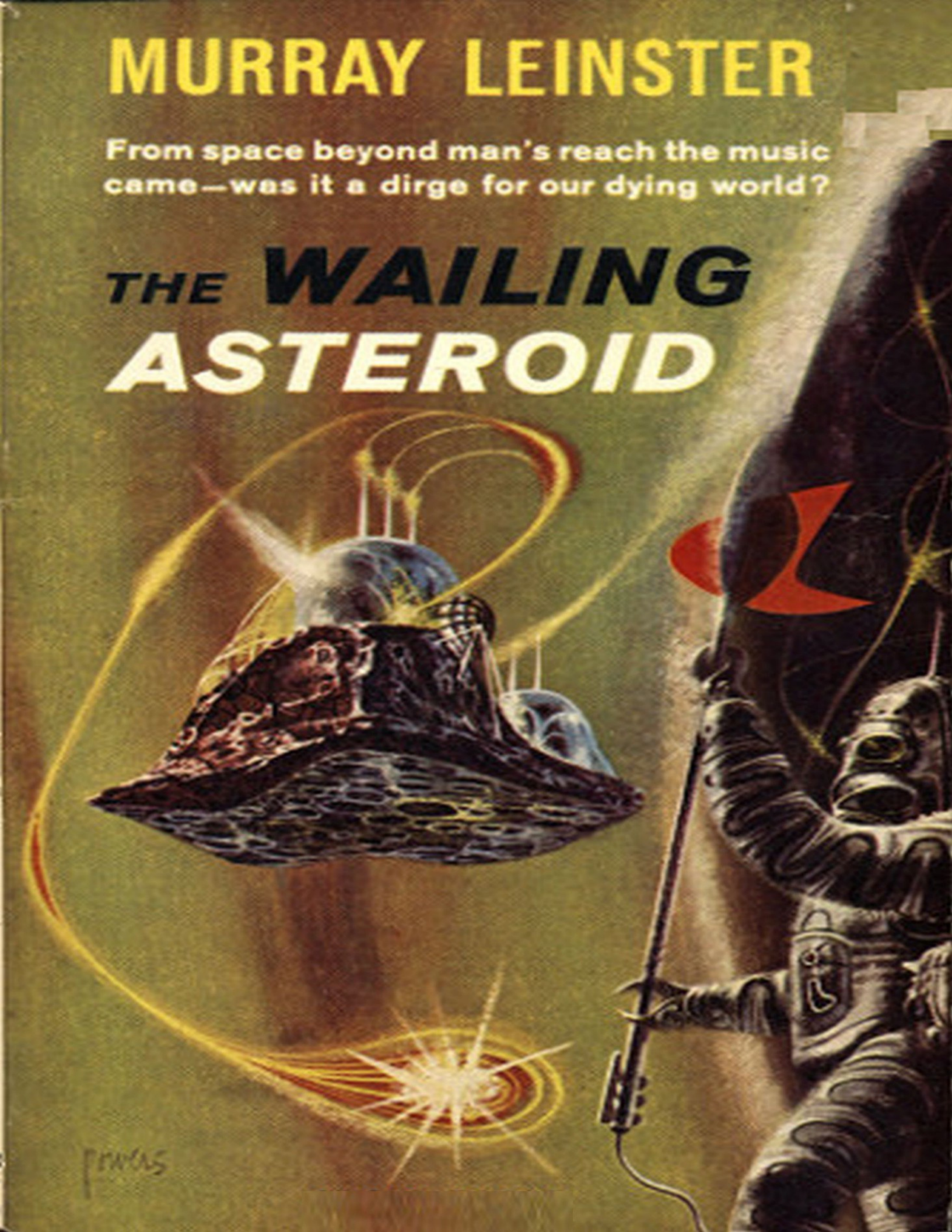
MURRAY LEINSTER

From space beyond man's reach the music came—was it a dirge for our dying world?

THE WAILING ASTEROID



THE WAILING ASTEROID

by Murray Leinster

There was no life on the asteroid, but the miles of rock-hewn corridors through which the earth party wandered left no doubt about the purpose of the asteroid.

It was a mighty fortress, stocked with weapons of destruction beyond man's power to understand.

And yet there was no life here, nor had there been for untold centuries.

What race had built this stronghold? What unimaginable power were they defending against? Why was it abandoned? There was no answer, all was dead.

But—not quite all.

For in a room above the tomb-like fortress a powerful transmitter beamed its birdlike, fluting sounds toward earth. Near it, on a huge star-map of the universe, with light-years measured by inches, ten tiny red sparks were moving, crawling inexorably toward the center.

Moving, at many times the speed of light, with the acquired mass of suns ... moving, on a course that would pass through the solar system.

The unknown aliens would not even see our sun explode from the force of their passing, would not even notice the tiny speck called Earth as it died....

