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SHORT NOVEL:

COLLISION COURSE!
By Robert Silverberg



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**COMPLETE
SHORT NOVEL**

COLLISION COURSE

By
**ROBERT
SILVERBERG**

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

CHAPTER 1

ONLY a month before, the Technarch McKenzie had calmly sent five men to probable death in the name of Terran progress. But now, it seemed, those five men had not died after all, and McKenzie's normally rock-hard face now reflected inner tension.

The message, reaching him in the Archonate Center, had been brief. "*Luna detection center reports return to this system of the XV-ft1. Landing at Central Australia spaceport requested for 1200 hours EST.*"

The Technarch read the message through twice, nodding. So



The Norglans could not control



the tremendous force that whipped them into the air against their will. 85

they were back, were they? After a successful trip? *By the Hammer, he thought, we'll see men in the far galaxies yet! And in my Archonate, heaven willing!*

His nature was too stern to allow him more than a moment of gloating pride. He had gambled; he had won; and perhaps his name would ring in the galleries of history for millennia. The experimental faster-than-light ship was returning safely.

He depressed a communicator stud. "Set up a transmats connection to Central Australia spaceport right away, Naylor. Immediate departure."

McKenzie stared for a moment at the big, thick fingers of his hands as they lay before him on the desk. Hands like those could never wire a circuit, wield a surgeon's excising vibroknife, or tune the fine controls on a thermonuclear generator. But they were hands that could write, "*If we remain bound forever to the limiting velocity of light, we will be as snails seeking to cross a continent. We must not be lulled into complacency by the slow expansion of our colonial empire. We must surge ever outward; and the faster - than - light spacedrive must be the be-all and end-all of our research effort.*"

He had written those words fifteen years earlier, in 2765, and delivered them as his first public address after his accession to the Archonate.

And, fifteen years later, a ship had gone to the stars and returned in less than a month.

Rising, McKenzie traversed the gleaming marble floor of his private chamber and passed through the irisng sphincter into his transmats cubicle.

Naylor waited there, an obsequious little man in the stiff black robe of the Technarch's personal staff. "The coordinates are set, Excellency."

McKenzie stepped forward. The lambent green transmats field pulsed up from the floor aperture, forming a curtain dividing the cubicle in two. The hidden power generators of the transmats were linked directly to the main generator that spun endlessly on its poles somewhere beneath the Atlantic.

There was no sensation. The Technarch McKenzie was destroyed, a stream of tagged wavicles was hurled halfway across a world, and the Technarch McKenzie was reconstituted. If the moment of destruction had been longer, the pain would have been unbearable. But the transmats field ripped the Technarch's body molecule from molecule in so tiny a fragment of a microsecond that his neural system could not possibly have relayed the pain; and the restoration to life came with equal speed. Whole and undamaged, McKenzie stepped through the field and out, almost instantly later, in the transmats cubicle at Central Australia spaceport.

It had been shortly before

noon in New York. Here, it was early the following morning. A wallclock read 0213 hours. McKenzie left the transmat cubicle.

They spotted him at once; the Technarch's toweringly commanding figure was a familiar sight here, and they came running to greet him. McKenzie smiled a Technarch's greeting at Daviot and Leeson, who had developed the warp-drive that powered the experimental ship; at Herbig, the spaceport commandant; at Jesperson, the coordinator of faster-than-light research.

McKenzie said, "What's the news from the ship?"

Jesperson grinned boyishly. "They sent the all-okay signal five minutes ago. They're in a deceleration orbit, coming down on rocket drive, and they'll make touchdown at 0233 hours."

"How about their trip?"

Leeson said in his rumbling basso, "It seems they made it out and back."

"We don't know that for sure," Daviot objected.

McKenzie scowled. "Make up your minds."

Daviot said, "All we know is that they quote switched from warp-drive to plasma-drive some time last evening near the orbit of Jupiter, unquote."

The Technarch looked up and out. The clear desert air, utterly transparent, yielded a magnificent view of the heavens. Stars speckled the black sky like jewels.

In twenty minutes—nineteen

—eighteen—the XV-ft1 would be returning.

He looked at the stars. Hundreds, thousands of them. Every star within a radius of four hundred light-years that bore a habitable planet—and that was most of them—had been reached by humanity. For centuries now, ships traveling at nine-tenths of the speed of light had coursed outward to the stars, prisoned by the limiting velocity but still capable of eating up the parsecs, given enough time. It had taken six years to make the first one-way trip to the Centauri system. The return, via transmat, was all but instantaneous.

But you had to reach the stars before you could plant the transmat pickup there, and that was the stumbling-block. Ever outward, by little hops, the empire of Man expanded. But always hampered by the inexorable mathematical limits of the known universe. Once a planet could be reached and linked into the interstellar transmat network, it was as close to Earth as any other point within the network. The transmat gave infinite connectivity—once the link had been established. But until then—

So progress had been slow. After better than four centuries of interstellar travel, mankind had colonized every habitable world within a sphere of four hundred light-years' radius. And no other intelligent life-form had ever been discovered. The

universe belonged to man—but it would be millennia before man could take possession.

That fact had irked McKenzie during his years of training for the Archonate, and when the death of Technarch Bengstrom raised McKenzie to the dais he bent all of Earth's energies to the task of cheating the chains of relativity.

There were failures, expensive ones. Test ships had been sent out and monitored and followed by manned ships, and the manned ships had exploded or never returned. And still there were volunteers for the next ship, and the next, and the one after that.

Until the Daviot - Leeson Drive, with its incredibly slender generator smashing a hole in space-time by controlled thermo-nuclear thrusts — and suddenly the way seemed clear. Space in the region of a star, reasoned Daviot and Leeson, is warped and distorted by the star's mass and heat. If only the same effect could be duplicated in miniature, if only a wedge could be opened in the space-time fabric wide enough for a ship to slip through, travel a predetermined course, and return—then man's dominion would be boundless.

It took six years from the first pilot models to the confidence that allowed McKenzie to send a manned ship to the stars. And now that ship was returning. In thirteen minutes, twelve, eleven. Jespersen, wearing head-

phones, was in contact with the main monitoring station at the far end of the field.

At five minutes before touchdown time Jespersen said, "They've sighted it clear and sharp."

McKenzie moistened his lips, turning away so the others would not see a hint of tension on the Technarch's face. Four minutes. Three. Two.

Jespersen was relaying the final countdown. And then the *XV-ft1* was there, arching down in a golden stream of flame, coming to rest in front of them, lowering its landing-jacks and stabilizers. The decontamination crew was swabbing down the field; the hatch was opening. Men came forth.

Technarch McKenzie counted them. One, two, three, four, five. No casualties, then.

The Technarch said to Jespersen, "Have the men brought up here right away."

"Harkening, Excellency." Jespersen gabbled into a phone. Moments later, the door irised open and the crew of the *XV-ft1* entered.

They looked tired, sallow-faced, sweaty. The beards belonged to Laurance, Peterszoon, and Clive. Nakamura's face was clean-shaven, but his black hair hung dankly over his ears. Only Hernandez looked completely well-groomed. But all five men had the same weary, overstrung look.

McKenzie walked briskly to-

ward them. His big hand seized Laurance's limp, moist one.

"Welcome back, Commander. All of you, welcome."

"Obedience, Excellency. It's—good to be back."

"It was a successful trip?"

An expression of doubt crept into Laurance's bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes. "Successful? Well, I suppose. The drive worked beautifully. We covered ninety-eight hundred light-years in the snap of a finger. But—"

Daviot whooped jubilantly. Leeson slapped Jespersion on the back. McKenzie said crisply, "But *what?*"

Laurance looked around. "It's—it's kind of classified, Technarch McKenzie. Maybe we'd better wait till later—"

"You can speak in the presence of these men."

