

SYNOPSIS

The accidental discovery of a faster-than-light drive by CHANDRAGUPTA RAO and CHANG PEI-FU near the end of the Twentieth Century has opened the way to interstellar exploration at a time when development of the Solar System is only well begun. In the early Twenty-first Century, a few Rao-Chang ships are sent out to seek colony sites among nearby stars, and one, the Archaeopteryx, is sent a hundred and thirty light-years out on a pure-research mission. DONALD LEWISTON, the astronomer who persuaded the World Science Foundation to support the expedition, hopes to overtake light from the supernova S Andromedae and perform observations which were not possible when the light passed Earth in 1885. He is accompanied by DIRK BOROWSKI, pilot and captain, and JONEL TURABIAN, a young man with both astrophysical and pilot's training who doubles as ship's mate and astronomer's assistant. Lewiston's observations are successful, but when the ship returns to Earth, two weeks overdue, he is insane and Borowski has been murdered.

The ship is met at Kennedy Spaceport in Florida by HENRY CLARK, Lieutenant Commissioner of Grants for the WSF, who was influential in getting the Archaeopteryx funded. Turabian tells him that Lewiston went berserk, possibly because of the psychological effects of super-c travel, and killed Borowski. He leaves the spaceport, saying he needs contact with Earth to reinforce his own sanity, and Clark summons JOE SANCHEZ, the Foundation's chief counselor.

Sanchez is appalled that Clark let Turabian wander off the base, suggesting that Turabian's story may not be entirely true and that Clark may lack some of the qualifications for effective use of power. Meanwhile Turabian conducts some investigations of his own, and when he is called back to the spaceport he admits that he has not told the whole truth. The Archaeopteryx's mission took it closer to the center of the galaxy—and its instruments showed that the galactic core has suffered a large-scale explosion. The radiation will begin reaching Earth in twenty years or less, and Turabian's independent investigations have convinced him that it will make Earth's surface uninhabitable. But it need not mean extermination. It may be possible for some people to survive either by hiding underground or by fleeing, using Rao-Chang ships at unprecedented speeds to reach a neighboring galaxy such as M31 in Andromeda. Clark finds both solutions unsatisfying, and suggests that Turabian go off on his own for a few days while they all try to think of a better solution.

Turabian goes to visit his fiancée, SANDY DUNBAR, in the mountains of eastern Tennessee. He tells her what has happened, and is relieved that she is willing to flee to M31 with him if the opportunity arises. She wonders whether there may be some significance in Lewiston's having had hallucinations about being followed in the period when he killed Borowski.

Henry Clark, though pessimistic, visits Chandragupta Rao to get his opinion on the feasibility of intergalactic escape such as Turabian suggested. Rao confirms his suspicion that it cannot help more than a very small number of people—and Rao himself has little interest in even that.

Clark leaves the interview deeply discouraged—and is informed by Sanchez that extraterrestrials have appeared near Earth, made radio contact, and are sending representatives to Kennedy Spaceport to talk to Clark. Clark, surprised and confused, awaits their arrival with Sanchez—and Rao, hastily and somewhat reluctantly summoned as a technical consultant.

The aliens, called "Kyyra," arrive in a small shuttle seemingly intended to be inconspicuous. There are three of them, all of imposing appearance to human eyes, led by a spokesman named BELDAN. Beldan explains that they saw the Archaeopteryx in space and followed it home. The Kyyra formerly lived near the galactic core and are already fleeing the explosion, having converted their home planets to faster-than-light ships using the Rao-Chang principle. They offer to help the inhabitants of Earth escape in the same way—by bodily moving the Earth to M31.

Clark is intrigued by the offer, but wonders what price they will ask in return. However, he decides it would be better not to ask at this time.

That night, while trying to decide whether to notify United Nations head FRANZ GERBER of the recent events, Clark is visited in his apartment by Rao. Rao is suspicious of the Kyyra offer, both because he wonders whether they can be trusted and because he suspects something sinister in their motives for the offer. Clark doesn't see the reason for the latter until Rao reminds him of the energy and time-dilation characteristics of the Rao-Chang drive. If Beldan's story is true, it seems inescapable that the Kyyra have been traveling very slightly above the speed of light. Such a speed seems to offer no advantages at all over traveling much faster—but it involves a huge amount of additional expense and trouble.

So the obvious and very puzzling question is, Why are they doing it that way?

Part 2

VIII

Word leaked, of course. Sometime during the hours of tossing and turning and staring into the darkness, Clark decided that he needed rest more than anything else, and switched off the alarm clock. When sleep finally came, it was fitful at first but then he sank deeper and deeper. When the phone finally woke him, it dragged him up from the depths as if through miles of thick syrup, until at last he found himself staring at the ceiling and observing dimly that it was light and the phone was ringing.

The fact eventually penetrated enough to make him reach out for the phone, more annoyed than curious or apprehensive. He managed to pick up the receiver and tuck it under his chin, propping himself up on one elbow. "Hullo?"

"Henry Clark," a painfully loud voice snapped crisply. "Is that you?"

"Yeah," Clark muttered. "Who—"

"Gerber here," said the voice. "Franz Gerber. You may remember me."

Gerber's voice dripped sarcasm. Clark worked diligently to finish waking his mind, but annoyance was still his dominant feeling. "I remember," he said. "What's up?"

"Funny that *you* should ask that. What's all this rubbish in the morning papers—and why wasn't I notified?"

Clark sat up abruptly on the edge of the bed, suddenly more attentive. "What rubbish in the morning papers? I haven't seen them yet."

"Haven't seen them? Good heavens, Clark, what are you doing? Sleeping your days away while the rest of us try to keep the world reasonably intact?"

Clark's reaction surprised him.

"Knock it off, Franz," he interrupted. "I'm in no mood for personal vitriol. Come to the point."

A brief pause; Gerber was probably equally surprised. Then he said, very businesslike, "I have three papers in front of me. Each of them carries at least one article on the front page. Not top headline stuff, but front page. Is it true that some sort of extraterrestrial creatures have landed at Kennedy Spaceport?"

"What?"

"You heard me. Do you have aliens there? Or have the wire services gone in for monster fiction?" "What do they say?"

"Hm-m-m," the UN head observed darkly, "you're hedging. The articles I refer to mention the obvious facts that you are there and the port has been shut down more thoroughly than it has ever been shut down before. Naturally speculation about that is rampant. Coincidentally, there's been an unusual rash of UFO reports from that area. At least a dozen in the Titusville-Merritt Island area, all at about the same time yesterday afternoon. Any good newshound would start thinking out loud about a connection, and several already have."

Clark was surprised; the Kyyra ship had blended superbly with the sky. How had so many people seen it—or had they seen something else instead? He wondered silently whether there had been any

public word about the shuttle sent out to investigate the orbiting object which he now knew as a Kyyra convoy ship. He asked, "What did these UFO's supposedly look like?"

"The reports were remarkably consistent. The observers all said they saw a single object, high, fast, probably round, and sky-blue. They only happened to notice it when it passed in front of a white cloud. If there'd been more clouds, we might have had more sightings. *Nicht wahr?*"

For one final moment, Clark toyed with the idea of still trying to cover up. Then he decided that was pointless and the time was too late. He would throw the unembellished truth directly in Gerber's face and play it by ear from there, letting the UN man react however he wanted to. "*Wahr*," he announced almost belligerently. "Yes, Franz. We have aliens here."

There was a long silence, except for slow breathing. Finally Gerber said tightly, "Why wasn't I informed?"

Clark shrugged; without video, the effect was lost. "They've been here less than a day."

"But you knew they were coming long enough to get down there to meet them."

"A few more hours."

Another long silence. Clark could easily visualize Gerber's round, ruddy, boyish face growing steadily tighter and redder with exasperation. There was a faint hiss of breath being drawn in sharply, and Gerber spat out, "Quit playing games! What do they want?"

"We're not sure. We've only talked to them once."

"And you have no idea what they're doing here?"

"I didn't say that. Look, if you really want to know what little I know, you'd better relax and settle back and listen for a few minutes. Can you keep a secret?"

"What kind of a question is *that*?" Gerber didn't dignify it with an answer. His anger showed no sign of abating.

"Serious," said Clark. "I'll assume the answer is yes; it had better be. We had a faster-than-light research ship out and it got a look at the core of our galaxy by light that won't reach us for a while. It's exploded. The radiation will begin arriving in about seventeen years."

"Hmph," Gerber snorted. "What's all that have to do with the aliens? Or are you trying to lead me off the subject?"

"That radiation's going to be dangerous when it gets here. It's probably already wiped out life on millions of planets in the galaxy, and it's not going to overlook any of the others. Earth is in danger."

"You're being unnecessarily melodramatic," Gerber said brusquely. "It ill becomes one in a position of such responsibility. What about the aliens?"

Clark took time to reflect that it did sound melodramatic. It sounded more like something that happened in low-budget horror films than in reality ...

But it wasn't a low-budget horror film. It was something that astronomers had known about for years, suddenly brought closer to home. All Earth really was in danger, and it would be purest folly to dismiss that fact lightly because it sounded melodramatic.

"Earth is in danger," he repeated quietly. "The Kyyra have offered to help us escape."

"Bah! You really expect me to swallow this rubbish?"

Clark managed to put a shrug into his voice. "I don't especially care. Reality has a way of forcing itself on you, whether you want to recognize it or not."

Gerber snorted again. He started to say something but bit it off before it had gone far enough to be recognizable. "I'll buy your aliens," he said. "But the rest of the story? Well . . . suppose I buy that too. You say they want to help us. How, pray tell?"

"By converting the Earth to a spaceship and moving it to another galaxy."

"I see." Gerber's voice had become patronizing now, and faintly amused. "Faster than light, of course?"

"Of course." Clark couldn't resist adding, "It's the only way to fly."

"Hmph. And what do they want in return?"

"That," said Clark, "we don't know yet."

"But you're planning to dump a big decision on me, huh? You're going to expect the UN to decide

whether to accept their offer or not. Eh?"

"I imagine it'll wind up there eventually." Clark felt stirrings of the old hope of getting out from under the responsibility, but they were weaker now. Gerber wasn't inspiring much confidence in his ability to handle such a matter this morning.

"The last word belongs to us, all right," Gerber said ominously. "And you'd better not forget that. Frankly, I still can't decide whether you're on the level or this is some screwy hoax. But if 'it's real, I'm going to pass the buck right back to *you*—until the last word."

Clark stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"You're already in this thing. You've made a start on it, and a lot of the things we'll need to know before we make a decision are scientific. *Nicht wahr?* So I'm not even getting into it yet. Except to tell you to learn everything you can to advise us on a final decision. If the time comes that I actually have to make a move like that, I'm expecting you to make a strong recommendation, with lots of hard facts to back it up. And while you're gathering them, I'll expect interim reports so I won't have to try to assimilate it all at the last minute. Understand?"

"Yes, but—"

"And one more thing."

Clark broke off. "Yes?"

Gerber paused dramatically before answering. Then he said, very deliberately, "This had better be good."

He hung up without waiting for anything else.

Clark sat there, staring at the phone, for quite a while after he hung up. It had not gone as he had expected. Even in the face of Gerber's attitude, there had been that thing in his mind which hoped the conversation would shift the burden of responsibility from his shoulders to Gerber's. It hadn't; instead it had settled the load more solidly than ever where it was. Gerber would not even admit that the things Clark spoke of were real—but if they were, it was Clark who would have to think them through to a decision. It was Clark who would have to bear the constant pressure of knowing that on that decision rode, quite literally, the fate of an entire planetful of people.

And all the while knowing that, no matter how much he tortured himself to arrive at the best possible decision, it could be swiftly and completely overruled by a sudden whim of Gerber's group.

Again he resented it. He felt overwhelmed. But at the same time, a part of him that was slowly beginning to grow stronger quietly resolved to make the best of it. At the moment, caution prevailed. It was already late morning when Gerber called; it was midafternoon before Clark rounded up the Kyyra delegation and the other humans for another meeting. And then it was a singularly fruitless meeting.

Clark recalled afterward that both Rao and Sanchez showed signs of impatience during it, but they also showed restraint. As he had requested, they avoided initiating lines of questioning, leaving that to his diplomatic judgment. He asked few questions himself. There were many in his mind, but somehow the appropriate moment to ask them never seemed to arise. Or at least, so it seemed to him in his present state of mind, colored by an exaggerated consciousness of his responsibility. And Beldan volunteered little except occasional eerie pipings. Clark was becoming increasingly conscious of a peculiar, vaguely unsettling reticence about the entire Kyyra delegation, but he had no way of knowing what—if anything—it meant.

A slightly clearer picture of how the Kyyra proposed to move the Earth emerged from the meeting. But only slightly, and Clark, thinking back, could remember very little of substance that was said before its early adjournment.

The question of motives had not even been approached.

Back in his apartment that evening, he lay on the couch mentally reviewing his performance at the meeting and fiercely criticizing his own timidity in it. Tomorrow, he resolved, would be different.