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Chapter 1

The signals from space began a little after midnight, local time, on a Friday. They were first picked up in the South Pacific, just westward of the International Date Line. A satellite-watching station on an island named Kalua was the first to receive them, though nobody heard the first four or five minutes. But it is certain that the very first message was picked up and recorded by the monitor instruments.

The satellite-tracking unit on Kalua was practically a duplicate of all its fellows. There was the station itself with a vertical antenna outside pointing at the stars. There were various lateral antennae held two feet above ground by concrete posts. In the instrument room in the building a light burned over a desk, three or four monitor lights glowed dimly to indicate that the self-recording instruments were properly operating, and there was a multiple-channel tape recorder built into the wall. Its twin tape reels turned sedately, winding a brown plastic ribbon from one to the other at a moderate pace.

The staff man on duty had gone to the installation's kitchen for a cup of coffee. No sound originated in the room, unless one counted the fluttering of a piece of weighted-down paper on the desk. Outside, palm trees whispered and rustled their long fronds in the southeast trade wind under a sky full of glittering stars. Beyond, there was the dull booming of surf upon the barrier reef of the island. But the instruments made no sound. Only the tape reels moved.

The signals began abruptly. They came out of a speaker and were instantly recorded. They were elfin and flutelike and musical. They were crisp and distinct. They did not form a melody, but nearly all the components of melody were there. Pure musical notes, each with its own pitch, all of different lengths, like quarter-notes and eighth-notes in music. The sounds needed only rhythm and arrangement to form a plaintive tune.

Nothing happened. The sounds continued for something over a minute. They stopped long enough to seem to have ended. Then they began again.

When the staff man came back into the room with a coffee cup in his hand, he heard the flutings instantly. His jaw dropped. He said, "What the hell?" and went to look at the instruments. He spilled some of his coffee when he saw their readings.

The tracking dials said that the signals came from a stationary source almost directly overhead. If they were from a stationary source, no plane was transmitting them. Nor could they be coming from an artificial satellite. A plane would move at a moderate pace across the sky. A satellite would move faster. Much faster. This source, according to the instruments, did not move at all.

The staff man listened with a blank expression on his face. There was but one rational explanation, which he did not credit for an instant. The reasonable answer would have been that somebody, somewhere, had put a satellite out into an orbit requiring twenty-four hours for a circuit of the earth, instead of the ninety to one-hundred-twenty-four-minute orbits of the satellites known to sweep around the world from west to east and pole to pole. But the piping, musical sounds were not the sort of thing that modern physicists would have contrived to carry information about cosmic-particle frequency, space temperature, micrometeorites, and the like.

The signals stopped again, and again resumed. The staff man was galvanized into activity. He rushed to waken other members of the outpost. When he got back, the signals continued for a minute and stopped altogether. But they were recorded on tape, with the instrument readings that had been made during their duration. The staff man played the tape back for his companions.

They felt as he did. These were signals from space where man had never been. They had listened to the first message ever to reach mankind from the illimitable emptiness between the stars and planets. Man was not alone. Man was no longer isolated. Man....

The staff of the tracking station was very much upset. Most of the men were white-faced by the time the taped message had been re-played through to its end. They were frightened.

Considering everything, they had every reason to be.

The second pick-up was in Darjeeling, in northern India. The Indian government was then passing through one of its periods of enthusiastic interest in science. It had set up a satellite-observation post in a former British cavalry stable on the outskirts of the town. The acting head of the observing staff happened to hear the second broadcast to reach Earth. It arrived some seventy-nine minutes after the first reception, and it was picked up by two stations, Kalua and Darjeeling.

The Darjeeling observer was incredulous at what he heard—five repetitions of the same sequence of flutelike notes. After each pause—when it seemed that the signals had stopped before they actually did so—the reception was exactly the same as the one before. It was inconceivable that such a succession of sounds, lasting a full minute, could be exactly repeated by any natural chain of events. Five repetitions were out of the question. The notes were signals. They were a communication which was repeated to be sure it was received.

The third broadcast was heard in Lebanon in addition to Kalua and Darjeeling. Reception in all three places was simultaneous. A signal from a nearby satellite could not possibly have been picked up so far around the Earth's curvature. The widening of the area of reception, too, proved that there was no new satellite aloft with an orbit period of exactly twenty-four hours, so that it hung motionless in the sky relative to Earth. Tracking observations, in fact, showed the source of the signals to move westward, as time passed, with the apparent motion of a star. No satellite of Earth could possibly exist with such an orbit unless it was close enough to show a detectable parallax. This did not.

A French station picked up the next batch of plaintive sounds. Kalua, Darjeeling, and Lebanon still received. By the time the next signal was due, Croydon, in England, had its giant radar-telescope trained on the part of the sky from which all the tracking stations agreed the signals came.