"All right. We had a smooth trip. We ducked in and out of hyperspace and came out just where we wanted to be, and we got back home the same way. Only we met some aliens out there."

"You met *aliens?*"

"Not really *met*. We *saw* them, and got the deuce away from there before they saw us. They were building a city, Excellency. It looked like—like they were colonizing that planet, just like we would do."

CHAPTER 2

FOUR hours later the entire Archonate convened. The thirteen men who ruled Earth

COLLISION COURSE

and her network of dependent worlds foregathered in the Long Room, on the hundred-and-ninth story of the Center building.

They had come from every part of the world, summoned from their individual duties by McKenzie's call, arraying themselves in their traditional places along the rectangular table. In the center sat the Geoarch, old Ronholm, nominal first among the thirteen equals who comprised the Archonate. To Ronholm's right sat the Technarch McKenzie. At the Geoarch's left was Wissiner, Archon of Communications. At Wissiner's side of the table were Nelson, Archon of Education; Heimrich, Archon of Agriculture; Vornik, Archon of Health; Lestrade, Archon of Security; Dawson, Archon of Finance. To the right of McKenzie sat Klaus, Archon of Defense; Chang, Archon of the Colonies; Santelli, Archon of Transportation; Minek, Archon of Housing; Croy, Archon of Power.

As the Archon of technology, science, research, McKenzie was the most important man in the room. But he observed protocol scrupulously. He permitted Geoarch Ronholm the first word.

"We have been called together, the old man quavered, "to hear of matters the Technarch considers of prime importance to the future welfare of our worlds. I relinquish the chair to the Archon of Technological Development."

McKenzie spoke without ris-

ing. "Members of the Archonate, four hours ago a spaceship landed in Australia after completing a journey of nearly ten thousand light-years in less than a month—and of that month, better than three weeks were spent in exploration. The actual interstellar trip was virtually instantaneous. That would normally be occasion for great rejoicing; for now, the stars lie within the reach of us all, within our lifetimes. but there is a complicating factor. I call now on Dr. John Laurance, Commander of the *XV-ft1* which returned a short while ago, to explain the nature of this factor to us all."

McKenzie gestured, and Laurance rose, a thin, tall figure, in the center of the room.

Laurance came forward until he was within twenty feet of the Archons. He was a man of forty, with close-cropped hair just turning a grizzled gray, and a lean, bony face which just now reflected the many tensions of his recent trip.

He said, "Excellencies, I was chosen by you to command the first manned Daviot-Leeson interstellar ship. I left Earth on the First of Fivemonth past, with my crew of four. Travelling at a constant velocity of interplanetary rate, we reached the orbit of Pluto, the assigned safety zone, and converted to the Daviot-Leeson drive there.

"We left the 'normal' universe at a distance of some forty

astronomical units from the Earth and followed our precalculated course for seventeen hours, until reaching our intended position. Making use of the Daviot-Leeson drive once again, we returned to the 'normal' universe and found that we had indeed reached our goal, the star NGCR 185143 at a mean distance of approximately ninety-eight hundred light-years from Earth.

"This star is a G-type main sequence sun with eleven planets. Following our instructions, we made landing on the fourth of these planets, which was Earthtype to six places and thus suitable for colonization. To our great surprise, we found that a city was in the process of construction on this planet."

McKenzie said, "Tell us about the aliens you saw."

"Yes, Excellency. I dispatched my crewmen Hernandez and Clive to reconnoiter. They observed the aliens for several hours."

"What were these aliens like?" asked the Archon of Defense, Klaus, in his thin, testy voice.

"Humanoid, Excellencies. We have photographs of them which would have been available for display had we—had we been given sufficient notice to prepare them. They stand about two meters in height, are two-legged, oxygen-breathing, and in many respects are much like ourselves. Skin pigmentation is green, though some observed

aliens were blue. They appear to have a more complex joint structure than we do; their arms are double-elbowed, permitting motion in all directions, and they seem to have seven or perhaps eight fingers. Opposable thumbs, of course. They wear clothing. In brief, they seem to be an intelligent and energetic race of about the same stage of evolutionary development as ourselves."

The Archon of Security asked quietly, "Are you certain you were not observed?"

"They paid no outward attention to our ship. At all times my men remained hidden while observing them."

"We're *not* alone, then," said Ronholm, half to himself. "Other beings out there, building their colonies too—"

"Yes," interrupted McKenzie crisply. "Building their colonies too. I submit that we've stumbled over the greatest threat to Earth in our entire history."

"Why do you say that?" asked Nelson, the Archon of Education. "Just because another species ten thousand light-years away is settling a few worlds, Technarch, you can't really draw dire conclusions."

"I can, and I am. Today the Terran sphere of worlds and the alien sphere are thousands of light-years apart. But we're expanding constantly, even forgetting the new spacedrive for the moment, and so are they. It's a collision course. Not a collision between spaceships, or planets,

or even suns. It's an inevitable collision between two stellar empires, theirs and ours."

"Have you a proposal?" the Geoarch asked.

"I have," McKenzie said. "We'll have to contact these people at once. Not a hundred years from now, not next year, but next week. We'll have to show them that we're in the universe too—and that some kind of accord is going to have to be reached—*before* the collision comes!"

"How do you know," asked Security Archon Lestrade, "that these—aliens—have any hostile intent at all?"

"Intent of hostility is irrelevant. They exist; we exist. They colonize their area; we, ours. We're headed for a collision."

"Make your recommendation, Technarch McKenzie," the Geoarch said mildly.

McKenzie rose. "I recommend that the newly returned faster-than-light ship be sent out once again, this time carrying a staff of negotiators who will make contact with the aliens. The negotiators will attempt to discover the purposes of these beings and to arrive at a cooperative entente in which certain areas of the galaxy will be reserved for one or the other of the colonizing races."

"Who's going to pilot the ship this time?" asked the Archon of Communication.

McKenzie looked surprised. "Why, we have a trained crew

with us today who have proved their capabilities."

"They've just returned from a month-long expedition," Archon Wissiner protested. "These men have relatives, families. You can't send them out again immediately!"

"Would it be better to risk our one completed faster-than-light ship by putting it in the hands of inexperienced men?" McKenzie asked. "If the Archonate approves, I will present before the end of the day a list of those men I think are suited for treating with the aliens. Once they have been assembled, the ship can leave at once. I leave the matter in your hands."

McKenzie returned to his seat. A brief, spiritless debate followed; although several of the Archons privately resented the sometimes high-handed methods of the Technarch, they rarely dared to block his will when it came to a vote. McKenzie had been proved right too often in the past for anyone to go against him now.

He sat quietly, listening to the discussion and taking part only when it was necessary to defend some point. His features reflected none of the bitterness that had welled up within him since the return of the *XV-ft1*. The homecoming had been ruined for him.

Aliens building colonies, he thought bleakly. The shiny toy that was the universe was thus permanently tarnished in the Technarch's mind. He had

dreamed of a universe of waiting planets, through which mankind could spread like a swiftly-flowing river. But that was not to be. After hundreds of years, another species had been encountered. Equals? It seemed that way—if no worse. Whatever their capabilities, it meant that mankind now was limited, that some or perhaps all of the universe now was barred to them. And in that respect McKenzie himself felt diminished.

There was nothing to do but negotiate, to salvage some portion of infinity for the empire of Earth. McKenzie sighed.

