with the aliens. The inevitable result, should either occur, would be a disastrous shift in the balance of power in which Russia could well sink back into the obscurity of history.

Those were the negative factors. The positive factor -- the golden opportunity that had presented itself -- lay in the propulsion system that had driven the strange spacecraft across the all but unimaginable gulfs that separate one star from another. The nation that possessed such a drive could extend its power into the universe. That glittering prospect, and the advancement it could bring him, honed his determination to a sharp edge.

In the few brief hours it had taken Clayton to alert the other four

members of the apparat, give them brief instructions, and drive them to the once-lonely valley east of San Diego, he'd crystallized several possible courses of action, each dependent upon the particular situation that he might encounter. The assumption of the spacecraft and its mysterious destruction had led to the assumption of survivors, a view shared by his superior as well as by the U.S. government, to judge from the action it was taking. Luce -- or more likely the chief of an apparat several steps above Luce -- had pipelines that reached into the most sensitive parts of the nation. Luce's orders had not only stemmed from his superiors but were based on knowledge of what the American government knew. That made the information given him doubly solid.

Following the premise of survivors, Luce had seen two alternatives, both acceptable to Clayton. The first, and most desirable, was to seize one or more of the survivors and spirit him or them across the nearby border into Mexico. There, close by the small Mexican town of Tecate, his superior would have another apparat waiting. From there it was but a short step to Tijuana. In almost no time at all the aliens would find themselves aboard a Russian fishing trawler for transfer to a waiting submarine. Shortly they would be in Moscow. That was the triumph he sought. But failing that, the second objective was to kill them. Under no circumstances could one of the strange beings be allowed to fall into the hands of the United States government. The end was all that counted, not the cost.

Now, concealed with his men on a small wooded knoll that overlooked the valley's floor, William Clayton knew that he had his work cut out -- had known almost from the hour of his arrival. Stopping at the country store, he'd heard the gossip concerning the coming of the giant helicopters, the sudden war games, the Army encampment that had sprung up in the darkness -- had seen the Army trucks that still streamed down the grade from the east. While dismaying, the events held a strong plus factor -- in his mind they made the story of the interstellar ship's existence a certainty. Although the ship had been destroyed, he clung to the hope that its critical secrets still lived in the minds of its survivors.

Clayton hadn't been idle. He'd heard and discounted the wild rumors regarding "the spaceship with the Russian flag," the "monstrous ape with the ray gun," and other such absurdities; but some rumors he hadn't discounted. One concerned the vigilantes' near-capture of a strange creature ("a midget Russian spy," the vigilantes had claimed) that had escaped them by throwing up a wall of flame; another concerned a boy who allegedly was shielding one of the ship's survivors from capture. The rumors had been too insistent, too much in agreement for him to disregard.

A few adroit questions had elicited the boy's name and where he lived. "The son of the Adam widow," a bystander had informed him and had obligingly pointed out the boy's house. In lieu of other leads, Clayton had decided to investigate the youth further.

He lifted his powerful field glasses again. Sitting on the porch with an old man, the boy had scarcely moved in several hours, and then only to pop in and out of the house. Clayton restrained his impatience. If the boy left the house, he would be able to follow him almost anywhere in the valley from his carefully selected vantage point atop the knoll.

Could the boy be hiding the alien in the house? The question, which had tantalized him earlier, returned. Anything was possible, he reflected, but how had the boy established contact with the alien? And was there only one? Perhaps one had been sent out from hiding to see how it would fare before the others risked revealing themselves; that seemed plausible. But if he could deliver even one to Moscow, he couldn't ask for more.

Despite his determination, Clayton felt some misgivings. He scarcely knew the four men who shared the knoll with him, nor had they known one another until drawn together by the present assignment; but that was the

nature of the GRU. Neither were they prepared for what Clayton sensed lay ahead. They had been trained for espionage, not for kidnap and murder; the GRU maintained special apparatus for that. Conrad and Easterbrook had tough faces, perhaps weren't strangers to violence. Maxwell and Harper appeared on the softer side, yet he knew that appearances told almost nothing about a man's capabilities. They'd been tried by the GRU and passed; that was sufficient to assure him that they'd carry out his orders to the letter. In the end it all fell back on him, which was the way he wanted it.

He moved his field glasses to study the Army encampment again. More tents were springing up, and dust rose in the wake of trucks that bounced along the rutted road from the highway. Here and there he spotted movement in the hills which indicated the presence of patrols. Farther still, where the ridges rose starkly against the skyline, he heard the low thunder of chopper blades. He had no doubt that the entire restricted area, including the knoll where he stood and the scattered houses and farms in the valley, would be searched. He'd have to watch the patrols, move to evade them, circle to let them pass -- hide among the tree branches if necessary. And while eluding the patrols, he would have to find his quarry -- the one the boy was shielding -- spirit him across the border or, if necessary, kill him. In that he couldn't fail. But it would be touch and go.

Careful to keep the sunlight from touching his glasses and possibly betraying his position, he made a minute inspection of the valley. The crowd in front of the store had more than tripled its earlier size. Although many of the men were armed and several held leashed dogs, none were venturing into the nearby fields. He attributed that to the warnings posted by the Army.

The tang of tobacco brought his head around sharply. Dave Harper was smoking. "Douse it," Clayton ordered curtly. Harper obediently ground the cigarette into the soil and looked away. Clayton was moving his glasses again when suddenly he paused. A woman -- no, a girl -- had emerged from an old two-story house set among a fringe of eucalyptus and was starting along the dusty road that led to the store.

He watched her casually, then more sharply as she turned off into a path that led directly to the house where the boy and old man sat. She appeared slender, brunette, on the tall side. The boy rose and hurried to meet her. They paused to talk for a few moments before proceeding to the porch where the old man sat.

How did the girl fit into the picture? Clayton frowned thoughtfully, if she were privy to the boy's secret, she might be aiding him. That would complicate matters. And what of the old man? Possibly all three were in on the secret. The thought was disquieting.

Several hours later the young couple returned across the field. He watched until they entered the two-story frame structure from which the girl had come. He studied the house and old shed behind it. Despite the trees, his location gave him a fairly good view of both the front and the back. If the boy came out either exit, Clayton was all but certain to see him.

He scanned the surrounding area. Beyond the sparse eucalyptus around the girl's house, an unplowed field perhaps several hundred yards wide terminated at a much larger grove. So thick were the trees that it appeared all but impenetrable.

His gaze traveled past a ramshackle structure and leaped back. All but hidden under the drooping branches, it would have escaped his detection were it not for the streaks of whitewash that still marked the weathered siding. He scrutinized the building carefully. Clearly it had been abandoned for many years. If entered at night, it might serve as an excellent shelter.

He was sweeping the edge of the valley when movement caught his eye. He held the glasses steady. Several indistinct figures were visible in the shade of another grove. His first surmise that it might be an Army patrol was

rejected when he realized the figures were clothed in solid black. Boots, trousers, shirts, flat-crowned hats -- all were of the same dark hue. Recalling the rumors he'd heard at the store, he reflected that these must be the vigilantes who had all but caught one of the survivors from the ship, only to lose him behind a wall of flame. They were also -- he smiled grimly -- rabid anti-Communists.

Clayton pondered the meaning of this new complication. Unless he was greatly mistaken, the vigilantes were as much in violation of the Army's orders as he was. Were they watching the boy? If so, they must still believe that he could lead them to the alien or be made to reveal where the alien was hiding. Glancing at the sun, he sat in the shade to watch the valley.

It looked, he thought, like a long, long day.

Several hours later the boy returned home. Vanishing inside for a short while, he returned to the porch to sit with the old man. Clayton watched them uneasily. If the boy wasn't involved, he was wasting precious time. Moreover, he couldn't hope to remain in the valley overly long without attracting attention. Coupled with that, the fear that Army patrols might flush the creatures from hiding and whisk them beyond his reach made him tense and edgy. Yet he had little alternative but to wait.

He spent the time dissecting the problem, reviewing what he knew. How many of the creatures were there? The gossip at the store had centered on one, yet it was probable that there would be several, at least. If the Army captured one of the creatures, that creature had to be killed. But what if the Army captured three or four? He hadn't really thought of that possibility.

His uneasiness grew as the long afternoon waned. Was the boy waiting for darkness? Clayton had the uncomfortable premonition that he was. If so, they'd have to abandon the knoll at nightfall, take up positions where they could watch both the front and the back of the boy's house. He contemplated the danger. He had small doubt that Army patrols would keep the valley floor under close surveillance. Moreover, they'd certainly be equipped with nightscopes. But he had no choice; he'd committed himself to a course of action, now had to follow through. He hoped, if he were successful, the mounting odds would be reflected in an increased reward. If he were successful? He couldn't fail; the stakes were too great.

With the onset of dusk the boy emerged from the house and started toward the rambling structure where the girl lived. Clayton studied him in the gathering gloom. Although he could see but little, the boy's walk and manner suggested nothing more than a casual stroll. Clayton didn't believe that to be the fact.

He felt a quiet desperation. He had to move his men out of cover, go down to the sparse grove where the girl's house stood. Wherever the boy went, they had to follow. Sooner or later, he was convinced, the boy would lead him to the alien.

He took a last look at the valley in the gathering gloom. No sound or movement touched his senses save for an occasional car on the highway. There should be Army patrols moving out, but there weren't. And what of the black-garbed men he'd seen earlier? Too quiet, he thought. The lull was unnatural.

He dispatched Easterbrook to get Conrad, who was standing watch on the opposite rim. When they returned, he briefly described their mission, cautioned them to silence, and started down the slope.

The night moved to gather them in.

David Harper tasted the sour fear in his throat.

Following Clayton through the gathering dusk, he was well aware of their danger; he'd glimpsed the patrols moving up the ravines and along the ridges of the neighboring hills. He realized that the floor of the valley at night -- especially at night! -- would be under close surveillance. If they were

caught, it would be the end for him. He'd had no time to warn the FBI; now, if they were apprehended, the FBI probably would operate on the assumption that he'd returned his loyalties to Russia. Should he manage to escape, the GRU would learn soon enough that he'd served as a double agent. If necessary, they'd track him to the ends of the Earth.

If he could somehow manage to contact the FBI before it was too late...He savored the desperate hope. Perhaps he could sneak away in the darkness, return to San Diego, tell his story. But no, he couldn't as long as Clayton and the others lived to reveal his defection.

But if they were caught? He tried to discern how he might salvage himself. If he talked -- if the FBI believed him -- they might give him a new identity, new papers, allow him to start over in an entirely different part of the country. Was that possible? He'd heard of such cases. But there was still the GRU!