Croydon painstakingly made observations during four seventy-nine-minute intervals and four five-minute receptions of the fluting noises. It reported that there was a source of artificial signals at an extremely great distance, position right ascension so-and-so, declination such-and-such. The signals began

every seventy-nine minutes. They could be heard by any receiving instrument capable of handling the microwave frequency involved. The broadcast was extremely broad-band. It covered more than two octaves and sharp tuning was not necessary. A man-made signal would have been confined to as narrow a wave-band as possible, to save power for one reason, so it could not be imagined that the signal was anything but artificial. Yet no Earth science could have sent a transmitter out so far.

When sunrise arrived at the tracking station on Kalua, it ceased to receive from space. On the other hand, tracking stations in the United States, the Antilles, and South America began to pick up the cryptic sounds.

The first released news of the happening was broadcast in the United States. In the South Pacific and India and the Near East and Europe, the whole matter seemed too improbable for the notification of the public. News pressure in the United States, though, is very great. Here the news rated broadcast, and got it.

That was why Joe Burke did not happen to complete the business for which he'd taken Sandy Lund to a suitable, romantic spot. She was his secretary and the only permanent employee in the highly individual business he'd begun and operated. He'd known her all his life, and it seemed to him that for most of it he'd wanted to marry her. But something had happened to him when he was quite a small boy—and still happened at intervals—which interposed a mental block. He'd always wanted to be romantic with her, but there was a matter of two moons in a strange-starred sky, and trees with foliage like none on Earth, and an overwhelming emotion. There was no rational explanation for it. There could be none. Often he'd told himself that Sandy was real and utterly desirable, and this lunatic repetitive experience was at worst insanity and at the least delusion. But he'd never been able to do more than stammer when talk between them went away from matter-of-fact things.

Tonight, though, he'd parked his car where a river sparkled in the moonlight. There was a scent of pine and arbutus in the air and a faint thread of romantic music came from his car's radio. He'd brought Sandy here to propose to her. He was doggedly resolved to break the chains a psychological oddity had tied him up in.

He cleared his throat. He'd taken Sandy out to dinner, ostensibly to celebrate

the completion of a development job for Interiors, Inc. Burke had started Burke Development, Inc., some four years out of college when he found he didn't like working for other people and could work for himself. Its function was to develop designs and processes for companies too small to have research-and-development divisions of their own. The latest, now-finished, job was a wall-garden which those expensive interior decorators, Interiors, Inc., believed might appeal to the very rich. Burke had made it. It was a hydroponic job. A rich man's house could have one or more walls which looked like a grassy sward stood on edge, with occasional small flowers or even fruits growing from its close-clipped surface.

It was done. A production-job room-wall had been shipped and the check for it banked. Burke had toyed with the idea that growing vegetation like that might be useful in a bomb shelter or in an atomic submarine where it would keep the air fresh indefinitely. But such ideas were for the future. They had nothing to do with now. Now Burke was going to triumph over an obsessive dream.

"I've got something to say, Sandy," said Burke painfully.

She did not turn her head. There was moonlight, rippling water, and the tranquil noises of the night in springtime. A perfect setting for what Burke had in mind, and what Sandy knew about in advance. She waited, her eyes turned away from him so he wouldn't see that they were shining a little.

"I'm something of an idiot," said Burke, clumsily. "It's only fair to tell you about it. I'm subject to a psychological gimmick that a girl I—Hm." He coughed. "I think I ought to tell you about it."

"Why?" asked Sandy, still not looking in his direction.

"Because I want to be fair," said Burke. "I'm a sort of crackpot. You've noticed it, of course."

Sandy considered.

"No-o-o-o," she said measuredly. "I think you're pretty normal, except—No. I think you're all right."

"Unfortunately," he told her, "I'm not. Ever since I was a kid I've been bothered by a delusion, if that's what it is. It doesn't make sense. It couldn't. But it made me take up engineering, I think, and ..."

His voice trailed away.

"And what?"

"Made an idiot out of me," said Burke. "I was always pretty crazy about you, and it seems to me that I took you to a lot of dances and such in high school, but I couldn't act romantic. I wanted to, but I couldn't. There was this crazy delusion...."

"I wondered, a little," said Sandy, smiling.

"I *wanted* to be romantic about you," he told her urgently. "But this damned obsession kept me from it."

"Are you offering to be a brother to me now?" asked Sandy.

"No!" said Burke explosively. "I'm fed up with myself. I want to be different. Very different. With you!"

Sandy smiled again.

"Strangely enough, you interest me," she told him. "Do go on!"

But he was abruptly tongue-tied. He looked at her, struggling to speak. She waited.

"I w-want to ask you to m-m-marry me," said Burke desperately. "But I have to tell you about the other thing first. Maybe you won't want...."

Her eyes were definitely shining now. There was soft music and rippling water and soft wind in the trees. It was definitely the time and place for romance.

But the music on the car radio cut off abruptly. A harsh voice interrupted:

"*Special Bulletin! Special Bulletin! Messages of unknown origin are reaching Earth from outer space! Special Bulletin! Messages from outer space!*"

Burke reached over and turned up the sound. Perhaps he was the only man in the world who would have spoiled such a moment to listen to a news broadcast, and even he wouldn't have done it for a broadcast on any other subject. He turned the sound high.

