

THE TESSELLATED TETRAHEXAHEDRAL YELLOW ROSE OF TEXAS

By Alan Dean Foster

"Sir, I've got something very peculiar here."

The lieutenant assumed an irascible expression and walked over. Mobler was not a particularly pleasant man, due in part to an unfortunate childhood disease that had given his skin the form and consistency of a golf ball's surface. This pebbled epidermis would turn color according to his emotions. At present both cheeks resembled obese anemic strawberries.

Despite this, he was respected, if not especially well liked, by the enlisted men and women who served under him. This was sad because Lieutenant Mobler was competent and intelligent. It wasn't his fault he looked like a sniffling adolescent instead of a soldier.

It was dark in the long, sealed room. Illumination came from bulbs, purposely, dim set in the ceiling overhead and from the numerous dials, switches, and screens that lined both walls. Smartly uniformed people sat intent before the instruments. When they conversed at all, it was in whispers. A natural somberness kept talk soft and furtive, not orders. The purpose behind this room was well known to all who worked in it, and this itself was enough to inspire reverence and quiet.

Now that businesslike attentiveness had been broken, and Mobler would know the reason why. Standing behind the young electronics spec. seven, he peered over his shoulder at the circular screen in front of them. It was lit from within by a rich fluorescence the color of pea soup. Right away he noted the cause of the specialist's comment without detecting the declared peculiarity of it.

"So you've got a track, Davis. What's so startling about that?"

Grimacing uncertainly, the specialist pointed to several small gauges set into the console at the screen's lower left. Mobler leaned close to read them, a movement shoving his prominent Adam's apple taut against neck skin. Then he frowned, turning the tiny craterlets on his face linear.

"It's not possible," he finally announced. His voice was surprisingly deep.

"That's just what I thought, sir." The specialist stared now not at the screen but at his superior. He was waiting for orders but hoping for an explanation.

Mobler turned, looked down the long row of seats. His tense words were unnaturally loud in that funereal atmosphere. "Colson, Matthews. Specialist Davis's instrumentation insists it's got a small object reentry coming in from the west on irregular descent at three thousand kilometers per."

One of the women started. "Pardon, sir," Matthews queried, "three thousand and irregular?"

"I know," Mobler concurred. "That's much too slow, and the approach path is cockeyed all to hell. Let's have some confirmation."

Abruptly the room looked like an anthill before an impending thunderstorm. Those not among the two designated to confirm the impossible sighting were hard pressed to attend to their own tasks. The level of noise in the room rose alarmingly, but Mobler couldn't blame them.

Eventually, disbelieving reassurance came from both additional stations that the track was legitimate, that both the speed of reentry and the zigzagging descent path were correct. Mobler turned back to Davis's screen and saw to his dismay that the tiny blip, the cause of all the commotion, was still there.

Almost absently he ordered, without turning, "Matthews, Garcia, Abramawicz. Taking into account all shifts in path, I want the best prediction of a touchdown site you can come up with. I've a hunch this baby isn't going to burn up."

"What do you think it is, sir?" Davis asked wonderingly. But the lieutenant was busy nearby, speaking into a rarely used phone. Davis strained to overhear, found he could make out the local half of the conversation.

"No, sir," Mobler was telling someone softly, "three thousand. No, no change in angle of descent, not yet, anyway." A pause, then, "They're certain? That's what I hoped, too, sir. Yes, I'll wait." He turned slightly, saw every eye in the room locked on him.

"It's not Soviet or Chinese," he announced in response to the many unspoken questions. An almost audible sigh rushed through the room. "Absolutely no launchings in the past. ninety-six hours, and all orbital devices accounted for number and mass." He turned his attention back to the phone, listening intently.

"Yes, sir . . . I agree, sir. The angle is much too sharp for that speed. It's coming straight down, comparatively. No, sir," he added after a glance at Davis. "It's still intact. Yes, sir, I know it doesn't make any sense." A longer pause, and Mobler leaned to his right to study a chart hanging on the wall.

"No, sir, it's not one of ours. Impossible. The last re-entry we had was OGO eighteen, the geosurv satellite, and it burned up on schedule two and a half weeks ago. Nothing of ours, or theirs, for that matter, is set to come down for at least three more months.

"Yes, sir, we're working on a possible crash site now. It shows indications of shifting its path from time to time. There's a straight line in there somewhere, though . . . assuming it doesn't go ahead and burn up, after all. Just a second, sir."

Mobler looked back down the room toward the three technicians whose assignment he was plotting. He said nothing, but his cheeks turned slightly darker. Knowing the signs, the three specialists worked faster.

It was Garcia who spoke up excitedly. "No path yet, but I've got something else, Lieutenant. The object is no larger than three meters in diameter and not less than point eight. Its general shape is spherical." He hesitated, added, "That's all only a guess, but it's a good guess."

Mobler nodded once, reported the new information to whoever was on the other end of the line.

Meanwhile Matthews completed a final check of her instruments.

"If it doesn't burn up and if it maintains its present general heading, sir, it's going to strike somewhere in the southwest or south central states," Matthews called out.

"Can you pin it down any better than that, Matthews?" Mobler asked. She chewed her lower lip, made some hurried calculations.

"I'd estimate somewhere between El Paso and Dallas longitudinally and Tulsa-Galveston latitudinally."

"Thank you, Matthews," Mobler said gratefully. This prediction was relayed dutifully across the phone. The lieutenant put a palm over the receiver, spoke to the technician hopefully. "Both Colorado Springs and Washington would like to know if you can narrow it down a little more. They'd like even a preliminary impact point prediction."

Maybe it was the excitement of the situation, but more likely it was the almost indifferent mention of those two names that spurred the specialist's abilities. After several minutes of frantic computer work, she turned and declared guardedly, "I'd say anywhere in an area up to three hundred kilometers east of Dallas. That's a general radius, sir."

Mobler reported this to the phone. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Yes, we'll notify Point Mugu also and relay what we have. They'll send it on to White Sands and Houston. Very good, sir. Yes, sir. Good-bye."

Hanging up, the lieutenant spared a casual glance for the room. Everyone returned instantly to his or her assigned tasks, which were quite as important as what had just happened. He said nothing, simply stood thinking. Then he leaned back and stared upward, trying to see through the triple-reinforced ceilings of the tracking station.

Somewhere up there, above the palm trees and sands devoid of tourist hotels, far above thick Hawaiian clouds, something almost surely not of this Earth was speeding past.

As soon as Point Mugu picked up the rapidly dropping object, fighters -near White Sands scrambled in hopes of intercepting it visually before impact. Unfortunately, that entire area of the United States was awash in winter thunderstorms. The few planes aloft had enough to do fighting buffeting winds and instrument distortions engendered by lightning. The object was never sighted.

Worse still, when it finally went tropospheric, all contact was lost. Important people in paces far from one another raged impotently at the uncooperative weather and chain-smoked many substances whose sole point of commonality was that all were encased in paper tubes and then fired.

So it was that a tired Josiah Chester, Major, USAF, found himself standing in the office of General MacGregor, to which he had been summoned posthaste.

Chester's skin was numb from the steel lashing of the frigid Texas wind outside as he started to remove his heavy winter overcoat. The general only allowed him to finish his salute, however.

"Just stand there, Joe," MacGregor ordered him gently. "No point in removing your coat; you don't have time to warm up."

Chester moved his hands from the buttons. "I came as fast as I could, sir. The weather's brutal tonight. Something's up?"

"Something." MacGregor snorted teasingly as he reached for a bottle concealed out of sight. He poured and downed half a shot glass neat, offered the same to Chester. The major accepted and duplicated the general's efforts-to ward off the weather, he insisted to himself.

"I should have taken that job National Avionics offered me in Washington," the general told empty air. Just as easily, he cocked a querulous eye at the standing officer and asked, "Joe, do you believe in flying saucers, UFOs, that sort of thing?"

Chester had thought himself as well prepared as possible for one summoned unexpectedly to a meeting with his base commander at nearly two in the morning during a near blizzard. So the speed with which he lost his composure was unsettling.

A host of conflicting thoughts fought for attention. The Ruskie's were trying something . . . no, if that were so, he'd have been called to his plane, not the general's office. We're being invaded . . . but if that were the case, he'd hardly be alone here.

He finally decided that something very important was going on that higher-ups wanted as few people as possible to know about. His last thought before replying was that he probably wouldn't have a chance to telephone Charlene to tell her he wouldn't be able to attend MaryEllen's ballet performance at the school today.

"No, sir, I don't, but then, I don't disbelieve, either."

"The little green men's agnostic, is that it?" essayed MacGregor. He added irritably, without giving the major a chance to comment, "Oh, for heaven's sake, at ease, Joe!" Chester relaxed as the general pushed the bottle forward on the desk.

"Like another? A cigar, maybe? Havana."

"No thank you, sir."

MacGregor sighed, folded his hands on the desk. "Why don't you believe in UFOs?"

Chester considered the answer as seriously as the question was being asked. It was a question that every pilot had been forced to contemplate at one time or another during his flying career.

"Not enough evidence, not enough facts to support their existence," he eventually stated.

"The saucer advocates say they have sufficient facts and evidence," countered MacGregor.

"They have yet to convince me, sir."

The general sat back, apparently satisfied. "Good. That's what I wanted to hear." He rolled his chair across the acrylic carpet protector and pulled down a wall map of Texas. Rising, he hunted around on the map for a bit, then tapped something near its middle.

"Come around here, Joe." Chester did so, fighting hard to keep a growing list of questions from overpowering him.

"Know this area?" the general inquired, tapping the map again. Chester studied the region in question.

"I've been clean across the state on Interstate 20, sir."

The finger froze. "This is a town called Cisco."

Chester shrugged apologetically. "Never been there, sir. "

"Neither have I," confessed MacGregor. "They claim to have the world's largest man-made swimming pool there. We think they may have acquired a new attraction." He put his finger in the metal ring at the bottom of the map, pulled, and then let the plastic sheet slide shut without a snap.

Chester took it as a signal for him to return to his former position in front of the general's desk. "You've been over to the Manned Space Center?"

"Numerous times, sir," Chester admitted. "There's one thing, sir," he asked hesitantly. "May I be permitted to telephone my wife? She's expecting me home by five."

"Go ahead. No reason you can't, though of course you won't be allowed to say anything about your mission where you're going or how long you'll be there." At Chester's distraught look of resignation the general added, "You may tell her that you're not going out of the country this time."

Chester looked happy. "That'll satisfy her, sir. Thanks. Where am I going?"

"To Cisco and the surrounding countryside. But first you're to proceed to Houston to pick up three people at the Space Center." Exploring his desk, he located a notepad filled with scribbles. "Couple of fellows named Calumet and Tut."

"Perham 71st?" wondered Chester. MacGregor appeared mildly surprised.

"You know him?"

"Only by reputation, sir, and through a couple of articles. It's not a name you read and quickly forget. I don't know this Calumet."

"Jean Calumet," MacGregor elaborated, studying the note. "And a Sarah Goldberg."

"That's another name I know." Sometimes Chester wished the general would begin his puzzles with the border instead of loose pieces. "She and Tut are both associated with all aspects of the search for extraterrestrial life. They both worked on the directional programming for Pioneers sixteen and seventeen. I guess Calumet's in a related field of study, if not the same."