Clayton signaled for a halt while he peered into the gathering darkness. Harper saw the lights of houses, the beams of vehicles coming down the grade from the east. In the deep gloom that was not yet night they looked like pale yellow blobs. He wished he were back in Los Angeles gathering his information on the big aircraft plants, living quietly. The city had given him an anonymity; here he was naked. There was something terrifying about the rolling land, the big empty sky.

Apparently satisfied, Clayton moved ahead again, using the fringe of eucalyptus to keep them hidden from any chance observers in the big house. It was crazy, thought Harper. How could anyone hide in an open field? But then, the whole thing was crazy. The idea of a ship from another star was something he might expect on TV, not in real life. Yet Clayton apparently believed that such a ship had landed, which meant that Clayton's superiors believed it. That gave him pause for thought.

Clayton reached the fringe of eucalyptus, halting well to the rear of the house. Gesturing to the others to sit, he worked his way to one side, where he could see the light spill out should anyone open the front door.

Silent and immobile, Harper watched the night deepen around them. The hum of insects, the twitter of birds, rustling noises in the grass -- sounds reached him that he'd seldom if ever heard. With each new sound his fear soared.

After a while Clayton returned, gave terse instructions, then slipped off through the darkness with Maxwell and Easterbrook to cover the front of the house. Harper was left with the agent named Conrad.

When the others were gone, Conrad dug into his pocket. "Cigarette?" he offered.

"Don't mind if I do." Harper tried to still the sudden trembling in his fingers as he took one. Conrad ignited his lighter, cupping the flame in his hands. As they smoked, Harper kept his senses tuned to the night. He got the odd impression that the darkness held motion. The deep shadows of the trees, the silhouette of the house against the star-speckled sky, the distant ridges -- everything around him appeared to sway in a slow back and forth movement. Strange scents touched his nostrils. He wondered that Conrad appeared so unperturbed. The harsh scream of a night bird caused him to start involuntarily.

"Jittery?" asked Conrad.

"I don't like the country," he admitted.

"All in a day's work." Conrad took a deep drag on his cigarette and exhaled slowly. "But I'll have to admit that this is a crazy assignment."

"Do you believe that, about the spaceship?"

"Why not?" Conrad glanced at the sky. "Lots of room for lots of people up there." Harper didn't answer. After a while he became aware of a dull thudding sound and jerked erect.

"What's that?" he asked worriedly.

"Horses. Might be a corral around somewhere."

"I didn't see any."

"Shhhh." Conrad gestured him to silence and peered into the darkness. Following his gaze, Harper was alarmed to see several gigantic blobs that he realized were riders moving across the field.

"Army patrol?" he asked tremulously.

Conrad shook his head. "Those boys use jeeps."

"Who could they be?"

"Local yokels. Lots of farms around."

"They don't seem worried about the Army."

"Probably know their way around." As the figures vanished in the night, Conrad took another drag on his cigarette before extinguishing it in the ground. "Hell of a way to make a living," he observed.

"Yeah." For the thousandth time Harper wished he'd never heard of the GRU.

He was thinking about it when the boy came out through the back door.

NINE

TOBY MOVED STEALTHILY across the field toward the old Jackson barn, his senses attuned to the night. Under the faint glimmer of starlight the scene ahead was a mosaic of dark blobs that held a curious fluidity -- an illusion, he knew, caused by the inability of his eye to focus on any specific object. Only the hills, silhouetted against the sky, returned a sense of perspective and solidity.

He paused to peer behind. Rectangles of light spilling from the side windows of the Jansen house emphasized the valley's loneliness. Earlier, from one of those same windows, he'd glimpsed the vigilantes standing at the edge of a grove at the western side of the valley, recognizable only by their black garb. The sight had been disquieting. He felt certain they wouldn't maintain a vigil without a definite plan of action. Would they be watching through the night? Reason told him they would, for whatever their plans, they'd have to be carried out under cover of darkness now that the Army had come.

That was one danger. Another was the Army. Up till now the troops had concentrated on throwing a vast net over the valley and surrounding hills and probably for many miles around. All traffic on the highway and side roads was being stopped, ostensibly to warn the drivers of the war games but in reality to inspect the vehicles. That became evident when it was revealed that the cargoes of trucks were also being inspected. The commentators had speculated on it during the day. With soldiers still pouring into the area, he sensed that the real search was yet to come. Tomorrow, he thought, and tomorrow was so close.

Where could he hide Barlo? The question had nagged him all day. There'd be no safety in his house or in Linda's, and he felt certain that the Jackson barn and every inch of the grove by which it stood would be thoroughly combed before another day had passed. Neither could he smuggle him out of the restricted area; and if he could, where could he take him? He hadn't the slightest idea but felt it imperative that he speak with Barlo, decide on a course of action. Perhaps Barlo could figure out a way.

Abruptly he cocked his head to listen, caught by a sense of danger. Only the chirrup of crickets and the low hum of tires on the highway reached his ears. He gazed at the black shadow of the grove, in the faint starlight discerning the whitish streaks that marked the old barn.

What had alerted him? Turning slowly, he scrutinized the night on all sides, saw no indication of danger. Despite that, the sense of alarm remained

unabated. Something was out there! He knew it for a certainty. Swallowing hard, he tried to imagine what that something might be.

Finally he forced himself to move ahead, his nerves taut with anticipation. The sound of insects had never seemed so loud, the distant screech of a night bird so forlorn. Familiar stimuli touched his senses with a clarity he'd never before experienced. His eyes, darting from side to side, evoked strange imagery from the shadows. If only he had Barlo's eyes, he could see in the night!

The blob that was the eucalyptus grove reached higher and higher; the ghost-white barn raced out to meet him. He was but a few dozen yards from it when a sound from behind brought him whirling around. His heart hammering, he peered into the night. An Army patrol? The vigilantes? He felt his tension grow. A light in one of the distant houses blinked. While gazing at it, it blinked again. Someone or something had passed between him and the light! Someone was in the field!

He crouched lower, searching the blackness. A long minute passed and then another before he was rewarded with movement -- a dark shadow that for an instant glided against the blacker shadows beyond. He had the impression of other movement slightly off to the side. He was being followed! Fighting his fear, he realized that his followers were making no attempt to catch him, otherwise they long since would have closed the distance between them. The alternative was that he was being used as a guide to Barlo. That made more sense. But who were they? Not that it really mattered; the important thing was that they not find Barlo.

Gradually he altered his course until he was walking parallel with the edge of the grove. The whitish barn slid past a dozen or so yards to his left. Would his followers see the barn, suspect it had been his destination? Stemming the urge to look behind, he pondered what he should do. To turn back toward his house would be a dead giveaway.

Toby? The small voice in his brain brought him up sharply, then he resumed his stride.

I'm being followed.

Five men, reported Barlo. I can sense their thoughts.

Five? He was appalled. The vigilantes?

No. There was a brief pause. They are agents of some kind.

The FBI? His apprehension soared.

FBI? No, they are...GRU, that's it. I draw that quite clearly from one of their minds. Their leader, I believe.

GRU? Toby tried to place the initials.

William Clayton, that's the leader's name, but he's also Igor Kuznetsov. It's what your people call a split personality. It's strange, because he thinks of himself as Igor Kuznetsov, yet the name is buried so deep...

Kuznetsov? Toby interrupted.

Russian, explained Barlo. They want me very badly.

Russian! Toby repeated the word in his mind with a feeling of doom.

Russians...after Barlo! They must be spies, must know about the star drive! He felt panic rise inside him.

Keep walking, instructed Barlo. They won't bother you as long as they believe you're leading them to where I am.

But...

Swing back toward your house, not too sharp a circle.

If I do, they'll know something happened to make me change my mind, he protested.

You have to turn back. The vigilantes are in the valley.

"The vigilantes!" He repeated the words aloud, felt a stab of dismay. Everything was closing in. But the vigilantes weren't as dangerous as the men following him; not if they were Russians. The Russians behind and the

vigilantes ahead -- he was grasping worriedly for some means of escape when a tiny hope flared in his mind. He nourished it, assessing the possibilities before he asked, Where are they?

In the field. I believe -- yes, I'm certain -- they plan to search the Jansen barn and yours. Cleator feels certain that I'm at one place or the other. Barlo's thoughts flowed to him, accompanied by a mental picture of the vigilante leader and his men riding slowly in single file, their black clothes blending with the night.

Where in the field? he asked insistently. During the long silence that followed, he sensed that Barlo was probing his mind, testing the hope that flourished there. He could all but feel the alien's invasion -- the eerie sense of a second presence. He wondered at Barlo's calmness at such a time. Russians! He shuddered.

Finally Barlo cautioned, There is danger.

I have to know!

To the west, beyond the grove. The answer held reluctance.

Stay hidden, urged Toby. A sound came from behind that reminded him of a boot scuffing a rock. Stifling the impulse to glance backward, he increased his pace. Russian! It seemed inconceivable, yet it didn't. Not if the Russians knew about the star drive. And they were Russians! Barlo had picked that directly from their minds. How had they gotten to the valley so quickly? He'd have to ask.

Another sound from behind brought the uneasy impression that his pursuers were drawing closer. But they wouldn't bother him, not as long as he kept walking -- not while they thought he was beading them to Barlo's hiding place.

As the shadowy grove slid to his rear, he turned toward the western hills. Although his eyes had long since become fully dark-adapted, he could discern little in the blackness ahead. The night was immense. Once or twice he slackened his step, trying to discern how close his followers might be. He heard only the familiar hum of insect wings.

Were the Russians armed? The question smote him suddenly, brought a new wave of fear. He hadn't considered that. But they would be, if not with rifles, then certainly with small arms. He couldn't imagine them taking such a desperate chance otherwise. He wanted to ask Barlo but refrained, fearful that the alien might try to deter him from his plan.

Ahead, suddenly, he sensed movement. The vigilantes? His step faltered but momentarily as he searched the darkness. Shadows within shadows -- he saw only a strange shifting of the dark blobs of night. Had his followers sensed the same thing? He forced himself to keep moving at the same pace.

A whispered call from somewhere ahead was followed by an abrupt stillness, a cessation of movement. For a moment the black field gave the impression of a vast emptiness through which he walked alone. He had the absurd impression that Barlo had miraculously managed to dispose of the men behind, of the men ahead.

His hands grew clammy, and a small vein at the base of his throat commenced to pulse with the regularity of a metronome. Each pulse was a drumbeat in his ears. A horse whinnied softly.