"*This is a special broadcast from the Academy of Sciences in Washington, D. C.*" boomed the speaker. "*Some thirteen hours ago a satellite-tracking station*

in the South Pacific reported picking up signals of unknown origin and great strength, using the microwave frequencies also used by artificial satellites now in orbit around Earth. The report was verified shortly afterward from India, then Near East tracking stations made the same report. European listening posts and radar telescopes were on the alert when the sky area from which the signals come rose above the horizon. American stations have again verified the report within the last few minutes. Artificial signals, plainly not made by men, are now reaching Earth every seventy-nine minutes from remotest space. There is as yet no hint of what the messages may mean, but that they are an attempt at communication is certain. The signals have been recorded on tape, and the sounds which follow are those which have been sent to Earth by alien, non-human, intelligent beings no one knows how far away."

A pause. Then the car radio, with night sounds and the calls of nightbirds for background, gave out crisp, distinct fluting noises, like someone playing an arbitrary selection of musical notes on a strange wind instrument.

The effect was plaintive, but Burke stiffened in every muscle at the first of them. The fluting noises were higher and lower in turn. At intervals, they paused as if between groups of signals constituting a word. The enigmatic sounds went on for a full minute. Then they stopped. The voice returned:

"*These are the signals from space. What you have heard is apparently a complete message. It is repeated five times and then ceases. An hour and nineteen minutes later it is again repeated five times....*"

The voice continued, while Burke remained frozen and motionless in the parked car. Sandy watched him, at first hopefully, and then bewilderedly. The voice said that the signal strength was very great. But the power for artificial-satellite broadcasts is only a fraction of a watt. These signals, considering the minimum distance from which they could come, had at least thousands of kilowatts behind them.

Somewhere out in space, farther than man's robot rockets had ever gone, huge amounts of electric energy were controlled to send these signals to Earth. Scientists were in disagreement about the possible distance the signals had traveled, whether they were meant solely for Earth or not, and whether they were an attempt to open communication with humanity. But nobody

doubted that the signals were artificial. They had been sent by technical means. They could not conceivably be natural phenomena. Directional fixes said absolutely that they did not come from Mars or Jupiter or Saturn. Neptune and Uranus and Pluto were not nearly in the line of the signals' travel. Of course Venus and Mercury were to sunward of Earth, which ruled them out, since the signals arrived only on the night side of mankind's world. Nobody could guess, as yet, where they did originate.

Burke sat utterly still, every muscle tense. He was so pale that even in the moonlight Sandy saw it. She was alarmed.

"Joe! What's the matter?"

"Did you—hear that?" he asked thinly. "The signals?"

"Of course. But what...."

"I recognized them," said Burke, in a tone that was somehow despairing. "I've heard signals like that every so often since I was a kid." He swallowed. "It was sounds like that, and what went with them, that has been the—trouble with me. I was going to tell you about it—and ask you if you'd marry me anyway."

He began to tremble a little, which was not at all like the Joe Burke that Sandy knew.

"I don't quite under—"

"I'm afraid I've gone out of my head," he said unsteadily. "Look, Sandy! I was going to propose to you. Instead, I'm going to take you back to the office. I'm going to play you a recording I made a year ago. I think that when you've heard it you'll decide you wouldn't want to marry me anyhow."

Sandy looked at him with astonished eyes.

"You mean those signals from somewhere mean something special to you?"

"Very special," said Burke. "They raise the question of whether I've been crazy, and am suddenly sane, or whether I've been sane up to now, and have suddenly gone crazy."

The radio switched back to dance music. Burke cut it off. He started the car's motor. He backed, swung around, and headed for the office and construction shed of Burke Development, Inc.

Elsewhere, the profoundest minds of the planet gingerly examined the appalling fact that signals came to Earth from a place where men could not be. A message came from something which was not human. It was a suggestion to make cold chills run up and down any educated spine. But Burke drove tensely, and the road's surface sped toward the car's wheels and vanished under them. A warm breeze hummed and thuttered around the windshield. Sandy sat very still.

"The way I'm acting doesn't make sense, does it?" Burke asked. "Do you feel like you're riding with a lunatic?"

"No," she said. "But I never thought that if you ever did get around to asking me to marry you, somebody from outer space would forbid the banns! Can't you tell me what all this is about?"

"I doubt it very much," he told her. "Can you tell me what the signals are about?"

She shook her head. He drove through the night. Presently he said, "Aside from my private angle on the matter, there are some queer things about this business. Why should somebody out in space send us a broadcast? It's not from a planet, they say. If there's a spaceship on the way here, why warn us? If they want to be friends, they can't be sure we'll permit it. If they intend to be enemies, why throw away the advantage of surprise? In either case, it would be foolish to send cryptic messages on ahead. And any message would have to be cryptic."