"You'll have a driver," the general continued. "All five of you will proceed from Houston to Cisco. "

MacGregor's expression turned solemn. "We have evidence," he began slowly, "unconfirmed but pretty impressive, that a small object that may be of extrasolar construction survived entry into the Earth's atmosphere earlier this morning and came down in one piece somewhere in a circular region of 120 kilometers with Cisco at its center.

"You understand," he went on, both hands twirling a pencil back and forth, "the reason for total secrecy

and for informing no one of this information."

"What about local sightings?" Chester asked.

"The same rotten weather that caused us to lose this thing over New Mexico has apparently helped us, too. We've been monitoring everything from fifty-thousand-watt radio stations down to personal CBs in the area. No one's reported seeing or hearing anything unusual.

"That might also mean that the damn thing's gone and burned up during final descent. In fact, the experts tell me that's probably what happened. " He glanced up from the pencil, and his eyes were cold. "Naturally, we can't take that chance.

"Given the suspected small size of the object, the weather, and the fact that people live pretty far apart from each other up in that part of the country, it's just possible something could have set down intact without anyone noticing it, even if it made a good-sized bang on impact.

"You'll take an unmarked station wagon from the Space Center. It'll hold the five of you and the minimum amount of equipment the three scientists are being allowed."

"Not much room for instrumentation in the back of a wagon," Chester observed.

The general smiled. "From what I hear, this Goldberg and her friends would like about six two-and-a-halves packed with all kinds of gadgetry. Obviously we can't have the kind of attention a convoy would attract in that area. "

"Obviously," Chester echoed.

"We want to try and hide our interest without hiding it," MacGregor explained. "Nothing seems to attract attention like people trying not to attract attention. So you and the driver will wear uniforms, and the three scientists, of course, will be in whatever they want.

"If this isn't someone's idea of a bad joke, and if the object really exists, and if it's come down in recognizable chunks, then we'll move in with larger forces."

"Does that mean I can get whatever I need if I need it?"

"Use your own judgment," the general instructed him. "Keep in mind that we want this kept as quiet as possible but that in addition to the Air Force, you're serving as representative for all the armed forces. Special units at Fort Hood have been placed on emergency standby. On your word, they can reach the Cisco area by copter inside an hour.

"Also keep in mind that I, General Hartford at Fort Hood, and a few others here and at the Space Center are in constant touch with NORAD and Washington.

"Again, there's a wallop good chance you'll find nothing but cold beef on the hoof and a lot of mud. On second thought-" The general grinned thinly. "-you may be spared the mud. I understand the high up that way's been well below freezing lately. Better have your woolens."

"No problem, sir," said Chester, smiling back. "I'm wearing them."

That's good, because your driver should be waiting for you outside by now."

Chester glanced involuntarily toward the closed door. When he turned back, he saw that MacGregor was standing. Coming to attention, he saluted, and the general saluted him back.

"One last thing, Joe," MacGregor declared. Chester paused with his hand on the doorknob.

"What's that, sir?"

"Probably worrying you needlessly. Kauai was the first of our stations to pick this thing up. Midway missed it, but we can't tell if that means the Russians did, too. We haven't had any queries from them, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. Given the potential of this, if it's; what we hope it is, well ~ . . . I'm not saying they'd try anything crazy, but

Chester didn't reply, merely patted his left underarm in a significant fashion. "I understand, sir. I'll brief that driver accordingly." i

"He's already been briefed," explained a grim MacGregor. "With those three scientists jabbering among themselves, we couldn't very well keep him in the dark, anyway. It'll be up to you and him to take care of the three people from NASA. They won't look beyond the end of their gauges."

"Yes, sir. Good night, sir."

"Good night, Major Chester. Tell the driver to take it easy. The roads are bad."

"I will, sir."

Chester turned, walked wordlessly through an outer office, a waiting lobby, and down a corridor, then out into the subfreezing night.

"Dad?"

"Huh-what?"

"Dad!"

Jesse Shattuck blinked, rolled over in bed. In the moonlight filtering fitfully in through the broken clouds and the big window he saw the anxious face of his sixteen-year-old, David.

"What is it, boy?" Then he put up a hand for silence as his son started to reply.

The wind was a sad echo of its former might-the storm had obviously passed, he told himself-and the barking reached him clearly from somewhere back of the henhouse. A shadow stirred on the other side of the bed and sat up. It had a small, intense, delicately aquiline face with eyes of black opal. The hair of a woman thirty years younger cascaded in curls and ripples at its sides.

Shattuck sat motionless, listening to the frantic barking. The bedroom was warm and dark. A soft anvil-like bang sounded from the old heater. He definitely did not want to go outside.

"What are those damn-fool dogs barking about now; J.W.?" his wife wondered in the darkness.

"I don't know, Mother," the rancher admitted as he slid his long legs out from under the quilts.. He bent over hunting for his socks. "Could be coyotes, maybe wolves. Too, it's cold enough and the pickings are thin enough for them to risk trying the henhouse again. Thought we'd cured 'em of that last winter, though." He pulled up the last sock, found his boots by the nightstand.

David rose, looked excited. "Should I get my gun, Dad?"

Shattuck nodded. "My twelve-gauge, too."

"And mine," said the woman, scrambling out of the other side of the bed.

"Don't you think you ought to stay here, Mother?"

Awry, delightful smile crossed her face, feminine lightning. "Go-"and she added a colorfully crass suggestion. Shattuck said nothing, merely smiled ever so slightly.

By the time David returned to look down at his tall father and his mother expectantly, they were already dressed and donning winter coats. The son passed out the armory. Husband and wife methodically checked their weapons. Four shells slid into four chambers.

Suitably attired for the cold and armed against whatever might be threatening their domain, the family started for the back of the rambling house.

The chill hit Shattuck the moment he opened the rear door. Dry, freezing air caressed his stubbled cheeks like steel wool, and his breath formed ghost patterns in the night.

Off to the south, nothing could be seen under the black clouds of the receding storm. The remainder of the night sky was clear. He regarded the nearly full moon and its tenebrous halo, a sign, perhaps, of more wetness to come.

"It wouldn't be a wolf, Dad, would it?" David theorized nearby. "Isn't it too light out for them to come in this close?"

"Could be a sick one, David," his father told him curtly. "Funny, the dogs have shut up. Quiet now."

The faintest whisper of a breeze stirred the cold air. From the henhouse came only a soft clucking, nervous and uncertain. That was to be expected from the way Cotton and Gin had been carrying on. But the cluckings weren't panicky, as they would have been if the scent of wolf were in the wind. The guineas, at least, would have sensed that, and they were quiet.

"Must be out back of the tank somewhere, J.W.," his wife said. The rancher nodded slowly, and they started off past the coop.

Behind it the dogs were wandering back and forth, looking puzzled and anxious but not straining at their tethers, either. Cotton, the big Irish setter, whined as the family came up to him. The big weimaraner, Gin, abruptly turned, barked at the distance, and then turned whining to David.

"Never seen dogs act like this before," Shattuck mused. "Something out there's got 'em stirred, all right, but they don't seem anxious to be out after it."

He looked out toward the distant tank, the deep artificial pond that held the ranch's water supply. Overhead the sky was almost white with stars. The moon spread pale fingers across the still water. A light snow had sugared the ground, final testament of the retreating storm.

"See anything, Mother?"

His wife shook her head slowly, one finger resting easily on the trigger of the .30-30. "Not a thing, J.W. If there is something out there, we're going to have to let the dogs find it."

"Yep." He bent over Cotton, his hands working gently at the setter's collar. David was performing the same actions with Gin.

"All right, girl," he whispered into one russet ear, "go git it. Let him go, David."

Both dogs were set free at the same time. They started off toward the tank on the run. Twenty meters from the near shore they unexpectedly slowed, turned, and came trotting back toward the henhouse. Something appeared to pull at them. They whirled, ran at the tank once more. And once more came to a halt, reversed their direction, and headed back toward the astonished family.

"I swear, Mother," Shattuck muttered, "strangest behavior I ever saw." He gestured with the end of the shotgun. "Still, there's for sure something out back there: It may scare the dogs, but it doesn't scare me. It's on our property; better go find out whatever it is."

Nothing rose to confront them when they reached the rim of the tank or when they started around it. The tank backed up against a slight rise that had once housed a den of rattlers. They started up the slight slope.

Alternately barking and whining as though they couldn't make up their minds whether to be angry or afraid, the two dogs trotted alongside. They showed no inclination to charge ahead, as was the normal manner of dogs.

As they approached the rim of the rise, a brightness separate from that falling from the lambent moon seemed to come from just ahead.

"Something burning over there, J.W.," Beth Shattuck said huskily. The rancher considered, shook his head positively.

"We would smell smoke sure in this air, Mother. Could be a plane crash, maybe, but I think we would have heard it hit. Car or bike's a possibility, but I don't know any kid in town fool enough to be out playing at motorcross on a night like this."

"It might be something that's fallen from a plane, Dad," suggested his son helpfully. "You read lots of times about a piece of cargo or part of an engine that breaks loose."

His father didn't nod or smile, but quiet approval was in his words. "Could be."

They topped the little hill and looked down the other side at a wide plain. Wild wheat full of dead stalks clustered as if for warmth around the trunks of bushy mesquite trees, the latter's branches gnarled and grooved like the arms of old men.

But the thing that had fallen here wasn't burning. It had struck a section of dry broken slate, and there

were no burn marks around it.

Shattuck, his wife, and his son stood staring at it. "Whatever it is, it don't look dangerous," he finally decided, setting the safety on his shotgun. He started down the slope.

"Sure is bright," David observed.

The thing lying amid dry rock and gravel was about the size of Mrs. Shattuck's washing machine. It was roughly spherical but with many smooth, flat surfaces. Many of those surfaces appeared to be inlaid with tiny squares and other geometric shapes that glowed like inlaid lights.

Several long, twisted projections not unlike antennae rose from the top surfaces, and two stuck out from one side. They were the only interruptions in the otherwise uniform shape.

Closer inspection revealed that the tiny, multicolored lights were flush with the various flat surfaces. Crimson and deep purple predominated, though every color of the rainbow was present. Some remained steady and unwinking, white others pulsed light to dark to light again at seemingly random intervals.

Still regarding the object warily, Shattuck circled it once, staring admiringly at the display of brilliant lights. Exclusive of the inlaid many-shaded patterns, the rest of the thing shone brightly with a deep yellow the hue of old butter.

"What do you reckon it's made out of?" he asked his wife.

"It looks like metal, J.W., but it has no shiny surfaces."

It was true. The material itself, rather than something from within, seemed to emit the light. The slick sides did show a luster and sheen like metal, but the object was at least partly translucent, unlike any metal they had ever seen. Where the two largest projections vanished into the surface they could actually see them continue inside.

It was the intense mosaic of colored shapes-rhombohedral, triangles, circles, and such-that prevented them from peering deeper into the thing. Cautiously, Mrs. Shattuck moved right up next to the device. Feeling no heat, she reached out a hand and touched it.

"It's not hot," she announced. "Looks like metal, but it feels like plastic." Her gaze went upward momentarily. "I don't think this fell out of some airliner, David." She ran her palm over it. "It's downright cold, in fact."