The vote took place. Each Archon operated a concealed switch beneath his section of the table. To the right for support of the measure, to the left for opposition. Above the table, a gleaming globe registered the secret tally. White was the color of acceptance, black that of defeat. McKenzie was the first to throw his switch; a swirl of pure white danced in the mottled gray depths of the globe. An instant later a spear of black lanced through the white—and then another white, another black. Gray predominated, swirling inconclusively. The hue leaned now toward the white, now to the black. Sweat beaded the Technarch's forehead. The color grew light as votes were shifted.

At last the globe displayed the pure white of unanimity. The Geomarch said, "The proposal

is approved. Technarch McKenzie will prepare plans for the negotiating mission and present them to us for our approval. This meeting is adjourned until reconvened by the Technarch."

Rising, McKenzie made his way down from the dais and toward the five spacemen.

"May we go now, Excellency?"

Laurance asked, obviously keeping himself under tight leash.

"One moment. I'd like to have a word."

"Of course, Excellency."

"I didn't come over to apologize. But I want to say that I know you boys deserve a vacation, and I'm sorry you can't have one yet. Earth needs you to take that ship out. You're the best we have; that's why you have to go."

He eyed the five of them—Laurance, Peterszoon, Nakamura, Clive, Hernandez. Half-throttled anger smoldered in their eyes. They were defiant; they had every reason to be. But they could see beyond their own momentary rage.

Laurance said, in his slow, deliberate way, "We'll have a day or two, won't we?"

"At least that much," the Technarch said. "But as soon as the negotiators are gathered, you'll have to go. If it's worth anything to you—you'll have a Technarch's gratitude for going." It was as far as McKenzie could lower himself toward being an ordinary human being. The smile slowly left his face, and he nodded a stiff salute and

turned away. Laurance and his men would go. Now to pick the negotiating team.

CHAPTER 3

DR. MARTIN BERNARD was at his ease, that evening, in his South Kensington flat just off the Cromwell Road. Outside his window drifted London's murky Sixmonth fog; but Martin Bernard took no notice of that. His windows were opaqued. Within the flat, all was cozy, warm, snug. As he liked it. Ancient music tinkled softly down from the overhead sonic screen: Bach, it was, a harpsichord piece.

Bernard lay sprawled in his vibrochair, cradling a volume of Yeats on his lap. A flask of rare brandy, twenty years old, imported from one of the Procyon worlds, was within reach. Bernard had his drink, his music, his poetry, his warmth. What better way, he asked himself, to relax after spending two hours trying to pound the essentials of socio-metrics into the heads of an obtuse clump of sophomores?

Even as he relaxed, he felt a twinge of guilt at his comfort. Academic people were not generally thought of as sybarites. But he told himself that he *deserved* this comfort. He was the top man in his field. He had, besides, written a successful novel. His poems were highly esteemed and anthologized. He had struggled hard for his present acclaim; now, at forty-three,

with the problem of money solved forever and the problem of his second marriage equally neatly disposed of, there was no reason why he should not spend his evenings in this luxurious solitude.

He leaned back, thumbing through Yeats. A wonderful poet, Bernard thought; perhaps the best of the Late Medievals.

*That is no country for old men.
The young
In one another's arms, birds in
the trees
—Those dying generations—at
their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-
crowded seas—*

The phone chimed, shattering the flow. Bernard scowled and elbowed himself to a sitting position; putting down the book, he crossed to the phone cabinet and thumbed the go-ahead button. The screen brightened; but instead of a face, the image of the Technarch's coat-of-arms appeared.

An impersonal voice said, "Dr. Martin Bernard?"

"That's right."

"Technarch McKenzie wishes to speak to you. Are you alone?"

"Yes. I'm alone."

"Please apply unscrambler."

Bernard lowered the toggle at the side of the phone. A moment later the coat-of-arms gave way to the head and shoulders of the Technarch himself. Bernard stared levelly at the strong, blocky-featured face of McKen-

zie. He inclined his head respectfully and said, "Hearkening, Technarch."

"Good evening, Dr. Bernard. Something unusual has arisen. I think you can help me—help us all."

"If it's possible for me to serve, Technarch—"

"It is. We've sent an experimental faster-than-light ship out, Dr. Bernard. It reached a system ten thousand light-years away. Intelligent colony-building aliens were discovered. We have to negotiate a treaty with them. I want you to head the negotiating team."

The short, punchy sentences left Bernard dizzy. He followed the Technarch from one startling statement to the next; the final sentence landed with the impact of a blow.

"You want—me—to head the negotiating team?"

"You'll be accompanied by three other negotiators and a crew of five. Departure will be immediate. The transit time is negligible. The period of negotiation can be as brief as you can make it. You could be back on Earth in less than a month."

Bernard felt an instant of vertigo. All seemed swallowed up: the book of poetry, the brandy, the warmth, the snugness. Punctured in a moment by this transatlantic call.

He said in a hesitant voice, "Why—why am I picked for this assignment?"

"Because you're the best of your profession," replied the

Technarch simply. "Can you free yourself of commitments for the next several weeks?"

"I—suppose so."

"I have your acceptance, then, Dr. Bernard?"

"I—yes, Excellency. I accept."

"Your service will not go unrewarded. Report to Archonate Center as soon as is convenient, Doctor—and no later than tomorrow evening New York time. You have my deepest gratitude, Dr. Bernard."

The screen went blank.

Bernard gaped at the contracting dot of light that had been the Technarch's face a moment before. He stared down suddenly at the floor, dizzy. *My God*, he thought. *What have I let myself in for? An interstellar expedition!*

Then he smiled ironically. The Technarch had just offered him a chance to be one of the first human beings to meet face-to-face with an intelligent non-terrestrial. And here he was, worrying about a temporary separation from his piddling little comfortable nest. *I ought to be celebrating*, he thought, *not worrying. Brandy and vibro-chairs can wait. This is the most important thing I'll ever do in my life!*

He disconnected the sonic screen; the harpsichord music died away in the middle of a twanging cadence. Yeats returned to the bookshelf. He took a final sip of brandy and replaced the flask in the sideboard.

Packing was a problem; he winnowed out several fat books, packed two slim ones, some clothing, some memodiscs. He found himself unable to sleep, even after taking a relaxotab, and he rose near dawn to pace his flat in tense anticipation. At 1100 hours he decided to transmat across to New York, but his guidebook told him it would still be early in the morning on the other side of the Atlantic. He waited an hour, dialed ahead for courtesy permission to cross, and set his transmat for the Archonate Center.

Not many minutes later, he was in the private chambers of the Technarch McKenzie.

The Technarch was not in his chambers at the moment. But three other men were. One was a tall, dark-faced man with a gloomy scowl, dressed in the somber clothes that indicated his affiliation with the Neopuritan movement. Another was shorter, but still a little over six feet in height, a cheerfully affable-looking man in his early fifties. The third man was short and stocky, with quick, darting black eyes and heavy frown-lines in his forehead.

"Hello," Bernard said. "My name's Martin Bernard—I'm a sociologist. Are you three part of this outfit too?"

The affable-looking man put out his hand. "Roy Stone. Basically a politician, I guess. I'm understudy for the Archon of Colonial Affairs."

"And I'm Norman Dominici,"

the stocky one said. "Biophysicist, when I'm not out on expeditions to greenfaced aliens. Welcome to our little band."

Only the Neopuritan had not offered an introduction. Bernard turned uncertainly toward him. "Hello?"

"He isn't the friendly type," Dominici warned *sotto voce*.

The big man turned slowly. He was, Bernard thought, a hulking giant of a man—six-foot-six, at least, with the aloof, withdrawn look that men sometimes get when they grow to enormous heights at precocious ages.

"The name is Thomas Havig," the lanky Neopuritan said in a surprisingly thin voice. "I don't believe we've met before, Dr. Bernard—but we've shared the pages of several learned periodicals."

Bernard's eyes went wide. "Thomas Havig of *Columbia*?"