The car went whirring along the roadway. Soon twinkling lights appeared among the trees. The small and larger buildings of Burke Development, Inc., came gradually into view. They were dark objects in a large empty space on the very edge of Burke's home town.

"And why," he went on, "why send a complex message if they only wanted to say that they were space travelers on the way to Earth?"

The exit from the highway to Burke Development appeared. Burke swung off the surfaced road and into the four-acre space his small and unusual business did not begin to fill up.

"If it were an offer of communication, it should be short and simple. Maybe an arithmetic sequence of dots, to say that they were intelligent beings and

would like the sequence carried on if we had brains, too. Then we'd know somebody friendly was coming and wanted to exchange ideas before, if necessary, swapping bombs."

The car's headlights swept over the building in which the experimental work of Burke Development was done and on to the small house in which Sandy kept the books and records of the firm. Burke put on the brakes before the office door.

"Just to see if my head is working right," he said, "I raise a question about those signals. One doesn't send a long message to emptiness, repeated, in the hope that someone may be around to catch it. One calls, and sends a long message only when the call is answered. The call says who's wanted and who's calling, but nothing more. This isn't that sort of thing."

He got out of the car and opened the door on her side, then unlocked the office door and went in. He switched on the lights inside. For a moment, Sandy did not move. Then she slowly got out of the car and entered the office which was so completely familiar. Burke bent over the office safe, turning the tumbler-wheel to open it. He said over his shoulder, "That special bulletin will be repeated on all the news broadcasts. You've got a little radio here. Turn it on, will you?"

Again slowly, Sandy crossed the office and turned on the miniature radio on her desk. It warmed up and began to make noises. She dimmed it until it was barely audible. Burke stood up with a reel of brown tape. He put it on the office recorder, usually used for the dictation of the day's lab log.

"I have a dream sometimes," said Burke. "A recurrent dream. I've had it every so often since I was eleven. I've tried to believe it was simply a freak, but sometimes I've suspected I was a telepath, getting some garbled message from somewhere unguessable. That has to be wrong. And again I've suspected that—well—that I might not be completely human. That I was planted here on Earth, somehow, not knowing it, to be of use to—something not of Earth. And that's crazy. So I've been pretty leery of being romantic about anybody. Tonight I'd managed to persuade myself all those wild imaginings were absurd. And then the signals came." He paused and said unsteadily, "I made this tape a year ago. I was trying to convince myself that it was nonsense. Listen. Remember, I made this a year ago!"

The reels began to spin on the recorder's face. Burke's voice came out of the speaker, "*These are the sounds of the dream*," it said, and stopped.

There was a moment of silence, while the twin reels spun silently. Then sounds came from the recorder. They were musical notes, reproduced from the tape. Sandy stared blankly. Disconnected, arbitrary flutelike sounds came out into the office of Burke Development, Inc. It was quite correct to call them elfin. They could be described as plaintive. They were not a melody, but a melody could have been made from them by rearrangement. They were very remarkably like the sounds from space. It was impossible to doubt that they were the same code, the same language, the same vocabulary of tones and durations.

Burke listened with a peculiarly tense expression on his face. When the recording ended, he looked at Sandy.

Sandy was disturbed. "They're alike. But Joe, how did it happen?"

"I'll tell you later," he said grimly. "The important thing is, am I crazy or not?"

The desk radio muttered. It was an hourly news broadcast. Burke turned it up and a voice boomed:

"*... one o'clock news. Messages have been received from space in the century's most stupendous news event! Full details will follow a word from our sponsor.*"

There followed an ardent description of the social advantage, personal satisfaction and business advancement that must instantly follow the use of a particular intestinal regulator. The commercial ended.

"*From deepest space*," boomed the announcer's voice, "*comes a mystery! There is intelligent life in the void. It has communicated with us. Today—*"

Because of the necessity to give the later details of a cafe-society divorce case, a torch murder and a graft scandal in a large city's municipal budget, the signals from space could not be fully treated in the five-minute hourly news program. But fifteen seconds were spared for a sample of the cryptic sounds from emptiness. Burke listened to them with a grim expression.

"I think," he said measuredly, "that I am sane. I have heard those noises

before tonight. I know them—I'll take you home, Sandy."

He ushered her out of the office and into his car.

"It's funny," he said as he drove back toward the highway. "This is probably the beginning of the most important event in human history. We've received a message from an intelligent race that can apparently travel through space. There's no way in the world to guess what it will bring about. It could be that we're going to learn sciences to make old Earth a paradise. Or it could mean that we'll be wiped out and a superior race will take over. Funny, isn't it?"

Sandy said unsteadily, "No. Not funny."

"I mean," said Burke, "when something really significant happens, which probably will determine Earth's whole future, all I worry about is myself—that I'm crazy, or a telepath, or something. But that's convincingly human!"

"What do you think I worry about?" asked Sandy.

"Oh ..." Burke hesitated, then said uncomfortably, "I was going to propose to you, and I didn't."