"Halt!" a voice ahead crackled.

"Colonel Cleator!" shouted Toby. Caught with a sudden fear, he dashed forward.

"It's the Adam boy," someone exclaimed hoarsely.

"Russians!" yelled Toby. "They're following me!"

"Russians!" a voice bellowed.

A flashlight went on, pinned Toby in its beam. Other lights illuminated the night, swept the field behind him. He crouched and whirled, saw a solitary figure standing in a cone of silver as if transfixed. Abruptly the figure

turned and ran. Off to the side two other figures were racing toward a clump of trees.

"After them!" a nasal voice shouted. The pounding of hooves sent tremors through the ground. Immense shadows took form in the darkness, loomed larger and larger while the flashlight beams bobbed to the movements of the horses.

A dark-clad figure swept past him and then another and another. A rifle cracked, its reverberations bouncing back from the nearby hills. The flat bark of an answering shot came from somewhere ahead.

Toby watched, gripped by a terrible fascination. The first figure caught in the beam half turned in flight, extended an arm. Toby sensed rather than saw that he held a weapon. A sharp crack reached his ears, followed by the louder crash of a rifle; the figure staggered and fell. A vigilante fought his horse to a standstill before leaping off alongside him. The other riders were now close behind the other two racing figures. Toby saw they'd never reach the trees.

Three Russians, but there had been five! Where were the other two? He glanced nervously around, struck by the thought that they might still be hiding nearby. Abruptly he darted in the direction from which the vigilantes had come, then circled and headed back toward the Jackson barn. His breath was whistling harshly in his throat when he reached the trees. Barlo! Barlo! he called silently.

They're not following. The alien's unexpected answer held a calming effect. You're safe.

You're not, Toby declared anxiously. Those shots will bring the whole Army. Movement in front of the barn resolved itself into the alien's slight form. His violet eyes glowed in the night.

The trees should be safe enough, he observed.

Not now. Toby glanced around worriedly. The shortest route to his house lay directly across the field, but it was also the most exposed. By circling the grove behind Linda's, they could hook onto the road that ran to the general store, then cut off on the lane that led to his place. If anyone came, they could hide in the drainage ditch. He outlined the plan.

No, answered Barlo.

The Army's bound to come, Toby warned. A shout in the distance brought his head up. In his mind's eye he had a vision of the black-clad vigilantes thundering toward him. Hurry, he urged.

The barn then, not your house, insisted Barlo.

Okay, the barn. Fearing further protest, Toby started toward the grove that sheltered the Jansen house. The alien glided like a shadow at his side. Toby circled the eucalyptus, halting when they reached the dirt road. Up ahead, where it curved, his view was obscured by trees. Sense anything? he asked nervously.

There's a profusion of thoughts all around us.

Where? Toby asked tersely.

Behind us, ahead, off to the sides. I suspect they're your Army patrols. Barlo drew a deep breath. Your world is quite pleasant when the sun is down.

We'd better hurry. Toby tried to quell the jittery feeling in the pit of his stomach as they started down the road. The soldiers would comb every inch of the valley. When they learned about the Russians, it would be that much worse.

A vehicle, warned Barlo. Toby jerked his head up as the headlights of a car came into view around the curve. A red light blinked on the roof. The sheriff! He halted, perplexed. If the sheriff were hurrying to investigate the shots, he ought to be warned about the Russians: He suddenly realized that the oncoming beams were sweeping up fast. Hide in the brush, he urged.

A spotlight flashed on, catching them briefly in its glare as they scrambled toward the ditch. The car slid to a screeching halt, and the sheriff

leaped out.

"Toby!" he shouted. Toby halted sheepishly, gesturing to the alien to remain hidden as he returned to the edge of the road. "You all right, son?" the sheriff called.

"I'm all right." He blinked in the harsh beam of the sheriff's flashlight.

"Call your friend," the sheriff instructed. A shadow moved, and the alien emerged into the cone of light, standing silently by Toby's side. The sheriff's hand hovered near his holster as he studied the strange figure in the reddish garb. "From the ship?" he asked finally. His eyes remained fixed on the alien.

"He's my friend," answered Toby. "His name's Barlo."

"Barlo?" The sheriff cocked his head. "How'd you learn his name?"

"Well, he can talk." He fidgeted uneasily.

"He can? How'd he learn the language so soon?"

"From me."

"Smart, eh?" The sheriff studied the slight figure. "Where you from, Barlo?"

"Another world." The alien's large violet eyes regarded the sheriff intently.

"Mars or one of those other planets?" If the sheriff was surprised, he carefully concealed it.

"The planet of another star."

"Another star," echoed the sheriff. Momentarily he was silent, as if trying to absorb the impact of what he must have felt. Finally he said, "Our moon trips don't seem like much, do they?"

Barlo said gravely, "The moons are usually the first stepping stones."

"I suspect so." The sheriff turned his face to the sky, squinting as if looking into a bright sun. "What's it like up there?"

"Each sun, each planet, each race is different."

"More than one is inhabited?"

"Many thousands are inhabited," explained the alien.

"That a fact?" The sheriff's eyes held skepticism. "You've been to them?"

"To many of them." Barlo nodded.

"Must be wild up there."

"Wild?" Barlo took the time to discern his meaning. "We all live in peace and harmony. That's essential."

"That probably lets us out," the sheriff observed.

"All things change."

"In time perhaps." The sheriff looked off into the darkness. "What was the shooting all about?"

Toby hesitated.

Tell him, urged Barlo.

"The vigilantes were chasing some Russians," he blurted. Sensing the sheriff's incredulity, he hastily explained what had happened. When he finished, the sheriff's eyes rested speculatively on Barlo's face. "What made you believe they were Russians?" he asked.

"I read their minds."

"You...read minds?"

"It's normal among my people," admitted Barlo.

"It ain't right." The sheriff shook his head slowly. "No man should be able to look into another man's mind."

"He doesn't, except in an emergency," Toby said hurriedly.

"That a fact?"

"We try not to," answered Barlo.

"What about the Russians?" asked Toby, trying to change the subject.

"I'll put out an alert," the sheriff promised. "Not that anyone will believe me."

"They're probably headed for Mexico, if they got away," Toby said darkly. "All but one. I saw him get shot."

"Then Cleator had better hope he was a Russian." His gaze lingered on the alien. "Guess I'd better take you in."

"Why?" cried Toby. "He hasn't broken any laws."

"'Cept maybe immigration...and vagrancy."

"That's silly!"

"Lots of laws are, son. Actually, I was thinking of his own safety -- what we call protective custody."

"I'm not greatly worried," the alien interrupted. "No?" The sheriff peered at him. "How about Toby? He could have gotten shot tonight. I don't want the same thing to happen again."

"That does worry me, of course."

"I can take care of myself," declared Toby.

"Sure, sure." The sheriff chuckled. "What would Gramp say if he knew what you were up to?"

"He knows."

"He does?" The sheriff cocked his head.

"He plays pinochle with Barlo."

"That a fact?" The sheriff switched his gaze to the alien. "Where'd you learn to play pinochle?"

"Toby's grandfather was kind enough to teach me," explained Barlo.

"The old coot! He's always lookin' for someone to beat."

"Gramp usually loses," offered Toby.

"That a fact?" This time the sheriff did appear surprised. He weighed the alien critically before continuing, "I still think you'd be safer with me."

"He's going to stay at our place." Toby spoke insistently, hoping to overrule the sheriff's objections.

"No." Barlo shook his head. "That could endanger your family."

"He's right," the sheriff agreed.

The alien lifted his head, his violet eyes suddenly unmoving. "They're coming," he said.

"The vigilantes?" Toby felt apprehensive.

"And the others, two or three. I can sense their thoughts. Lots of thoughts," he added. He looked around in the darkness, his small face thoughtful.

"If they're Russians, Cleator will go to Congress," answered the sheriff sourly. "You'd better hop in the back of the car, keep hidden till we see what it's all about." He stepped back and opened the rear door, closing it when the alien disappeared inside. Turning off the car lights, he doused his flashlight and returned to Toby's side. Together they peered into the darkness. In a short while they heard the unmistakable sounds of horses.

"Sharp critter," the sheriff murmured. "Reckon he's reading my mind?"

Toby shook his head. Shadows loomed at the edge of the grove, turned out onto the narrow road. The creak of leather came faintly through the still air. The sheriff remained as immobile as if carved of stone. Toby had the sensation of sitting on a bomb waiting for it to explode. Abruptly, the movement ceased and the night grew still. A beam shot out, pinning them in its harsh light.

"The sheriff and the kid," a hoarse voice exclaimed.

The sheriff turned on his flashlight, sweeping the beam slowly across the faces of the eight or nine men who flanked Cleator on either side. "Douse your lights," he snapped.

There was a brief hesitancy before they complied, Cleator last of all. The sheriff resumed his inspection before lowering the beam to the three men

on the road in front of them. Toby felt a shock. Two of the men, their hands tied, had faces smeared with blood, as were their jackets. Dazed and glassy-eyed, they appeared ready to fall. The third man, thin, with sullen eyes that he kept averted, stood a few paces apart from them. He didn't appear wounded. All three had their ankles roped together to limit the length of their strides.

"Russians, Sheriff." The sneering voice was Cleator's.

"That's for the law to decide," the sheriff observed.

"Decide what?" Cleator gestured disdainfully toward the sullen-eyed captive. "Ask that fellow. He says they are. He claims to be working for the FBI. Not that I'm taking any chances with him."

"Tell him about the rest of them, Colonel," a rider urged.

"Rest of them?" The sheriff eyed Cleator inquiringly.

"That's right," exclaimed Cleator. "The hills are swarming with Commies. We must have spotted two dozen of them tonight."

"Probably Army troops," the sheriff reflected. "Ever think of that?"

"The Army's not out tonight," Cleator said nastily. "We've had the valley under surveillance. Those boys like their comfort."

"Could be." The sheriff switched his beam to the vigilante leader. "I'll take 'em in."

"No you won't, Sheriff." Cleator hauled back on his reins, and his horse performed an intricate dance in the dust before settling down. "You don't grab the credit this time."

"What do you figure on doing with them?"

"Taking them to Ed's." He gestured toward the rider next to him. "I'm calling the FBI, delivering them personally."

"I'm the law, Cleator."

"Not this time."

The sheriff moved a few paces from Toby and dropped a hand to his holster. "Want to try me?"

"Hold it," a voice from the darkness crackled. "Don't anyone move." Startled, Toby jerked his head around. The night seemed moving again, and then he realized the movement was the silhouettes of helmeted figures. Suddenly they were all around them.