"Thomas Havig of *Columbia*. The Thomas Havig who wrote *Conjectures on Etruscan Morphemes*, Dr. Bernard. An article which you didn't seem to appreciate."

"Why—why, I simply couldn't swallow any of your premises. You flatly contradicted everything we know about the Etruscan personality and culture—"

"And therefore you took it upon yourself to attempt to destroy my reputation?" Havig asked maliciously.

"I merely wrote a dissenting opinion," shot back Bernard.

"The *Journal* saw fit to print it. I—"

"Evidently you gentlemen are old friends, even though you've never met," commented Stone. "Or should I say old enemies?"

"We've had our disagreements professionally," Bernard admitted.

"You aren't going to carry those disagreements along for ten thousand light-years, are you?" Dominici asked.

Bernard smiled. "I suppose we can forget the Etruscans for this trip. Eh, Havig? Our quarrel was pretty small beer, after all."

He extended his hand. After a moment the towering Neopuritan grudgingly took it. The shake was brief; hands dropped quickly back to sides. Bernard moistened his lips. He and Havig had battled viciously over what was, indeed, a minor technical point. It was one of those quarrels that specialists often engage in when their separate specialties meet at a common point of junction.

"Well," said Roy Stone nervously, "we'll be leaving almost any minute now."

"The Technarch said we'd have at least until tonight," Bernard said.

"Yes. But we're all assembled, you see. And the ship and crew are ready as well. So there's no point in delaying any further."

"The Technarch wastes no time," Havig muttered darkly.

"There isn't much time to be wasted," Stone replied. "The

quicker we get out there and deal with those aliens, the more certain we can be of preventing war between the two cultures."

The door irised open suddenly. Technarch McKenzie entered, a bulky, powerful figure in his formal robes. Technarchs were chosen for their size and bearing as well as for their qualities of mind. "Have you four managed to introduce yourselves to each other?" the Technarch asked.

"Yes, Excellency," Stone said.

"You'll be leaving in four hours from Central Australia. We'll use the transmat in the next room. Commander Laurance and his crew are already out there, giving the ship its final checkdown." The Technarch's eyes flicked meaningfully from Bernard to Havig, and back. "I've picked you four for your abilities, understand. I know some of you have had differences professionally. Forget them. Is that understood?"

Bernard nodded. Havig grunt-assent.

"Good," the Technarch snapped. "I've appointed Dr. Bernard as nominal leader of the expedition. All that means is that final decisions will rest with him in case of absolute deadlock. If any of you object, speak up right now."

The Technarch looked at Havig. But no one objected.

McKenzie went on, "I don't need to tell you to cooperate with Commander Laurance and his

crew in every way possible. They're fine men, but they've just had one grueling voyage, and now they're going right out again on another one. Don't grate on their nerves. It can cost you all your lives if one of them pushes the wrong button."

The Technarch paused as if expecting final questions. None came. Turning, he led the way to the adjoining transmat cubicle. Stone, Havig, and Dominic followed, with Bernard bringing up the rear.

We're an odd lot to be going starward, Bernard thought. *But the Technarch must know what he's doing. At least, I hope he does.*

CHAPTER 4

ONE thing mankind had forgotten how to do, in the peaceful years of expansion under the Archonate: it had forgotten how to wait. The transmat provided instantaneous transport and communication; from any point within Terra's sphere of dominion, any other point could be reached instantaneously. Such convenience does not breed a culture of patient men. Of all Terra's sons, only a special few knew how to wait. They were the spacemen who piloted the lonely plasma-drive ships, bearing with them the transmat generators that would make their destinations instantaneously accessible to their fellow men.

Someone had to make the trip by slow freight first. Spacemen

knew how to wait out the empty hours, the endless circlings of the clock-hands. Not so others. They fidgeted the hours past.

The *XV-ft1* had left Earth at a three-g acceleration, hurling a fiery jet of stripped nuclei behind it until it had built up to a velocity of three-fourths that of light. The plasma drive was shut down, and the ship coasted onward. And its four passengers fretted in an agony of impatience.

Bernard stared without comprehending at the pages of his book. Havig paced. Dominici ground his teeth together and narrowed his forehead till his frowning brows met. Stone haunted the vision port, peering at the frosty brilliance of the stars. The four men were quartered together, in the rear compartment of the slender ship. Fore, Laurance and his four crewmen were stationed.

The hours dragged mercilessly. Some time later that day, when the four passengers were coming to their breaking-point, the door to their compartment opened and the crewman named Clive entered.

He was a small man, built on a slight scale, with a mocking, youthful face and unruly, strangely graying hair. He smiled and said, "We're passing across the orbit of Pluto. Commander Laurance says for me to tell you that we'll be making the mass-time conversion any minute now."

"Will there be warning?" Dominici asked. "Or will it—just happen?"

"You'll know about it. We'll sound a gong, for one thing. But you can't miss it."

"Thank God we're out of the solar system," Bernard said. "I thought the first leg of the trip would last forever."

Clive chuckled. "You realize you've covered four billion miles in less than a day?"

"It seems like so much longer."

"The medieval spacemen used to be glad if they could make it to Mars in a year," Clive said. "You think this is bad? You ought to see what it's like to make a plasma-drive hop between stars. Like five years in one little ship so you can plant a transmat pickup on Betelgeuse XXIX. *That's* when you learn how to be patient."

"How long will we be in warp-drive?" Stone asked.

"Seventeen hours. Then it'll take a few hours more to decelerate. Call it a day between now and landing." The little spaceman showed yellowed teeth. "Imagine that! A day and a half to cover ten thousand light-years, and you guys are complaining!" He doubled up with laughter, slapping his thigh.

Then Clive was serious again. "Remember—when you hear the gong, we're converting."

"Should we strap down?"

Clive shook his head. "There's no change in velocity. You won't feel any jolt." He walked

out, letting the bulkhead swing shut behind him.

Bernard laughed. "He's right, of course. We're idiots for being so impatient. It's just that we're accustomed to getting places the instant we want to get there. To *them*, this trip must seem ridiculously fast."

"I don't care how fast it seems to them," Dominici said tightly. "Sitting around in a little cabin for hour after hour is hell for me. And for all the rest of us."

The gong sounded suddenly, a deep, full-throated bonging chime that was repeated three times, dying away after the last with a shimmer of harmonics.

"We're making the conversion," Dominici muttered. He swung around to face the wall, and Bernard realized suddenly that the biophysicist was crossing himself.

Although not a religious man himself, Bernard wished he could commend himself in some way to a watchful deity. As it was, he could only trust to good fortune. Havig was moving his lips in silent prayer; Dominici was whispering something in Latin. Stone, evidently like Bernard a man of no church, had lost some of his cheery rudeness of cheek.

They waited—and if the hours since blastoff from Earth had seemed long, the minutes following the gong were eternities. Bernard wondered what was supposed to happen as they made the conversion. He felt a

dull vibration, heard a thrumming sound: the Daviot-Leeson generators building up potential, most likely. In a moment or two, a fist of energy would lash out, sunder the continuum, and create a doorway through which the *XV-ft1* might glide.

Into where?

Bernard could not picture it. All he knew was that it was some adjoining universe where distances were irrational figures, a universe that had been mapped in five years of experimental work and now was being piloted by men who had but the foggiest concept of where they were.

The change came.

The first hint was the flickering of the lights, only momentarily, as the great power surge drained the dynamos. The only other immediate effect was a psychological one: Bernard felt cut loose, severed from all he knew and trusted, cast into a darkness so mighty it was beyond comprehension.

The feeling passed. Bernard took a deep breath.

"Look at the vision port," Stone breathed. "The stars—they aren't there!"