Somewhere around dusk he was snapped out of his reverie by the phone. "Guardsmen Miller at the Main Gate, sir," said the caller. "There's a man here who claims he's Jonel Turabian and needs to see you, sir. His credentials seem to be in order. He has a woman with him. And a dog."

Clark frowned slightly, then said, "Let me see them." He flicked on the small screen in the base of the

phone. A second later, a clear picture snapped into being, showing the guardsman, Jonel, and Sandy Dunbar, holding a picturesque mongrel who looked as if he would like to get at the guardsman.

Clark said, "What's up, Jonel?"

"I need to see you personally," Jonel said. "You'll want us to stay."

Clark thought very briefly. Then he said, "Guardsman, escort these people in here and give them quarters. My authority."

"Yes, sir. The dog, too?"

"The dog too." He switched off the screen and hung up.

A half hour later there was a knock and Clark went to let Jonel and Sandy in. He was surprisingly glad to see them.

And he was more than surprised when Jonel said, "Hi! We've come to meet your aliens. Lewiston warned us to expect them—and I thought he was hallucinating."

IX

Jonel's strange opening remark gave Clark the impetus he needed to go into the next afternoon's meeting with a firm battle plan—a series of questions that *must* be asked and which he *would* ask before he allowed adjournment. He even went so far as to jot them down on an index card. And he spent an hour in the morning with Rao, working out the wording of some of them.

Beldan, he thought without being able to put a finger on why, seemed surprised and uneasy when the human party filed into the conference room this time—with two new members. There had been no question about admitting Jonel, of course. Clark had balked slightly at letting Sandy in, but Jonel had thought it was a good idea and Clark had not been able to think of a good reason to deny the request. And Sandy herself could be pretty persuasive at times.

They all settled into their chairs. Beldan still managed somehow to look withdrawn and uncomfortable, though Clark did not yet feel any confidence about reading Kyyra faces. There were introductions. Sandy smiled ingratiatingly and then continued to watch the Kyyra with frank interest; Jonel watched too, but with a deliberate effort to avoid being obvious about it. "I have a question," Clark told Beldan when they were through the formalities. "Mr. Turabian was aboard the *Archaeopteryx*. There was another person aboard who he formerly thought was suffering hallucinations, but now suspects may have been aware that you were following the ship. Is that possible?"

Beldan nodded slightly. "Yes," he said quietly. "You refer to the astronomer. Please accept our regrets for what happened."

Clark frowned abruptly, startled by the unexpected reference to Lewiston's profession. "Exactly what did happen?" he asked sharply.

"Large objects in super-c are very conspicuous to an observer who is also in super-c," said Beldan. "That is how we first detected your ship. To learn more of its nature and origin, we had to use other methods." He hesitated, as if searching for words. "Your language is ill-equipped to tell you about them. You seem to have a few words which approach the fringes of the concepts, but they are incomplete, confused—and not even fully or universally accepted in your culture." Clark felt a touch of fear. Just how much had these beings been able to learn from radio and television broadcasts? "There is a class of phenomena which are associated with minds and follow different laws from, the ones you call 'physical'. But they do follow laws, and an understanding of those laws provided the basis of our normal means of communication while in super-c. You don't seem to have a word for that means of communication."

We don't have the means, either, Clark thought tightly, his fear flaring up. He said, "You mean the Kyyra are telepathic?"

"No. Not in the sense that you use that word, though it is one of the words I mentioned that approach the subject. We have not cultivated direct mind-to-mind contact among individuals. Normally we use transmitters and receivers, controlled by speech or similar means. We tried contacting the *Archaeopteryx* that way but got no response. So we used a sensor beam which is a modification of the same principle. It is vaguely analogous to your radar, being sent out and returned in modified form by the

activities of minds that it encounters. There is no travel time involved, so it can be used in either super-c or sub-c to gain information from a mind not equipped with a transmitter. Less reliable than good two-way communications equipment, but an acceptable emergency substitute."

"And that's what you used on Lewiston?"

Beldan nodded. "And Turabian, and the other one. And later you, Mr. Clark. You seem offended; I fear I don't understand exactly why. This was our only way to learn enough about you to come here and begin these discussions of our common danger. That was our only purpose. It was unfortunate that Lewiston's mind was one of those that are unusually sensitive to the sensor beam. While his two shipmates were at most dimly aware of it, Lewiston at times felt it very strongly and even gained some awareness of what it was and who was behind it. But since such phenomena as telepathy are so sporadic in your species, and the underlying principles not even suspected, he himself tended to regard those moments of heightened awareness as mere hallucinations. Most unfortunate; we are sorry. We learned from such cases as his, and as soon as we were able we restricted our communications with you to your own electromagnetic methods."

Clark relaxed slightly. If the Kyyra weren't reading all his thoughts right now, things weren't as bad as he had thought. Still, he had been read in the past . . . "I'm surprised our minds are similar enough for you to study that way " he remarked.

"The basic laws are general," said Beldan. "We have little experience with life forms other than ourselves, but we find a sameness in the effects of human and Kyyra minds on the sensor beam which far transcends the superficial differences in spoken language or even neural circuitry."

Clark whistled. "Wow," he said softly. "What a weapon this must be. When you were home, I suppose you used it a lot in war?"

"What is war?" Beldan asked.

Such a response had never even occurred to Clark. When he recovered from the first shock of it, he said, "Never mind. It would take too long to explain, and it has nothing to do with us." (*I hope*, he thought involuntarily.) "If you don't know what it is, you're lucky." He changed the subject, but the oddity of the question lingered in his mind. "There's a question that's been bothering several of us, and we think things will go more smoothly if we clear it up now. If I ask it badly, please believe no offense is intended."

"What is it?"

"You've offered to help us escape our galaxy. What we wonder is, why?"

Beldan's eyes jerked back momentarily and then he unmistakably frowned, as humanly as was possible without a nose. "What difference does that make?" he asked. "You know the danger exists, and we offer you a way out of it. Isn't that enough?"

"Yes, but . . ." Out of the corner of his eye, Clark saw Sandy watching Beldan even more intently than she had been so far—and her eyes had never left him for more than a second or two. Now her expression had become almost as inscrutable as his, but Clark could spare no effort to try to figure it out. He said, "Of course we're grateful for the offer. But helping us would be an enormous inconvenience to you—"

"Not as enormous to us as it appears to you."

"I can appreciate that," Clark said, with growing exasperation, "but still enormous. What we get out of it is obvious. But what do you ask in return?"

"Must we ask something in return?"

Rao and Sanchez were staring expectantly at Clark, but he couldn't think of another way to attack the question. As unsatisfied with himself as they were, he said, "I don't seem to be making myself clear. Maybe I should leave that question and come back to it later. There is one more thing, though, along the same general lines. Dr. Rao brought it to my attention that you must have left your home not long after the core explosion began and been traveling at a speed only slightly above c. Is that true?"

Beldan's eyes jerked slightly and he was silent for a few seconds before answering. "Yes."

"Wouldn't it have been a lot easier and less costly to jump to super-c from well below, and then accelerate to a very high speed?"

Another pause. "Perhaps."

"Then why didn't you do it that way?"

"How very inquisitive you are," said Beldan.

The remark instantly struck Clark as sarcastic. "Yes," he said with muffled anger. "We're inquisitive by nature. You'd better get used to it."

"I meant no offense," said Beldan. "I meant only that with your planet in such danger, and with so little time to prepare, it seems odd that you dwell so much on matters that have so little to do with the problem."

So little? Clark thought incredulously. But he calmed himself with an effort and said only, "I see your point. If you prefer to talk about procedures, let's talk about procedures." He drew the index card full of notes out of his shirt pocket and looked at it.

Beldan had taken his music-pipe out and started a snatch of melody on it. One of the others also took out a pipe and started an independent tune. At first the two pipings seemed chaotically unrelated. Then they seemed to merge for a moment into an indescribable unity, and then slither off in their separate ways, again independent entities but somehow still belonging together. Clark shivered. The stuff they did with those pipes was unearthly, all right, but some of it was powerfully evocative to human ears. He turned to Jonel and Sandy and explained, "They carry those pipes around and play them at the drop of a hat. Seem to use music like we use cigarettes and coffee."

"I like it," said Sandy. The remark startled Clark; he would never have thought of making it. Beldan stopped and looked at Sandy. "Thank you," he said. He played a few more notes, put the pipe down on the table in front of him, and looked back at Clark. "You have questions?" The other Kyyra kept on playing his pipe, softly.

"Yes." Clark glanced at his card, then back at Beldan. "You said that when you move a planet, the planet itself provides the fuel. Yesterday you clarified that somewhat by specifying that subsurface and core material are converted into energy for propulsion. How much subsurface and core material?"

"An appreciable fraction," said Beldan. "All of what you call core, and a good deal of what you call subsurface."

And you don't want to give numbers? Clark thought suspiciously. He noticed that Rao was doodling on the tabletop. He started to ask something, but right then Rao whipped out a pocket calculator, punched a set of buttons, and looked up. "Excuse me," he said.

Clark glanced at him, hoping he would watch what he said. "You spoke yesterday," said Rao, "of running the Earth up to what we consider a typical speed before the transition to super-c, and then accelerating beyond the barrier to keep trip time down to a small number of years. Any mechanism I can envision short of essentially complete conversion has no possibility of doing that. So you propose injecting large quantities of antimatter?" To human ears, his sarcasm was obvious. Clark found it hard to tell, at such moments, whether Rao was showing an admirable willingness to acknowledge his ignorance, or an eagerness to flaunt knowledge that he thought was greater than it was.

Beldan gave a matter-of-fact answer. "It is not necessary to inject anything from outside. It is far easier to use what is already here. We can initiate a controlled process of complete conversion by a process which induces a transition—Forgive me; your broadcast media have not provided me with a good basis for discussing technical matters in terms familiar to you. The best I can do is to say that our 'induced annihilation' process effectively converts *some* of the atoms in a sample to corresponding atoms of antimatter. I can see your skepticism, Dr. Rao, but be assured that it is a perfectly normal . . . quantum transition, even though you have not recognized the appropriate quantum numbers. And we would only use that process at the beginning of the trip. Reaction engines are intrinsically inefficient, even at their best. Once under way, it becomes possible to use another process—one which I fear is even less familiar to you. It converts a portion of the mass of the Earth directly and completely into kinetic energy of the remaining unconverted part, without wasting most of the energy on an exhaust."

Rao stared at him silently for a long time, disbelief written plainly on his face. Clark could easily understand that disbelief, but he was not yet willing to share it absolutely. Rao punched out something else on his pocket calculator, stared at it, punched again, and shrugged. "And the transition to super-c is

achieved by large induction stations built at several points on Earth's surface?"

"Correct. And some or all of that construction can be done after the trip begins, during the sub-c acceleration."

Clark felt a growing, deep-seated discomfort as he began to see some of the ramifications of the Kyyra proposal. If it was accepted, Earth would be changed irrevocably and beyond recognition. A powerful tug-of-war was beginning to grow in his mind and feelings. On one hand, there was the desire to do whatever was needed to save Earth and man in whatever form could be managed; on the other, the desire to save them in their present form for as long as possible—even if only seventeen years. On one hand was the urge toward personal escape; on the other, the intellectual realization that his personal life-span might not extend beyond those seventeen years anyway.

"There's a very simple question," he said, trying to keep his mind focused on one thing at a time. "You say you start out with a reaction engine. Where do you put the nozzle? If you don't know what war is, you can't imagine the trouble that question will cause."

"I believe I can see some of the trouble you anticipate," said Beldan. "Fortunately the best place to start the reaction is relatively uninhabited. A nozzle at your South Pole would have the advantage of thrusting along the axis, and M31 is located roughly north. Once the reaction is under way and has penetrated deeply enough, we can make course corrections by modifying the shape of the reaction zone."

"But running it at the South Pole, one of the first effects would be to melt the South Polar cap. What about all the flooding?"

"A definite inconvenience," Beldan said simply. "But not by any means the last or largest you'll face. I will not try to hide the hardships from you. Others come to mind immediately. As the Earth accelerates and uses up its mass, its surface gravity will decrease—rather drastically. That will have physiological effects on all who are not protected by artificial gravity fields. It will also lead to partial loss of atmosphere. That in turn will be aggravated by the changed thermal properties. We can adjust the heat released internally by the driving reactions to maintain the surface region at a tolerable temperature in interstellar space, but the accustomed structure of your atmosphere and oceans is dependent on the main heat input coming from an external point source. All that will change."

Clark nodded numbly as Beldan confirmed a whole string of his worries. He had subconsciously half-hoped that the Omnipotent Benefactors could do their good deed without all those unpleasant side effects. But of course they *weren't* omnipotent. They worked within the strict framework of physical laws, even if those laws were far more inclusive than the ones man knew—or had thought he knew two decades earlier. "So it seems," Clark said slowly, "that the surface will become unfit for life during the trip and we will have to move underground."