"The U.S. Army to the rescue," the sheriff drawled.

TEN

THE LIEUTENANT HAD A LEAN, hard face. In the glare of the flashlight beams it appeared bronzed, with high-set cheekbones, a humped nose, and dark eyes that held a hooded look. It was also an intelligent face. His gaze barely touched Toby and the sheriff before settling on the vigilante leader.

"Lower those weapons," he snapped.

Cleator drew himself up in the saddle. "These are dangerous men," he said, "spies and saboteurs."

"I said to lower those weapons." Sheepishly they obeyed, Cleator last of all. The lieutenant glared at him. "Your name?"

"Colonel Cleator." He gestured toward his companions. "These are my men."

"Colonel?"

"Troop One of the Vigilantes Against Communist Infiltration," Cleator explained.

"You're in a restricted area in violation of military regulations," the lieutenant rasped. "Keep those rifle barrels lowered. Sergeant?" He bawled into the darkness without moving his head.

"Yes, sir." One of the helmeted figures moved quickly forward.

"Have them dismount, collect their firearms."

"You can't do that," protested Cleator.

"Can and will." The lieutenant glanced at the sergeant. "Make certain they have no side arms." He walked past Toby and the sheriff to the squad car, shone his light inside, and stood very still. Toby felt his heart thump. The sheriff's face remained expressionless. For a long moment the lieutenant didn't move. Finally he turned back to look first at Toby, then at the older man. His face was absolutely blank.

"Your name?" he asked.

"Deputy Sheriff Ed Washburn."

"You're in a restricted area, Sheriff."

"I was keeping within regulations until I heard gunfire a bit ago. I came out to investigate."

"Who's the boy?"

"Toby Adam. He lives down the road a piece. I was visiting his folks when I heard the ruckus."

"You brought him with you?"

The sheriff shook his head reluctantly. "Toby was out in the field." The lieutenant's face was thoughtful. Toby had the wild hope that Barlo must have escaped from the other side of the car. Certainly the lieutenant's voice and expression gave no indication that he'd seen anything unusual. But how could he explain about being in the field? Everything was happening too fast. First the Russians, then the vigilantes, now the Army. And the sheriff knew about Barlo. That was all right, except that he'd have to make a report.

"Sergeant?" The lieutenant wheeled sharply. "Escort those men back to the compound immediately. Deliver them to the custody of the provost marshal."

"Yes, sir."

"How about our horses?" someone bawled.

"Sergeant, march them back. Assign men to lead the horses."

"You can't do that!" shouted Cleator.

The lieutenant disregarded him and turned back. "I'll have to return you to the compound, Sheriff. Both of you. I'll ride with you."

"Beats walkin'," the sheriff replied. "Will you require my side arms?"

The lieutenant's dark eyes flicked from the holster to the sheriff's square hands, to the badge, and back to the weathered face. "That won't be necessary," he said.

"Thank you," the sheriff answered gratefully. The lieutenant unhooked a miniaturized walkie-talkie from his belt, extended the antenna, and spoke briefly in some code jargon that Toby couldn't begin to fathom. Finished, he hooked the instrument to his belt, waiting while the sergeant completed his preparations. Toby noted that the soldiers checked the vigilantes for weapons as carefully as they did the Russians.

"What's going to happen?" he whispered.

"Nothing, son." The sheriff appeared completely relaxed.

Everything's all right. The sudden voice in Toby's mind startled him. Where are you?

In the sheriff's car.

Didn't the lieutenant see you? He tried to suppress his agitation.

He saw me.

Can't you get out the other side, get away?

It's better this way, answered Barlo.

But...Toby gazed perplexedly at the lieutenant. Nothing in his lean countenance indicated his thoughts. It was as if he'd looked into the back seat and found it empty. What would happen to Barlo now?

When the two columns of soldiers marched away with the vigilantes and Russians between them, Toby noticed that one had remained behind. Standing languidly off to one side, he cradled a short-barreled weapon. Toby had to

concede that the lieutenant took few chances. It was also a good reason for Barlo's not trying to escape.

The lieutenant asked, "What's that in your car, Sheriff?"

"That's my pet," blurted Toby. "I was looking for him when the Russians and vigilantes came."

"Pet?" The lieutenant gazed at him. Flustered, Toby glanced away from the dark eyes, not knowing what to say. The sheriff didn't volunteer an answer. Finally the lieutenant said, "It's just as well that I don't know."

"Amen," the sheriff agreed.

Waiting, Toby fidgeted, wondering what they would do when they got Barlo to the Army camp. One thing was certain; there would be no hope of escape. He should never have come out tonight, he thought dismally. If he hadn't, Barlo would still be safe in the barn. It was his fault; now he had to help Barlo get out of it. But how? As if sensing Toby's predicament, the sheriff placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Beautiful night," he remarked. He arched his face toward the stars.

The headlights of two vehicles came bouncing along the dusty road. The lieutenant signaled with his light. As they drew closer, Toby saw they were jeeps. Swinging in sharp circles, one drew up behind the squad car, the other in front. The soldier with the snub-barreled weapon climbed into the rear vehicle.

"Let's go," the lieutenant said.

The general, lean and graying, was clearly a field officer. It was evident in the taut lines of his face, in the skin toughened and discolored by sun and wind, in the erectness of posture. His cerulean-blue eyes appeared mild until they focused on an object of interest, at which moment they took on the sharpness of ice crystals. They were that way now as they scrutinized the alien.

There were just the four of them in the big pyramidal tent that served as the command post -- Toby, the general, the sheriff, and Barlo, the last appearing slight and insignificant in contrast to the others. His reddish, metallic garb held a curious gleam under the glare of the electric bulbs.

The few questions the general had asked up to now seemed innocuous enough -- mainly information to establish identities, what had taken them into the field at night, the events leading up to their detention by the lieutenant's patrol. They had been general rather than specific questions. Neither did he dwell on the Russians or vigilantes, nor give any indication of interest in them. Yet Toby sensed what the general was doing; he was sizing up the alien. Although the sheriff had rubbed his jaw when Toby had identified the alien as a pet, the general had given no indication that he suspected otherwise.

But all that was past now, Toby knew. The sudden change in the general's demeanor, his hunching forward in his chair and the way his cerulean-blue eyes summed up the scene, told him that the moment of reckoning had come. Suddenly uncomfortable, he realized that the general not only hadn't been fooled but was quite unlikely to be. The general's gaze settled on his face.

"What is the name of your pet?" he enquired. "You didn't say."

"B-Barlo," Toby stuttered.

"That's quite an unusual name."

"Well, I like it."

"It's all right, Toby," said Barlo suddenly. In the quiet of the tent, his high-pitched voice held a reedy tone. Toby distinctly heard his heart thump. His eyes traveled from the alien to the general. To his surprise the latter's face, aside from its studied appearance, portrayed no emotion whatever. The general had known! But how?

Metal fragments from the pod. The alien's words came as a silent aside.

The general shifted his gaze to the sheriff, let it linger briefly on the latter's face before saying, "I'm sorry for your inconvenience. If you'll step outside, my aide will see to it that you're comfortable."

"Why does he have to go?" cried Toby. He felt worry assail him anew.

"Reckon it's a matter of security," answered the sheriff.

"Yes, certainly." The general nodded. "If you'll take the young man with you."

"I won't go," protested Toby. "Not without Barlo."

"Reckon you'd better, son," the sheriff adjured softly.

"I won't." He stared defiantly at the general. The chill blue eyes that returned his gaze were deep in thought. But Barlo knew what the general was thinking! Why didn't he tell him?

"You'll have to go," the general said finally. "You won't have to worry about your friend."

"You can't make me go!" he shouted. Casting a frantic look at Barlo, he was caught by a sudden thought and added, "He won't talk unless I'm with him."

"Oh?" The general glanced inquiringly at the sheriff, who shrugged helplessly, then returned his gaze to the boy. For a moment he held his question, letting the tension mount inside Toby until he felt that he'd burst. Finally he asked, "Why is that?"

"Well..." Toby struggled with his thoughts. "He just won't," he ended. The general turned his attention to the alien. The large violet eyes returned his look steadily.

"I would prefer that he remain," said Barlo.

The sheriff fought to suppress a smile. "I'll just mosey outside," he volunteered.

"If you would." The general nodded, waiting until the sheriff had departed before returning his gaze to the boy. Toby fancied he caught the slightest hint of a passing twinkle in the other's eyes. The general asked, "Why are you so insistent on staying?"

"I'm the only friend he's got," he explained desperately. "Well, aside from Gramp and Linda and the sheriff."

"Four friends?" The general arched his brows. "He's quite fortunate."

"We're the fortunate ones," Toby exclaimed.

Thank you, Toby, Barlo said.

"However" -- the general's face grew severe -- "problems of national security possibly are involved."

"I don't care about that. I..."

"You should," the general reprimanded sharply.

Toby flushed. "I wouldn't say anything." He felt hot and cold all over and his hands trembled as he stared beseechingly at the figure in the field fatigued with the two stars on each shoulder. He mustered the courage to ask, "What do you want with Barlo? He hasn't harmed anyone."

"There are certain security measures..."

"Of course," the alien cut in suddenly. The general sighed and leaned back. The expression that momentarily flickered across his face gave Toby renewed hope. Clearly the general hadn't faced this kind of situation before and didn't quite know how to cope with it.

He's going to let you stay, Barlo informed Toby.

I'm glad for that. Toby wanted to cast a sidelong glance at his companion but was afraid to. The general hunched forward, eyeing the alien as if searching for some hidden clue, some key to his being. Toby found himself wishing he could read the general's thoughts. A horsefly buzzed noisily above their heads. The general brought his fingers together to form a steeple.

Abruptly he asked, "You're from beyond the solar system, aren't you?"

"Far beyond." Barlo nodded gravely.

"From where?"

"My planet is named Raamz."

"And your star?"

"Zaree. It's in the direction of the constellation you know as Andromeda."

"Ah!"

"A lovely star, dusky red and cool. Not that your own sun is less pleasing. It's all a matter of adaptation."

Watching the general's face, Toby was intrigued by its lack of expression, even though he realized that inwardly the general must be caught in turmoil. To realize suddenly that one's own race was not alone in the universe was startling enough; but to realize that one's race was relatively primitive in the grand scheme of things was quite something else. He had to marvel at the general's composure.

The general asked, "Why did you come to Earth?"