Bernard spun around. It was true. A moment before, the port, a three-by-four television screen that gave direct pickup from the skin of the ship, had been dazzling with the glory of the stars. Unending cascades of brightness had glinted against the airless black.

Now all that was gone. Stars, planets, cascades of bright glory. The screen showed a featureless gray. It was as though the universe had been blotted out.

Once again the bulkhead light flashed. Stone pushed the switch to admit, this time, John Laurance himself.

"We've made the conversion successfully, gentlemen. What you see on the screen is a completely empty universe in which we're the only bit of matter."

Stone said, "In that case, what do you steer by?"

Laurance shrugged. "Rule of thumb. The unmanned ships were sent into nospace, they travelled along certain vectors that we've charted, and they came out someplace else. For lack of landmarks we just follow our noses."

"It doesn't sound like a very efficient way of getting places," Dominici said.

"It isn't," Laurance admitted. "But we don't happen to have any choice."

Laurance paused. "I came in to tell you that all was well, that we'll be eating in half an hour, and that we'll be in Star NGCR 185143's neighborhood in about seventeen hours. Ah—Mister Clive tells me you're all a bit edgy. Been doing some bickering."

Bernard reddened. There was the beginning of contempt in Laurance's eyes.

Stone said, "We've had our little disagreements, yes. Minor differences of opinion—"

"I understand, gentlemen. May I remind you that you're entrusted with great responsibility. I hope you'll have settled your — ah — 'minor differences' before we reach our destination. You'll find relaxotabs in the medical supply cabinet over there, if your 'edginess' continues. I'll expect you in the fore galley in half an hour."

When a half hour had elapsed, the four went up front for the meal. Synthetics, of course; but lovingly prepared by Nakamura and Hernandez. After the meal the passengers returned to their cabin. More than sixteen hours remained to the nospace leg of their journey.

Bernard settled into his acceleration cradle and tried to read. But it was no use; the words danced on the page.

He slept for a while, and was able to read when he woke. Looking around the cabin, he saw Dominici deep in snoreland, Havig thumbing what was probably a prayerbook, Stone peering endlessly out the vision port at nothing whatsoever. The cabin clock told Bernard that four hours remained till transition.

Bernard forced himself to stop thinking about the frictions in the cabin and to ponder the nature of the aliens waiting ahead. He had seen their photos, in tridim and color, but yet he looked forward to the meeting with complete uncertainty. Would contact be possible? And

if it were, would an agreement be forthcoming? Or was the civilization of man doomed to be racked by an interstellar war that would send the centuries-old peace imposed by the Archonate crumbling?

The rise of the oligarchy, Bernard thought, had ended the confusion and doubt of the Nightmare Years. But what if the aliens refused to meet and enter into peaceful treaties? What would the strength of the Archonate be worth then?

He had no answers. He forced himself to concentrate on his reading. The hours marched past, until the gong sounded once again. Transition was made.

The vision screen exploded into brilliant life. New constellations; eye-numbing new clusters of stars, perhaps including among them a dot of light that was Earth's sun.

And, hanging before them like a blazing ball, was a golden-yellow sun darkened by the shadow of planets in transit across its disk.

CHAPTER 5

THE ship swung "downward," cutting across the ecliptic plane to seek out the orbit of the fourth of the golden star's eleven worlds. Assuming an observation orbit five hundred fifty miles above the planet, the *XV-ft1* zipped round four times before spying the alien settlement.

In the rear cabin, Martin Bernard and his fellow negotiators lay strapped in, shielded against the atmospheric buffeting of landing, waiting the minutes out as the *XV-ft1* dropped in ever-narrowing spirals toward the darkness below.

Queasiness of the stomach assailed him. His life, all their lives, lay in the hands of five bloodshot, tired men. A miscalculation in somebody's computations and they might smash into the unnamed planet below at fifty thousand miles a second.

Bernard eyed the planet growing in the viewscreen. They were too close to regard it as a sphere, now; it had flattened tremendously, and nearly a third of its area was outside the screen's subtended angle of vision.

Bernard caught glimpses of great continents lying in a blue-green sea like slabs of meat against a table. Now the bright threads of the bigger rivers could be picked out. One vast waterway seemed to travel diagonally across the biggest continent. Mountain ranges rose like buckled humps in the far west and north. Most of the continent was a verdant green, shading into a darker color toward the north and in the highlands.

Closing his eyes, Bernard choked back his dizziness and waited for the moment of landing.

It came some time later. He sensed a gentle thump. That was all.

It had been a perfect landing.

The voice of Laurance came over the intercabin speaker: "We've made our landing without trouble. Our landing-point is some ten or twelve miles east of the alien settlement. The sun is due to rise here in about an hour. We'll be leaving the ship as soon as routine area decontamination is carried out."

The routine decontamination took only a few minutes. Then, once all radiation products incident to the landing had been sluiced away, the hatch slid open and the air of another world came filtering into the ship.

It was much like Earth's; but there was a fraction more of oxygen in it, not enough of an overplus to jeopardize health but just enough to give the air a rich, heady quality. It was almost like breathing fine white wine.

A fresh morning breeze, slightly chill, swept down across the meadow in which they had landed. The sky was still gray, and a few last stars of morning still glimmered faintly. But pink streaks of dawning were beginning to splash across the sky. The temperature, Bernard estimated, was in the forties or fifties: promise of a warm morning. The air had the transparent freshness one found only on a virgin world.

It might have been Earth on some ninth-century morning, thought Bernard. But there were differences. The blue-green

blades of grass sprouted triple from the stalk, twisting round each other in a complex pattern before springing upward. No grass on Earth had ever grown in such a way.

The trees — looming evergreens two hundred feet high, their boles a dozen feet thick at the base—had cones three feet long dangling from them; the bark was pale yellow, ruffled by horizontal striations; the leaves were broad glossy green knives, a foot long, two inches wide. Crickets chattered underfoot, but when Bernard caught sight of one he saw it was a grotesque creature three or four inches long, green with beady golden eyes and a savage little beak. Great oval toadstools with table-like tops a foot or more in diameter sprouted everywhere in the meadow, bright purple against the blue-green. Domini-ci knelt to touch one and it crumbled like a dream when his finger grazed the fungus' rim.

Laurance said quietly, "We'll proceed to the alien village on foot. There are two landsleds in the ship, but I'm not going to use them. It might look too much like an armed invasion to the aliens if we came rolling up in landsleds."

"How about weapons?" Domini-ci said. "Do you have enough to spare for the four of us?"

Laurance tapped the magnum pistol at his side. "I'm carrying the only weapon we'll need."

"But—"

"If the aliens react to us with

hostility," said Laurance in a dry voice, "you may quite possibly all become martyrs to the cause of Terran diplomacy. I'd rather see us all shot down by alien blasters than to have some jumpy negotiator fly off the handle and pump bullets into them."

He turned, checking his position against a compass embedded in the sleeve of his leather jacket along with several other indicators, and nodded toward the west. Without further ado he began to walk. Nakamura and Peterszoon fell in behind him, Clive and Hernandez back of them. No one looked around to see if the negotiators were following.

Shrugging, Bernard scurried after the five retreating spacemen, Dominici jogging alongside. Stone followed, with gloomy Havig bringing up the rear.

"They don't treat us as if we're very important," Bernard said to Dominici. "They seem to forget that we're the reason they're here."

"They don't forget it," Dominici growled. "They just feel contempt for lazy Earthblubbers like us. 'Transmat people,' they call us, with a sort of sneer in their voice. As if there's something morally wrong with taking the quickest possible route between two points."

"It *does* breed some bad habits," Bernard said. "We lose a sense of appreciation of the uni-

verse. Since the transmat was invented we've forgotten what distance means. We don't think of *time* as a function of distance any more; they do. And to the extent that we can't control our impatience, we're weaklings in a spaceman's eyes."