"So it seems. But it is not as bad as it sounds. Some of the modifications are needed only for later stages of the trip and can be done en route. For the beginning, you already have some places that are good enough, in your cities which have grown downward in recent years."

That was true. Underground expansion had become big business lately, and some of the underground parts of places like New York would be able to protect travelers and atmosphere with little modification. "But only a few,"

Clark protested. "What about all the others?"

"Many homes could be modified rather easily. The occupants could do it themselves, before starting or in the earliest phases of the trip."

"But that's expensive. What about all the people who can't afford it?"

Beldan shrugged—a shrug too obviously learned from Rao. "A huge quantity of detail work," he said, "but you'll find a way to do it if you want it badly enough. We'll provide propulsion and basic guidance in the whole program, but the rest of the details you'll have to take care of yourselves."

The hope the Kyyra had brought was becoming far too tainted with other things. In a voice bordering on despair, Clark asked bitterly, "So to accept your offer we have to go underground and give up all that means Earth to us. How is that better than just going underground and hiding right where we are?"

Beldan stared at him for a long time, apparently surprised, before he answered. "Do you really have

to ask that? The answer is simple enough. At the other end will be new planets—and in far less than the million years that the danger will last here."

The end of the session found Clark mentally and emotionally exhausted. He was relieved when Beldan agreed to a day's recess to allow time for thought. A guardsman came to escort the Kyyra back to their quarters; Jonel and Sandy followed them out without saying anything. But Rao and Sanchez remained, and as soon as the others were gone they both turned on Clark with fire in their eyes. "I trust," Rao said venomously, "you do not think you have cleared up the questions of motives and travel time to anybody's satisfaction except your own."

"Second the motion," Sanchez drawled, frowning as he lit up a cigar. "Sounds to me like I'm still supposed to believe they just want to do this out' of the goodness of their hearts. And I don't."

"Knock it off," Clark said. "I know nothing's settled, to my satisfaction any more than yours. But I didn't see any good way to keep pursuing the questions today. I had the impression, watching Beldan's reactions, that there was' a difference in cultural orientation getting in the way. As when he said we were wasting time on unimportant questions. It's hard for us to see it that way, but I think maybe he really *believed* they were unimportant."

"Then why wouldn't he answer?"

"I won't know that until I understand better how they think. That'll take time. Meanwhile, I freely admit I got nowhere on the motive question. But I did think of a possible reason for the way they've been traveling."

Rao's thick black eyebrows jerked suspiciously upward. "Yes?"

"Maybe they wanted to look for people like us who needed help. And they wanted to have time to make contact when they found any."

Rao laughed, a single contemptuous blast. "Really, Mr. Clark, really! That brings you right back to the motive question. With a galactic explosion breathing down their necks, why should they wish to dawdle along looking for backward races to help? Above all, why should they be so eager to help that they would go to literally tremendous expense looking for such races?"

"Actually," Sanchez mused, "how do 'we know they're really from anywhere near the core? How do we know they're not from right around where the *Archaeopteryx* went? Maybe they saw it and got scared and this whole business is an elaborate scheme to get a chance to destroy Earth. And us."

"Yesterday," Clark said wearily, "I was accused of being unnecessarily melodramatic. Were you really listening to what you just said, Joe? Think about it. Why should they want to destroy Earth? And if they did, and they really have the capability to do it, why should they go through all this silliness of meeting us face to face and asking permission?"

Sanchez uttered something between a grunt and a snort, but otherwise said nothing. Clark was somewhat relieved; though his questions were good ones, already he was seeing equally good counterquestions for which he had no ready answers. And he could think of no really *positive* way to answer the questions Sanchez had already asked.

"We seem," Rao said after an awkward pause, "to be at a stalemate on those questions. However, I would remind you again, Mr. Clark, of the first question I asked you night before last. Can we trust them? Even if they mean well, have you really tried to visualize the measures Beldan has described? He is speaking of spaceship-style living, Mr. Clark, for everybody on Earth for a period of at least a year and possibly many years. Confining quarters; air and water and food supply problems; reduced gravity or dependence on pseudo-grav^y. And months or years of isolation in super-c; I'm sure you have heard what that is like. Not everybody is suitably constituted for spaceship life, physically or psychologically. There are good reasons why astronauts have always been carefully screened and trained. Most of us are simply not prepared to endure those conditions. *I* am not prepared to endure those conditions."

Clark looked straight at him. "Are you more prepared to die?"

Rao looked straight back without flinching. "Yes, Mr. Clark, I am. I already told you that, when you first came to see me. I have thought of another reason why pseudo-gravity will be needed, by the way, even before much mass is lost. Acceleration. Our ideas of up and down are going to become rather strange when the whole planet begins accelerating along its axis. I don't know what sort of accelerations

they propose to use, but I did a rather interesting calculation during today's meeting. You might be interested in its result, Mr. Clark. It will help you to appreciate the kind of thing we're discussing. Would you like to hear it?"

"Let's hear it," Clark said indifferently.

"I estimated the rate at which they would have to annihilate matter to produce an initial acceleration of half a G—which, by the way, would mean an acceleration time on the order of a year before the transition. The annihilation rate, if I calculated correctly, is roughly comparable to completely annihilating twenty-five Mt. Everests per second. Try to picture that, Mr. Clark. And then think of how delicately even such a puny thing as a bulldozer refines a landscape."

Clark thought about it; the picture was not pleasing. But he didn't say so. He just said, very quietly, "You know, Dr. Rao, I believe you're scared." And he smiled slightly, meanwhile reflecting that there was nothing unreasonable in Rao's being scared. If the Kyyra really did things like that—and the far more spectacular things they had apparently done with their own planet—they were thoroughly awe-inspiring. And the more you knew about science, the more awe-inspiring they were. If Lewiston had got any kind of a good look at what the Kyyra were ...

No wonder he had cracked up.

Rao's piercing black eyes glowered. "Ridiculous!" he snapped. "I merely want to be sure you do not commit us to anything rash." He paused. "Frankly, I seriously question even the possibility of many of their claims."

"Oh?"

"Yes Consider their alleged exhaustless drive. A flagrant violation of momentum conservation. And their claim that they can release little enough of the energy as heat to keep the surface at a reasonable temperature. What about the second law of thermodynamics?"

"Maybe," said Clark, his weariness beginning to overcome his patience, "your knowledge isn't quite as general as you think it is."

"I am not *that* ignorant. Those laws are *fundamental*."

"So were certain interpretations of relativity—until *you* invented the paratachyonic drive." Clark yawned. "All through history people have been sure they've had The Basics, and over and over they've been wrong. They never learn." He paused. "Anything else, Rao?"

Rao glared at him indignantly, breathing hard through clenched teeth. "Just one thing," he muttered finally. "When are you going to tell people about this? Or are you just going to play God?"

He stood up and wheeled to leave in a single swift motion—and almost ran into Beldan, standing with his escort in the open door.

"Excuse me," Beldan said very quietly as he moved aside. "I forgot my pipe." He came in silently, almost apologetically, as Rao stomped out. Clark watched wordlessly as Beldan scooped the pipe off the table, stunned by the realisation that the statuesque alien had heard the last exchange.

X

As they left the conference room, Sandy gripped Jonel's hand tightly and walked more hurriedly than was her custom. Jonel glanced at her and saw that her face was tight, her lower lip caught between her teeth. She looked straight ahead and didn't say anything. All the way to the end of the long corridor, Jonel waited. When they entered an elevator, otherwise empty, and Sandy punched for the ground floor, he finally said quietly, "Something's bothering you."

Sandy nodded. "I'm scared," she said simply. "I felt cut off from Earth in there. Can we go . . . out ... to talk?"

The elevator halted gently and its door slid open silently. They stepped out and headed without pause for the outer door nearest the spot where Jonel had parked. He, too, still felt the craving for earthly things he had first experienced when the *Archaeopteryx* had come home, and he had earlier talked Clark into giving permission for them to come and go while the Kyyra meetings were going on. Clark hadn't liked the idea at first, but had given in after reasonably little persuasion. After all, he knew Jonel was

trustworthy, and not terribly well known to the public. And no one had yet announced publicly that the *Archaeopteryx* was back, much less linked her return with the UFO reports and the suspicious events at the spaceport ...

Jonel knew Sandy well; he didn't try to force conversation now. They stepped outside into late afternoon sunshine and crossed a narrow strip of concrete to the parking area. They got into Jonel's compact blue car; Sandy sat close to Jonel but still said nothing as they spun out to the gate and checked past a slightly puzzled but cooperative guardsman.

Jonel took her to that seaside park he had visited the day he got back. *Odd*, he mused as he nosed the car into a parking space, *I've been here dozens of times and I've never even noticed the name of the place. Don't seem to be any conspicuous signs ...*

It didn't seem important enough to check now, either; it was merely a curiosity he had just consciously noticed for the first time. He and Sandy got out, taking along the blanket he always kept in the back of the car, and walked barefoot down toward the water. The place was even less crowded than usual, probably because of the hour—many people would be at supper now.

They found a place where the beach met the gardens and the sunlight struggled through between the leaves to fall in dappled patterns on the sand. Jonel spread the blanket on the sand there and they lay down on it, parallel to the beach. He waited. Sandy looked at the surf and the vegetation and sifted sand through her fingers, and gradually she seemed to relax—but not completely. Finally Jonel said, "You say you're scared?"

She nodded. "Uh-huh. Aren't you? Listening to Beldan describing the way they can help us . . . I started picturing it. I don't have the background to be sure of all of it, but . . . Jonel, was he making sense?"

"I think so. Anyway, as far as I could tell, he was. Some of it's based on principles we don't know, but the part that's familiar holds water. I don't have any way to check the rest, but there is evidence that they may very well know some principles we don't. And we seem to need some, if we're going to get away."

"Hm-m-m." For several seconds she was silent, thoughtful. Finally she said slowly, "But the way he describes it, it's going to be so much trouble. The trip will be hard for everybody and the Earth will never be the same again. Everything—" she gestured around them, "all of this will be ruined. It hurts to think about that." She paused again. "I found myself wondering if it was really worth it. If it might not be better to forget about running that hard. Just resign ourselves to the inevitable and make sure we get all we can out of the years we have left—"

Jonel was startled—this didn't sound like Sandy at all. "What about the kids?" he interrupted. "Could you really bring children into the world knowing they were going to get as far as their teens and then have that happen?"

"There's the hiding thing," she said feebly. "Or . . . maybe we shouldn't have any. Knowing what's going to happen . . ."

"Not have any?" He stared at her in disbelief. "But they were such an important part of our plans. We've both always enjoyed doing so much, and we wanted to share it with them . . ."

"I know. But if it's all going to end . . . as you say, why let them just get as far as their teens and have it all collapse around them?"

"But . . ." Jonel found it hard to think clearly about what to say to her, when the things she was saying were so out of character. "O.K. Suppose we decided to just stay here and wait it out and not have any kids. Do you think for a minute everybody else is going to do the same? No matter what we do, there'll be lots of those youngsters around when the radiation gets here. All in the same boat we tried to make sure ours wouldn't get caught in." He looked at her. "The end won't be quick or easy for any of them."

She was biting her lip rather hard. "I know. There aren't *any* answers I like."

"What happened," Jonel asked, "to what you said when I first told you about this? Before Beldan and his buddies came, you were all set to take off for M31 if we could get space on a ship. All that's changed is that they're saying they can take a lot more people."

"Yes, but . . . I don't know. Maybe it's just that I can't bear doing all that to the Earth. I love the

Earth. If we went on a ship I could subconsciously pretend it was still right there where we'd left it. But it wouldn't be, would it?" She shrugged, visibly annoyed with herself. "I don't know *what* I want. I just know I've never been so confused and helpless and—" She broke off and looked at him abruptly, a sharply bordered piece of the uncertainty suddenly gone. "Jonel, what are we waiting for?"

"What?"

"We've known each other long enough and well enough that there hasn't been any question of what we planned to do for a long time. Has there?"

"Of course not."

"Well, now the details are all messed up and nothing's certain any more. Except that. Why don't we go ahead and get married *now* and then stick together through whatever happens next?"

"Right away?" Jonel asked, startled.

"Uh-huh." She looked at him expectantly. He looked back, reading her face as carefully as he could. Her suggestion was completely unexpected, but he found himself feeling a kind of tenderness for her that he had never before seen her need.

"O.K.," he said.

And they did.

Much later that night, in a married-personnel apartment at Kennedy Spaceport, Jonel and a much more relaxed and cheerful Sandy lay in the darkness, waiting for sleep. The evening's events replayed themselves giddily in Jonel's mind. The ceremony had been quick and inconspicuous, in a shabby little office in a shabby little town a short distance inland. The presiding magistrate, a nervous little fellow with a droopy mustache, had remarked that Jonel's name was unusual, but managed to get through the proceedings without actually seeming to recognize it. Then there had been a very small party, of sorts, instigated by Henry Clark, and the move into new quarters, and ...