Quite unexpectedly, the object emitted a sound. All three took several hurried steps backward. Three muzzles rose in unison.

The drama didn't intensify, however, and they relaxed. Other than the new noises, the object remained sitting immobile, glowing as beautifully as ever. Only now it was softly saying hmm-hmm-hmm, buzz-hmm-buzz . . . tick! Hmm-hmm-, buzz-hmm-buzz . . . tick! . . .

Over and over again.

"It must still be working," David mused. "But what is it, and what's it do?"

His father shrugged again. "Beats me." He moved down to the device again and commenced a

nose-to-surface inspection.

"What are you looking for, Dad?"

"Something to identify it. Whoever lost this is going to want it back."

"I know!" the boy said, suddenly aglow with a sense of imminent importance. "It's a satellite! Maybe a Russian spacecraft that landed in the wrong place."

"No Old Glory," his father said. "No hammer and sickle, either, 'less they're underneath."

"I don't know," his wife murmured, her eyes never leaving J.W. "It doesn't look like a satellite, at least not any kind I ever read about, David-ours or theirs. And even spacecraft that are designed to come down in one piece usually have burn marks or signs of reentry beat into them.

"Look. There's not a streak anywhere on it or on the ground. It sure landed softly." She pointed to the base of the object. The gravel there was hardly disturbed, and bent grasses were raising their tousled heads through the snow once again. "Even the snow around it isn't melted. I don't think it so much as bounced."

"Nothing," came Shattuck's voice. They both ruined to see him rising, brushing at his pants. "I can't find anything saying anything, let alone where it's from.; Whoever built this is kind of closemouthed." He appeared to come to a decision, looked at his son.

"Yes, Dad?"

"Run back to the house and get the pickup, boy. Check out the winch and make sure it isn't froze up."

"Okay." The youth took two long strides toward house, skidded to a halt, and looked back. "What we gonna do with it?"

"Well, now," his father said appraisingly as he studied the fascinating whatever-it-was, "I'm not sure." Almost painfully rich colors flashed and blinked at him. "I don't know that it's good for anything, but it sure is pretty."

"It sure is that, J.W.," his wife commented, staring at it. She put an arm around his waist. His went over her shoulder. They stood regarding the glowing thing in the night as David puffed and panted his way toward the ranch garage.

Eventually she looked up at her husband and smiled. "You know, J.W., I think I've got an interestin' idea ..."

"Actually, Miss Goldberg," Joe Chester was saying as the late-model station wagon bounced along the sunny back road, "I'm convinced that if it did come down intact, it did so in such a place and fashion that we're never going to find it. We've been looking for a month now, and we haven't got a hint as to its whereabouts. Myself, I'm pretty sure it burned up at the last minute on entry."

"Science," the older woman told him in a voice buttressed by dedication, "requires patience even above brains, Major. I'm sorry we're inconveniencing you. Please feel free to go home any time."

"Oh, that's all right," Chester replied, a polite if false smile plastered across his face to conceal his irritation. "No trouble at all."

Turning away from the backseat, he stared out the front window again at the snow-covered wheat and corn fields they were passing through. He couldn't leave any more than they could, though his reasons were different, if no less compelling. His orders had directed him to accompany and watch over the little expedition for as long as the three scientists found it worthwhile to continue.

He wondered what Charlene was doing today.

A chance glance at his watch told him the date as well as the time. If the three musketeers in the backseat kept this up many more weeks, he would miss spending the holidays with his family. Somehow he had to convince them that further search was absurd.

Before this had started, he'd been more than half-convinced that the suspected UFO was more fictional than real. Failing that, it had certainly burned up, blown up, or otherwise scattered itself undetectably across a wide section of west Texas. Even if it had existed and had come down in one section, this part of the state was crisscrossed with uncountable deep creeks overgrown with cottonwood, live oak, and other thick vegetation. Or it could have fallen into a deep dirty lake.

A thousand people, he was positive, could scour the same territory and have no better luck than the five of them had had. A month of this was more than enough.

He was sick of the whole business-sick of small-town motels, sick of lonely beds, and sick of the scientists' subtle but certain air of condescension toward him. He was even getting sick of real country cooking, a sure sign it was time to quit and go home.

They still had some time left before the holidays. He resigned himself to continuing the hunt a while longer.

The day wore on, and they followed the by now monotonous procedure of interviewing farmer after farmer. If even one had seen something strange, anything out of the ordinary, he would have understood the scientists' insistence on going on.

But none of the puzzled men and women they talked with had noticed anything out of the ordinary. That was hardly surprising, considering the terrible storm that had raged that night. Everyone had sensibly been inside in bed or stretched out in front of a roaring fire.

Some of the looks they got suggested that many thought the peculiar group of five people had spent too many such nights wandering around exposed to the elements, with the result that their brains were slightly frozen in spots.

"It's getting dark," Sarah Goldberg noted. "We'd better be getting back to Albany." She was first back into the station wagon, oblivious to the curious stares of the two cattlemen they'd just interviewed.

"We've about covered all the farms and residences in this area," she said when the wagon was rolling again. "Tomorrow we'll move our base of operation to Breckenridge and commence a fresh spiral outward from there."

As the temperature outside dropped, Chester turned on the car's heater. To add to his discomfort, it

had begun putting out a disagreeable odor lately, in addition to a steady grinding as-if a bearing or something had broken loose and was rattling about inside it.

He couldn't find fault with it. It had been in constant use all day and night the past month. It was only sounding the frustration and irritation Chester felt himself.

In the rapidly growing darkness the driver, known to them all only as Pat, had switched the brights on. The extra illumination was welcome on the narrow back farm roads. Pat rarely had to dim them, as oncoming cars were infrequent.

This part of the county was especially thinly populated. Pat slowed, afraid of missing the Albany turnoff, and Goldberg began screaming like a high-schooler whose date had unexpectedly turned out to be the town wolf.

"Stop the car! Stop the car!"

The usually phlegmatic, imperturbable Pat slammed a size-thirteen shoe on the brake, and they were all thrown sharply forward. Chester pushed hair from his eyes and turned to look angrily into the backseat.

"What is it now, Miss Goldberg?" he asked, fighting to remain civil. The old woman's eyes ignored him as she stared out the window on her left.

"Look-look at that," she murmured.

Something in her tone made Chester turn quickly to gaze in the indicated direction; he had to peer around the considerable bulk of the driver to do so.

Disappointment was instant. Just off the road and ahead was yet another of the many isolated ranches they'd passed and stopped at during the past month. This one was a bit more modern, a little larger than the average, but otherwise unspectacular.

Befitting the season, it was lined around roof edge and windows with Christmas lights. Two plastic, meter-high candy canes flanked the entrance to the yard in front of the main house.

Chester felt a pang of homesickness at the sight, as he had at every such group of decorations they'd passed. He'd never get home in time to string his own lights. Charlene and Mary-Ellen would be heartbroken, and the things would sit up in the attic, unused, for another year.

"Not the house. Not the house," Goldberg stammered, noticing the direction of his gaze. "Off to the left of it, in the back."

Off to one side of the house and set farther back from the road was a large barn. The front edge of the barn's roof was also lined with lights. The cause of the staid scientist's sudden hysteria was located there.

As was common in such structures, a large square gap was set above the ground over the barn's entrance, opening into the hayloft. The opening was currently filled by an object of indeterminate size and dimensions.

It lit the whole front of the barn with an incandescent yellow glow as soft and intense as an Arizona sunset. Within the yellow dwelt a horde of colored pinpoints arranged in intricate and strange patterns to form a photonic mosaic. The lights shifted position as they watched.

"It's so bright, the smaller lights so deep and rich," Tut observed quietly. "LEDs, maybe?"

"No," objected Goldberg with assurance. "The color is too intense even for that. Pull in here, Pat; there's no gate. "

Until now the stoic sergeant had responded with equanimity to requests from all his passengers. This time he glanced for confirmation from his real superior.

"By all means, Pat, let's see what it is," Chester declared, unable to take his fascinated gaze from the enigmatic object. So bright was its glow that it overwhelmed the sign that had been strung on wire just beneath it. The sign was cut from silver foil and consisted of four large letters: N-O-E-L, Chester read to himself.

Little bounces jostled the occupants of the station wagon as it turned left into the dirt driveway running toward the barn. As they stopped next to the house and the sergeant turned off the motor, the barking of two or more large dogs could be heard. Nothing rushed to meet them, however.

"I guess they're chained or in the house," Tut commented nervously. Chester wasn't surprised at the slight tremor in Tut's voice. Numerous stops had already shown that the huge engineer had a genuine fear of dogs.

Goldberg left the car and headed straight for the barn. The youngest of the three scientists put out a hand to restrain her before Chester could do so verbally.

"Better hold off a minute, Sarah."

She whirled, glared at him. "Why wait?"

Jean Calumet kept a hand on her even as he continued to regard the object set so temptingly near, up in the loft. The yellow glow was bright on olive, smooth skin. "I'm as curious to be into it as you are, Sarah, but remember where we are."

"So where are we?" she snapped, irritated at the delay.

"On another man's property," the diminutive Cajun told her. "This isn't Los Angeles or even Houston. People out here have archaic notions about things like property rights. We'd better wait till we have a chance to explain ourselves."

So while Goldberg and Tut groaned at the wait and Chester nodded gratefully to Calumet, they stood and fidgeted until several lights came on inside the house.

Two lean hairy shapes raced out of the front door, barking furiously. The cluster of visitors stood their ground, even Perham Tut, who would have returned to the safety of the car if it hadn't been for the disgusted look he received from Sarah Goldberg.

The dogs sniffed each of them in turn, then trotted quietly back toward the house, satisfied in the notable way of dogs that the newcomers presented no immediate threat to their masters.

A tall, clean-shaven man in his middle or late forties sallied forth to greet them. He was wearing a pair of threadbare blue jeans, a tired flannel shirt, and boots, all obviously donned in haste. He was even taller

than Tut, though not nearly as massive. The thin adolescent who trailed slightly behind him was a couple of inches taller still.

"Evening," he said pleasantly. "I don't believe I know you all."

Chester stepped forward, identified himself and his companions with names only. The man shook hands with the men, nodded at Goldberg.

"I'm Jesse Shattuck; this is my son, David," he told them. "Can we help you folks with something? We don't get many visitors this time of night, strangers or otherwise."

A strong voice sounded from the door. "You gonna all stand out there in the cold like a covey of paralyzed quail? Come on in and have some coffee and pie."

"In a minute, Mother!" the man yelled back at her. A screen door clattered shut by way of reply. The man looked back at Chester expectantly.

"We're up from Houston," the major told him, deciding that this man could tell truth from lie quicker than Chester could think up fresh deceptions. "I'm in the Air Force, attached to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Manned Space Center in Houston." He gestured behind him.

"My friends are all scientists. We've been out hunting around this part of the country for over a month."

"We've been looking for that," Goldberg interrupted, pointing toward the barn, talking twice as fast as Chester. "Thank you for finding it for us. We'll see that you receive a suitable reward."

That closed the matter as far as the scientists were concerned, and they started toward the barn. Chester started to say something but was interrupted by a disarming wave from Shattuck, who indicated that they should head toward the barn also.

Together they stood in the open space below the loft, staring mesmerized into its alien radiance.