They fell silent. The path was on a slight upgrade, and despite the tiny extra percentage of oxygen in the air Bernard soon found himself puffing and panting. Anxiety-toxins were flooding his body now, willy-nilly. The poison of fear added to the fatigue of his muscles, slowing him down.

But Laurance and his men, up ahead, never flagged. They strode on, clearing a way through the sometimes impassable brush, detouring to circle a fallen tree whose man-high trunk blocked the path, pausing to estimate the depth of a stream before plunging across.

Bernard had never realized that the abstract term "ten miles" meant quite so many weary steps. His feet felt numb, his calves stiff, his thighs already developing a charley-horse, after only half an hour's march.

But there was no help for it but to plug gamely on.

At the end of the first hour they rested, leaning against the massive stumps of fallen trees that lined their path.

"Tired?" Laurance asked.

Stone nodded; Bernard grunted his assent. A twinkle appeared in Laurance's eyes. "So am

I," he admitted cheerfully. "But we'll keep going."

The sun rose finally a few minutes after they had resumed their trek. It burst into the sky gloriously, a young sun radiant in its youth. The temperature continued to climb; it was above seventy, now. Bernard realized bleakly that it was likely to reach ninety or better by high noon. He remembered that medieval jingle: *Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the mid-day sun*. He smiled at the thought, flicked sweat from his forehead and grimly forced his legs to continue carrying him forward.

CHAPTER 6

IT BECAME purely mechanical after a while, and he stopped feeling sorry for himself and concentrated all his physical and mental energy on dragging one leg after another. And the yards lengthened into miles, and the distance between the spaceship and the alien encampment shrank.

Up ahead, the procession came to a halt. Laurance and his men had stopped at the summit of a gently rising hill. Peterszoon was pointing into the valley, and Laurance was nodding in response.

As Bernard caught up to them, he saw what they were pointing at in the valley. It was the alien settlement.

The colony had been built on the west bank of a fast-flowing

river about a hundred yards wide.

In the colony, furious activity seemed to be the order of business. The aliens scurried like energetic insects.

They had built six rows of domed huts, radiating outward from a larger central building. Work was proceeding—no, boiling ahead—on other huts that would extend the radii of the colony's spokes. In the distance, gouts of dirt sprang high as the aliens, using what seemed to be a hand-gripped excavating device of force-field nature, dug out the foundations for yet more of the six-sided, stiff little huts.

Some thousand yards to the north of the main scene of activity stood a massive blue spaceship—adhering in the main to the cylindrical form, but strangely fluted and scalloped in superficial design to provide an unmistakably alien effect.

After he had taken in the first surprising sight of the furiously energetic colonizers, Bernard turned his attention to the aliens themselves, not without a chill. At this distance, better than five hundred yards, it was hard to see the creatures in great detail. But they bore themselves upright, like human beings, and only their skin coloration and the odd free-swinging motion of their double-elbowed arms bore witness to their un-earthliness.

They came in two sorts: the green ones, which were overwhelmingly in the majority, and

the blue-skinned ones. These seemed to be overseers; color-supremacy, he wondered? It would be interesting sociologically to run into a species that still practiced color-dominance.

The blue aliens were definitely in charge, shouting orders that could just barely be heard on the hillside. And the green ones obeyed. The colony was being assembled in almost obscene haste.

"We're going to march down the hillside and right into that colony," Laurance said quietly.

"The important thing to remember is not to show any sign of fear. Dr. Bernard, you'll march in front with me. Dominici, Nakamura, Peterszoon, follow right behind us. Then Stone, Havig, Clive, Hernandez. It'll be a kind of blunt-tipped triangle. Stay in formation, walk slowly and calmly, and whatever you do don't show any sign of tension or fear." Laurance glanced quickly around the group. "If they look menacing, just smile at them. *Don't* break and bolt unless there's an out-and-out attack on us. Stay calm, level-headed, and remember that you're Earthmen, the first Earthmen ever to walk up to an alien being and say 'hello.' Let's do it the right way. Dr. Bernard, up front with me, please."

For a long moment it seemed as though the aliens would never notice the nine Earthmen filing toward them. The nonterrestrials were so busy with their

construction tasks that they did not look up. Laurance and Bernard advanced at a steady pace, and they had covered perhaps a hundred paces before any of the aliens reacted to their arrival. Then one did.

The first reaction came when a worker stripping felled logs happened to glance up and see the Earthmen. The alien seemed to freeze, peering uncomprehendingly at the advancing group. Then he nudged his fellow-worker in an amusingly human gesture.

"They see us now," Bernard whispered.

Consternation appeared to be spreading among the green-skinned workers. They had virtually halted all construction now to stare at the newcomers. Closer, Bernard could make out their features; their eyes were immense goggling things, which gave them a look of astonishment which perhaps they did not feel inwardly.

The attention of one of the blue-skinned overseers had been attracted. He came over to see why work had stopped; then, spying the Earthmen, he recoiled visibly, double-elbowed arms flapping at his sides in what was probably a genuine reaction of surprise.

He called across the construction area to another blueskin, who came on a jogtrot after hearing the hoarse cry. With cautious tread the two aliens moved toward the Earthmen, taking each step with care and

obviously remaining poised for a quick retreat.

Only a hundred feet separated the two aliens from Bernard and Laurance. The remaining non-terrestrials had ceased work entirely, and were bunching together behind the two blueskins.

The sun was merciless. Bernard's shirt plastered itself to his skin. He murmured to Laurance, "We ought to show some gesture of friendliness. Otherwise they may get scared and gun us down just to be on the safe side."

"All right," Laurance whispered. In a louder voice he said, without turning his head, "Attention, everyone: slowly bring your hands up and hold them forward, palms outward. *Slowly!* That might convince 'em that we're coming with peaceful intentions."

Heart pounding, Bernard slowly lifted his arms and turned his palms forward. Only fifty feet separated him from the aliens, now. They had stopped moving.

He studied the two blueskins. They seemed to be about the average height of a man, possibly a little taller—as much as six-feet-two or three. They wore only a loose, coarsely woven, baggy yellow garment round their waists.

The aliens had no noses as such, merely nostril-slits covered with filter-flaps. Their mouths were lipless; their faces in general had little fat, and it seemed as if their skin were stretched

drum-tight over their bones. When they spoke to each other, Bernard caught glimpses of red teeth and a tongue so purple it was practically black. So they differed from Earthmen in pigmentation and in most of the minor details—but the overall design was roughly the same, as if only one pattern could serve for intelligent life.

The aliens' arms fascinated him. The double elbows seemed to be universal joints that swivelled in any direction, making the aliens capable of doing fantastic and improbable things with their arms.

The greenskins seemed to be very much like their blue overseers, except that they were shorter and thicker of body. It seemed fairly obvious that the greens were designed for working, the blues for directing.

A third blue appeared, crossing diagonally from the side of the settlement to join his two colleagues.

When they were ten feet from the aliens, Laurance halted. "Go ahead," he muttered to Bernard. "Communicate with them. Tell them we want to be friends."

The sociologist took a deep breath. He felt limp. His mind spun. What to say? *We are friends. Take us to your leader. Greetings, men of another world!*

There was no help for it, he thought. The old cliches had become cliches precisely because they *were* so damnably valid; what else were you supposed to

say when making first contact with nonterrestrials?

"We are Earthmen," he said, enunciating each syllable with painstaking crispness. "We come from the sky. We wish to be friends."

He pointed to himself and to the sky. Then, tapping his chest, he said, "I." He pointed to the aliens, slowly, not wanting to alarm them. "You. I—you. I—you—friends."