Barlo explained about the shipwreck, how he'd reached Earth in the lifeboat, the events since. The general listened stoically. When he finished, the general asked, "You have been on Earth just four days, never before?"

"Never before," answered Barlo. "If that seems strange, consider that our galaxy holds a billion suns, more than a tenth of which have planets. As you can readily understand, the galaxy is awesome even to us. We have scarcely touched it."

"And in four days you learned our language?" The question held a note of challenge.

"Languages come rather naturally."

"Apparently. Have any other of your people ever been to Earth?"

"Not unless it was during some age of the remote past," answered Barlo. "I have never known of such an account."

The general glanced around restlessly while framing his next question. Toby held his breath, hoping the subject of telepathy wouldn't arise. Although Barlo hadn't attempted to conceal the trait from Gramp, Linda, or the sheriff, he'd sidestepped it rather neatly in the matter of language. Yet if the question came up, Barlo wouldn't deny it; Toby knew that instinctively. Finally the general asked another question, and then another and another. Circuitously, or so Toby thought, he was drawing quite a comprehensive picture of the alien's civilization, with the major emphasis on its technology. His face took on an incredulous expression when Barlo informed him that none of the major civilizations maintained armed forces but only units concerned with rescue or to give aid in time of disaster. The general's questions regarding transit times were related, Toby was certain, to the star drive, although he never referred directly to it. Did Barlo realize his intent? Toby felt certain that he did. Yet there was no evasion in Barlo's answers. Once Barlo explained that as a planetary archeologist, he had only a general knowledge of the big Zemm star ships.

"Generalities, then," the general encouraged.

At times Barlo spoke slowly as he translated certain concepts into English, sprinkling them with mathematical notations. Toby found himself completely lost when Barlo spoke of such things as Q space and Z time and zones of transition. But then, he suspected, so did the general. Not that it mattered, he reflected, for almost certainly every word was being taped. Earth's scientists soon enough would dissect the entire conversation word by word, evaluate the precise meaning of each, probe for clues that might point mankind toward the stars. But he was equally certain that the attempt was doomed to failure and that Barlo knew it. This realization brought a pang. Barlo was speaking almost casually of things that almost certainly lay many thousands of years in mankind's future. But they couldn't wait that long, he thought fiercely. Suddenly he could understand how the general, the men above him, must ache for the alien's secret: the star drive!

Finally the general rose. Toby was surprised to see that his lean face under the glow of the harsh field lamp appeared slack, all but defeated. Only a scant hour or so before, when he'd entered the tent with Barlo and the sheriff, that same face had held the strength of granite. Strength and confidence. But then the general had been a figure of high rank and prestige in what was the most powerful military force on the face of the planet. And now? Now he knew that his proud army was a pitiable thing in the true measure of power. Toby felt sorry for him.

"It will be necessary to detain you a few days, possibly a week," the general said.

"A week?" Toby was aghast. "What of my folks?"

The general smiled slightly. "My aide has contacted your grandfather. He believed you might enjoy the experience."

"But why are you keeping us?"

"Some men are coming from Washington to interview your friend." The general eyed him speculatively. "And you say he won't speak unless in your presence."

"He won't," Toby declared doggedly.

"So it is necessary that you remain with us," the general said. He avoided the large violet eyes. He didn't say that he was making every effort to conceal the story from the press, both in the belief that it might panic the nation and in the fear that foreign powers might make a concerted effort to obtain the ship's secret. Barlo told Toby of that later. But he did say that it had been decided not to move Barlo until safe quarters could be provided in another area. Barlo, although he wasn't told, had suddenly become top secret. So had Toby, the sheriff, and undoubtedly the five Russians. If the general felt any discomfiture over his superiors' plans, he didn't reveal it.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to remain with you very long," Barlo advised quietly.

"No?" The general suddenly was alert.

"A ship is coming to take me from your planet."

The general asked sharply, "How do you know?"

"Through the search methods my people employ."

"How would they know where to find you?"

"Signals have been sent out to..."

"You have a device?" the general interrupted.

"Yes, but not with me."

"Where?"

"In orbit." Barlo told about the capsule and a device on a nearby knoll that would guide the rescue ship to him.

The general gripped the edge of his desk and leaned forward, his knuckles white under the lamplight. "How soon would you say?"

"Within another few nights."

"Night?"

"We are nocturnal," explained Barlo. "We tend to avoid the direct light of the hotter suns."

"Yes, of course." The general released his grip on the desk and drummed his fingers in a rapid tattoo. "What kind of ship will they send down?"

"A scout pod much like the one I arrived in."

"And the mother ship?"

"Will remain in the upper atmosphere. That is the usual procedure." In the silence that followed, Toby could sense the general's mind working furiously. If the starship came -- and departed -- so would the hope of a star drive; man would remain alone on his small island in space. It was all but written across the general's suddenly puckered countenance.

The general raised his eyes. "And if you fail to meet it?"

"If I'm not there?" The violet eyes regarded him steadily.

"If you are delayed," explained the general.

"Then my people won't come."

"Would they know whether or not you were on the knoll?"

"They would know."

"I see." The general spoke as if in a soliloquy. Walking slowly to the entrance of the tent, he parted the flaps and tilted his face to the sky.

In silence he stared at the stars.

To Toby's dismay, Barlo was quartered separately. His protest was silenced by the alien. "It's all right," counseled Barlo.

Toby found himself sharing a pyramidal tent with the sheriff, who sprang up from his cot to greet him. "Looks like we're soldiers for a while," he bantered.

"Yeah." Toby felt despondent.

"Enjoy yourself," advised the sheriff. "Roll with it."

"Yeah," he repeated, thinking he'd messed everything up. He should have gotten Barlo to a safe place the first day, before the valley had become a trap, but hadn't the faintest idea of how he might have achieved it.

The sheriff kept up a running patter intended to cheer him, but he noticed that the sheriff never once mentioned the general or the conversation that had followed the sheriff's departure. Did the sheriff believe the tent was bugged, or was it because of the national security aspects the general had warned of? Still, the sheriff had always been closemouthed when it came to "the law business," as he termed it. Toby could understand that.

National security? He let the words run through his mind. His first reaction, that they had seized Barlo to obtain information which might lead to the star drive, gave way to the realization that the situation was far more complex than that. He knew that Barlo's race was peaceful, but the government didn't know it. And he knew that Barlo had come to Earth as a result of the disaster which had struck the big Zemm liner, but the government didn't know it. Because it didn't, it had to be absolutely certain that Barlo was what he claimed to be, that his race was as peaceful as he said it was.

That was one aspect. Another was the possibility that Barlo possessed far more technical information on the star drive than he'd admitted. If so, every major government on Earth would want that information. Look how quickly the Russians had gotten agents into Eklund Valley. That had shocked him. Worse, two of the agents still were at large, perhaps more. He was thankful that Cleator had claimed the credit for identifying the Russians rather than attributing the source to him. If he had, the interrogation would have been relentless -- in the end would have led to the big question of how Barlo had known that the agents were Russian. That would have unleashed the telepathy bit. Not that it wouldn't come out yet.

He could see other ramifications too. One dealt with the readiness of Earth to become involved suddenly with an interstellar technology, with the diverse races that peopled the stars. A lot of people would eagerly welcome it, but many more would be cautious. It could cause tremendous political and economic upheavals, a fact that the government would weigh carefully.

After the lights went out and the sheriff was asleep, he concentrated on Barlo, hoping that the other was touching his mind. Are you all right?

I'm all right. The response was immediate. Something like a chuckle touched Toby's mind. Private accommodations complete with doormen. Toby translated that to mean guards.

What do you think they might do? he asked worriedly.

They're doing what they have to do, Toby.

What do you mean by that?

A stranger from a distant star, the possible opening of the universe...Barlo fell silent.

I suppose, Toby answered disconsolately. They talked for a while longer before Barlo, cautioning Toby to get some sleep, withdrew from his mind.

Later, on the verge of slumber, he fancied he heard a small voice say, The stars aren't as far as you believe, Toby.

And then he slept.

ELEVEN

United Press International
Washington, D.C., July 31, 1974

WASHINGTON, JULY 31 (UPI) -- U.S. Army troops engaged in war games called suddenly in Eklund Valley near San Diego have captured three men described as Russian agents, according to a source high in government circles. The capture allegedly occurred close to the site where a strange spacecraft reportedly was destroyed last week. Both the President's press aide and the Pentagon have declined to comment.

Meanwhile, new rumors swept the capital that the spacecraft came from another planet. A top NASA official, who declined the use of his name, said he understood that the vehicle was "of alien origin." Pressed for details, he defined "alien" as meaning "not of Earth." He refused to comment further.

In related news, a Pentagon spokesman denied that the nation was on "red alert," the instant combat readiness of all military forces. Red alert presupposes the imminent danger of an enemy attack. He stated that if the war games had been held in Brown County, Wisconsin, they wouldn't have made page 33. "But they happened to choose Eklund Valley," he said.

A White House spokesman admitted that the Executive Committee of the National Security Council had been called into session but described the meeting as routine.

Congressman Leonard Wheelhart (Rep. Cal.) told the press that the people must remain calm. "We can't afford hysteria in this grave hour of crisis," he said. He refused to elaborate on...

Crisis was in the air.

The President felt it in the smoke-filled room. Warily he studied the haggard faces around the long table. ExComm -- the Executive Committee of the National Security Council -- had been in almost continuous session since the electrifying news that the destruction of the strange spacecraft had left a nuclear footprint. And now a strange creature from the vessel had been apprehended; and three alleged Russian spies! The truth of the latter allegation appeared all but certain, for the FBI had identified one of the three as a double agent.

But a creature from another star! A reddish star that lay somewhere in the direction of the Andromeda constellation, Mirach, his science adviser had deduced. More than eighty light-years away! A creature who in four short days -- perhaps sooner! -- had mastered the English language, had reported not only the existence of his own race but of scores of advanced races among the stars. Incredible! He was moved by the wonder of it.

He looked again at the photograph dispatched by radio. The almost wizened face with its button nose and large solemn eyes told him little, yet he had to admit that the face fitted the general's initial reports of his impressions of the creature. "Gentle" was the word he'd used. Coming from a field officer of General Brockler's reputation, that was something.

But it was a crisis, a very real one. For a moment, watching the strained faces, listening to the heated debate, he felt a deep sense of history. Berlin, Cuba, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, the China crisis --

his predecessors had known such anguished days. Because they had steered wisely, the nation still lived. He prayed to God to give him wisdom. Yet, at best, he had but a narrow path to tread; the choices were few.