"Is it safe there?" Tut finally whispered, breaking the spell the object's beauty had cast over them. "It's right near the edge . . . it could fall out."

"Huh uh," Shattuck assured him. "There's a couple of braces holding the base steady and a rope around its bottom under the hay. I don't reckon it would hurt it none if it did tumble out." Entranced by mere sight of the object, the three scientists failed to note the rancher's evaluation.

"What are you counting, Jean?" Goldberg asked her young colleague, noticing that his mouth was moving silently as he stared at the object.

"The facets. I can't call them sides; the thing's too much like a jewel to me." He squinted into the soft glare. "If the rest of the artifact matches what's visible, I would estimate a total of twenty-four sides, not counting projections such as the apparent antennae."

"That suggests they could have a system based on two, three, four, six, eight, twelve, or twenty-four, and that's only if their mathematics conform in any way to our own. Ten sides would have made things a lot simpler."

"Not necessarily," countered Perham Tut through pursed lips. "The twenty-four sides might be merely

decorative, having no mathematical significance whatsoever."

"That's true," admitted Calumet reluctantly.

"We'll find out as soon as we can get it back to the lab and begin taking it apart," Goldberg informed them in her half-gentle, half-shrill tones. "How do we go about getting it down?" She faced the quiet Shattuck. "How did you get it up there in the first place?"

"Put it in a wire net and used the hay lift," the rancher explained easily.

"We might," suggested Tut, rubbing his chin, "fit it in the back of the wagon. That would save some time."

"No, no," objected Goldberg, speaking as though correcting a child. "Look how bright it is already. Do you want to drive all the way back to Houston with it shining like a spotlight out the car windows? One reporter finds out, and we'll never be able to study this at the proper pace. No, we need a panel truck or a small van." She eyed Chester. "You can get this for us, Major?"

Chester found himself nodding. "But for now," she continued briskly, "we can at least get it down for a closer look. Mr. Shamuck-

"Shattuck," the rancher corrected her.

"Yes, Mr. Shattuck . . . if you'll be good enough to bring it down the same way-and as gently-as you took it up, it will be a help to our preliminary examination."

"Why should he?" inquired a new voice. "Is it yours?"

Everyone turned, saw Mrs. Shattuck walking toward them. She wore exactly the same attire as her husband.

"I guess if you're all goin' to stand out here in the cold and freeze, someone better be around to be ready to thaw you. out." Startlingly youthful dark eyes focused on the older woman. "I asked you a question, honey."

"Uh, no, not exactly, it doesn't," replied Goldberg, momentarily flustered by the abruptness of the question.

"What do you mean, 'not exactly'?"

"Well, while we didn't build it or . . . See here," Goldberg said, stiffening and trying to stay civil despite her mounting impatience at these irritating, continuing delays, "I don't think you realize quite what you have up in your hayloft."

"It should be clear to anyone," Tut added condescendingly, "that whatever it is, it is certainly not a Christmas decoration."

"No?" exclaimed Mrs. Shattuck, her gaze darting up to the softly humming semisphere. "How do you know? Don't you think it looks pretty up there, whatever kind of watchamaoallit it really is?"

"Umm, actually, I suppose it does," confessed Tut, taken aback. He really hadn't pondered much on the

artifact's aesthetic properties.

"You admit you don't own it," she pressed relentlessly, eyes flashing.

"We said we didn't build it," Tut argued, "but in the name of the United States government, as its representatives in the search for extraterrestrial life, we, uh, hereby claim it."

She looked away from him, her mouth twisted in a disdainful grimace. Her attention settled eventually on Chester as the one actually in charge.

"What about it, mister? Is that thing legally the property of the government?"

Chester started to reply, "I don't think there's any-" and he stopped, thoughtful.

"What is this, Major?" Goldberg wanted to know. "It does belong to us . . . and the government, doesn't it?"

After a considerable pause, Chester answered,

"Frankly, I don't know. I'm a military man, Miss Goldberg, not a lawyer."

"That's what I thought," Mrs. Shattuck said, obviously satisfied. She glanced up at her husband. "Well, J.W.?"

The rancher turned and looked wordlessly at Chester.

"'Watchamacallit,' she calls it!" sniffed Goldberg.

"You actually don't know what it is, do you?"

"Oh, judgin' from who you say you are and what I can tell of it-" She jabbed a thumb toward the blinking artifact. "-I'd guess it's some kind of artificial unmanned craft from off this world, probably from outside our solar system. Just because we got television out here doesn't mean we're ignorant, honey."

"It doesn't look like it's government property, does it?" observed Shattuck softly. "Not yet, anyway. Since it come down on our property, I expect we'll hang on to it for a bit."

"Now, look here," Tut began heatedly, moving his bulk forward. "If you think for one minute that we're going to let you hang on to the most important discovery of the last five centuries just to satisfy your personal--take your hand off me, Jean," he told his much smaller associate.

"You bet your ass we're going to hang on to it, four-eyes," Mrs. Shattuck informed him in no uncertain terms.

"Excuse me," Chester said hurriedly to Shattuck. "We don't mean to seem unfriendly. You must realize you're going to have to give up the artifact eventually. Why not make things simpler for us and yourselves and let us take it away. Tomorrow, say."

"I might just have let you do that an hour ago," the rancher told him with a significant glance at the fuming Tut and Goldberg. "But at this point I'm feeling -sort of ornery. So, no offense, mind, but I think we'll hang on to it for a while." He gazed up at the barn.

"It looks mighty pretty up there, in the middle of the other lights. Right in keeping with the season."

"No offense," agreed Chester amiably, though his mind was churning unhappily at the turn events had taken: "You understand we'll have to take official action to obtain the artifact."

"I understand you've got to do what you think is right," Shattuck concurred. "Now, if you want to check the legality of it all, I expect you'll want to talk to the sheriff over in Breckenridge. Name's Amos Biggers. You go talk to him and let me know what he says."

"We'll do that, and thank you," Chester replied. He turned to face the vivacious, defiant woman standing nearby. Hands on hips, she stared evenly back at him.

"Thanks for the coffee and pie offer, ma'am. I hope I can take you up on it under more pleasant circumstances." She softened somewhat, even smiled back at him.

"Maybe so. If you're goin' to Breckenridge, watch yourself. Some of the roads that way are still pretty icy. We don't want you happy folks to go pile up in a ditch somewhere the middle of this cold night." Her smile widened.

"No, we don't want that," agreed Chester. Turning, he shepherded the scientists back toward the station wagon. They protested every step of the way.

Goldberg was beside herself. "Who do these . . . these cattle people think they are? Who do you think you are, Major? Are you here as our aide, to help us, or not? I think maybe a few words to your superior officer-"

"We'll do what we can, Miss Goldberg," Chester announced, fighting to keep his temper in check, "but we'll do it legally. When you calm down, you'll see this is the best way. You might also recall that if any situation requires the use of force, then I'm wholly in charge. You may complain to General MacGregor if that's what you want. "

"Well, I'll think about it," she grumbled, climbing into the car.

"Really, Major Chester," exclaimed Tut from the back of the wagon as the engine turned over, "how can we simply leave like this? They might do anything with the artifact after we're gone." He nodded toward the ranch house.

"They could bury it somewhere in one of these endless fields. If it doesn't generate sufficient radiation of a type we can detect, we might never locate it. Or he could be overcome by a bumpkin's curiosity and try to take it apart. He might ruin it completely. The importance, the knowledge at stake here . . ." He shook his head in disbelief.

"This situation is absolutely insane. This would never happen in Massachusetts."

"That's right, Mr. Tut," admitted Chester, turning to look back over the seat as they backed up and the sergeant sent the car toward the highway. "This isn't Massachusetts. And if you don't believe me-" He pointed toward the house receding to one side and behind them. "-look over there, toward the front door. You'll see a very big teenage boy standing there with a rifle about as big as he is. He's been there ever since we started toward the barn.

"You don't go around threatening people out here, Mr. Tut. They don't look kindly on it, and they have a strong sense of right and wrong. If you and Miss Goldberg could have been a little more polite and acted less like barons of the fief, we might have been spared all this. It's too late now, though. You challenged that man, and he reacted."

"More polite, he says," Goldberg finally sputtered violently. "In the face of that, he asks us to be polite!"

Chester sighed and settled himself back in his seat alongside the driver. "Now we're going to have to get proper legal confirmation of our claim. That means telling at least one new person about the craft's landing. And this was supposed to be kept quiet." He glanced sharply over his left shoulder. "Or have you all forgotten that in your haste to get at the thing?"

"All right, sir, so it's supposed to be kept quiet, sir," fumed 'hit. "So let's do this quietly . . . quietly contact Fort Hood and have a couple of truckloads of troops brought in. Show the locals a bit of force. We'll show them that-"

Chester cut him off, shaking his head steadily. "You don't seem to understand, Mr. Tut. Not only isn't this Massachusetts, it's not Cam Ranh Bay or Saigon-or Moscow, either. We don't want these people talking to the media, now or later.

"Calm down and relax, and we'll salvage this business. Oh, I don't think you have to worry about this Shattuck burying or breaking into your precious UFO, either. Believe me, I'm just as anxious to get at its insides as you are."

"Why aren't you worried?" Goldberg asked challengingly.

"Because they like the craft -up there in the hayloft, lighting up their little 'Noel' sign and showing off the rest of their Christmas decorations. They didn't chase us off because they're planning anything underhanded. They did it because they think they're in the right."

Chester would have been interested in the family meeting the Shattucks were conducting as the station wagon skidded and bumped and bounced its frigid way toward distant Breckenridge. The result of that meeting was a long-distance phone call that Mrs. Shattuck placed to San Francisco.

Sheriff Biggers of Breckenridge was built like a tarnished fireplug. Enormous arms stuck out of his long white shirt, currently rolled up to his elbows. They were coated with a healthy crop of red curls, as was his head. He had the look of a man who'd worked hard all his life and would continue to do so until his body finally betrayed him.

His voice, however, was a surprise, as gentle and smooth as processed cheese. "You say this thing landed on Shattuck's property, hmm? I know J.W. and his missus." Biggers chuckled at a private thought. "The wrong people to get riled, Major."

"But surely you can see the importance to us of this discovery, Sheriff," Goldberg broke in ingratiatingly from the back of the office. "This represents our first contact with another intelligent civilization. We must be allowed to examine it."

"Yes, I can see all that, ma'am," admitted Biggers, scratching a thick ear. "Trouble is, as near as I can see, the Shattucks have a right to it, since it came down on their land." He spread his hands in an

expansive gesture of helplessness.

"If J.W. wants to lay a claim to it, I don't see as how I can legally go in and take it away from them."

"This is ridiculous," snorted Tut, turning away in mounting frustration. "Utterly ridiculous!"

"That it may be," conceded the sheriff, "but I've heard that about plenty of laws. Ridiculous or not, they all seem to stand up in court. Now, if you want me to go out to J.W.'s and take that spaceship or whatever it is away from him, you'd better find me some legal grounds to do it with."

"There is, naturally, no precedent for such a matter," mused Calumet thoughtfully. "If we could obtain a writ from a high authority giving you permission, from the capital, say. An order from the governor of the state of Texas ought to suffice, don't you think?"

Biggers nodded very slowly, impressed. "If you can get me that, I'd certainly be bound to go in and enforce it, son."