He was glad to see Sandy feeling so much calmer. After a while he thought she was asleep—and so he was surprised when, after a long silence, she whispered, "Jonel ... are you awake?"

He whispered back, "Yes." "Were you watching Beldan during that meeting today?"

Jonel frowned in the darkness. He had thought she'd got her mind off that . . . "No. Should I?"

"I don't know. But I was. You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think he's scared, too." "Huh? Why should he be scared?"

"I don't know. Maybe that isn't even exactly what it is. But it's something like that. I could feel it through the whole thing."

"But you've never even seen their species before. How could you—"

"I may be wrong," she said, "but I don't think so. You've often commented yourself on my 'feel' for people and other animals, haven't you? Well, I can't tell you why, but I feel sure something's bothering Beldan. And I think we might be able to help."

Jonel was silent for several seconds. Then he said, "How can we help?"

"I have an idea," Sandy said. "See what you think Henry would have to say about this . . ."

XI

Clark needed the day off. He again allowed himself to sleep late, and this time no unwanted telephone calls thwarted his plans. He awoke spontaneously at midmorning, feeling more relaxed and refreshed than he had since before the *Archaeopteryx* came home. He rose, washed and dressed, cleared the windows to let daylight flood in, and dialed a breakfast of bacon and eggs from the dispenser in the corner of the room. It came quickly and tasted good. He was halfway through it before he noticed the envelope someone had slipped under the door.

He started to get up, still chewing, to go and get it, but he quickly thought better of it. *No*, he told himself firmly, *a few minutes aren't that important. I've got this far without ulcers and I don't intend to start now. I'm going to sit right here and finish my breakfast before I go back to worrying about whatever somebody wants me to worry about now.*

But he finished breakfast faster than he had begun it.

Then he picked up the envelope and took it to the couch to examine it. It was sealed, but his name was written plainly in bold blue ink on the outside.

He tore it open hurriedly with his thumb, pulled out and unfolded the single small sheet of paper that was inside. It contained only a few terse words, in the same meticulously neat hand that was on the envelope. Clark read:

Dear Mr. Clark:

I have thought over our conversation last night and have decided that I cannot condone your continued secret consideration of the aliens' proposed abuse of the Earth. I cannot in good conscience continue to associate myself with these deliberations. Nor can I in good conscience allow them to remain secret. As a man of good conscience, I feel but one final obligation to you, and that is to inform you of these two decisions so you will not need to wonder where I stand.

Sincerely, Chandragupta Rao.

Clark read it twice, to make sure he was reading the right meaning out of the stiffly polite phrases. The second time through, slowly and carefully, he began to react, with a mixture of anger at Rao for taking such a step without discussing it first—and worry about what the consequences would be. Up to now he had had only the impending disaster and the Kyyra offer to think about and try to reach decisions about. Now he would have to deal with public opinion, too—a thing he had thought about the day Turabian told him of the threat, but which then had seemed comfortably remote.

Disturbed, his throat dry, he tried to think of something he could do now. There was no way to tell when the note had been slipped under his door—very early this morning or even last night—but very probably it was already too late to stop Rao. Even if it wasn't, he had no idea *how* he might stop Rao. The physicist had quite understandably left no word as to where he was going, and he would have had little trouble talking his way past the gate guards. If he had aroused any suspicion, Clark would have already been called. And he hadn't been.

So Rao was gone, and very probably he had already blown the whole business wide open. Clark glanced at his watch. There would be a television newscast in a couple of minutes. That would be a good quick chance to find out how far things had gone.

He switched on his room's receiver and waited through two minutes of commercial drivel with the volume turned low, then turned it up as the news began. Rao was the third item. The staff announcer read from his script, "Chandragupta Rao, co-discoverer of the Rao-Chang drive used in experimental starships, this morning alleged that beings from outside the Solar System have landed on Earth and are engaged in secret conferences with high government officials. Our reporters were on the spot; we give you the story in Professor Rao's own words."

The image on the screen switched to a tape clip of Rao, unsmiling and with just enough stage fright to be apparent to anyone who knew him. "I feel it is my duty," he said quietly, "to inform the public of certain matters which directly affect all of them and which their political leaders have been concealing from them. Several days ago the research starship *Archaeopteryx* returned to Earth. The fact was not made public because of certain events which had occurred on board, but you should know that those events were related to a discovery made by the research party carried by the ship. Galactic nuclei sometimes suffer large explosions whose effects extend to the whole galaxy. If the *Archaeopteryx* observations are correct, our galaxy has suffered such an explosion, which threatens to make the surface of the Earth uninhabitable within a few decades.

"Two days ago rumors began spreading that intelligent extraterrestrials had landed at Kennedy Spaceport. These -rumors are true. I have been there. I have seen these aliens and talked to them. I have left now because of my belief that the matter was being mishandled and should be public knowledge. Henry Clark of the World Science Foundation has been in conference with these aliens. They claim that they are already fleeing the core explosion which the *Archaeopteryx* detected, and that they can help us to escape the danger. It appears probable that they can do so, but they have given no indication of why they want to. And they have made it quite clear that their proposed methods of help would drastically affect the life of every person on Earth. So I urge every citizen to demand full explanations from his

leaders. Perhaps the danger is real, and perhaps the aliens' offer is a good one, but I remind you of an ancient slogan which applies very well to this case. *Caveat emptor!*"

Very interesting, Clark thought numbly. And very slick, for somebody with neither experience nor talent as a demagogue. Calm, objective, factual—and thoroughly inflammatory. Of course, his vocabulary's too big for some folks, but it'll get translated soon enough . . .

The television picture switched back to the staff announcer. "Reaction to Professor Rao's statement," he said without expression, "has so far been mild and scattered. There has been some picketing, notably at the UN and at WSF headquarters"—two brief tape clips of New York street scenes, each showing perhaps a dozen people carrying placards protesting bureaucratic secrecy and news management, together with a few curious bystanders—"but our spot checks of the man in the street show responses ranging from mild curiosity and skepticism to 'never heard of it'. Now, turning to state and local news—"

Clark switched the set off and swore at himself for not taking more precautions about Rao. Though it actually might not have been so easy, even if he'd thought to try. It had been hard enough just to get Rao here, no emergency had been declared, and his own nonemergency powers had definite limits. Still ...

The phone clamored shrilly for his attention. Annoyed, he snatched up the receiver and snapped, "Clark here. What is it?"

The gate guardsman identified himself and then said awkwardly, "Sir, there are a bunch of . . . er . . . people out here who say they want to see you. They don't have any credentials, exactly . . ."

Clark scowled, counted quickly and quietly to ten, and flicked on his screen. "Show me," he said curtly. The screen showed what was happening at the gate. It looked quite a bit like the scenes in New York. One placard read, "The people have a right to know!" Another said, "This is OUR spaceport. Who invited THEM?" Another ...

"Tell them we're not prepared to admit the public at this time," said Clark. "If they get unruly and you need more men at the gate, don't hesitate to ask for them." He hung up without waiting for a reply.

He stretched out on the bed and tried to think. He had been making progress—slow, but progress. Rao had had no call to throw this monkey wrench into the works, and the fact that he had was intensely irksome. Even as he tried to clarify the new status of the problem and how he should react to the changes, Clark kept being sidetracked by thoughts of how he could get even with Rao—or at least keep him from doing any more damage.

He was also sidetracked by a phone call, but to his great relief it was only Jonel. "Sorry to bother you," Jonel said. "Sandy and I wondered if you might join us for lunch. There's a little thing we'd like to talk to you about."

"Is it—" Clark started to ask if it was urgent, then cut himself off. Whatever else was happening, and whatever else they were, those two were newlyweds and friends of his. If he couldn't even take time to accept their invitation to lunch the day after their wedding . . . "I'd be delighted," he said more calmly, "and thanks for asking. About an hour?"

"Fine. See you then."

A minute after he hung up, Clark thought to wonder what the public prints were doing with Rao's statement. He dropped a token in the newsfax dispenser next to the desk, and a minute later he had a sample.

It was on the front page, halfway down, with a three-eighths-inch head reading "EARTH INVADED?" and then a one-eighth-inch subhead: "PROMINENT SCIENTIST ALLEGES FACTS BEING WITHHELD ABOUT BEINGS FROM SPACE."

Clark groaned. The body of the short article was essentially the same as what he had heard on television; the headlines were blatantly irresponsible. A friend who ran a news magazine had once taken offense at Clark's suggestion that all caption and blurb writers should have to pass a literacy test, but it still seemed like a good idea. In this case, the relatively inconspicuous position of the article on the page would help to minimize the damage done, but there was simply no excuse for that kind of wording. Especially on the strength of one man's unsupported word—even if the one man did happen to be Chandragupta Rao.

As if the thought were a cue, the phone rang and when Clark answered, an unfamiliar voice said,

"Mr. Clark, I've been trying to reach you all morning and haven't been able to get past your underlings. How do you get important calls?"

"I have ways," Clark said evenly. "I take it this isn't an important call?"

"I didn't mean it that way. Listen, I'm Walter Stuart of Consolidated Information Media. I suppose you've heard Professor Rao's statement about the aliens. We'd like very much to get an interview with you—"

"No comment."

"What?" Walter Stuart sounded incredulous.

"No comment at this time."

A long pause. Then, "But ... we already have a long interview lined up with Rao. It'll be broadcast and printed all over the world."

Clark shrugged. "Well, I suppose there's nothing I can do about that. But if I think of anything, I certainly will."

Another long, unbelieving silence. "I find your attitude astounding, sir. Surely you realize that anything you don't say will be held against you—by the public, that is."

"Surely. When I'm ready to comment, I will. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have lots of work to do—to get ready to comment."

"Have it your way. But I'll be calling back. And so will plenty of others. Interviews with you and Rao are going to be very hot properties before long."

Walter Stuart hung up. Henry Clark didn't; instead, he gave instructions to issue a "No comment," without bothering him personally, to all newsmen who tried to reach him until further notice.

Shortly thereafter, and with a delay time of only thirty or forty hours, he thought of something that should have hit him as soon as Jonel and Sandy had showed up night before last. He put through a call to psychiatrist Stephan Kovacs in New York. "Anything new on Don Lewiston?" he asked.

"Nothing significant. We've hardly had enough time."

"Understandable. I've got a new angle I'd like you to check. I'll have to ask you to regard it as very confidential."

"Agreed."

"I assume you've heard Chandragupta Rao's statements about the aliens who've landed here at the spaceport."

"Yes," said Kovacs. He did not comment further.

"They're basically true, though I think he hasn't fairly represented the problem I face. Anyway, the Kyra—that's the visitors' name—say they first learned about us by observing the *Archaeopteryx* crew by something that sounds vaguely like machine-aided telepathy, and that Lewiston was apparently aware of the process and may have been receiving some actual information about them. I don't know how you feel about parapsychology—"

"I have no opinion about it."

"—but the angle I'd like you to check is this. Suppose at least some of Lewiston's 'hallucinations' were real perceptions that he just thought were hallucinations because they seemed fantastic and were coming in through unfamiliar channels. If that's true, he may actually know some significant things about the Kyra. And if you can sort out what he does know—we need it. Badly."

Kovacs was silent for a few seconds. Then he said, "Noted. I'll look into it, Mr. Clark. Strictly confidential."

And by then it was almost time for lunch.

Thoughts of what to do about Rao intruded once or twice, but on the whole the meal Sandy had fixed in the Turabians' apartment was a pleasant interlude. The food was good and the conversation refreshingly light. They were into dessert—blueberry tarts—before anybody brought up the "little thing" Jonel had mentioned on the phone.

"It's just this," Sandy said. "When I was watching our visitors yesterday, I had the feeling they were as tensed up about this as we are. Maybe even more so."

Clark frowned. "Now why should that be?"

"I don't know, but I can make some guesses. Try to put yourself in Beldan's place. Practically alone on a planet full of aliens, bearer of grim news and an offer of a cure that's 'almost as scary as the disease. One tense session a day with the alien leader—that's you—"

"He could untense them a lot if he'd just come out and say what's in it for them," Clark muttered.

"Could be," Sandy granted. "But maybe there's some reason why he can't—or he honestly doesn't see why we keep harping on that question. Take a look at anthropology—there's an amazing variety of outlooks just among human cultures. Anyway, he has that one grilling a day and that's all he sees of us. The rest of the time he sits cooped up in a room designed for humans because you talked him into staying there for security reasons—which I suspect he also doesn't understand. Anyway, I got to wondering if you would have any objection to Jonel and me inviting the three of them to visit us here when the talks aren't in session. Like this afternoon or evening."

Clark stopped chewing and looked at her, perplexed. "For what purpose?"

Sandy shrugged. "Just a social call."

"A *social* call? Why, what on Earth could you have in common with them?"

Sandy smiled disarmingly. "I guess we're not likely to find out unless we try, are we?"