"That's right," said Sandy. "You didn't."

Burke drove for long minutes, frowning.

"And I won't," he said flatly, after a time, "until I know it's all right to do so. I've no explanation for what's kept me from proposing to you up to now, but apparently it's not nonsense. I *did* anticipate the sounds that came in tonight from space and—I've always known those sounds didn't belong on Earth."

Then, driving doggedly through a warm and moonlit night, he told her exactly why the fluting sounds were familiar to him; how they'd affected his life up to now. He'd mentally rehearsed the story, anyhow, and it was reasonably well arranged. But told as fact, it was preposterous.

She listened in complete silence. He finished the tale with his car parked before the boardinghouse in which Sandy lived with her sister Pam, they being all that was left of a family. If she hadn't known Burke all her life, of course, Sandy would have dismissed him and his story together. But she did know him. It did explain why he felt tongue-tied when he wished to be romantic, and even why he recorded a weird sequence of notes on a tape recorder. His actions were reasonable reactions to an unreasonable, repeated

experience. His doubts and hesitations showed a sound mind trying to deal with the inexplicable. And now that the signals from space had come, it was understandable that he should react as if they were a personal matter for his attention.

She had a disheartening mental picture of a place where strange trees waved long and ribbonlike leaves under an improbable sky. Still ...

"Y—yes," she said slowly when he'd finished his uneasy account. "I don't understand, but I can see how you feel. I—I guess I'd feel the same way if I were a man and what you've experienced happened to me." She hesitated. "Maybe there will be an explanation now, since those signals have come. They do match the ones you recorded from your dream. They're the ones you know about."

"I can't believe it," said Burke miserably, "and I can't dismiss it. I can't do anything until I find out why I know that somewhere there's a place with two moons and queer trees...."

He did not mention the part of his experience Sandy was most interested in—the person for whom he felt such anguished fear and such overwhelming joy when she was found. She didn't mention it either.

"You go on home, Joe," she said quietly. "Get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow we'll hear more about it and maybe it will all clear up. Anyhow—whatever turns out, I—I'm glad you did intend to ask me to marry you. I intended to say yes."

Chapter 2

Burke was no less disturbed, but his disturbance was of a different kind. After he left Sandy at the house where she and her sister boarded, he headed back to the plant. He wanted to think things out.

The messages from space, of course, must presage events of overwhelming importance. The coming of intelligent aliens to Earth might be comparable to the coming of white men to the American continents. They might bring superior techniques, irresistible weapons, and an assumption of superiority that would bring inevitable conflict with the aborigines of Earth. Judging by the actions of the white race on Earth, if the newcomers were merely explorers it could mean the coming doom of humanity's independence. If they were invaders....

Something like this would be pointed out soon after the news itself. Some people would react with total despair, expecting the strangers to act like men. Some might hope that a superior race would have developed a kindliness and altruism that on Earth are rather rare. But there was no one at all who would not be apprehensive. Some would panic.

Burke's reaction was strictly personal. Nobody else in the world would have felt the same appalled, stunned emotion he felt when he heard the sounds from space. Because to him they were familiar sounds.

He paced up and down in the big, partitionless building in which the actual work of Burke Development, Inc., was done. He'd done some reasonably good work in this place. The prototype of the hydroponic wall for Interiors, Inc., still stood against one wall. It was crude, but he'd made it work and then built a production model which had now been shipped off complete. A little to one side was a prototype of a special machine which stamped out small parts for American Tool. That had been a tricky assignment! There were plastic and glass-wool and such oddments with which he'd done a process-

design job for Holmes Yachts, and a box of small parts left over from the designing job that gave one aviation company the only practical small-plane retractable landing-gear.

These things had a queer meaning for him now. He'd devised the wanted products. He'd developed certain needed processes. But now he began to be deeply suspicious of his own successes. Each was a new reason for uneasiness.

He grimly questioned whether his highly peculiar obsession had not been planted in him against the time when fluting noises would come from that illimitable void beyond Earth's atmosphere.

He examined, for the thousandth time, his special linkage with the space noises. In previous soul-searchings he'd pinpointed the time when the whole business began. He'd been eleven years old. He could even work out something close to an exact date. He was living with his aunt and uncle, his own parents being dead. His uncle had made a business trip to Europe, alone, and had brought back souvenirs which were fascinating to eleven-year-old Joe Burke. There was a flint knife, and a carved ivory object which his uncle assured him was mammoth ivory. It had a deer's head incised into it. There were some fragments of pottery and a dull-surfaced black cube. They appealed to the small boy because his uncle said they'd belonged to men who lived when mammoths roamed the Earth and cave men hunted the now-extinct huge beasts. Cro-Magnons, his uncle said, had owned the objects. He'd bought them from a French peasant who'd found a cave with pictures on its walls that dated back twenty thousand years. The French government had taken over the cave, but before reporting it the peasant had thriftily hidden away some small treasures to sell for himself. Burke's uncle bought them and, in time, presented them to the local museum. All but the black cube, which Burke had dropped. It had shattered into a million tissue-thin, shiny plates, which his aunt insisted on sweeping out. He'd tried to keep one of the plates, but his aunt had found it under his pillow and disposed of it.