Chester looked at the younger scientist with fresh respect. "Can you do that?"

"I think so." The Cajun physicist smiled shyly. "May I use your telephone, Sheriff?"

"I'd like to let you, Mr. Calumet, but," he said apologetically, "the county budget's been kind of tight lately. They keep a tight watch on how we spend our money. There's a pay phone just outside the station."

Calumet grinned. "That will do." The three scientists left the office, leaving Chester and the sheriff seated across from each other. The driver sat impassively nearby.

"I don't think I've ever seen three people quite as excited as that bunch of yours," Biggers said conversationally.

"They have reason to be excited, Sheriff. If I didn't have so many other things to worry about, I'd be just as excited and anxious as they are."

A moment's silence, then Biggers leaned forward suddenly and spoke in a fashion new to Chester. "You know, I've been a sheriff, deputy and chief, in this county for close on thirty-five years now, and not once in those thirty-five years did I have occasion to think I might be making the wrong decision." He looked across at the major.

"What do you think? Should I go take that thing from J.W. without waiting for proper authority?"

The honesty and forthrightness that would keep Joe Chester from ever making brigadier replied, "I wouldn't go against thirty-five years' judgment, Chief."

Biggers leaned back in his frayed swivel chair, pleased and relieved. "That's what I was hoping you'd say, Major." He drew a plug of tobacco from his shirt pocket, bit a hunk off, and offered the same to Chester.

The major waved it away with a smile. "No thanks, never tried the stuff. "

"You should," Biggers told him, his mouth full of juice. "Helped me give up cigarettes thirty years ago."

He smiled a wide, brown-stained smile. "Also helped me get rid of my first wife." And he leaned over and spit delicately into a cuspidor hidden behind the old desk.

Calumet hadn't been bragging. He knew the right people in Austin, but even so, the wheels of government creaked instead of spinning. It was several days before the formal document, dutifully signed by the governor, arrived at the post office in Breckenridge.

Thus armed, the little group set out again for the Shattuck ranch, accompanied by a second car that held a deputy and a reluctant Sheriff Biggers.

It also held Josiah Chester. The second car provided him with away of avoiding the company of the three complaining scientists. They'd had him crawling the walls of the country motel the past few days while they waited for the state order to arrive. He enjoyed the chance to ride instead with the soft-spoken sheriff for a change.

"Do you think we'll have any trouble?" Chester was asking him.

Biggers didn't have to consider the question. "Naw. J.W.'s a good man. Stubborn, sure, and at that only half as stubborn as his missus, but they're good law-abiding folks. J.W. will read every word of that writ"-he gestured at the formal-looking envelope resting on the patrol car's dash-"and then his wife'll read it, and then he'll shrug and say, 'What's got to be will be.' And then he'll do his damndest to help you get that thing out of his barn and loaded for you.

"A shame I have to do this. You folks shouldn't have tried to push them around."

"Not me," corrected Chester quickly. "My charges let their excitement runaway with them."

"I guess I can understand that," declared the sheriff sympathetically. "I'm looking forward to seeing this visitor from Mars myself."

"Not Mars," Chester corrected gently. "We're fairly sure it's from much farther out than Mars."

"Is that God's truth?" Biggers murmured. "Me, I still can't believe in radio."

It was late afternoon hurrying toward evening when the two cars pulled into the open area before the sprawling Shattuck home. This time it was Mrs. Shattuck who was first out to greet them, wiping dirty hands on the seat of her jeans. They were surely the same ones, Chester reflected, that she'd been wearing days ago, only they'd been washed in the interval.

"Expected to see you back sooner than this," she said by way of hello.

"We moved as fast as we could," Goldberg assured her, the touch of frost in her voice nicely matching that in the air.

"I'll bet you did;" said the younger woman. She turned, roared toward the house. "David! Go find your father. Tell him the eggheads from Houston are back!"

Chester repressed a smile even as Tut and Calumet winced, while Goldberg grew more superior than before.

"Hello, Amos," Mrs. Shattuck said to the sheriff.

He tapped the brim of his hat as he replied. "Afternoon, Beth. I'm sorry about this."

"Damn silly of you. We told these folks to look you up. Now, don't you worry about a thing, Amos. You just do what you have to do."

"I thought you'd say something like that, Beth."

She looked impatiently behind her, standing on tiptoe to see over a fence. "Now, where's J.W.-that tank inlet filter ought to be fixed by now."

"Is that it?" the sheriff asked Chester, pointing toward the barn. His voice was touched with awe.

The multiple-faced craft sat as before on the lip of the hayloft, still shining as brightly as before. Its multiple patterns of inlaid lights continued their steady, exotic blinking. Even this far away Chester could hear the faint mechanical beat from within.

Hmm-hmm-hmm . . . buzz-hmm-buzz . . . tick! Hmmhmm-hmm . . . buzz-hmm-buzz . . . tick!

"Sure is pretty," was the sheriff's first and only comment.

"Ain't it, though?" agreed Beth Shattuck. "Fits in right nice with the rest of the lights." Sarah Goldberg gave her a venomous glare..

"That J.W.?" asked the sheriff.

Beth Shattuck turned and looked. "That's him." Her extraordinary voice rent the air again. "Hurry up, dammit!"

Chester recognized the tall, lanky figure of Jesse Shattuck but not the man accompanying him. Both were dressed alike in flannel shirts, dirt-encrusted jeans, and well-used work shoes, although those worn by the stranger were not nearly as scuffed and battered as the rancher's. Something else didn't fit. The man's long white sideburns were too neatly clipped, his demeanor different even at a distance. His face was pink instead of earthenware-red like Shattuck's.

"Howdy," the rancher said, greeting Chester. He ignored the scientists, nodded once at the sheriff. "Hello, Amos."

"J.W.," the sheriff murmured. "Who's your friend?"

"Oh, this is an old acquaintance of the missus, Amos., Mr. Wheaton, meet Sheriff Biggers."

"I'm pleased," the smaller, softer man said, shakin hands. He had a voice like an off-tune organ, cracked butt powerful. He shook hands with Chester, stepped back.

"Would your first name by any chance be Cable?" asked Jean Calumet uncertainly.

"By any chance I am unable to deny it," the mad replied.

Chester revised his initial appraisal of the newcomer again. He was not, he decided firmly, a handyman.

Mentally he removed flannel shirt, dirty pants, a shoes from Wheaton, substituted a slightly loud th hundred-dollar suit, and combed the white hair. Meanwhile Calumet had turned to speak to Beth Shattuck.

"How do you and Mr. Wheaton happen to know o another? "

She smiled magnificently at him. "Cable was my agent's lawyer. Still is, I think."

" 'Agent?'" echoed the young scientist awkwardly.

Chester studied the rancher's wife intently, noted flashing black eyes, the elegant ebony mane, and the striking figure.

"The Story of Joshua, " he said abruptly, "Idyllwild River." She was smiling at him now, a smile he recognized fully. That film about sulky racing . . . He snapped his fingers in remembrance.

"Something Beauty, " he murmured.

"American Beauty, " she told him, nodding approval. "I quit acting when I turned fourteen, though. J.W. was working for a contractor in California. After the war we came back out here. His country-mine now." She gestured at the spacious ranch house, the sturdy old barn, and the land beyond.

"It's not Hollywood, thank God."

"This is all very interesting," broke in Goldberg impatiently. "While I'm certain we'd all love to listen to the details of Mrs. Shattuck's career, we have something rather more important to deal with."She looked expectantly at Biggers.

"Sheriff?"

"I know, ma'am, I know." He turned and walked back to the patrol car. When he returned, he had the fancy envelope in one hand. This he opened and handed the contents apologetically but firmly to Shattuck.

"J.W., this here's an order from the governor directing you to turn that alien satellite, extratres-" He stopped trying to recite the contents of the note and concluded, "Whatever it is, you're supposed to let these folks take it away with them."

"Let me see that, Jesse," murmured the church-organ voice of Wheaton. Shattuck handed the paper to the smaller -man, watched as he skimmed through the long document.

Tut and Calumet grew restless as the study continued. Goldberg ignored the proceedings, her gaze fixed on the multisided, radiant object ensconced in the hayloft opening.

Eventually Wheaton looked up, smiled. "This is very interesting, Sheriff, Major Chester. As long as we're exchanging missives . . ." He reached into the back pocket of his pants and withdrew a thick roll of paper. Opening the roll up, he shook the dry Texas dust from it. Chester counted an impressive number of attached sheets.

"Let's see what we've got here," Wheaton began as, he flipped one page after another. "This one here is a restraining order forbidding any representative of any agency of the United States government, or any other government, from removing any item whatsoever from the property henceforth called the Shattuck ranch. Attached is a map of said ranch and copy of the title deed, going back to 1874." Wheaton looked up at Shattuck. "Fine man, your grandfather, Jesse."

He continued turning pages, mumbling to himself just, low enough so that Chester couldn't decipher his words. "Here," he continued, more lucidly, "is a court order, granting temporary title to the object, or device, said object or device to be referred to in all proceeding henceforth as the 'extraterrestrial artifact,' jointly to Jesse William Shattuck and family. Permission is given for them to do with said extraterrestrial artifact as they please, understanding that they will do all in their power to maintain said artifact in good condition." Again his eyes met Chester's.

"That means they can turn it over to you if they desire, or they can use it for a doorstop, a conversation piece, or even a Christmas ornament." He returned his attention to new pages.

"Any objection to the aforementioned order or order shall be submitted for consideration by any individual government agency to the proper legal authorities." Wheaton handed the sheaf of paper to a thoroughly awed Biggers.

"You can see there, Sheriff, that all included forms and orders are signed by Justices A. Hammond and G. Lamar of the Supreme Court of the State of Texas. I believe they take precedence even over an executive directive of the governor's.

"Of course," he added pleasantly, "the governor can always declare a state of emergency and call out the National Guard to come seize my client's property. He is welcome to do so. However-" He turned to face increasingly nervous Chester. "-I believe that might result in a touch more publicity than any of us would like."

"Let's see," he mused speculatively, "the government rides in to steal legally claimed property from its discoverers. We could have some nice posed shots of the Shattucks standing on their front porch while Guard troops in helmets and full battle gear stand lined up across from them, machine guns and bazookas at the ready to deal with this massive threat to the American way of life. That would look impressive, say, on the front page of The Washington Post. What do you think, Major?"

All eyes focused on Chester, attention he could have done without. Hopefully he looked at Biggers, but the sheriff wanted nothing to do with that ream of legal documentation.

"As far as I can see, I've been overruled, Major. I'm willin' to do what you think best, though."

Thanks a whole lot, Chester thought. "I think," he ventured after a brief pause, "we'd better go back to Breckenridge and consider this very carefully."

Perham Tut made a noise Chester wouldn't have thought was in him. He held his temper in check, managing also to ignore the low stream of bitter curses falling from Goldberg's lips. Calumet said nothing. He was eyeing Wheaton respectfully.

"We'll be back, of course," Chester added, trying to salvage something from the meeting. Wheaton didn't appear fazed.

"I expect so. But if you'll excuse us-" He glanced up at the rancher. "-we'll have to hurry, Jesse, if we're

going to get that new pipe put in before sundown."

Shattuck nodded. Both men turned and headed for the rear of the house as the disgruntled scientists piled back into the station wagon.