Clark chewed vigorously, stalling to think of a good answer. At first glance, he didn't like the idea, but it was hard to verbalize why. Finally he said slowly, "As you say, we know very little about what they're really like. By seeing them alone like that, under . . . er ... uncontrolled conditions, you could be exposing yourselves to danger."

"Could be. But are the conditions really any more uncontrolled than in the official meetings?"

"Hmph. Well, try to look at it from Beldan's point of view. He might have the same kind of worries about unnecessary exposure to humans."

"Or he might be as indifferent to them as we are. It doesn't cost much to ask."

"*Probably* not." He looked at Jonel. "Jonel, she said 'we'. You've been sitting there pretty quietly. What do you think about all this?"

"It was Sandy's idea," said Jonel, "but I find it intriguing. From curiosity, if nothing else. And maybe we even can help put them more at ease. Sandy's pretty good at that."

"So you don't mind trying it?"

"Not at all."

"Hm-m-m." Clark put his final bite of blueberries in his mouth. As he chewed it, he suddenly saw something he had been missing through the whole conversation. By the time he finished the bite, his decision was made. "Since you seem determined, I'll say O.K., in spite of the things I've already mentioned. Because it just occurred to me that maybe this is what I've been needing, too. You saw how Beldan was evading my questions yesterday. Maybe if you *can* establish some sort of friendly relationship, you can find out what I couldn't—if not an outright statement of their motives, at least some understanding of that cultural outlook you mentioned." He grinned and winked at her. "If anybody can do it, Sandy, I'll bet you can."

She returned his smile, but with a certain cool detachment. "Thanks," she said. "I don't intend to spy on them, but if I learn anything you should know, I'll tell you."

Beldan accepted the invitation with surprisingly little discussion or comment—surprising, at least, to Jonel, who had anticipated the kind of reaction Clark had warned against. But Beldan showed neither apprehension nor hesitation. He simply thanked Sandy for the invitation and made sure he knew the correct hour to come. He even agreed that he would be glad to share their supper—a subject Sandy had hesitated to broach because of her uncertainties about both biochemistry and etiquette.

He did, however, say that he would be coming alone. He offered no reason why his two compatriots would not be with him, and neither Jonel nor Sandy asked for one. But it was not hard to imagine possibilities. Possibly they were not interested, or there were social class barriers, or coming here was considered such a dangerous mission that only one of them should volunteer for it.

The doorbell rang at precisely the hour Sandy had specified. She was busy with the meal, then, so Jonel opened the door. "Hi," he said, "come on in." Beldan towered in the hallway and had to stoop slightly to come through the door. Once inside, he stood, simultaneously awkward and awesome, as if

awaiting further instructions. The apartment had a low ceiling and so far contained few decorations except the ones that came with it, so Beldan made an even more imposing picture standing here than he had in the conference room.

Sandy came into the living room, smiling broadly. "Beldan," she sang out cheerfully, with surprisingly accurate intonation, "welcome to our humble abode. Sit down wherever you like; we're not very formal."

"Thank you," said Beldan—rather stiffly, Jonel thought, and without making any move toward a chair. "If you will excuse me . . . before I sit, it is custom among the Kyyra for a guest to offer his hosts a gift. It is just a small thing." He reached inside his robe and pulled something out. He handed it to Sandy. "Here. For the two of you."

Sandy took it and turned it over in her hands, staring incredulously at it. "Look at this, Jonel. Isn't it beautiful?" It was a relief sculpture showing two Kyyra standing on high ground in front of a city of fairy-tale architecture, under a domed canopy of stars. It was set in a hemisphere six inches in diameter, meticulously crafted down to the smallest details, and—Jonel reached out and felt it—apparently solid metal. And not just metal, but an astonishing swirling blend of what looked like gold and silver and at least a dozen alloys. It would have cost many thousands of dollars—if any human craftsmen knew how to make it. Sandy smiled at Beldan. "Thank you, Beldan. We'll always remember who gave it to us. Now, would you like to sit down?"

Sandy laid the gift aside, on a table, and Beldan sat in the nearest chair. He still seemed somewhat uncomfortable. He took his pipe out and softly played a short tune made of two long, winding phrases. When he stopped, Sandy asked him, "Have you heard any of our music?"

"Some, I believe," said Beldan. "When we were in orbit and listening to your electromagnetic broadcasts."

"There are kinds you've probably missed," Sandy told him. "Would you like to hear some? If you don't like it, I'll take it off whenever you say."

"I would be glad to hear it." Beldan put his pipe away. Sandy went to the entertainment console, looked thoughtful for a moment, and then punched out a code for something in the spaceport's central library. As she came back to join Jonel on the couch, a long, soft note overlaid with fragments of melody started up from speakers all around the room—the beginning of Mahler's First. Beldan looked attentive, but said nothing.

Jonel felt a little awkward, too. So far he had been almost entirely a bystander—but then, Sandy had always taken much more naturally to this sort of thing. He went to the kitchen and returned with a bottle and glasses. "We sometimes have a glass of wine before supper," he told Beldan. "Would you like one? Maybe I should warn you that it contains ethyl alcohol, which acts as an intoxicant if you have too much of it."

Beldan, for the first time since coming here, smiled—and there was little doubt that it meant the same as a human smile under similar circumstances. "For us, it does not," he said. "Yes, I will be glad to have a glass of wine, I have already tried it and found it ... agreeable." He reached out and took the glass Jonel poured for him. "Thank you." As Jonel poured two more, for Sandy and himself, Beldan fished a smooth gourd-like thing out of his robe and poured a drop of wine into the top of it. He waited a few seconds, then laid the gourd down in his lap and took a sip of the wine from his glass. "You see," he said, smiling again, "there are some differences in our metabolisms, as you might expect. Many similarities, but also differences. Alcohol has no effect on us. The main thing we must be careful of in your food is chlorophyll. But don't be alarmed, Sandy; I promise not to get drunk on your broccoli." He tapped the gourd. "All of us on the convoy ships carry these to make life simpler. If we must eat unfamiliar food—or have the opportunity to try exotic treats, as I do tonight—the converter will analyze a small sample of each item. If it finds anything we are not equipped to handle—such as chlorophyll—it will immediately prepare a liquid which will eliminate the danger to us."

"Very clever," Jonel said. He meant to ask Beldan what the plants on the Kyyra worlds used for photosynthesis, but he was interrupted by a timer bell from the kitchen.

"That means the chlorophyll's ready," said Sandy, standing up. "If you gentlemen want to move to the table, I'll have the food up in a jiffy."

They moved, and she did. As she dished out meat loaf and vegetables, Beldan picked up samples of each and dropped them into his converter. When everything had been sampled, he picked the gourd up, aimed it like a wineskin at his mouth, and a thin stream of clear bluish liquid squirted straight down his throat. It stopped after half a minute or so; then he laid the gourd down and attacked the food with no further inhibitions. Jonel was a little surprised that he seemed thoroughly familiar with knives and forks, but quickly realized that he'd probably been practicing in the quarters Clark had provided.

"I find your music . . . interesting," Beldan said suddenly, during the relative quiet following one of the minor climaxes which abound in Mahler. "This that we are listening to now—it is a recording of many individuals simultaneously playing on instruments comparable to my pipe?"

Sandy nodded.

"Most interesting," said Beldan. "That kind of complexity is something quite new to me. But I can see the possibilities."

"That kind of complexity is peculiar to one branch of human culture," Sandy told him. "There are still quite a few places on Earth where the people would find it as novel as you do."

Gradually, as the meal progressed, Beldan showed signs of relaxing. And as that happened, Jonel also began to feel more at ease. Beldan still seemed distant and mysterious, but not utterly unknowable—possibly not even unlikable.

After supper they moved back to the living room and Jonel noticed an insistent scratching sound. He asked Beldan, "Have you met any dogs since you came to Earth?"

"Dogs?" Beldan seemed at first not to recognize the word. Then he said, "I remember seeing them on television. I don't believe I have seen any in actuality. They are small furry animals, aren't they?"

"Yes. Would you like to meet one?"

"I'm not sure. My memories of them from television are mixed."

"This one's very friendly. And if you don't get along, we can lock him back up in the bedroom where he is now."

"All right. I will meet this ... dog." He looked vaguely apprehensive as Sandy went to let Ozymandias the Mutt out of the bedroom. Oz came out with a bound. Jonel himself was a bit uncertain about the results—neither Oz nor Beldan had ever seen anything like the other before. But after the first tense moments, they found each other fascinating, and in fact Oz proved to be the final influence which put Beldan more at ease than they had seen him yet. Beldan and his hosts talked of the role of pets in human society—apparently the Kyyra had none—and finally Sandy felt bold enough to mention Beldan's discomfort in the meetings. She did it discreetly, by mentioning offhandedly that he seemed much more relaxed now than when she first saw him yesterday.

He nodded and kept stroking Oz, who was lying contentedly on his side next to Beldan's chair. "That is true," said Beldan, abruptly solemn. "I feel . . . uncomfortable . . . here. Not here, tonight, in this room, but everywhere else. Next you will ask me why, and I will say that it is hard to explain. I do not know how to say it in your language; I do not even know whether it can be said. But I can try. I feel things among your people that are unfamiliar and uncomfortable to us. The things you call suspicion and distrust . . . the . . . this is especially hard to communicate ... the absence of God . . ."

Jonel was a little startled to hear Beldan speaking in such terms. As he pondered it, he heard Sandy say, "I don't think that's quite universally true, but it's interesting that you should comment on it. Would you be offended if I asked you what kind of God the Kyyra believe in?"

"I would not be offended," said Beldan. "However, it is not a question of belief, but of simple fact. But I would prefer not to talk about it."

"Why?" Sandy asked innocently, momentarily unthinking. Her face immediately showed that she wished she hadn't said it—but it was too late now.

Beldan stopped scratching Oz. His eyes bounced back into their sockets, and when they returned to normal he averted them, looking at the wall to his left rather than at Jonel or Sandy. "Our God is dying,"

he said in a low, choked voice. "We're killing Him."

XII

There was nothing Clark could do about Rao, of course. True, there was the verbal agreement he had recorded the first time he visited the physicist, under which he could prosecute for breach of confidence. But in practice that would be difficult and time-consuming and would do nothing to undo the damage. Done now, it might even prove politically disastrous by inviting still more charges of unwarranted secrecy. So Clark wasted little time lamenting things he hadn't done. He even found, after the initial shock, that he was rather relieved to have things finally out in the open.

Having them out in the open changed much more than Clark's discomfort at having to be secretive. Very shortly after Rao's statement, Kennedy Spaceport reopened—a measure which had the incidental advantage of restoring at least a small measure of public confidence. Security measures remained around the parked Kyyra shuttle and the living quarters of the Kyyra themselves, but at least human shuttles could resume normal operations. And, although the surface of most of the Solar System had barely been scratched, there was enough key industry in orbit and on the Moon to make normal operation of the shuttles an important matter.

The human-Kyyra conferences went on, still in the same conference room near the Kyyra quarters, but with changes. With the public aware of aliens on Earth discussing changes that would radically affect the whole planet, Franz Gerber no longer dared leave the whole matter in the hands of a single man with the unimposing title of Lieutenant Commissioner of Grants. So with considerable fanfare, he demanded that the visiting Kyyra be brought before a special closed session of the UN Security Council, under his personal supervision. They went without protest, accompanied by Clark and Sanchez aboard a sealed plane met in New York by a sealed limousine. They listened attentively to the Council's ceremonial greetings, but shocked the Council by playing their pipes in the middle of Gerber's prepared speech. When asked, Beldan briefly explained their reasons for being on Earth, but the details were obviously beyond most of the Council members. The whole experience was so traumatic for many of them—including Gerber—that they were even more relieved than insulted when Beldan made it clear that he would prefer to return to Florida and continue dealing with Clark. Gerber promptly granted the request "for the time being." But, as a final face-saving gesture, he enlarged the meetings, sending a panel of reasonably prominent specialists to go over the Kyyra proposals with a fine-toothed comb.

And, of course, the public had to know. A majority of the deliberation committee backed Clark in his contention that unlimited publicity would be unwise, so the conference room was not thrown wide open to newsmen. But Clark and two other members of the committee had to submit to regular press conferences—at first daily, then later tapering off to once a week.

And the first pictures of the Kyyra were published. They did not appear often, and Beldan seemed mystified by the reasons for the original request. But Clark largely through the help of Sandy Turabian—managed to persuade him and his associates to sit for a few portraits.

The pictures played a surprisingly important part in shaping public reactions, which grew rapidly at first—and in many directions. The anger over governmental secrecy remained, but more attention gradually focused on the astronomical danger, the Kyyra themselves, and their proposal. At first there was a rash of demonstrations representing a range of opinions and—predictably—more emotion than thought. Most of them fell into two rough categories: "It's the end of the world but here's a chance to do something about it," or "It's the end of the world but we deserve it and it would be against the will of God to resist." (There was also a relatively small "I don't believe it" school—but then there was still a Flat Earth Society, too.) Each category further divided into a rich spectrum of subsects, but each included plenty of hot-headed fanatics and each managed to drum up all manner of support for its position—including biblical quotations.