Perhaps Carl Barrett's contention that they had to plan for the worst was right. He looked at the angular face of his CIA director. How could they know -- how could anyone know -- the true motivation behind the alien's advent? A shipwreck in space? Or had he come to assess our strength? Chance visitor or forerunner? Yet he sensed instinctively that there was a far deeper crisis. The real crisis was that this was man's initial contact with an intelligent being from beyond the solar system. A stellar being! In a sense, a confrontation. What they did today, the decisions he made, could have a profound effect on Earth's future. Nothing in the books had prepared them for that. He had to tread cautiously.

But Barrett and General LeRoy Kalmer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, were right; nothing could be taken for granted. Absolutely nothing. Yet if Earth had everything to lose, it also had everything to gain. That was the dilemma.

His eyes took in the stained coffee cups, the littered ash trays, the scattered papers -- moved to the pink face of Secretary of State Nelson Chadwick III, who was saying, "We appear to be at an impasse."

"We have been all day," snapped Defense Secretary Dale Wharton. His voice held a flash of temper.

"We have to explore..."

"We have but three options," broke in Attorney General Robert Whitney. His strident voice overrode the others. "One: Hold the creature, interrogate him to the fullest extent possible. take a chance that the rescue ship -- as he says -- won't come down. Two: Allow him to go to the hill, in which case the ship might pick him up and depart immediately." He tolled each point with a sharp hand movement. "Three: Allow him to go to the hill, be prepared to detain the ship if it lands, see what it is that we're confronted with. I personally favor the third choice," he added.

"If such a ship lands, I want a ring of steel around it," growled General Kalmer.

"We could tragically throw away the opportunity of establishing a beneficial contact through an ill-planned action," the Secretary of State argued. "Here, tonight, we are speaking for generations yet to come. We can't lightly risk losing such a golden opportunity."

"What opportunity?" rasped General Kalmer.

"Cultural, economic, scientific; we can't assess that yet."

"Opposed," the Attorney General stated. He slapped the table. The Defense Secretary, a balding, bulky man with a reputation built on industrial production, nodded agreement. The President's security aide and science adviser appeared unhappy.

The Secretary of State's voice grew plaintive. "There's so much we don't know."

"You can say that again," General Kalmer snapped caustically.

"Like what, LeRoy?"

"Our latest intelligence reports indicate that it was the creature who identified the Russians. How did he know?"

"You're saying?"

"There's too much about that creature that we don't know."

"Perhaps amicable relations would clear that up," suggested the State Secretary.

The President glanced at his watch. He'd heard each argument a hundred times. The only trouble was that no single argument was either provable or disprovable. There were no data, no hard and fast facts. But Kalmer's question was pertinent. How had the alien -- as Riordan had termed him -- known of the Russian agents? That question, as yet unanswerable, was perturbing.

But he had to think beyond the alien, had to assess their own response to whatever it was that they'd be responding to. He realized that the general's arguments and the arguments of those who sided with him were motivated in part by the possibility of obtaining the secret of the ship's propulsion system, of opening the galaxy to mankind (which he translated to mean America). Still, that was a cogent argument. As it was, Earth lay naked before the universe.

The President filled his water glass from a silver decanter. What would be the verdict of history? A word, a nod of his head, an agreement -- of such things was history made. But he couldn't afford a mistake; the future couldn't afford it. Perhaps he had one last chance before the inevitable decision was made.

An aide entered hurriedly, bending to whisper in his ear. The President straightened. A rustle ran through the room, and suddenly it grew quiet. He looked at the faces around the long table.

"Gentlemen, Nelson" -- he inclined his head toward his Secretary of State -- "has fairly cited our predicament. We've reached an impasse simply because we lack the data to make a clear-cut decision." He paused.

"And no time to get it," someone murmured.

The President nodded. "Accordingly, I've requested information from another source. We have a visitor from San Diego."

"The alien?" a shocked voice asked.

"A friend of the alien." The President smiled slightly. "As I understand it, someone quite close to him."

"A friend?" General Kalmer frowned. The President didn't answer but turned toward the door. The stillness came back, heavy and expectant. The blue eyes of Secretary of State Nelson Chadwick III held a faint hope. The Attorney General pursed his lips skeptically.

The aide returned with a youth at his side -- a youth dressed in his Sunday best, his shoes gleaming, his dark hair rumpled where he'd run his fingers nervously through it. His face, although not frightened, was tense with anxiety.

The President rose. There was the hasty movement of chairs as the others followed suit. The aide made a quick introduction.

"Mr. President..." Toby gulped, struggling to remember the words he'd been coached to say. Somehow they seemed stuck in his throat.

The President stepped forward and extended a hand. "Toby Adam, we're glad you're here, young man."

"Thank you, sir," he stuttered.

"Like riding in a bomber?"

"Yes, sir, it was great." He felt his tension subside.

The President turned. "Gentlemen, Toby Adam from San Diego." He smiled whimsically. "Toby has the great honor of being the first person on Earth to greet the newcomer from the stars." Introducing each member, he gestured Toby to a chair which an aide had drawn up alongside his own. Toby sat gingerly and glanced nervously around. He'd recognized a few of the faces from photos; others appeared vaguely familiar, still others quite strange.

"We've been discussing your friend," observed the President. His eyes were expectant.

"Barlo," he blurted. "His name is Barlo."

"Like him?"

"Yes, sir, real well. So do Gramp and Linda and the sheriff."

"The sheriff?"

"Deputy Sheriff Ed Washburn," explained Toby. "He comes over to play pinochle with Gramp. He helped us when the Russians were trying to catch us."

"Ah, yes, the general mentioned that." The President's face grew quizzical. "I understand you met your friend shortly after his ship reached

Earth?"

"Yes, sir." He didn't volunteer more.

"He was staying in your barn?"

"Yes, sir, or was until the vigilantes came, then I had him hide in another barn."

"The reports mentioned that."

"They thought he was a Russian spy." Someone at the table chuckled. Toby saw the President stifle a smile and all at once felt better. The President was a lot like Gramp, only not so old.

"I understand you taught him our language?"

"Well, he learned it from me."

"In four days?"

"He's...he's telepathic," Toby blurted.

"Telepathic?" General Kalmer was on his feet. "He reads minds, is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, sir." Toby felt flustered.

"And he was talking to General Brockler? Good Lord, he probably knows half our defense secrets!"

"I don't think so," protested Toby.

"How do you know?"

"He doesn't read everyone's mind -- only in case of emergency or danger. He told me so."

"Told you so?" the Defense Secretary intoned. His face was frosty.

"Gentlemen," the President rebuked. When the silence returned, he asked Toby, "Why didn't you tell the general that your friend was telepathic?"

"He didn't ask, but Gramp and the sheriff and Linda know all about it." He had another thought. "Besides, I know all about Barlo."

"You do?"

"He let me look into his mind."

"He let you...look into his mind?"

"He projects his thoughts into my mind, but it's the same thing," explained Toby. "I saw a lot of things on his world. It's called Raamz. And on other worlds," he added.

"Saw?"

"Pictures, like looking at television, only the screen was in my mind." He told of his visions of the tall pink buildings jutting against the dusky red sun, of the aircars soaring through a darkened sky, of planets that were new with life, of others that were dying. He told, too, how he'd pierced the black night through Barlo's nocturnal vision. "The blackness turned to gray, like the onset of dusk," he finished.

"That's not the same as telepathy," the Attorney General accused.

"He said it wasn't."

"The alien? He made you see exactly what he wanted you to see!"

Toby looked at him, thinking that Linda had said exactly the same thing. Not knowing how to answer, he remained quiet.

"So we don't know anything about his world at all," the Attorney General pursued. "We know only what he wanted us to know."

"I don't think that's it at all," Toby flared.

"How would you know?" demanded the Defense Secretary.

"Well, you get a feeling about people." He groped for words. "It's just something you know."

"Just something you know," intoned the Attorney General. He exchanged significant glances with the Defense Secretary.

"Gentlemen!" The President looked at Toby as if to phrase the inquiry in a different manner but instead asked, "Did he mention anything about his government or the governments of other worlds?"

"Not exactly." Toby wrinkled his face. "He told the sheriff that each

sun, each planet, each race was different but that all the races lived in peace and harmony."

"Ah!" the Secretary of State exclaimed.

"He said it was necessary."

"Why did he tell the sheriff that?" asked the President.

"The sheriff asked him what it was like out there."

"Mr. President?" asked General Kalmer suddenly. "May I ask a question?"

"Go ahead, General."

"What kind of armed forces do they have? Did he say?"

"I don't believe they have any." Toby told about the disaster and rescue units. "I think that's all they have, but he did say they hadn't had an interstellar war for more than a million years."

"That's exactly what I would expect him to say." The general smiled coldly. "But we know he carries weapons."

"Weapons?" Toby stared blankly at him.

"Some sort of a ray gun. He's started two fires that we know of."

"Oh, that." Toby explained how the alien hadn't used the rays until the dogs were almost on him, then had burned the grass to stop them but had been careful not to hit them. "He said that no life should die violently," he explained.

General Kalmer's eyes seemed to bore right through him, as did the eyes of the Defense Secretary and the Attorney General. Toby thought it clear that they were afraid of Barlo, but they also wanted the star drive. It was more what he sensed than what they'd said. But the Secretary of State didn't think that way at all. Neither did the President. He drew hope from that. The President mainly listened as if weighing each morsel, but his eyes were kind.

He felt better as the conversation went on. There was even a small chuckle when he told how Gramp and Barlo had played pinochle under the glare of the lamp in the hayloft. There were scores of questions, many of which he recognized as rephrasings of earlier ones. He tried to answer them as clearly as he could. He wished they would bring Barlo here, talk with him. But he knew they wouldn't, not since they'd learned that Barlo was telepathic. That had really scared the general.

Finally the President rose and thanked him. An aide entered to escort him from the room. His last view, as he glanced back from the doorway, was of the President. He stood tall and thoughtful, his eyes for the moment looking at nothingness. Toby had the wild impression that the President was all alone in the big smoke-filled room.

He wondered what the President was thinking.

"If but one race of the thousands allegedly up there is hostile, we could be in serious trouble," declared General Kalmer. He thumped the table to emphasize the point.

"Correct," the Defense Secretary snapped. "I'm not willing to accept that shipwreck story. It's quite likely the creature's appearance on Earth is some sort of a psychological gambit, perhaps to test our reaction."

"It's a matter of viewpoint," declared the Secretary of State. His eyes sought the support of the Secretary of the Treasury. "I firmly believe..."