"What now?" Goldberg wanted to know as they chugged and bumped back toward Breckenridge. "In the papers we don't want anything, or a long court fight, either. "

"United States of America versus J. W. Shattuck and family," Calumet added: Chester winced at the field day the papers would have with that one. "Uncle Colossus and the Hitlerian physicists against just plain country folks. No, Major, we have to find another way."

"I'm open to suggestions," admitted Chester tersely.

It was silent in the car for several minutes. "Washington is still expecting to hear from us," the young chemist continued. "It occurs to me that we have preserved secrecy very well. No one knows yet that we've actually located the spacecraft."

Chester started. Calumet was right. Only the five of them-and Sheriff Biggers-knew that an alien craft had set down on the planet in one piece.

"I think it's time, Major, to bring larger forces to bear," Calumet went on briskly. "You'd best notify your General MacGregor and also the Pentagon. I'll want all three of us to speak with NASA headquarters. When more important people realize what we've found and convey it to their superiors, we should be able to persuade these people to give up the craft voluntarily."

"From what I've seen," Chester mused, "neither Shattuck nor his wife persuades too easily. Who'd you have in mind to try and persuade them?"

"The President," Calumet said, staring out the front windshield past Chester. "It will take several days for those other people I mentioned to convince him of the urgency of the matter. After he is convinced, I'm sure he'll rush to cooperate with us."

"What about Wheaton?"

Calumet frowned. "He's going to be a problem. He's just obstinate and smart enough to make trouble. But the President can be a pretty persuasive man. He might be able to convince even a maverick legal genius like Cable Wheaton that it would be in the best interests of his clients to allow matters to take their natural and inevitable course . . . quietly." He leaned back in the seat.

"For example, I've always heard that Wheaton aspires to sit on the Supreme Court some day. A President has a lot of options at his command. Who knows what pressures, benign and otherwise, he might bring to bear?"

What, indeed? wondered a benumbed Chester, feeling way out of his depth and wishing fervently he was back home before the family fireplace with Charlene and the kids.

Hmm-hmm-hmm . . . buzz-hmm-buzz . . . tick! sang they yellow blossom out of the galactic vastnesses from itss~ snug perch in the barn loft.

High above, the moon had commenced its descent, but the stars still shone bright and clear. Several hours remained until sunrise. Nothing stirred on the grounds of the ranch.

On the farm road up from the ranch house a large eighteen-wheeler slowed and stopped, pulling onto the road shoulder. Its headlights dimmed. Back doors opened, and a ramp slid out. A tight knot of men moved quickly down the ramp, ran forward.

At the cab of the truck they were joined by a bigger, older man. Plans were discussed in muted voices. Clutching various instruments of a nonscientific nature, they began moving, crouched low but still running, toward the ranch house.

Behind them activity continued as other men within the truck struggled silently to rig a mobile winch and sling in expectation of the others' return.

As was usual lately, Chester was having a difficult time sleeping. The Korean and Vietnam wars had made light sleepers out of many men. He woke as he found himself reaching across the mattress for the woman who wasn't there.

Rubbing his eyes, he rolled over and stared at the ceiling. Once again unarguably, helplessly awake, he slid his legs to the side and sat up.

The three scientists, he knew, would be sound asleep in their respective rooms. The budget for this kind of endeavor provided for privacy for all concerned.

Disgusted with himself, envious of their ability to sleep, and unhappy with the way events had gone the last couple of days, he wrestled his fatigued form into his clothes. A check of his watch showed the wrong side of four A.M.-an insane hour.

Down the main street was a twenty-four-hour café frequented by off-freeway truckers. He filled his pockets with the usual paraphernalia without which a man felt unbalanced: wallet, keys, pocketknife, and small flashlight.

He would, he decided, have a couple of cups of coffee, stretch them out for as long as possible, read the morning paper from Dallas, and then maybe eat some breakfast.

Hopefully he could at least prolong things until the sun came up.

He closed the motel-room door behind him, not bothering to lock it. That was one of the advantages of living outside a city. Partway through the motel lot he paused, thinking. This morning his loneliness was particularly strong. A little company would do him good.

The soft-spoken companionship of the sergeant was more to his liking than that of the scientists, who would be downright uncommunicative this time of the morning, even Calumet.

Turning, he walked two units past his own room and knocked on the door of number six. It was possible the sergeant was already awake. Chester had encountered him down at the truck stop several times, often before he arrived himself. He wondered if Pat had as much trouble sleeping as he did. -

There was no response, and he knocked again, louder. One last time. It was just as well, he decided. Pat was probably down at the café already and would be glad to see him.

But when he arrived, a quick search of the small dining area showed no sign of the sergeant. Chester took a seat, thinking perhaps that Pat was in the men's room. Ten minutes of waiting dispelled the likelihood of that.

Chester was puzzled. No place else in town except the gas station across the street would be open for several hours, and he could see that the sergeant wasn't lingering there, chatting with the sleepy attendant.

Prompted by something stronger than just curiosity, he left his coffee half-finished and strolled back to the motel. Further knocks, verging on pounding, produced no response from within number six. The station wagon was still parked in front of the room.

Had the sergeant gone off on some errand of his own? That seemed unlikely, since he was under strict orders to be available to drive at any time.

Chester made a decision he regretted in advance. Probably he'd come out looking the fool, he thought as he walked toward the office. There he woke the groggy manager-owner of the motel and borrowed the duplicate key to room six.

He opened the room. The sergeant was not in bed. Nor was he in the bathroom, hiding in a closet, or elsewhere about. Chester checked the bed carefully, noted that it hadn't been slept in.

"Lookin' for your friend, the big fella?"

Chester spun, reaching for the pistol at his hip that wasn't there. It was only the bathrobe-clad form of the motel manager.

Chester forced himself to relax, startled at how tense he was. "Yes, of course," he explained.

"Could have told you 'bout him," the manager declared with an air of superiority. "Heard a noise out back a couple of hours ago . . . don't know exactly when. Didn't look at my clock. I'm used to engines wakin' me up. Get a lot of folks come in the middle of the night.

"There was this big rig pulled up behind the back rooms. It struck me funny, you know? Because there's no reason for a truck to pull in here. Truckers, they sleep in their cabs and park behind the night station 'cross the street. Never had a one take a room here.

"I saw a couple of fellas get out. They met somebody else . . . big fellas, coulda been your friend. They yakked a minute or two, then all climbed in and drove off together. Didn't see nothin' to make noise about, so I went back to bed."

"You're sure it was my friend?" Chester asked tightly.

"Nope. Said it coulda been," the manager replied. "But I am sure of one thing."

"What's that?"

"I'm still tired." He turned and walked back toward his office, leaving Chester standing paralyzed with anxiety in front of an ominously deserted room number six.

He whirled finally, ran to the phone, and stopped with one hand about to pick up the receiver. Part of

the conversation he'd had with the sheriff as he'd driven out to the ranch came back to him.

"They sure like their privacy," Biggers had told him. "They've got a TV, all right, and radio. But they pipe and filter their water out of their tank, and they've got their own generator for power. There are gas lines running all over that part of the county, and J.W. sneaks some of what they need from here and there. No telephone, though. No real contact with the outside world except for the mail."

No telephone, Chester thought frantically. His hand left the receiver. The three scientists would have to be told eventually, of course. But not now, not yet.

He picked up the phone, firmly this time, and dialed. There was a pause and a click, and a voice said, "Post operator. May I help you, sir?"

"This is Major Josiah Chester. I have an emergency call for General MacGregor. He'll be at his home now, operator. "

About an hour to have troops here, MacGregor had told him. But that had been over a month before. Were the helicopter-borne special units still standing by?

They'd better be, he thought grimly.

The cluster of seven men had reached the entrance to the open, flat area in front of the house and barn. It was well lit by the steady glow from the alien device. Each man was clad entirely in black and had black streaked across cheeks, forehead, and other projecting parts of his face.

Turning, the big man in the lead caught the attention of his companions. "If possible, no killing," he instructed them. "If you must, do it fast."

Someone in the back of the group spoke up. "What about using the guns? Should we-"

"It doesn't matter. There's no one near enough to hear, and even if there were, people here fire off guns all the time. That's one thing we don't have to worry about, but I'd prefer to avoid any killing."

"Why?" a coldly casual voice asked.

"It's always better to be neat than sloppy," the leader explained. He pointed toward the house, moving his gaze from one man to another. "You, you, you, and you, forma semicircle from the front to the rear side of the house. I don't think there are any other doors.

"You two, get out the suppressant. I can see the dogs from here, sleeping on the front porch. Move fast. They might not wake up in time to do much barking. The rest of you come with me to the barn."

Short nods all around. This group was not given much to talking. Each was a professional, knew his job. They moved forward.

Cotton, the setter, raised his head at the rapid approach of the strange human. The scent was unfamiliar, and so was the face. As he started to growl softly, Gin also woke.

Something went puff in the setter's face. In his dog fashion he felt an overwhelming tiredness. Quickly

and quietly, both animals fell asleep again.

Already the three men in the lead had reached the base of the barn. Like a sphere full of jewels, the alien craft shone above the foil sign, tiny, far duller decorative lights strung to either side of it.

Hmm-hmm-hmm . . . buzz-hmm-buzz . . . tick! Hmmhmm-hmm . . . buzz-hmm-buzz . . . tick! it murmured mechanically.

"Got the roll?" the leader inquired. One of the two men with him smiled, patted the pack on his back. It contained a fine, superstrong mesh net and equally strong cables. The rancher had clearly used the hay winch and pulley arrangement to raise the craft into the loft. It would serve conveniently for getting it down again. The other man started to assemble the tiny collapsing cart strapped to his back.

If all went well, they would have the precious device down and set on the cart in a few minutes. The family would sleep on peacefully, hearing and seeing nothing. In the morning they would miss it, but by then it would be on its way out of the country.

They opened the barn door quietly, with a minimum of squeaks, thanks to the judicious use of the oilcan brought for just that purpose. Everything had been thought of and carefully planned out.

There was movement inside, and the two men froze, but it was only the uneasy shuffling of the two horses and the cows inside.

They mounted the metal ladder leading to the hayloft, were joined soon by the third man. The leader watched as they worked, looking with satisfaction out toward the road, where the truck sat waiting.

One man used a convenient rake to pull the hay cable into the loft. He started to arrange the net over the device while his companion sought to slip the net underneath it where possible. This finished, he hung by his arms from the stout support beam and oiled the pulley.

The net was attached by cables to the pulley hook, much as a bale of hay would be. The leader leaned out and beckoned. Leaving his position in front of the house, the nearest of four guards ran over to the barn. The leader met him in front of the doors. Together they took up the slack in the thick rope running through the pulley.

A signal to the men above produced a wave in response. In the loft, both men sought to make sure the device was well encased in the net. It remained only to slide it a little to the right and then to lock the net shut beneath.

The larger of the two put both hands against the side of the glowing yellow artifact and shoved gently to fit it perfectly in the net. It wasn't terribly heavy and started to move without trouble.

Unexpectedly, the yellow glow intensified to a brightness that drowned out the hundreds of lights set inside. Both men were tossed aside as if by a giant hand. Neither let out a squeal, a yell, or so much as a deep breath. But each lay unconscious, one in a very unnatural position. They continued to breathe softly, but they did not move.