Clark worried a little when he saw religion being dragged into it. Such an argument was difficult enough when all involved were making an honest effort to be rational and objective. If it became a matter of religious fervor, rationality and objectivity would tend to be drowned out. And there were special

reasons for concern in this case. They were directly related to the pictures, and Clark himself understood them only too well. He vividly remembered his own reactions on seeing the Kyyra for the first time, and later when he had found himself unconsciously regarding them as virtually omnipotent benefactors who could save man without unpleasant side effects. He, trained to think self-critically, had caught himself in time—but many others had no such safeguards. The appearance of the Kyyra was an unfortunate accident, and pictures of their orbiting starship only tended to strengthen feelings of awe. It was too easy for humans to think of them as godlike, or divinely sent, or whatever most closely fit their particular beliefs. Traditional beliefs had not been especially strong or popular in the last couple of decades, but there was a noticeable trend toward revivalism in the early days of the Kyyra talks.

But as fall turned into winter and the talks dragged on, the initial wave of public response faded. It didn't die, but when nothing came out of the press conferences except lists of technical details, much of the public lost interest. News releases became less frequent and moved to the 'inside pages of the papers. The most vocal proponents of either jumping at the Kyyra offer or (if possible) running the Kyyra off the planet remained vocal, but people paid less attention to them.

Every couple of weeks somebody would publish an opinion poll, which tended to show sizable minorities—say thirty percent—but never majorities, in favor of accepting the offer. Toward the end of November the polls began to show something else, too—action. One of the earliest things to come out of the news conferences with the deliberation committee had been the statement that many buildings would have to be modified to withstand the trip, and that some of the modification could be done either before or after the trip started. Successive conferences yielded more details. Papers and magazines—some of them with tongue obviously deep in cheek—ran "how-to" articles on making your home spaceworthy in case the Earth is moved to M31. Some people paid attention. Business began to boom quietly in materials for making houses sturdy and airtight and able to recycle their own air and water. Scattered citizens began openly converting their homes, just in case. And in many cases they found themselves victims of persecution by their neighbors, in forms ranging from gentle ridicule and social snubs to large-scale vandalism and physical attack.

That Clark watched with real misgivings. Some police departments hinted that he was to blame for growing lawlessness by encouraging people to go in for weird behavior that naturally attracted suspicion. After one such incident—a case near Christmas in which a suburban Indianapolis family which had been converting had its home burned to the ground and the local police responded with some especially vicious innuendos—Clark finally said something about it to Joe Sanchez.

They were in Sanchez' apartment at the end of an unusually tedious talk session. Sanchez was seated, with a cigar in one hand and a drink in the other. Clark paced the floor, hounded by frustration. Standing at the window with his back to Sanchez, he remarked, "You know, Joe, I'm beginning to see problems about this that I'd hardly dreamed of when it first came up. Suppose we do decide to accept their offer and move the Earth. How are we going to actually implement all the changes that are needed?"

"Some people are already doing it on their own."

"Yes, but look at the trouble they're having. Look at this thing in Indianapolis. How can you work on a major project like that when your neighbors won't give you any peace and the police are as likely as not to side with them against you?" He sat down, crossed his legs, and looked at Sanchez. "Besides, it still wouldn't be enough. Even leaving public buildings and utilities out of the picture. You remember when Beldan said homes could be modified easily and I asked, What about all the people who can't afford it?"

Sanchez nodded. "Yes."

"He just said we'll find a way to do it if we want to. I've been thinking about that. I've been thinking about it a lot, and I've gradually found myself forced to the conclusion that we won't. Not the way things are now."

"What do you mean?"

"Our whole political and economic organization is all wrong to do that kind of thing. I think the technical resources exist to help almost everybody make the trip alive, but we don't have a chance of getting to more than a few in the time available. Not the way we're used to doing things."

Sanchez was eyeing him narrowly. "Do you have any better ideas?"

"I'm getting more and more afraid that it's going to take something like martial law on a scale we've never seen before. A really strong central authority with the machinery to get things done fast and efficiently over the whole world."

Sanchez stared at him for a long time. "Don't get carried away, Henry," he said finally. "That's strong language. I don't think you have to start thinking that way."

"I hope not," said Clark, "But I'm afraid you're being naive."

"And I hope you're being facetious. I really do."

But the look on his face haunted Clark's memory for a long time. Through it all, Clark kept trying to find the motives for the Kyyra offer. Oddly, the public that wanted pictures was more interested in gossip about the aliens' everyday lives than in concrete reasons for their actions. They remained reticent about that, too. Clark still considered the motive question far more pressing and directed his main efforts toward that. Again and again he raised the question in different ways, and again and again Beldan gracefully evaded it. Clark tried again to enlist Sandy's direct aid, and again she told him she would not do any outright spying and did not yet know Beldan well enough to make any statement about him. He checked back with Kovacs periodically, but the psychiatrist never managed to reconstruct anything coherent from his interviews with Lewiston.

Frustration grew. As the winter progressed, Clark was increasingly plagued by the feeling that nothing else was progressing at all.

At least part of the hunch that had led Sandy to invite Beldan to visit was apparently right. The original visit proved the first of many, and as fall passed into winter she gradually came to feel that she was gaining inklings of what made him tick. There was not much that she could put into words, yet, except the conviction that he had indeed needed some more relaxed contact with the aliens who lived on Earth and that she seemed to fill that need and gain his confidence as no one else had done. When Clark had spoken of the possibility of "some sort of friendly relationship," she had taken the phrase lightly. It had seemed too much to expect. But a few weeks later she realized as she was going to sleep one night that something of that sort had in fact developed.

The air of mystery remained, of course. She came to regard Beldan as a friend, but at the same time he never ceased to be alien also. In that fact lay part of his fascination. He was less aloof with her than with others, and the two of them could find common ground to talk about, but he still had a certain inscrutability. Through all their conversations ran the feeling that he was seeing the whole world from a different angle, and Sandy had never quite managed to get her eyes and mind in the right position to see how it looked from there. But she never quit trying.

Sometimes she lay awake far into the night, thinking over something he had said, comparing it with other things he had said earlier, trying to see the pattern that tied them all together—but never quite succeeding. She wondered why he seemed to sidestep certain questions even when she asked them—yet at the same time always seemed to be honestly trying to be completely open and frank. She wondered often and hard about the remark he had made on that first visit, about their dying God. But she could never bring herself to ask him about it.

She wondered and thought about other things, too. She never lost sight of what was behind the whole web of events since Jonel's return, and the decision that must be made. She took to reading whenever she had time, about things like galactic structure and supernovae and Seyfert galaxies. When there was something she didn't quite understand, or she had an idea about a possible implication of something she read, she asked Jonel, who had pursued formal studies of astrophysics as far as a Master's degree. Sometimes he found her questions puzzling, seen without the context of her thoughts, but he always tried to answer them as well as he could. She in turn pursued each point she considered until she could pursue it no further. Many of them seemed to be dead ends; others seemed likely to be significant but she couldn't see clearly why. All of them she filed in her mind for future reference, with no more definite idea of what she was doing than that she wanted to understand as clearly as possible the background against which a decision would be made. If she understood well enough and the decision which came seemed to ignore something vital, she would not hesitate to point it out.

Sometimes—such as the times when the committee wanted to confer with Jonel privately—Sandy

did things alone with Beldan. That worked out rather well, in a way. Although Jonel was completely sympathetic toward Sandy's efforts to befriend Beldan, he himself never felt quite the empathy for the Kyyra that she did. Quite possibly that was why Beldan sometimes seemed even more relaxed when Jonel wasn't around. Those times led to some of the incidents which engraved themselves most deeply on Sandy's memory.

Like the time she showed Beldan her oboe, as one of the rough human counterparts to his music-pipe. He watched and listened attentively as she warmed up with a few quick scales and arpeggios and then started one of the oboe solos from the slow movement of the Mahler symphony he had heard. Halfway through it, he suddenly took out his pipe and began playing along, improvising a part that was nothing Sandy had ever heard but which blended uncannily. And where the Mahler oboe part sank back into the orchestra, she found herself improvising too, to avoid stopping. For over a minute the two of them played on, listening to each other and weaving a counterpoint, which, at least to Sandy, made good musical sense. Then, partly because she was afraid she couldn't sustain it any longer, she led her part toward an ending—and Beldan followed. They stopped together. For another minute Sandy sat almost breathless with exhilaration at what she thought they had done—but afraid to ask. Finally Beldan said, "That was very good," and she knew she was right.

There were other incidents too. After the spaceport reopened and the Kyyra presence became common knowledge, Clark's attitude toward security relaxed somewhat. By the beginning of December he had reached the point where he was willing to let either or both of the Turabians take Beldan on excursions outside the spaceport. There were special security requirements for those, of course. They had to use a special car in which Beldan could ride without being seen from outside, he was never to get out in the presence of other people, and the car maintained constant electronic surveillance to be sure those conditions were met. But the fact of being able to show him the outside world at all was a radical and welcome departure.

On one of the earliest trips, Sandy and Beldan stood on a deserted shore of sand and scrubby grass beside an inlet barely outside the north end of the port. The day was bleak and unseasonably cool, with amorphous gray clouds streaming past overhead, in different directions at different levels. At ground level the winds chilled Sandy enough to make her wear a sweater fully buttoned and whipped the water into a choppy froth. Here and there a pointed fin would occasionally appear among the waves, sometimes accompanied by an arching back that rose and descended in a single flowing motion, and once or twice a porpoise jumped completely clear.

Sandy and Beldan watched silently for many minutes, Sandy feeling a kind of melancholy she didn't quite understand, unless it could be blamed on the weather. After a while Beldan remarked, "They look as if they are playing."

Then Sandy thought she understood her feelings—but instead of going away, they intensified. "They *are* playing," she told him. "They're very playful animals—and very intelligent. We've just begun to learn how intelligent in the last few decades. Some say they're as bright as we are, only adapted to a completely different environment. You hear the noises they're making? They're talking to each other. We've finally started learning the language—just enough to know there's a lot more to learn." She stopped, looked around at the porpoises, and then back at Beldan. "Beldan, what's going to happen to them?"

Beldan didn't look away, but his expression was hard to read and for half a minute there was no sound except the porpoise talk and the lapping waves. Finally he said, "I don't know. That is a problem we have not faced before. But I do know that the oceans will change. If you want to save the things that live in them, you will have to find ways. And there may not be time."

They said little more about it then, but the day kept getting grayer and later kept haunting Sandy's dreams.

At Christmas the committee adjourned for several days and Clark's security policies had become still more liberal. Jonel and Sandy took the special car and drove up to her—now their—house in the Tennessee mountains, taking Beldan along. The car was equipped so he could watch the scenery from his compartment, and though he was still disturbed by the fact that Clark considered the special

compartment necessary, he seemed to enjoy the trip. They spent four days in the mountains, and Beldan liked to stroll around the yard in all kinds of weather, asking Sandy questions about things he saw ranging from valleys full of morning fog to the vein patterns in fallen leaves. On the second day, it snowed, a wet, fluffy snow that clung to tree branches and trunks, and that night it changed to freezing rain and then cleared. In the morning it was ten below and cloudless, the snow on the ground deep and smooth-crusted and the tree branches uniformly sheathed in ice that sparkled dazzling in the sun. As soon as Sandy was awake, Beldan wanted to go outside. He didn't add any visible clothing—either his metabolism wasn't picky about temperature or his robes incorporated some pretty sophisticated thermal controls. But he stayed out for a long time and seemed thoroughly fascinated by the changes the weather had wrought in the landscape. "It's like seeing it for the first time," he said with obvious excitement as they went back into the house. "A planet is truly a remarkable thing."

Sandy squirmed out of her boots and laughed. "You say that as if you were seeing a planet for the first time."

"I am," he said. "I have spent my whole life aboard my ship. I have missed a lot."

"Oh." Suddenly Sandy felt sorry for him, and at the same time found his discomfort on coming to Earth easier to understand.

And then she remembered that if the migration were carried out, Earth would become more of a ship than a planet.

Slowly, through incidents like that which were hard to assess taken singly, Sandy developed a growing understanding and affinity for Beldan and his race. Yet through it all she kept having the feeling that something not yet identified was bothering him.

Something most definitely bothered him when, in mid-January, somebody tried to blow up his shuttle.

XIII

Franz Gerber was on the phone almost immediately after that—meaning as soon as the word reached him via newsfax. Henry Clark held the receiver an inch from his ear to keep the volume down to a bearable level as the UN head fumed, "Damn it, Clark, what *are* you doing down there? Don't you even have enough sense to keep your security tight? You maybe *want* to let some imbeciles bring the wrath of a vastly superior power down on humanity's head?"