He remembered the matter solely because he'd examined his memories so often, trying to find something relevant to account for the beginning of his recurrent dream. Somewhere shortly after his uncle's visit he had had a dream. Like all dreams, it was not complete. It made no sense. But it wasn't a

normal dream for an eleven-year-old boy.

He was in a place where the sun had just set, but there were two moons in the sky. One was large and motionless. The other was small and moved swiftly across the heavens. From behind him came fluting signals like the messages that would later come from space. In the dream he was full-grown and he saw trees with extraordinary, ribbony leaves like no trees on Earth. They wavered and shivered in a gentle breeze, but he ignored them as he did the fluting sounds behind him.

He was searching desperately for someone. A child knows terror for himself, but not for anybody else. But Burke, then aged eleven, dreamed that he was in an agony of fear for someone else. To breathe was torment. He held a weapon ready in his hand. He was prepared to do battle with any imaginable creature for the person he needed to find. And suddenly he saw a figure running behind the waving foliage. The relief was almost greater pain than the terror had been. It was a kind and amount of emotion that an eleven-year-old boy simply could not know, but Burke experienced it. He gave a great shout, and bounded forward toward her—and the dream ended.

He dreamed it three nights running, then it stopped, for awhile.

Then, a week later, he had the dream again, repeated in every detail. He had it a dozen times before he was twelve, and as many more before he was thirteen. It recurred at random intervals all through his teens, while he was in college, and after. When he grew up he found out that recurrent dreams are by no means unusual. But this was very far from a usual dream.

From time to time, he observed new details in the dream. He knew that he was dreaming. His actions and his emotion did not vary, but he was able to survey them—like the way one can take note of items in a book one reads while quite absorbed in it. He came to notice the way the trees sent their roots out over the surface of the ground before dropping suckers down into it. He noticed a mass of masonry off to the left. He discovered that a hill in the distance was not a natural hill. He was able to remember markings on the large, stationary moon in the sky, and to realize that the smaller one was jagged and irregular in shape. The dream did not change, but his knowledge of the place of the dream increased.

As he grew older, he was startled to realize that though the trees, for example,

were not real, they were consistent with reality. The weapon he held in his hand was especially disturbing. Its grip and barrel were transparent plastic, and in the barrel there was a sequence of peculiarly-shaped forms, in and about which wire had been wound. As a grown man he'd made such shapes in metal, once. He'd tried them out as magnets in a job for American Tool. But they weren't magnets. They were something specific and alarming instead. He also came to know exactly what the mass of masonry was, and it was a sober engineering feat. No boy of eleven could have imagined it.

And always there were the flutelike musical sounds coming from behind him. When he was twenty-five he'd memorized them. He'd heard them—dreamed them—hundreds of times. He tried to duplicate them on a flute and devised a special mute to get exactly the tone quality he remembered so well. He made a recording to study, but the study was futile.

In a way, it was unwholesome to be so much obsessed by a dream. In a way, the dream was magnificently irrelevant to messages transmitted through millions of miles of emptiness. But the flutelike sounds linked it—now—to reality! He paced up and down in the empty, resonant building and muttered, "I ought to talk to the space-exploration people."

Then he laughed. That was ironical. All the crackpots in the world would be besieging all the authorities who might be concerned with the sounds from space, impassionedly informing them what Julius Caesar, or Chief Sitting Bull, or some other departed shade, had told them about the matter via automatic writing or Ouija boards. Those who did not claim ghostly authority would explain that they had special talents, or a marvelous invention, or that they were members of the race which had sent the messages the satellite-tracking stations received.

No. It would serve no purpose to inform the Academy of Sciences that he'd been dreaming signals like the ones that now agitated humanity. It was too absurd. But it was unthinkable for a person of Burke's temperament to do nothing. So he set to work in exactly the fashion of one of the crackpots he disliked.

Actually, the job should have been undertaken in ponderous secrecy by committees from various learned societies, official bureaus, and all the armed forces. There should have been squabbles about how the task was to be

divided up, bitter arguments about how much money was to be spent by whom, violent disagreements about research-and-development contracts. It should have been treated as a program of research, in which everybody could claim credit for all achievements and nobody was to blame for blunders.

Burke could not command resources for so ambitious an undertaking. And he knew that as a private project it was preposterous. But he began the sort of preliminary labor that an engineer does before he really sets to work.

He jotted down some items that he didn't have to worry about. The wall-garden he'd made for Interiors, Inc., would fit neatly into whatever final result he got—if he got a final result. He had a manufacturing process available for glass-wool and plastics. If he could get hold of an inertia-controlled computer he'd be all set, but he doubted that he could. The crucial item was a memo he'd made from a memory of the dream weapon. It concerned certain oddly-shaped bits of metal, with fine wires wound eccentrically about them, which flew explosively to pieces when a current went through them. That was something to worry about right away.