Below, the leader had let go of the rope at the moment of the flash. He'd seen at least one of the men in the loft thrown backward, and now he cursed silently to himself. A muttered order to his companion sent the other man toward the barn door.

Hmm-hmm-hmm . . . buzz-femur-buzz . . . tick! Tick! fecka-mmmmmmm . . .

The yellow glow increased further, and the steady song of the device changed to a steady, rich whine. As he put a hand on the barn door, something that looked like a thick yellow wire reached down from the device. It was not metal, however. It wasn't even solid. If it was light, it did not behave in the manner of light. It curved and bent at odd angles.

It touched the man on the chest. He stood frozen for a moment as the light ran halolike over his body. When the tight went away, he collapsed, making a slight noise as though a bit of carrot or chicken bone had become caught in his throat.

His eyes never moving from the alien object, although by now the yellow glow was almost too strong to look at, the leader began backing slowly away from the barn. The yellow cable had not vanished. It continued to twist and turn like wire, though he could see through it easily.

The tenuous tentacle started to move along the ground in front of the barn, occasionally touching the ground like a dog hunting for a scent. When it touched earth, little puffs of dirt would jump explosively though silently into the air, as if a bullet had struck ground.

Backing away faster, the leader called to his men, not caring now if those in the house heard him. The thread abruptly swung over his head and touched one of the men guarding the house. He dropped his gun, and his hands went to his neck where the yellow light had touched him as he fell forward.

Now the leader had turned and was running, running, his heart pounding with fear of the unknown. He wanted to scream but couldn't spare the wind. The light continued moving over his head.

At last he reached the truck. Someone leaned out of the cab, waving wildly at him. As he did so, the yellow light passed through the glass windshield and touched him. He slumped, his upper body, head, and arms dangling over the door.

Like a live thing, the thread moved to the back of the truck and touched the man who stood paralyzed there. Then it curled around and began probing inside the open trailer.

Changing his course, the leader found himself sprinting through the dark brush. Prickly pear and Spanish sword tore at his neat black coveralls, and he felt blood running down his legs. Something heavy yet not oppressive tickled the middle of his back. It felt uncannily like a smooth finger rubbing his spine. He smelled marzipan and felt himself falling before he started to fall.

Nothing stirred outside the Shattuck house.

Mmmmmmm-ticka, tick! tick! Hmm-hmm-hmm . buzz-hmm-buzz . . . tick!

Chester ignored the noise in the seat behind him as he piloted the station wagon recklessly along the familiar road out of Breckenridge. They should arrive at the same time as the copters from Fort Hood. He underestimated the commotion his early-morning call to the general had caused.

Considerable confusion reigned when they drove up to the ranch. The traits had already arrived. More people than the land there had ever felt at one time were roaming around the ranch buildings and surrounding ground.

Two big transport helicopters were settled like monster beetles on the road ahead. Armed men with many-patched uniforms and funny hats milled about in confusion.

Chester was the last out of the station wagon as he cut the engine before the ranch house. All three scientists were already heading at their respective top speeds for the barn. Their worries, and Chester's, turned out to be groundless.

Even from here he could see the alien device resting in its former position high up in the hayloft; despite the noise, he could hear it humming its atonal hymn. Gem lights winked on and off within a globe of moon.

His first thought satisfied, he turned his attention to the house, headed toward it.

A smartly clad ranger blocked his path with a slim M-18. "Sorry, sir, no one permitted past this point without authorization."

Chester fumbled for identification, trying to locate the proper cards and peer past the bulk of the soldier as well.

"I'm Major Josiah Chester," he explained, "Air Force Intelligence. I'm the one who placed the emergency call that brought you all out here."

The soldier listened impassively, noncommittally. It was the printed identification that pleased him. After that careful study; he stepped aside. "Go on in, Major."

The first thing he saw in the big living room was a very alive Beth Shattuck and a long row of bodies. They were of indeterminate nationality and size, alike only their clothing. Some lay frozen in odd positions. They looked like a family of ravens worked on by a not-too-steady-handed taxidermist.

"Mornin', Major," Beth Shattuck greeted him brightly. "Seems we've been invaded twice tonight." She indicated the row of near corpses. "First by these. Then by your friends. They are your friends, aren't they?" He nodded ruefully. "Then they come swooping down with the most god-awful yelling and hollering you can imagine. Like to scared the chickens plumb to death.

"Cotton and Gin woke up woozy right when it happened. They're both in David's room hiding under his bed, and nothing can get them out. I got tired of shoutin' at those two bitches, so I came out here. What's goin' on? Who are these ugly catatonics-" She gestured again at the row of bodies. "-and why the invasion? You folks tryin' to make a comedy picture or somethin'?"

"There's no comedy to it, Mrs. Shattuck," Chester told her softly as he moved from one softly breathing, motionless form to the next. He stopped at the one he was hunting for, turned it over. Frightened, angry eyes glared back at him helplessly.

"Excuse me, sir?"

Chester looked up from the limp form into the face of an earnest captain of special forces. He repeated his identification, verbal and written, for the officer's benefit.

The captain stood back while Chester went through the sergeant's pockets, acutely aware of those eyes following him. Other than that, the big man didn't twitch a muscle, though Chester could feel as well as

hear the man breathing.

There was nothing in the man's pockets that proved particularly instructive, unless it was the exceedingly large amount of cash. He fondled a bent, smudged card on which numbers were listed for girlfriends, bowling alleys, and restaurants. Odd, but all the numbers were out of state.

It might have been his imagination, but it seemed to Chester that when he handled that particular item the sergeant's eyes widened slightly. He handed the card to the captain, along with the cash and the rest of the items.

"While Intelligence is running checks on these people and their identities, have them research the numbers on that card, delicately. They might turn up some interesting people at the other end of each of them."

"Yes, sir," acknowledged the captain, saluting respectfully.

"Now, what happened here?" Chester asked him.

"Nothing, sir. We flew out as fast as we could, putting on our boots on board ship. Someone got somebody big awfully excited."

"That was me," Chester told him.

"We'd been standing by for weeks," the captain went on, "told to be ready for an unspecified emergency. When we got the call, we were ordered to prepare to land shooting. But when we came in, no one challenged us.

"We found these-" He indicated the bodies, a couple of which were beginning to twitch. "-scattered between that barn, all along the road up to a big semi-I don't know if you can see it in the darkness, sir."

"We passed it coming in," Chester said.

"There's a fancy sling and winch arrangement inside the rear trailer of it, sir, along with a pile of legitimate cargo-cover, we presume. We were informed on the way about the satellite."

Chester did not enlighten the captain further. "It seems pretty obvious they came here to steal it, sir. We've spent most of our time waiting for someone to give us new orders." He looked hopefully at Chester.

"Load up your men, go home, and forget about this morning," the major instructed him. "You've done your job." He gestured with a thumb at the now stirring, and moaning bodies nearby. "Make sure these are turned over to base intelligence for 'debriefing.'" His stress on the last word was peculiar.

"If they can be debriefed. What happened to them?"

"Just a minute, sir." The captain turned, shouted to a man bent over one of the forms. He rose, walked over, to join them. Chester noted the captain's bars and medical insignia on his field uniform.

"Never saw anything quite like it," was his response to Chester's questions. "Full paralysis of every voluntary muscle. Those necessary to maintain the life functions are operating normally."

"Any idea what caused it?"

"None." The doctor shook his head slowly. "I can't imagine what happened."

"I can," said a soft voice. All three officers turned, looked out the front door.

Shattuck, obviously bored and annoyed with the whole business, was standing and watching the milling soldiers. His son sat curled nearby on a swing bench. There was a kitten in his lap.

Chester had noticed the abundance of half-wild cats swarming about the ranch on his first arrival. Now, though, it occurred to him to wonder how the cats and farm fowl coexisted. He mentioned it to the rancher.

"That's what I'm talking about," Shattuck said, pleased. "It's just like the coyote."

"What coyote?" Chester asked.

"Normally the dogs keep them well clear of the henhouse," the rancher explained. "But when it gets as cold as it's been lately, we let them sleep on the porch. I wouldn't put a good dog out in the snow any more than I would a good man.

"Those damn coyotes are smart enough to know when the dogs are tied up here instead of out back. That's when they come in quick and quiet, and I end up losing a hen a week. I'd rather do that than lose Cotton or Gin. They're part of the family."

"I understand," a new voice said. Chester saw that Jean Calumet had left the barn to join the little group on the porch. "I've got three dogs myself, back home . . . Don't have the temperature problems you do, though."

Shattuck examined the younger man with a fresh eye. "Where you from, son?"

"Little town near Baton Rouge," came the reply. Shattuck nodded as if that explained everything.

"About the coyote," Chester reminded the rancher curiously.

"Yeah. We came out one morning, a couple of days ago, and found two of them, a male and his bitch, lying side by side just outside the henhouse. They'd dug under the fence I'd put up around it. So I guess they'd already been inside and were coming out again, with one bird between them.

"When they come out, something had stopped them clean. They just lay there in the yard. I thought they were dead at first, but you could see their eyes move and that they were still breathing. So David and I took them way out behind the tank. When we checked them yesterday evening, we saw where they'd gotten up and run off. I don't expect them to come back again. Something shook them up pretty bad.

"Now, this doctor here has been saying that something knocked these fellows down and frazzled them good without killing them. They look just like those two coyotes."

"Make a note, Captain," Chester told the special forces officer, "of when we can expect them to come around again."

"Yes, sir."

Under the captain's direction, stretchers were used to ferry the motionless black-clad shapes to the waiting helicopters. When the whup-whup of many blades had faded to the south, Calumet spoke quietly to the rancher.

"You realize what this means, don't you; Mr. Shattuck?"

"Always did hate rhetorical questions," came the piercing voice of Beth Shattuck. "They're what pass for smarts in Hollywood. Ask a lot of questions that you can make other folk give the answers to and they think you're downright brilliant. Suppose you tell us what it means, good-lookin'."

Slightly unsettled at the compliment, Calumet wrestled with a reply. "It means," he finally burst out, "that that thing up in your hayloft is dangerous. It paralyzed a couple of animals, and now it's apparently done the same thing to a large group of armed men. I saw guns in that room. Did any of you hear a shot?"

"Can't say as we did," Shattuck confessed. Calumet smiled grimly.

"That means that the craft-" He pointed toward the glowing object up in the barn. "-incapacitated nearly dozen experienced, no doubt ruthless individuals? whether they were directly in front of it or out on road, before any of them could resist in any way. I believe any reasonable legal authority, on learning that, would classify the device as dangerous and order it removed by the proper supervisory personnel.

"What will your Mr. Wheaton have to say about that?" he finished.

"Don't know," Shattuck admitted.

"He was called back to San Francisco on business," his wife informed them, "but he'll be back if we need him, don't you worry. All we have to do is give him a call."

"Give him a call?" Chester looked confused. "I thought you didn't have a telephone out here."

"We don't. We got a lady in Cisco takes phone calls for us and relays them to the ranch via CB radio. We can get messages out the same way. One of them sent Cable hotfooting out of here two days ago. Took the plane from Abilene to Dallas and then out to the coast." Her expression turned angry.