"You're being unnecessarily melodramatic," Clark quoted wearily. "The wrath simply hasn't happened. Sure, Beldan was badly shaken up. I gather that among the Kyyra violence and that kind of irrationality are unknown, so he has trouble understanding it. But he does understand that we're an alien species and he has to expect us to do some things that seem odd. And he understands that even conscientious attempts at security may not be perfect." He didn't bother to mention that, before the sabotage attempt, Beldan had not even understood the basic need for any kind of security measures. Instead he finished by adding, "But we have found some ways to tighten security around the Kyyra shuttle and quarters."

"I'm very glad to hear that. Though it sounds a lot like locking the barn door after the horse is stolen."

"They didn't get the horse."

"No, but they *might* have. Just be sure they don't in the future."

Clark shrugged. "We'll try our best, but you can expect other attempts. Somebody once wrote that violence is the last resort of the incompetent, but that's not quite right. Often it's the first. And sometimes it's tried by somebody who isn't quite as incompetent as you'd like."

"Hmph." Gerber paused briefly and then changed his tack slightly. "All I know about this is what I've got through the public media, but you're right on the spot. Exactly what happened?"

"I find it very interesting," Clark observed wryly, "that you haven't shown any personal interest at all in this whole business until some little thing happens to scare you. And then suddenly you want to know everything and start jumping all over me."

"That's because I like to think I can trust things to you and sometimes you make me seriously doubt it. I asked you a question. What happened?"

"We don't know yet, Franz. Except in the most general way. Somebody got past the guards last night and got close to the Kyyra shuttle with a bundle of explosives and equipment to set them off. We know they were explosives because he left some of them behind when he ran."

"He *ran*?"

"Yes. Some guardsmen noticed him just in time and scared him off. He got away."

"He got away," Gerber echoed as if he found it beyond belief. "What kind of guardsmen do you have there? Don't they have guns? Or don't they know how to use them?"

"They have guns. We don't know how or why the saboteur got away. I'll admit it seems odd. We'll be questioning all the guardsmen, but of course we haven't yet."

"Humph. And you have no idea who it was?"

Clark hesitated a split second before deciding not to mention his suspicion that the saboteur was somebody who knew something about the security arrangements and likely even had some part in them—such as one of the guardsmen. He just said, "No."

"No idea whether it was an isolated crackpot or part of an organized conspiracy?"

"Not yet. Look, Franz, we've only had a couple of hours since this thing happened. We're getting a full investigation under way, but it's hardly had time to produce any conclusions yet."

"I suppose I can grant you that. But it just raises a larger question that's been bothering me. You haven't had enough time for this investigation, but how about the original one you started in the fall—the one about the aliens and whether we should accept their offer? Can you honestly say you haven't had time to get results from that one?"

"You're supposed to be collecting information. Well, what information have you collected?"

Clark scowled. "Haven't you been paying any attention to the papers except when they happen to scare you? We've been releasing information all along. Details about what the trip will entail, how people can prepare themselves for the trip—"

"All that is *if* we make the trip at all. When will we have enough to make that decision?"

"As far as I'm concerned," said Clark, "we already have all we need."

"What?" A familiar anger flared up in Gerber's voice. "Why wasn't I told?"

"All I mean is that we're not really getting any significantly new information any more. I think what we have is enough for anybody to reach a decision about what he thinks should be done."

Impatiently: "So what is your recommendation?"

"I have an *opinion* about what *I'd* like to see done. That's not the same as a recommendation."

"Quit splitting hairs. I don't care what you call it. What's your opinion?"

"I'm not sure I want to give it yet. It might sound too much like an official pronouncement. And I'm still wrestling with moral issues."

"*Moral* issues? Look, Clark, this is no time for philosophy—"

"On the contrary," Clark interrupted, glaring at the phone, "There has never been such a time for philosophy. If it'll make you feel any better, though, one of my moral issues is very, very practical."

"Yes?"

"*If* we decide to accept the offer, exactly how do we go about making the necessary adjustments on a worldwide scale so that as many people as possible can make the trip safely? That's a practical problem because there's a tremendous amount of logistics, economics, and politics involved in getting the materials and know-how to the people—and remember the people we have to get them to include Eskimos, Hottentots, and Australian abos as well as the ones you're probably thinking of. And it's a moral problem because the only ways I've been able to think of involve giving governments more power than I like to see them have. Even in an emergency."

"Hm-m-m." Gerber remained carefully noncommittal. "What's the other one?"

"It's simply the question of how to make a decision at all, knowing how drastically everybody who disagrees with it is going to be affected. The people have the information, but they haven't reached any consensus about what to do with it."

"Haven't they? I thought I'd seen polls—"

"That showed something like thirty percent in favor of going? You have. But those polls are local, for one thing. They ignore whole populations of countries. Some of them don't even know what's going on."

"Those countries wouldn't be likely to differ much from the others."

"A moot point," said Clark.

"Well, assume it for the sake of argument. Thirty percent in favor of going. That's seventy percent opposed."

"Even if I grant you that, it's not a real consensus."

"It's good enough for practically any election in the world."

"And in that respect those elections are a farce, but fortunately the stakes in them aren't really very high. In this one they are. I'd like to see a *real* consensus, and so would Beldan. We'd like to see nearly unanimous agreement on a course of action."

"You're out of your mind."

"Probably. But I can wait a little longer before I give up. Right now I can't even get a consensus from your committee. Incidentally, on your thirty-seventy argument—remember that those are percentages of people now living. How would their descendants vote?"

Gerber was silent briefly. When he spoke again, his tone had changed subtly, as if he had finally started to grasp some of the real implications of the problem. "I'm not used to thinking like that," he said with unaccustomed slowness. "But I can see why you bring it up." He paused again. "Does it *have* to be that kind of a decision? Couldn't we let the people who want to go, go on ships, 'and let the others stay here?'"

"Not a chance. I can see you haven't looked at the arithmetic, but I have." Clark thought back to his first meeting with Chandragupta Rao, and the memory triggered a whole string of others. Since his break with the Kyyra talks, Rao had spoken out frequently against accepting the Kyyra offer or even continued talks having that as a possible outcome. Clark had stubbornly resisted answering him directly, and even now he wasn't sure it was a wise decision . . . He told Gerber. "Thirty percent want to go. There's no way we can do that with ships. Maybe a thirtieth of a percent, with real heroism and incredible luck—but not thirty. And we have to assume there won't be a second chance for those who stay behind. The Kyyra are here *now* and they're moving out. And we can't do it without them."

"Hm-m-m." Gerber paused again, and then abruptly recovered some of his usual commanding air. "Well," he said crisply, "It's quite clear from this sabotage incident that some people have strong feelings about it. The longer we have *them* on Earth and a decision hanging in the air, the more trouble we're going to have. I don't want that. So, Mr. Clark, if consensus is what you need—I strongly recommend that you come up with a way to produce a consensus. Fast."

And with that he hung up.

He was right, of course. The realization that that was the next thing really needed had been gnawing at Clark's consciousness for several days. He had semiconsciously avoided it, tried to stall, because he had so little idea of how to achieve it. He had a lingering, lurking fear that Gerber was right, that real consensus even within a single nation was so farfetched that it was a quixotic waste of time to seek it. Yet he also clung to a faint hope, however farfetched it might be, that in just this one special case it might be possible.

Indecision again. Over and over he mentally raked himself over the coals for it, but the indecision remained.

Gerber's call demanding that something be done soon brought the matter to a searing focus in his mind. He thought about it night and day. He felt again, as acutely as in the first days after the *Archaeopteryx* came back and the Kyyra shuttle followed, the crushing pressure of unsought responsibility. Dreams of Dianne haunted his sleep more often than ever before, dreams in which she was back with him and listened as she always had before—but when she tried to speak, nothing came out.

The investigation of the sabotage attempt promised at first to provide a temporary diversion for part of his attention, but quickly proved to be nothing more than an additional headache. Talks with all the guardsmen in the area, held in the couple of days following the incident, failed to pin any blame on any of them. Nor did any of them provide any leads that seemed to lead anywhere. "Run them through again," Clark snapped impatiently when the head investigator told him they had exhausted the possibilities.

Two days after Gerber called, pressure was added from a new and unexpected source. The talks had become routine and dull these days—they seemed to be eternally circling over the same ground and never landing on anything. At the end of this one, as the representatives of both species filed out of the room, Beldan strode over to Clark and said quietly, "May I talk to you privately, Mr. Clark?"

"Certainly," said Clark, both surprised and apprehensive. "Will this room be all right?"

"This room will be fine." He waited until all the others were gone, then closed the door and turned back to face Clark. Clark had the fleeting thought that the Kyyra's height gave him an unfair advantage. Then Beldan said, "I have been in communication with those on both my convoy ship and the planet we are accompanying. They have asked me to convey to you the necessity of your reaching a decision in the near future."

The words hit Clark like an electric shock. "But," he said uncertainly, "there is still much to settle . . ."

"We don't think so. I don't believe you really think so, either, do you, Mr. Clark? It is my belief, as well as that of those you would call my superiors, that all the essential information is in your hands. If there are really central points of uncertainty, I suggest you formulate your questions tonight and clarify them at our next meeting."

"I . . . I'll try. If you'll forgive me, Beldan . . . this comes very suddenly. How soon must we give our final decision?"

"We would like to avoid imposing the indignity of a rigid deadline. We will do so if it seems necessary, but it is foreign to our nature except as a last resort. First we will simply ask you to give us a decision as early as you possibly can, bearing in mind that there is an element of urgency."

"I'll see what I can do," Clark nodded numbly. "May I ask why the sudden rush?"

"It is not a sudden rush. We believe you have had all the essential information for a considerable time and have failed to act on it for reasons which are less than clear to us. Meanwhile, our planet has been continuing outward, receding from us at a super-c velocity. It has to retain that velocity, Mr. Clark. A planet is not conveniently refuelable and is therefore far less maneuverable than a ship." *Especially*, Clark reminded himself, *at the speed your planet is going. And again we have the question: why?* Beldan finished, "The farther behind we fall while waiting for your reply, the more difficult it is to catch up. We have already fallen a fair fraction of a light-year behind."

We do not wish to lose much more time—particularly if you intend to refuse our offer."

Clark nodded. "I'll try to get you a decision as soon as possible," he said, and he meant it. Put that way, Beldan's concern was quite understandable—given that their planet was traveling so close to the speed of light that it was energetically impractical to change the speed very much.

But again Clark found himself utterly perplexed by the question of why they chose to travel at such a speed—and why they seemed convinced that that question was not irrelevant to the larger ones he faced.

It was Clark's idea to take a personal appeal for reason—and hopefully consensus—directly to the people. It was Sanchez' idea that he should do it in a live appearance.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Part of the reason for public distrust to this point had been the fact that all the deliberations were carried out behind closed doors. News filtered out, but the trouble was that "filtered" described the situation too accurately. The public never saw a picture of humans actually in conference with Kyyra. It never saw Henry Clark in a live television interview, as it often saw Chandragupta Rao. It saw so little of the Kyyra themselves, and only in still news photos, that to many people they didn't seem quite real. So it seemed reasonable that if Clark appeared before an actual audience, with live worldwide television coverage, the gesture would help dispel the impression that he was trying to hide something. And if one or more of the Kyyra could be present too, so much the better.

On the day of the show, as Clark watched the gathering crowds and camera crews from behind the

scenes, he had second thoughts. He tried to dismiss them as mere stage fright, but he knew they were more than that. In the week since the sabotage attempt, violent emotions on all sides of the question had been much more openly displayed in spots all over the world. The overflow crowd now swarming into the grandstand that had been improvised in a corner of the spaceport was noisy. To Clark it looked uncomfortably like an explosive mixture—and he wasn't sure what it would take to set it off. He was glad he had had the foresight to insist that Beldan be placed in a protectoglass dome at the side of the stage, despite his objections.

For a moment Clark wondered again about those objections. When he had mentioned that he would explain the dome by saying that the Kyyra needed protection from the local atmosphere, Beldan had immediately said, "But I don't. Why should we tell them I do when I don't?" There was so much Clark didn't understand about the

Kyyra. Could a culture really shape its members so that they found violence and deceit as incomprehensible as Beldan claimed to? What *kind* of a culture could do that?

The time came. Clark strode out onto the stage, shaking in his shoes even as he made his gait project confidence and strength. Polite applause greeted him and died quickly. Just in front of the stage, a long row of commentators and interpreters sat in glass booths with microphones and headsets, poised and waiting eagerly for his first words. He cleared his throat and began, "My friends, I come to you today to talk about a matter of serious concern to all of us—perhaps the most serious any of us has ever faced." The interpreters, keeping their eyes glued to his face, spoke rapidly into their microphones in thirty languages—all of them silent from where Clark stood. "First allow me to introduce a very distinguished visitor. You have all seen his picture in the news: none of you has seen him in person before. Being unaccustomed to Earth, he must be especially careful while visiting us. That is why you see him now enclosed in a dome. It is my pleasure to present Beldan, ambassador of the Kyyra." He gestured and Beldan stood. The audience responded in a strangely nonhomogeneous way. Isolated pockets of people clapped and cheered wildly; one group sang a hymn. Others stood with arms folded and stared stonily; still others gave a few seconds of perfunctory applause and then stood waiting. When it all subsided, Clark said, "Both Beldan and I will be happy to answer questions when I have finished my opening remarks." *Some questions, anyway,* he thought tightly.