The President listened idly, part of his mind on the youth's judgment of the alien. Could the perceptions of youth be sharper and more accurate than those of adults? Certainly their judgment wasn't as clouded by the myriad of prejudices and preconceptions that most adults were prone to erect in defense of their own particular views -- views that all too often merely served as barricades against anything that might assault their sense of security and well-being. But was the youth's judgment sufficiently penetrative? It was extremely unlikely that he could assess, or even suspect, the many reasons the alien might have come to Earth. Also, he would be far more likely to take the

alien at face value than, say, any of the men here tonight. With the possible exception of the Secretary of State, he amended.

His eyes roved the table. The general's job was to defend; no one could argue that point. By expecting the worst, the general would be prepared for the worst, and that was as it should be. As such, he had to stand at one wing of the balance. So did the Defense Secretary. But that was why they had counterbalances. If the general represented one extreme, the Secretary of State certainly represented the other. Moderation? He smiled whimsically. To both extremes the middle course represented a dangerous compromise. Yet it was moderation that had kept the world intact as it spun through the dangerous web of history. Ironically, history remembered its extremists but seldom others. Or did that reflect the cynicism of his time?

He let his mind wander. He could remember -- oh, how many years ago! -- when he had been a youth much like Toby Adam. How much simpler the world had seemed then; how much clearer. Then slowly, with maturity and experience, the clarity had lessened, for a man no longer was simply a man, to be judged as such, but was a being of purpose, guile, whimsy -- a two dimensional man clothed in a cloak of four-dimensional attributes. All too often a man was judged by his words rather than his deeds, or by how well he agreed with the person making the judgment. The eye sought to see the unseeable rather than what was to be seen. Wisdom had been called the ability to ride the vanguard of public opinion. Or was that, too, cynicism?

But there had been something extremely refreshing about young Toby Adam, perhaps because he had judged the alien without looking for a motive. Could that be it? Perhaps the youth had seen the alien as he really was rather than as what he represented in the minds of the rest of them. Possibly the youth understood the alien far better than all the experts lumped together who had been dissecting "the creature from Mirach," as his science adviser had tabbed him.

He raised his eyes to the littered table, the haggard faces. He listened again to the often querulous, often beseeching voices, yet in reality scarcely heard them. They were like rain on the roof. It was often that way, he reflected, once he had reached a decision. Although in reaching it he had balanced the arguments in his conscious mind -- weighing, pitting one against the other, extrapolating each to its ultimate significance and meaning -- the final decision always seemed to well from deep in his subconscious, fashioned by what crucible he couldn't hope to guess. It was that way now.

"Gentlemen!" He leaned forward and rapped the table sharply.

The room grew still.

Igor Kuznetsov, alias William Clayton, lay quietly alongside the agent Conrad in the dense hillside brush that overlooked the sprawling Army encampment. Despite the shade afforded by the mesquite, the heat of the day had become all but intolerable. Sounds from the camp below drifted up through the still air.

Kuznetsov's thoughts were fatalistic, yet determined. Following the capture of their three companions by the vigilantes, he and Conrad had managed to follow the boy on his return across the field. From a safe distance they'd witnessed the scene between the boy and the officer who had arrived fortuitously -- had seen the strange figure in the reddish garb. Creeping closer, Kuznetsov had glimpsed the small face with the large violet eyes, immediately had realized that this must be the creature from another star.

Kidnap him or kill him -- his instructions had been clear, but the top priority had been in seizing the alien. If he could kill the officer...With that in mind he and Conrad had been creeping closer, when suddenly they'd heard the movement of horses. An instant later the vigilantes had appeared, and within moments an Army patrol had enclosed the entire group. Kuznetsov

shuddered at his close escape.

Before withdrawing he'd learned one startling fact: David Harper, whose true name he'd never known, was a double agent. Undoubtedly, by now the FBI knew the names and activities of every member of the apparatus.

When finally the soldiers had marched away with their prisoners and the two jeeps had escorted the squad car back toward the Army encampment, he and Conrad had hurriedly returned to San Diego. Before the night had scarcely begun, he was once again closeted with his superior. He'd accepted his new orders stoically but with a pang at the knowledge that, for him, the road to Moscow was forever closed.

Now, lying with Conrad in the underbrush, his instructions were clear: Kill the alien! This time both carried the paraphernalia they might need, including sharpshooter rifles equipped with nightscopes. Sooner or later the creature from the stars would be brought into clear view, if only to be taken to one of the helicopters for transportation to another area. But they couldn't fire prematurely, couldn't take a chance on missing. Kuznetsov gripped his rifle determinedly.

"How do you know he's still in the Army camp?" Conrad had asked earlier.

"He is." He'd answered with assurance, for Luce had stated that the creature would remain there for the time being. And Luce had known. It was the kind of thing Luce would know, for his lines of information, devious and far-reaching, came down through a network that penetrated the most sensitive areas of government.

Kuznetsov had no illusions regarding what might happen when they killed the alien; They would get short shrift. Conrad knew it, too. But it was for the Party; they both understood that. It was the creed by which they lived and would die. There was but one thing to be dreaded: failure. But they wouldn't fail. Gazing down at the Army encampment, Kuznetsov felt the steady beat of his heart -- felt secure in the knowledge that, after all, he was one of the fortunate ones. By a single shot he could change the course of history.

That was power!

TWELVE

Los Angeles Times
Los Angeles, California, August 2, 1974

DOD OFFICIAL CALLS WAR GAMES IN EKLUND VALLEY "ROUTINE"

WASHINGTON, AUG. 1 (AP) -- Amid wild rumors of alien spaceships, extraterrestrial creatures and Russian spies, war games continued today unabated in Eklund Valley near San Diego, California, where the excitement began with flying saucer reports and a spy scare one week ago. A giant ape with a ray gun was also reported at the time.

One rumor that appears founded on fact is that three Russian agents were apprehended in the valley. A Defense Department spokesman said, "Russia always sends agents to observe our war games." He cited the large number of Russian submarines that regularly frequent our coasts and the constant infringement of our air space in the far north. He told reporters that the present war games were "strictly routine."

Other reputable government observers remain unconvinced that the entire story has been told. They point out that metal fragments found at the scene of the spaceship's alleged destruction were reliably reported to have come from beyond the solar system.

A scientist high in government councils told the press that "the entire story will be made public within a few days." He refused to state whether he

was speaking of extraterrestrials, spaceships or Russian spies.

On other fronts...

The general got his ring of steel.

The President had agreed that it should be there but had insisted that it be placed as inconspicuously as possible while still being able to cover the low hill where the alien had indicated the rescue craft would land. In good conscience he couldn't have done otherwise, for no one could be certain of the alien's true thoughts or that they represented those of his race. The knowledge that the alien was telepathic had shaken them all.

The ring of steel consisted of a number of heavy tanks hidden under heaps of brush on all sides of the hill. Similarly camouflaged mortar batteries also covered the site. And when darkness shrouded the hill, several battalions of specially armed troops were slated to move up the slopes to the immediate vicinity of the landing. Photographic units capable of night operations would record the scene. There was also the usual proliferation of public information officers. For good measure, several squadrons of supersonic jets ready for instant takeoff waited on the strip at George Air Force Base, but only a few flight minutes away.

But the Secretary of State had also had his say. The ship was to be met officially by the Under Secretary of State and a number of aides (two of whom were with the CIA). Despite the Secretary's protest, the official party also included General Brockler, who had served as the alien's host during his stay at the Army encampment. General Kalmer had been adamant on his inclusion.

The Under Secretary was to welcome the visitors, extend the official hand of friendship, and invite their leaders to Washington, where, hopefully, the way could be paved for the future exchange of ambassadors.

The alien had made no comment when apprised of the preparations with regard to the Under Secretary's role. Instead, he had asked to be accompanied to the rendezvous by Toby, Gramp, Linda, and the deputy sheriff. "They are my friends," he'd explained. That was how matters stood when, several days later, he'd quietly announced that the rescue ship would land that night.

Now, shortly after the onset of darkness, Toby and Gramp flanked the alien as they started up the hill. Linda and the sheriff followed close behind. They walked slowly, in silence, as if each were aware of the solemnity of the moment. Toby sensed it to be a moment of happiness, for Barlo would be returning to his people; a moment of sadness, for he was losing a friend. He wondered if Barlo would feel the separation as keenly as he.

Ahead, silhouetted against the sky, he saw the Under Secretary and his group waiting. Their figures were still, huddled close, and for some reason he fancied they were watching the first stars of night. Although he saw no other sign of life, he had the uneasy impression of being watched. Straining to see into the darkness, he perceived only the ghostly blobs of bushes, the occasional whiteness of shale outcrops. The distant chirrup of crickets floated in the still air. Occasionally he heard a soft murmur from Linda or the sheriff.

He was thankful for the solitude. The press and broadcasting media had broken the story that morning -- a garbled account to the effect that the strange spacecraft which reportedly had landed in a valley east of San Diego more than a week before and which allegedly had been destroyed through some nuclear means had in reality come from the stars. The story of the giant gorilla with the ray gun had been resurrected; so had the stories of Russian spies.

The President's discomfited Press Secretary had admitted only that an official investigation was being made. He'd refused to comment when asked if there was any relationship between the alleged spacecraft and the Army maneuvers being held in the area. The Pentagon remained mum. But the news

media, in highly distorted versions, had clamored the story all day.

Since then the traffic had been almost bumper to bumper on Interstate 8. Now the headlights formed a long glistening swath as the vehicles were kept moving by Army patrols. Toby dreaded to think of what might happen if the cars were allowed to stop.

The ship will be coming soon. The telepathic words brought back his attention. He glanced at Barlo's slight figure, at the large violet eyes agleam in the night.

I'm glad for you, but I'm awful sorry that you're going, he answered. It is a lovely planet.

Except for our sun; you didn't like that.

The nights are quite pleasant, countered Barlo. His step faltered, and Toby saw his head jerk around abruptly.

What is it? he asked worriedly.

Danger!

The soldiers?

No, the soldiers are all around us. It's others.

Who? Toby asked urgently. A sense of dread assailed him.

I can't isolate the source. The mind-thought is like a wave. But I know...Yes it's two people.

Who? he repeated desperately.

The Russians -- the men I sensed before.

Russians! He was appalled.

The man named Igor Kuznetsov and another, Conrad. They've moved up the slope with the soldiers. They intend to kill me.

I'll tell the sheriff!

No!

But...

I was speaking of their intent, interrupted Barlo. I'm quite certain I'm safe.