"Now, that thing up there hasn't killed a soul. It didn't kill those coyotes, and I don't expect it really injured those men. But I can see how you could jumble it up in a court to where you'd make it look like the thing was dangerous."

"Please believe me, Mrs. Shattuck," Calumet pleaded, "we don't want to take anything that's rightfully yours. You'll be suitably reimbursed just for finding it, I promise in the name of the government. In fact, in a few days you should be hearing from-"

"The President?" David blurted from the swing. "Ah, he called two nights ago. It was something!"

"I see," murmured Calumet, clearly surprised. "Uh, what did he say?"

"Pretty much what you all have told us, Mr. Calumet," Shattuck informed them. "Went on about how important the proper study of that thing would be to the country. How I ought to do my patriotic duty and turn it over to you without causing anyone any trouble and about how, like you just said, the government would make things right by us." He paused.

"I told him that if he wanted to make things right by us, he ought to take a look at how our taxes have gone up here for the past eight years."

"What did he say?" inquired a fascinated Chester.

"Said he'd look into it. Sounded like he meant it, too." The rancher pulled a pipe from a shirt pocket, commenced stuffing it with tobacco. At least, Chester was fairly sure it was tobacco.

"Reckon he's no better and no worse than any other Washington politician. They all sound sincere. Anyhow," Shattuck finished, lighting up, "I told him we'd cooperate."

"You did!" Calumet seemed to rise off the ground, turned to shout toward the barn. "Sarah, Perry-we can have it."

"In four days time," Beth Shattuck put in. Calumet turned back, blinking.

"In four days? Why four days?"

"Well," she went on, since her husband was puffing away, "we don't believe like some folks do in keeping the lights up until New Year's. It's Christmas we celebrate!. People think it's kind of funny of us to take them down so early, but then, they think we're kind of funny too."

"That's for sure," David put in, evidently relishing his family's notoriety.

"And they're right, for the most part," his mother went on. "For hereabouts, we are somethin' out of ordinary. Of course, we think everybody else around is a bit crazy, so there's a nice balance struck."

"Four days," Calumet grumbled. "I suppose we can wait, but-" He indicated the empty living room "-what if more of their types show up?"

"Now, I have to admit, that's a problem," agreed Shattuck, speaking around the stem of his pipe. "Soviets, you think?"

"Possibly," replied Chester guardedly. "One of them, their leader, was our driver. They knew exactly what was going on all the time, through him. But we have nothing far to indicate who they were working for." He indicated the fluorescent alien craft.

"That would have been worth anybody's trouble. Sure it might have been the Soviets, maybe the Chinese." his surprise, he found he was chuckling. "Or perhaps the French, or the Rockefeller Foundation, I don't know. Whoever it was will find out how monumentally unsuccessful they were.

"So if you don't mind, just as a precaution, we'll post a suitable guard around the ranch for the next four days."

"You don't mean you're going to let them keep it up there?" a startled Calumet broke in.

"What difference will four days make, Mr. Calumet?" Chester wanted to know, speaking in a sharp military manner for the first time. He was feeling a little lightheaded. "Remember the unfavorable publicity we could generate. We don't want Mr. Wheaton flying back from San Francisco with a planeload of panting photographers drooling at his heels.

"When the proper time comes, I want to see the public informed of our discoveries through scientific journals and channels, as I'm certain you do-not through the National Enquirer. Besides, it appears that the device likes it here. Any attempt to move it before we understand what motivates it and we could all be lying like logs out in the yard there.

"Anyhow," he added at the crestfallen expression on the young scientist's face, "I don't see why we couldn't set up a few trailers here where you could study the device without having to move it . . . if the Shattucks will give us permission." He faced the rancher.

"Long as they don't go breaking it apart until after the twenty-fifth," Shattuck finally agreed. He knocked his pipe against a post, worked to refresh it. "After that they can take it apart to their heart's content." He turned and stared at the subject of the discussion.

"It sure seems a shame, though, as pretty as it is." He let out a deep sigh, then turned back to Chester. "Not that we object to being protected, you understand, but be sure your people stay outside our fence. I don't want them scaring the cows and tramping through the winter garden."

"Don't worry, Mr. Shattuck," Chester reassured him, glad to be on familiar ground again. "They'll be stationed well away from the house. Remember, we don't want to draw attention to you."

"That's okay, then," Shattuck agreed. "You can put your trailers over there, behind the greenhouse."

Chester turned, squinted into the darkness at a dull white building across from the house. He hadn't paid much attention to it before.

"There are water outlets back there," Beth Shattuck told him. "You can hook your trailers up to them if you like . . . Tank's plenty full."

"Thank you. That's very hospitable of you," confessed Calumet, inclined to be friendly now. "What do you grow in your greenhouse, Mrs. Shattuck?" he asked . politely. "Tomatoes, house plants?"

She shook her head once, pulled out a pipe that matched her husband's, and began filling it. "Nope Tropical orchids. You'd be surprised what the market for fresh-grown orchids is in Dallas-Fort Worth. I've been experimentin' with some intriguing cross-pollination. I'll show you later if you're curious. Right now I'd better go, catch up on my beauty sleep. I need all I can get these, days." She turned and walked away, leaving the suave chemist standing open-mouthed.

The past several days Joe Chester had slept soundly. Tonight his sleep was especially deep, since he could rest secure in the knowledge that tomorrow the troublesome, fascinating alien device would be safely on its way via military helicopter to the Manned Space Center in Houston, allowing him to spend at least a portion of the holiday with his family.

So the shattering roar and subsequent rolling concussion came as even more of a shock than it would have in the weeks previous. Chester, wartime reactions still active, threw himself out of bed. He was on his feet and stumbling outside before the trailer cot had ceased trembling.

Freezing air formed a weathery gauntlet that stunned his still-warm skin even through the long woolen under wear. The numbness gradually gave way to a steady pounding.

A soft susurrant rose from the surrounding knot of trailers as others came awake, uncertain queries volleying from trailer to trailer. A glance up and down the road showed distant lights winking on. There were two battalions of crack but nonetheless trigger-ready troops stationed around the ranch, and they would need to know soon what was going on.

"Oh, my God, no!" an agonized voice sounded nearby. Then Calumet was rushing past him, clad in pajamas and robe, his bare feet kicking up dirt and gravel behind him as he ran toward the barn.

Goldberg and Tut appeared shortly thereafter, the big physicist struggling to clear his eyes and adjust his glasses simultaneously. Goldberg simply stared, her mouth moving slowly. She shivered a little and looked her age.

A light had gone out of the barnyard.

In its explosive departure the spacecraft had taken the front half of the barn roof with it. Bits and pieces of wood were still raining down on them, clattering like hail on the metal roofs of the trailers and bouncing off the sprawling ranch house nearby. From the front porch the two dogs were barking and whining piteously.

Looking toward the house, he saw that all three Shattucks were standing there, gazing at the barn. At least, he reflected with stunned relief, they'd elected to display the device on the barn instead of their home.

"Due west," a shrill-soft tone sounded behind him. Following Goldberg's instructions, he turned his eyes to the western sky. A bright star was rising heavenward there, shrinking in intensity as he watched. It was gone quickly.

Goldberg sat down on the hard earth, her old flannel nightgown crumpling devotedly around her, and sobbed. Chester had no words to assuage the loss of a lifetime's opportunity.

Tut was trying to comfort her, but Chester could sense that the younger man was having difficulty holding back tears himself.

As was often true of people in shock, Chester was unaware of his own paralysis. With the clarity of the stunned he noted how only wisps of hay were falling now. He noticed as well that there was no fire in the combustible soft and that none of the fallen fragments of wood were so much as scorched. Their mechanical visitor's method of propulsion was as infinitely cold as the reaches it was once again traversing-cold and silent.

There'd been no muted roar of pitiful, primitive rockets, no whine of energy building. The initial crack had been the sound of bare wood and metal giving way. The subsequent booming had been produced by air rushing in to fill the path displaced by the craft's departure. Again he looked at the vast hole in the barn and marveled at the acceleration achieved so rapidly.

A dejected figure was walking toward him, head staring dully at the ground. Calumet had both hands in the pockets of his robe, a picture of dejection too severe for the cold to affect. He stopped, noticing that the Shattucks had moved to stand midway between their home and the-barn. Chester strolled over to join them all.

"Well," said Beth Shattuck to the distraught Calumet, "it appears like you were right, after all."

"Right?" he muttered, seeming to only half hear her.

"Yep. About it bein' dangerous." She pointed for; ward. "Look what it went and did to our barn. Come on, J.W.," she urged her husband, "we'd better go reassure those fool cows or they'll give nothin' but Bulgarian buttermilk for a month."

The three Shattucks started for the remains of their barn. At least three and maybe four small gray-black cats of dubious pedigree trailed in their wake.

Again Chester stared upward in the direction taken by the vanished visitor from another world, another system. He found that he had to look away. The stars beneath that cloudless big country sky were pressing unbearably close all of a sudden.

"What do you think happened, Mr. Calumet-Jean?"

Somehow the chemist heard him and gave an indifferent shrug. "It was a robotic lander, probably similar in function to our advanced Viking landers. It set down here, gathered the information it was designed to, and left. Now it's on its way home, that's all." His gaze turned starward, unafraid.

"The operative question is, How long did it take coming? If it was ten years or something equally reasonable, we may finally meet some of those beings we always told ourselves are running around bumping in each other like crazy out there. If it took a thousand then neither you nor I will be around to see it."

"I wonder if it set down here accidentally." Chester murmured. "In a way they might be as disappointed as we were after the first couple of Mars landings." He nodded at the barn. "It couldn't have learned very much sitting up there."

"That all depends on what you want to study," countered Calumet. "I'm not so sure its touchdown here was as random as we might think. It was an incredibly sophisticated device. Can you conceive of an average family reacting to it as the Shattucks did? Their one reaction to it was that it was beautiful.

"Then we have the matter of the chicken-stealing coyotes which the device paralyzed, not to mention those thugs on their way to your base. I'd give twenty years of my life to have a look at the sensing equipment inside that thing.

"Somehow it must have made up its mind that it liked the Shattucks and this location and that it wasn't going to be moved. Furthermore, it was apparently intelligent enough to decide that the theft of chickens was detrimental to the family. Or that might just have been some sort of experiment. We'll never know. Not now."

"It's gone," noted Chester perfunctorily, "and there's nothing we can do about it. I'll make a report, calm the troops guarding the ranch, and then we can all go home, I guess. It's finished."

"I wonder," Calumet murmured, gazing heavenward,

"What?"

"Oh, nothing, really. It's just that it's not every night you see a new star recede into the firmament-funny coincidence."

"What is?" a puzzled Chester wanted to know.

Calumet looked at his watch. "That in a couple of hours dawn will break on the morning of the twenty-fifth." His smile was crooked. "Maybe we weren't meant to have too close a look at our guest this time around. Merry Christmas, Major."

Calumet wrapped his robe a little tighter around him and walked toward the big trailer that held sleeping quarters for the three scientists. Chester headed for his own and the field telephone inside.

He hesitated with the door half-open, even though he knew that the heat from the little electric heater was being sucked voraciously into the open air. His eyes went for the last time to the empty path the departed device had taken on its homeward course to no one knew where.

"And to all a good night," he whispered softly as he closed the door quietly behind him, shutting out the sky.