At three o'clock in the morning, then, Burke routed out the laboratory notes on the small-sized metal-stamping machine he had designed for American Tool. He'd tried to do the job with magnets, but they flew apart. He'd wound up with blank cartridges to provide the sudden, explosive stamping action required, but the notes on the quasi-magnets were complete.

He went through them carefully. An electromagnet does not really attain its full power immediately after the current is turned on. There is an inductive resistance, inherent in a wound magnet, which means that the magnetism builds up gradually. From his memory of the elements in a transparent-plastic hand-weapon barrel, Burke had concluded that it was possible to make a magnet without inductive resistance. He tried it. When the current went on it went to full strength immediately. In fact, it seemed to have a negative-induction effect. But the trouble was that it wasn't a magnet. It was something else. It wound up as scrap.

Now, very reflectively, he plugged in a metal lathe and carefully turned out a very tiny specimen of the peculiarly-shaped magnetic core. He wound it by hand, very painstakingly. It was a tricky job. It was six o'clock Saturday morning when the specimen was finished. He connected the leads to a storage

battery and threw the switch. The small object tore itself to bits, and the core landed fifteen feet from where it had been. Burke beamed.

He wasn't tired, but he wanted to think things over so he drove to a nearby diner and got coffee and a roll and reflected with satisfaction upon his accomplishment. At the cost of several hours' work he'd made a thing like a magnet, which wasn't a magnet, and which destroyed itself when turned on. As he drank his coffee, a radio news period came on. He listened.

The signals still arrived from space, punctually, seventy-nine minutes apart. At this moment, 6:30 A.M., they were not heard on the Atlantic coast, but the Pacific coast still picked them up and they were heard in Hawaii and again on the South Pacific island of Kalua.

Burke drove back to the plant. He was methodical, now. He reactivated the prototype wall-garden which he'd neglected while building the larger one for Interiors, Inc. The experimental one had been made in four sections so he could try different pumping systems and nutrient solutions. Now he set the pumps to work. The plants looked ragged, but they'd perk up with proper lighting and circulation of the hydroponic liquid.

Then he went into the plant's small office building and sat down with drawing instruments to modify the design of the magnetic core. At eleven he'd worked out a rough theory and refined the design, with curves and angles all complete. At four the next morning a second, modified magnet-core was formed and polished.

He'd heard the first newscast on Friday night. It was now early Sunday morning, and although he was tired, he was still not sleepy. He worked on doggedly, winding fine magnet wire on a noticeably complicated metal form. Just before sunrise he tested it.

When the current went on the wire windings seemed to swell. He'd held it in a small clamp while he tested it. The clamp overturned and broke the contact with the battery before the winding wire stretched to breaking-point. But it had not torn itself or anything else to bits.

He was suddenly enormously weary and bleary-eyed. To anyone else in the world, the consequence of this second attempt to make what he thought of as a negative-induction magnet would seem an absolute failure. But Burke now

knew why the first had failed and what was wrong with the second. The third would work, just as the unfired hand-weapon of his dream would have worked. Now he could justify to himself the association of a recurrent dream with a message from outer space. The dream now had two points of contact with reality. One was the sounds from emptiness, which matched those in the dream. The other was the hand-weapon of the dream, whose essential working part now plainly did something unknown in a normal world.

But it would be impossible to pass on his information to anybody else. Too many crackpots have claimed too many triumphs. His actual, unpredictable technical achievement would have little chance of winning official acceptance. Especially since he would be considered a non-accredited source. Burke had a small business of his own. He had an engineering degree. But he had no background of learned futility to gain a hearing for what he now knew.

"Crackpots of the world, unite!" he muttered to himself.

He dragged himself out-of-doors to a cool, invigorating morning and drove somnolently to the diner he'd patronized before. The coffee he ordered was atrocious, but it waked him. He heard two truck drivers at the counter.

"It's baloney!" said one of them scornfully. "There ain't no people out there! We'd'a heard from them before if there was. Them scientists are crazy!"

"Nuts!" said the other earnestly. "One of their idle thoughts would crack your brain wide open, mac! They know what's up, and they're scared! If you wanna know, I'm scared too!"

"Of what?"

"Hell! Did you ever drive at night, and have all the stars come in pairs like snake-eyes—like little mean eyes, lookin' down at you an' despisin' you? You've seen that, ain't you? Whoever's signalin' could be lookin' down at us just like the stars do."

The first man grunted.

"I don't like it!" said the second man, fretfully. "If it was a man headin' out to go huntin' among the stars for somethin' he wanted, that's all right. That's like a man goin' huntin' in the woods with a gun. But I don't like somebody comin' our way from somewhere else. Maybe he's huntin' us!"