You can't take the chance, Toby protested.

I'll have to leave more abruptly than I'd planned, answered Barlo. He turned his head toward Toby, his violet eyes enormous in the night. Listen closely, he commanded. He began talking about Earth and its future. Earth was not yet ready for the stars -- that was the gist of what he had to say. Toby felt a great sorrow. Suddenly the stars seemed infinitely far away.

Listen closely, the alien commanded again. His words flowed like a stream through Toby's mind. Toby's initial amazement gave way to wonder, elation, and finally humility. Abruptly the voice in his brain fell silent, and again there was only the night, the shadowy figures of his companions.

The Russians? he asked. When Barlo didn't answer, Toby's eyes swept the darkness. He saw only the blobs of bushes and the white of shale, heard only the occasional sound of insect wings. It was all but inconceivable that soldiers were all around them -- that near them were two Russians intent on killing Barlo. He thought it must be a wild dream.

He looked ahead. The Under Secretary's group had turned to await their arrival. He recognized the general's tall figure standing slightly apart from the others. As they drew closer, the Under Secretary detached himself from the group and came toward them.

"Ah, you are here." He paused as if not knowing quite what to say, then added nervously, "You know the others, of course."

The alien nodded. He'd talked with the entire group earlier in the day. Toby looked at the general, who stood ramrod-stiff, his gaze on Barlo. In comparison, the alien's figure resembled that of a very small child.

Toby glanced at Linda. Although her face was but a faint blur in the darkness, he sensed her encouraging smile. Someone ought to know about the Russians, he thought desperately. He craned his neck to look down the slope.

The sheriff moved to his side.

"Gettin' jittery?" asked Gramp.

"Always hate to lose a good pinochle player," the sheriff murmured. He moved his lips close to Toby's ear. "What's bothering you, son?"

"There are people down there," Toby whispered.

"Soldiers."

"Russians," he countered. "Barlo told me."

"Well, now..." The sheriff's hand dropped to his side before he remembered that he carried no gun. Almost as quickly he moved to interpose his stocky body between Barlo and the view from below.

The Under Secretary asked, "When do you believe the ship might arrive?"

"Very shortly." Barlo's voice was a squeak in the night.

"How do you know?" The Under Secretary peered more closely at him. So did the general.

"I'm in communication with it."

"Communication?" The Under Secretary was startled. The general stiffened, but that was all. Barlo didn't answer.

What about the Russians? Toby let the question flare in his mind as he fought his apprehension, at the same time marveling at Barlo's back of perturbation. But then Barlo had never exhibited distress, not even when the vigilantes were pursuing him across the fields.

Don't worry, the alien counseled. Despite the assurance, Toby's uneasiness persisted. Several times he thought he detected movement below the brow of the hill. So did the sheriff, for Toby saw him turn his head sharply, squinting into the darkness.

"I see something!" The exclamation from one of the Under Secretary's group brought back Toby's attention. The man's eyes were turned toward the sky. Toby looked up, conscious that everyone was doing the same. At first he saw nothing except the glimmer of stars, the gleaming swath of the Milky Way. All at once he realized that the stars directly overhead were being eclipsed.

A cylindrical splotch appeared in the sky, grew steadily bigger and bigger. Someone uttered a low exclamation. His eyes riveted to the monstrous form obliterating the star field, Toby felt his suspense grow until it was almost a physical pain. Conscious that he was holding his breath, he exhaled slowly, cast a swift glance around. Gramp, Linda, the sheriff -- everyone on the hill was standing as if transfixed, their eyes riveted on the enormous, still expanding object above them. He couldn't begin to guess how high it might be or how large. He only knew that it was more gigantic than anything he'd conceived of in his wildest dreams.

Abruptly, the object stopped growing in his visual field. A stir ran through the group. He looked up again at the blackness, at the starless sky, and thought how puny were the works of man.

"Mighty big," observed Gramp. No one answered. The Under Secretary swung nervously toward the alien. So did the general. The latter looked from the slight figure on the knoll to the huge object in the sky and back again. Toby could sense his incredulity.

"It can't land here," the Under Secretary protested. He gestured helplessly at the looming form overhead. The alien remained silent, his small face tilted upward. Toby had the impression that he hadn't heard. "It can't land here," the Under Secretary repeated desperately.

A sense of impending danger flooded Toby's mind. He jerked his gaze to the slope, subconsciously knowing the danger came from there. The Russians? Worriedly he peered into the darkness, the awful sense of threat swirling through him.

"What is it, son?" The sheriff's voice came as a whisper.

"I don't know." No sooner had he spoken than he had the swift impression of movement. Something thudded against the ground a few yards away and

instantly burst into a brilliant flare that illumined two figures with rifles just below him.

As he blinked, blinded by the harsh glare, the sheriff sprang to shield the alien. A rifle cracked. The sheriff winced, one hand thrusting the alien behind him. A helmeted figure rose from the brush, swung a snub-barreled weapon toward the two figures.

"Down," rasped the sheriff. Another shot sounded, and he staggered, without loosing his grip on the alien.

With shocking suddenness, a cone of eerie green light burst from the huge vessel overhead, bathing the entire hill and the brush-covered fields around it. So intense was the glare that the flare on the brow of the hill appeared but slightly brighter than a candle. A sharp exclamation escaped the general's lips.

Aware that his arm was outflung, Toby started to lower it and found to his horror that he couldn't. Neither could he move his feet or head. His entire body was frozen into rigid immobility. Out of the corner of an eye he saw that the Under Secretary, his aides, and the general were caught in the same catatonic posture. The sheriff held one foot lifted as if in the process of taking a step, and now was oddly off balance. The silence from behind, from all sides, indicated that everyone and everything within the cone of green light were transfixed in exactly the same way. He tried to call to Barlo, but no answer came.

Down through the emerald light came a small craft, oval-shaped at each end. Toby first glimpsed it in the periphery of his frozen stare. The craft touched down noiselessly about a dozen feet away, and simultaneously a door slid open in the side facing him.

Barlo walked to the open doorway and turned, his large violet eyes resting for a long moment on Toby's face. Farewell. The word, touching Toby's mind, held infinite sadness.

Good-bye, good-bye. Toby tried to shout the words but couldn't, so let them flame in his mind. The alien shifted his gaze to Gramp, to Linda, to the sheriff. Although Toby sensed no communication, he was certain that Barlo was bidding farewell to each in turn. Finally the large violet eyes turned to the Under Secretary.

"Good-bye." This time he spoke aloud. "Thank your government and your people for the shelter they have given me." He looked at Toby again before turning to enter the ship. The door slid shut behind him, and the small vessel rose swiftly into the cone of emerald light.

Farewell, Toby. The words in his mind echoed as from afar, then the cone of emerald light blinked out.

Instantly the tableau was broken. In the dying light from the flare on the slope he saw the sheriff's lifted foot stab toward the ground. A crash of gunfire came from the snub-barreled weapon held by the helmeted figure below him, and the bodies of the two men with rifles jerked convulsively. A babble of voices broke out as other helmeted figures rose from the thick brush all around.

"Sheriff!" Suddenly remembering, Toby leaped to the big man's side.

"Nicked," the sheriff drawled.

"Better'n television," cackled Gramp. Toby swung his gaze toward the sky, saw a shadow against the stars that grew smaller and smaller. But he wasn't thinking of the ship.

He was thinking of what Barlo had told him.

Ten years later to the day, to the hour, a man and a woman climbed the hill. The evening was warm, the sky cloud-spattered. The stars that showed in the gulfs between gleamed mistily. Occasional lightning flashes stabbed jaggedly from thunderheads above the mountains to the east. Long seconds after

each flash the thunder rumbled down the granite flanks to echo in the valley, smash against the hill.

They reached the top and halted silently to survey the world below. Cars crawled down the grade from the west and zoomed across the valley floor, their headlights agleam like fireflies in the night. Other headlights twisted down from the east. Small rectangles of light off to one side of the highway marked the rambling two-story frame house where Linda had lived until her parents had moved farther from the growing city.

But the valley was different now. Dozens of houses had been built for each one that had stood there before. The loneliness was gone. George Murdock's general store remained, little changed. In another building next to it his son now sold souvenirs to mark the alien's visit. There were also a new gas station, a roadside café, lines of tract housing snaking up the nearby hills.

Carl Cleator had never gone to Congress, but he had acquired considerable local fame for his part in the capture of the three Russian agents. And the VACI still rode the hills, much as they had before the starship came.

The man's eyes settled on a small house set several hundred yards behind the general store. Although he could see little but the light that spilled from its windows, he could reconstruct every part of it in detail. Following his mother's marriage to the sheriff, it had remained his home until he'd left to attend the university. Later the sheriff had retired and had moved with Toby's mother to Alpine, a nearby mountain community, where he now was busy raising saddle horses.

He let his mind wander. Across a distant ridge, where the green grass flowed down among the eucalyptus and sycamore, Grandpa Jed had lain for three years. He'd been with Gramp on that final night. A withered, fragile body, palsied hands, but eyes that burned as brightly as ever -- that had been Gramp, when he had come to say goodbye.

Gramp's eyes watching him in the lamplight -- how vividly he remembered. Gramp finally saying, "I was thinking of that Barlo fellow," his eyes expectant. And that night Toby had told him the story -- the things the alien had said in those last moments before he'd stepped into the small pod that had come down in the glare of the green cone.

When he finished, the old man nodded with an inner satisfaction. "I thought it was something like that," he said. Two hours later he was gone.

Now, gazing at the sky directly above him, Toby fancied he detected movement, then quickly realized the stars were being blotted out. "They're coming," he murmured.

Linda clasped his hand. "It seems so natural to be waiting here."

He knew how she felt. He felt the same, as if this was a part of him that could never be otherwise, that had always been destined. But they weren't going as strangers; they were taking their memories with them. And there would be Barlo.

But they would be coming back; Barlo had promised. In fifty or a hundred or perhaps a thousand years, whenever Earth was ready, they would return to lead their people to the stars. That's what he'd told Gramp on that final night. Several minutes later a small ship landed, a door slid open, and they stepped confidently inside.

The ship moved swiftly upward toward the gigantic shape that obscured the stars.

The Authors

JEAN and JEFF SUTTON are a man-wife writing team whose collaboration has

brought them three Junior Literary Guild Selections for their Putnam books: The Beyond, The Programmed Man, and Lord of the Stars. An ex-newspaperman and the author of many novels Mr. Sutton is an editorial consultant in the aerospace field. Mrs. Sutton teaches high school social studies in San Diego, California, where they live.