Bernard waited, and behind him eight other Earthmen waited, sharing his tension. He stared levelly into the bulging eyes of the foremost blueskin. Cautiously he extended his hand. "Friend," he said.

There was a long silence. Then, hesitantly, the blueskin lifted his hand, swivelling it upward in that startlingly fluid motion. The alien stared at his hand as if it were not part of him. Bernard glanced quickly at the hand too: it had seven or eight fingers, with a sharply curved thumb. Each finger sprouted an inch-long blue nail that protruded menacingly.

The alien reached out, and for a fraction of an instant the caloused blue palm touched Bernard's. Then, quickly, the hand dropped away.

The alien made a sound. It might have been a guttural grunt of defiance—but to Bernard it sounded something like "Vvrennddt!" and he took the sound at face value. Smiling, he nodded at the alien and repeat-

ed: "Friend. I—you. You—I. Friend."

The repetition came, and this time it was unmistakable. "Vvrennddt!" The alien seized Bernard's outstretched hand and gripped it tightly. Bernard grinned in triumph and satisfaction.

For better or for worse, the first contact had been made with the aliens.

CHAPTER 7

WITHIN a week, there was communication, of a rough, uncertain sort.

There was never any question of who was to learn whose language. The aliens spoke a vastly inflected tongue that involved variations in pitch, timbre, and intensity. On physiological grounds it was impossible for the Earthmen to learn the alien language. So the aliens would have to learn Terran.

They took to it readily enough. Havig, as the team's linguist, had charge of the project, and for long hours each day the eight other Earthmen acted out charades to demonstrate Terran verbs.

It seemed impossible that a language could be learned this way—but the aliens had retentive memories, and Havig approached the job of teaching them as if it were his sacred duty in the cosmos. By the time the sun began to dip toward the low hills behind the colony, several key concepts had been es-

ablished: *to be, to build, to travel.*

The aliens seemed pleased with their new knowledge. They tapped their bony chests and exclaimed, "I—Norglan. You—Terran."

"I—Terran. *We—Terrans.*"

"Terrans come. Sky. Star."

Night was falling, though; and the day's heat was dwindling rapidly. Evidently this was a zone of dynamic temperature contrasts, with the mercury cycling through a range of fifty or sixty degrees a day.

"Tell them we've got to leave," Laurance said to Havig. "Find out if they have vehicles and can give us a ride back to our ship."

It took Havig fifteen minutes to get the idea across, with the aid of much body - moving and frustrated arm-gesticulation. The blueskins squatted calmly as Havig performed, repeating words now and then as it suited their fancy. Bernard looked forward dismally to another ten-mile jaunt shipward in cold and darkness. But, finally, a spark of understanding glimmered. One of the blueskins rose to his feet in a quick, anatomically improbable motion, and barked stern orders to a waiting greenie. The latter disappeared immediately.

Moments later three small vehicles that looked much like landsleds came trundling forward, each driven by a green-skin. The blueskin whose command of Terran was most

secure pointed to the cars and said, "You. Terrans. Travel."

The cars were driven by some sort of turboelectric generator, and they seemed to have a top speed of about forty miles an hour. The greenskins drove impassively, never saying a word, simply following in the direction Laurance pointed out to them. When they came to streams, they simply rolled on through like miniature tanks. The trip back to the *XV-ft1* took less than an hour, even figuring in detours round impassable wooded areas. When the Earthmen stepped out of the little cars, the greenskins left without a word.

As they clambered into their ship, the Earthmen were equally silent. It had been a long, exhausting day. Bernard had never been wearier.

But even with the fatigue, it was impossible not to feel a deep sense of pride and accomplishment. Earth had met another race today, and there had been communication.

When Bernard woke, Nakamura was standing over his bunk shaking him and grinning. "Time, Dr. Bernard. Commander Laurance says you've done enough sleeping."

Commander Laurance was right; a glance at the clock told Bernard that he had slept twelve hours.

It was an hour past sunrise. The day on this planet was twenty-eight Terran Absolute

Hours and twenty minutes long. Bernard joined the others for breakfast.

When they reached the Norglan settlement, about an hour later, the scene was much as it had been the day before: the builders were at work with the same fierce energy. The three blueskins who were involved in the language lessons came to greet the Earthmen, offering a vocabulary display by way of salutation: "I—you. Travel. Come. Here. We—Norglans. You—Terrans."

During that day, and the next, and the next, Havig labored tirelessly while the other Earthmen sat by, more or less useless except to serve in verb-dramatizing charades. Bernard found the lengthy sessions tremendously draining on his patience. There was little he could do but sit in the broiling sun and watch Havig perform.

And the performance was incredible. On the fifth day, the Norglans were putting together plausible sentences out of a fund of nearly five hundred words. And though they fumbled and forgot and became confused some of the time, it was evident that they were fantastically quick learners. Five words out of six seemed to stick the first time. And, of course, the broader their linguistic base became, the simpler it was to teach them new words.

By the seventh day, enough of a mutual understanding had been reached to begin negotia-

tions in earnest. The first order of business was setting up a place to meet; squatting in the open while colony-building went on all around was not ideal. At Havig's suggestion, the Norglans erected a tent in the middle of the colony area where further discussion could take place.

In the tent, a rough wooden table had been rigged. The aliens sat on their heels at one side; apparently they had no use for chairs. The Earthmen, in the absence of seats, adopted a crosslegged squat.

Havig said, "This Earthman is called Stone. He will talk to you today."

Stone threaded a tortuous verbal path, with much help and correction from Havig. After two hours he had succeeded in establishing several vital points:

That Earth was the nucleus of a colonial empire.

That the Norglan home world, wherever it was, was a similar center of colonial expansion.

That some sort of conflict between the two dynamic planet-systems was inevitable before much time elapsed.

That, therefore, it was vital here and now to decide which parts of the galaxy should be reserved for Norglan and which for Terran expansion.

Zagidh, the biggest of the three Norglans, and his companions wrestled with these four points and appeared to show a complete understanding of what they meant. There was a brief

but fervid discussion between them.

Zagidh grimaced in the now-familiar facial agony that preceded any major statement of his. The alien said slowly, "This is serious matter. I-we do not hold authority. We-you can no further talk. Others-we must come."

The four sentences seemed to exhaust the Norglan. His tongue licked out, dog-like, and he panted. Rising, he and the other blueskins exited without a further word, leaving the startled Earthmen alone.

CHAPTER 8

"WHAT do you figure this means?" Stone asked uneasily. It was half an hour since the Norglans had left the tent.

"Obviously Zagidh and his friends realized they'd stumbled into something too big for them to handle," Bernard said. "Suppose you were a colonial administrator busy digging wells and building shelters, and some alien beings dropped down out of the sky and told you they wanted to hold a discussion about carving up the universe? Would you sit down and write a treaty on your own hook—or would you pass the buck back to the Archonate as fast as you could?"

There was nothing to do now but wait. Bernard scowled. This entire mission was a first-class education in patience. Laurance and his men sat quietly in the corner, no longer active partici-

pants in the negotiations, simply letting the minutes trickle past. Havig, with his Neopuritan self-control, showed no outward manifestation of impatience.

Now it was three hours since the Norglans had made their abrupt exit. Mid-afternoon had come; a blistering shroud of heat lay over the clearing, but the greenskins toiled on without seeming to mind.

"We'll wait around until sundown," Laurance said. "If they don't come back by then, we'll go back to the ship and try again tomorrow morning."

The tentflap parted and three aliens entered. The first was Zagidh. Behind him came two Norglans of massive stature, their skins a deep, rich bluish-purple. They were clad in elaborate gem-encrusted robes, and their entire bearing was regal. Zagidh sank into the familiar heels-to-thighs squat. The newcomers remained standing.