"You all know why Beldan is on Earth. To put it as simply as possible, Earth is in danger because our galaxy's core has exploded. The Kyyra have offered to help us escape the danger. But we must not leave it in such simple terms. It is vitally important that every One of you understand exactly what the danger is and what courses of action are open to us. Let me review things which many of you already know . . ."

Briefly, but thoroughly, he outlined what the core explosion would mean to Earth, what the Kyyra offer entailed, and what could be done if the offer were not accepted. Sometimes he had to pause for a burst of scattered applause or a wisecrack from a heckler; in each case he waited patiently and then went on. He pulled no punches. He made it very clear that any of the choices would involve, at best, great discomfort and sacrifice.

"And perhaps the saddest part of all," he finished, "is that we all have to live by the same decision. The decision will actually—formally—be made by your political leaders. But once it is made—no matter which choice is taken—we are all going to have to work together as we have never worked together before. That is why I am asking you today to give these matters your most careful thought, so that when we make our decision we can do so with confidence that it reflects your wishes. Sabotage attempts accomplish nothing. Persecuting your neighbors who disagree with you accomplishes nothing. *Thinking* may accomplish something.

"I hope that after you have thought, we can all agree on our choice. But if we cannot, I hope that all who disagree with the decision will resolve to cooperate fully in carrying it out—because there will no longer be any alternative. And as I said, whichever option we take, we are going to have to cooperate to make it work. The main difference I see is that one choice keeps open the possibility of life somewhat as we know it for our descendants; the other involves fewer unpredictable risks but allows only underground hiding for a longer time than any of us can imagine.

"There is one final point. We are going to have to make our decision soon—within a few days if at all

possible. Because our Kyyra visitors will not be able to wait much longer—"

"What do *they* want?" a heckler yelled hoarsely from one of the front rows. Another joined in, "Yeah, what's their angle?" Quickly, frighteningly, the scattered shouts grew into a general angry roar of people shaking their fists at the stage and trying to be heard over the din. Clark held up his hands to beg for order, but the tumult just swelled even faster and his vision of consensus shattered into tiny fragments that would never go back together again.

Then two gunshots rang out from the audience, almost simultaneously and from nearly opposite directions. Something smashed into Clark with a tremendous surge of blinding pain.

Everything else was lost as the stage dissolved under his feet and the world turned black.

XIV

Rao was on the air within two hours after the shooting. "I cannot overemphasize," he said, looking earnestly straight into the camera, "how much I deplore this afternoon's unfortunate incident. Any civilized person would agree that there is no excuse for this sort of unthinking violence. We can be thankful only that the injury to Lieutenant Commissioner Clark was not as serious as the offense.

"However . . . we must not allow our outrage at this barbarism, or our sympathy for Mr. Clark, to blind us to the seriousness of the issue that prompted him to speak. We must not forget that the question of whether or not to accept the Kyyra offer deeply touches the life of every one of us—including me and *you*." He pointed dramatically, straight at his viewers. "We must not forget that Mr. Clark's committee—despite having had some three months to study the problem—has utterly failed to answer the question of why the Kyyra are making this offer.

"Now we are told that the decision must be made within a few days. I urge you as strongly as I can: *do not* let this decision be railroaded through. We cannot afford to decide on this offer until we *know* why they are making it. They must have a reason. I urge every citizen to *demand* that our leaders find out what it is—and do not accept any decision until your demand has been met!"

People heard him and listened. Panic had begun to develop, now that something like a deadline had been announced and violence had reached high places. In popular opinion, a muddy -logic shifted blame for the shooting from the anonymous humans who pulled the triggers to the Kyyra whose presence somehow lay behind the whole web of events. Telegrams and phone calls began to pour into the UN, the Science Foundation, national governments, and Kennedy Spaceport. Some demanded that the Kyyra offer be accepted; others demanded just as loudly that it be rejected. But above all there was a rising clamor of demand that the Kyyra motives be clarified, and fast.

Little of that reached Clark at first. He was hospitalized at once, and for over twenty-four hours he was allowed neither visitors nor news. So he had a lot of time to kill with few distractions other than the pain in his right shoulder, which tended to become overpowering in the last hour before he got another dose of painkiller. Then when he got it, the drug tended to make him so drowsy that he fell asleep. But the sleep was hardly refreshing. It was too full of those dreams of Dianne listening to him and not being able to speak—and they got worse rather than better. In one of them, in the middle of the night, she listened and didn't even try to speak, but just turned and walked away while he was in the middle of a sentence. In another, he was back there giving the televised speech and suddenly Dianne stood up in the front row, pointing at him and laughing uproariously.

He woke in a cold sweat, afraid to go back to sleep. Intellectually he knew it was only a dream, of course, but some dreams can plague the sleeper long after he is awake. This one took him quite a while to get reasonably well out of his thoughts, and it might have taken longer if it had still been dark. Instead it was a bright morning and the sunshine flooding through the window encouraged him to stay awake and think about reality.

During the times when the drug was starting to wear off—when he was awake but not yet hurting too badly—he could do that fairly well. He thought a lot about things he had done and might have done differently—his failure to keep tight enough security on Rao, his silent suffering as Rao propagandized during the last several weeks, his tragicomic attempt to bring people together by an appeal to reason.

Maybe instead of that he should have just made his own decision and then used Rao's own tactics to make the people accept it. Or maybe ...

But of course there was no point in dwelling on what he might have done. The only question that really mattered was, What could he do *now*? Gradually he banished the past from his mind and refocused his attention on the immediate future. Very slowly, some possibilities began to crystallize.

In the evening visitors came—Joe Sanchez and Jonel Turabian. Clark was feeling fairly good then. They had caught him in the right part of the drug cycle and he was beginning to feel some slight satisfaction with his thinking. His first reaction when Joe and Jonel walked into his room was to look at them, frown, and ask, "Where's Sandy?" "She's with Beldan," said Jonel.

"Trying to explain to him why things like this happen." He took one of the two chairs in the room, hauled it over next to the bed, and sat down. Sanchez took the other.

"I wish she could make him see why people are making all the fuss about their motives," Clark muttered gloomily. "Well, anyway, I'm glad to see you two. Thanks for coming. What's the news in the outside world? They haven't let me hear any all day."

Sanchez shrugged. "Rao the Rabble-Rouser was at it again, as you might expect, trying to bring the motive question to a head. Meanwhile, the investigators have had a little more luck with your shooting than they did with the guy who tried to blow up the Kyyra shuttle. Maybe you should feel flattered. It isn't everybody who gets to be the target of two independent assassination attempts at the same time."

"Flattered or flattened?" Clark mused. "Independent, you say. They've established that?"

"Pretty well." Sanchez reached for a cigar, thought better of it, and withdrew his hand. "They caught one of them. He was the one who missed you. A bad shot, a crackpot, and a lone wolf with no apparent connections with anybody. Young fellow named Franklin who apparently had some confused idea that you were going to give up our one chance at escape. He thought if he could get rid of you, somebody else would take over with strong reins and make sure we didn't miss out. Don't know who he had in mind. I don't know what's going to happen to him, either. I wouldn't be surprised if he wound up in a loony bin."

"And the other one?"

"Nothing quite so definite there. Nobody in hand who we know did it. A few possible suspects, and some hints that it was part of a plot."

Clark's eyebrows rose slightly. "A plot? By whom?"

"Not certain. The investigators won't even tell me what the clues are. But they've uncovered a conspiracy by a group that wants nothing to do with the Kyyra offer and is afraid you're determined to accept it. It's not too hard to see why they think that. You've been entertaining Beldan for a long time—and some of your remarks yesterday seemed to lean that way."

"Did they? I thought they were very impartial."

"Some of us didn't hear it that way. Anyway, they suspect a connection between that group that's trying to stop you from what they think you're going to do, and the guy who shot you. And that's where we stand now. Further studies are in progress, as they say in the journals."

"I see." Clark shut his eyes and thought for a few seconds. His shoulder was starting to hurt again. "Is Rao in on this?" he asked suddenly, opening his eyes.

"We don't know. It seems hard to believe, but I suppose it's possible. All we know about him is that he's been very openly and vocally against the way you've been handling things and he has a strong personal preference for not accepting the Kyyra offer. And he's built up quite a following. Thanks to his latest effort, everybody's in a hurry and the motive question is the issue of the day. Everybody wants an answer, no matter which side they're on."

"I don't suppose you've seen any new polls, have you?"

"Yes, there was one that came out this afternoon. Hastily done, and started before yesterday afternoon, so it's hard to judge how reliable it is or how much effect either you or Rao had on it. But it does show a shift. The percentage in favor of going is down to twenty-five."

"It shows something else, too," Jonel added. "They asked people if they might change their minds if they had the answer to the motive question. A sizable number in both groups said they might, depending

on what answer the Kyyra might give."

Clark closed his eyes and nodded slowly. "Does Beldan know about all this?"

"Sandy's mentioned it to him. He still says he can see no relevance to the question and he can't wait much longer for a decision."

Clark, his eyes still closed, frowned. "It's really odd," he said. "Maybe he really considers it irrelevant, but I find that hard to believe. Anyway, they do have a seller's market. There's nothing they need from us, or they'd be willing to make that much of a concession to get it. It doesn't matter to them whether we accept or not. But if they don't want anything, and they're so callous that they'd withdraw their help just because we want to know why they offer it—why offer in the first place?"

"Maybe," said Sanchez, "they don't answer because their motives are something they have to hide from us."

"Maybe," said Clark. The possibility was real, but seemed small—and he didn't like to think about it. "But that doesn't make sense either. If it's obvious that we desperately want to know a motive, and they don't want to tell us the real one, why don't they just make up a phony one to shut us up?"

"Maybe they really never lie."

Beldan did try to give that impression. But could it be taken at face value? Trying to talk out the question, Clark found himself growing more confused than ever.

Jonel said, "All I know that seems important right now is that if we don't answer soon we may blow our chance. Motives are the key controversy on Earth. If we could clear them up, everything else might become a lot more clear-cut. So what we need right now, more than anything else, is a way to get them to answer that."

Tell me something I don't know, Clark thought acidly, but he said nothing. For a while none of them said anything. Clark opened his eyes and studied the other two men's faces.

Sanchez looked especially thoughtful, staring at an irregularity in the wall finish in a corner of the room. Finally he said, "I know one thing we might try."

Clark allowed himself no enthusiasm whatsoever. "Yes?"

"Sandy Turabian has more of Beldan's trust than any of us. Maybe you could get her to ask him."

"I've tried it," Clark said. "She said she wouldn't spy on him." "I'm not suggesting that she spy on him. I'm suggesting that she ask him a straightforward question. And try to make him understand why the answer is important to us, which is what none of us has been able to do."

Clark thought silently for half a minute. He didn't expect her to agree, and he wasn't even sure she could do it. But he had said weeks ago that if anybody could do it, she could. He still believed that, and at the moment he could think of nothing else that had any chance at all. He looked at Jonel, almost pleadingly. "Maybe if you talked to her, Jonel . . ."

"I'll do it," said Jonel, standing up. "And I'll do it right now, so you can talk to her too, if necessary."

There was a phone in the room, on a table temporarily kept out of Clark's reach. Jonel walked over to it, punched out his apartment's code, and waited.

And waited.

After a full minute he hung up, frowning. "I don't understand that," he said. "She didn't say anything about going out. I'd better go check up on her. Take it easy, Henry." He grabbed his light jacket and went out hurriedly.

The apartment was deserted. Everything—furniture, decorations, lights—everything was as it should be, but there was no sign of Sandy or Beldan. Not yet really alarmed, but with a growing prickling sensation that something was not quite right, Jonel went through the whole place, looking on and in all the furniture for any note Sandy might have left to tell him where they were going.

He found nothing. And then he began to worry. It would not be like Sandy to leave voluntarily without leaving a message.

He tried to call the Kyyra quarters. No answer.

He called the spaceport headquarters. "This is Jonel Turabian," he said as soon as he was connected. "I was just trying to call Beldan in his quarters but got no answer. Can you tell me where he is? And while we're at it, do you happen to know where my wife is?"

"Hold on a moment, sir," said the voice at the other end, "while we check your voiceprint." Jonel frowned. Voiceprints were never checked except under very special circumstances when security was at stake.

A minute later the voice was back. "Thank you for waiting, Mr. Turabian. I don't know where your wife is, but all three of the Kyyra have vanished. And so has their shuttle."

To BE CONCLUDED