Grimacing terribly, Zagidh said, "Two — *kharvish* — have come from Norglan. To speak. Time taken—learning the Ter-ran talk. They-we will talk to you."

Still squatting Zagidh duck-waddled out of the tent. The two big Norglans lowered themselves now in one smooth simultaneous motion into the standard squat.

Haltingly, but in a voice whose tone was the mellow boom of a fine 'cello, one of the big

Norglans said, "I am label Skrinri. He is label Vortakel. He—I—we both—label *kharvish*. How you say? One-who-comes-to - talk - to - others - of - other - kind."

"Ambassador," Havig suggested.

Skrinri repeated it. "Ambassador. Yes. Ambassador. From Norglan. From home planet."

Stone asked, "You have come to talk to us?"

"Yes. You are from Earth. Where is Earth?"

"Much distant," Stone said. "How can I convey it to him, Havig? Would he know what a light-year means?"

"Not unless he knows what a year is first," Havig said. "Better let it go by."

"Okay," Stone said. Facing the Norglans he said, "Your world is close?"

"All worlds are close. It takes no time to travel there to here."

Sweltering in his corner of the tent, Bernard followed the evolving chain of reasoning.

Gradually, the similarities between the two empires began to unfold.

The Norglans had the transmat, it seemed: Skrinri and Vortakel had come from the mother world only a few hours ago via some form of instantaneous transportation. The spaceship looming above the settlement was testimony that the Norglans also had some form of conventional space travel, probably a near-light drive but nothing faster-than-light.

Concrete information on distances was a good deal more difficult to elicit. But it was reasonable to guess that the home world of the Norglans was somewhere within three or four hundred light-years of the present planet, maybe less, probably not more. Which meant that the Norglan sphere of colonization was roughly of the same order of magnitude as the Terran.

So much was clear. But yet the real issue had not even been mentioned yet. Stone was working up to it closely, building a dazzling pattern of ideas and communicated information before he got down to actual business.

Outside the tent, night was falling. The temperature drop came swiftly. A cold wind scudded across the clearing, flicking open the tentflap. Hunger-sounds growled in Bernard's belly. But the Norglans showed no indications of wishing to suspend negotiations for the night.

Stone was sketching diagrams in the packed-down dirt floor of the conference tent. A dot with a circle around it: Earth's sphere of colonization. At a distance of several yards, another dot, another circle: Norgla's sphere.

Beyond those, other dots; no circles. These were the uncolonized stars, the *terrae incognitae* of the galaxy, which neither Earthman nor Norglan had reached at this stage of the galactic expansion.

Stone said gravely, "Earth people spread outward from Earth. We settle on other worlds."

He drew radial spokes projecting from the circle that was the Terran sphere of dominance. The spokes reached into the neutral area.

"Norglan people spread outward too. You build your colonies, we build ours."

Spokes grew from the Norglan sphere as well. Dragging his stick doggedly through the ground, Stone extended the Norglan spokes until some of them all but grazed Terran ones.

"You settle here," Stone said. "We settle *there*. We continue settling new worlds. Soon *this* happens—"

Stone sketched it graphically. Two spokes met, crossed. Others intersected as well.

"We reach the same territory. We fight over this world or that. There would be war between Earthman and Norglan. There would be death. Destruction."

Skrinri and Vortakel stared at the diagram on the ground as if it were the symbology of some complex rite. Their fleshless faces gave no hint of the thoughts passing through their minds.

Vortakel said slowly, "This must not happen. There must be no war between Earthman and Norglan."

Bernard leaned forward, chafing a little at his role as a spectator, but as tense as if he were

conducting the negotiations and not Stone. Despite the chill, despite the hunger, he felt a pounding surge of triumph swelling in his breast. The aliens had understood; there had been two-way communication; the Norglan ambassadors realized the grave dangers of war. The conflict would be averted. The paths of empire would swerve from their collision course.

Stone said, "We must choose the way of peace. Norglan leaders and Terran leaders will meet. We will divide the stars between us." He paused, making sure the ambassadors comprehended the meaning of *divide*. "We will draw a line," Stone went on, emphasizing his words by scratching a boundary between the two spheres of dominion on the ground.

Stone smiled. "All these worlds"—he made a sweeping gesture over the left-hand side of his sketch—"will be Norglan. No Terrans will settle there. And on this side—" he indicated the Terran domain—"no Norglans may come. These worlds will be Terran."

The aliens were silent, peering down at the lines scrawled in the dirt. They appeared to grasp the meaning of the lines.

"We understand," said Skrinri slowly and heavily.

The wind whipped furiously at the tent, whicking the loose flap back and forth. Rising from the squat he had maintained with so little discomfort for so

long, Skrinri stepped forward to tower over Stone's diagram. He stood still only a moment.

Carefully placing one huge bare foot over the lines, the Norglan rubbed out the boundary Stone had drawn to delimit the proposed Norglan and Terran sectors. Then, kneeling, Skrinri obliterated with his fingers every one of the spokes of expansion Stone had depicted as radiating from the Terran sphere.

Skrinri's voice was level, somber, without any hint of malice. He made a broad gesture with both hands, as if to take in the entire universe.

"Norgla builds colonies. We expand. You—Earthmen—have occupied certain worlds. You may keep these worlds. We will not take them away. All other worlds belong to Norgla. We do not have to talk further."

With calm dignity, the two Norglans made their way from the tent. In the shocked silence that followed, the wind rose to a mocking screech.

All other worlds belong to Norgla. Stunned, the nine Earthmen stared white-face at each other. No one had expected *this*.

"It's a bluff!" Dominici whispered harshly. "Limiting us to present holdings? They can't mean it!"

"Perhaps they can," Havig said quietly. "Perhaps this is the end of our fine dream of galactic colonization. And perhaps this is a disguised bless-

ing. Come: we'll accomplish no more here today."

The Earthmen filed out of the tent, into the alien darkness, into the suddenly hostile wind.

CHAPTER 9

MORNING came slowly. The little red moon twirled across the sky and was gone; the unfamiliar constellations passed above and lost themselves beyond the horizon. As the hours of night gave way to the hours of dawn, the men of the *XV-ft1* busied themselves in the routine tasks of daybreak. No one had slept that night aboard the ship.

"We shouldn't have let them march out of there like that," Stone said bitterly. "They stalked out like a couple of princes giving the word to a rabble of commoners. We should have made them stay, let them know that Earth wasn't going to listen to their high-handed nonsense."

"*'You may keep these worlds,'*" Dominici repeated in harshly sardonic tones. "*'All other worlds belong to Norgla.'* As if we were worms!"

"Perhaps it was the will of God that man's expansion through the heavens come to a halt," Havig suggested. "The Norglans have been sent as a reminder that pride is sinful, that there are limits beyond which we dare not go."

"You're making the assumption that the Norglans are a

genuine limit," Bernard said. "I don't think they are. I don't think they've got the technology to keep us penned into our present sphere. They sound like bluffers to me."

"I'll go for that idea," Dominici said. "What I saw of their science didn't impress me. They've got spaceships and transmats, but nothing that's qualitatively advanced over what we've got. In a war we could hold our own with them."

"But why a war?" Havig asked. "Why not accept the decree and keep within our limits?" He answered his own question immediately. "I know. We do not accept limits because we are Earthmen, and in some mysterious way Earthmen have a divine mandate to spread throughout the entire universe." Havig smiled darkly. "None of you pay attention to what I say, of course. You think I'm a religious crank, and in your eyes I suppose I am. But is it so utterly wrongheaded to be humble, gentlemen? To draw back our frontiers and say, Thus far and no further shall we go? When the alternative is bloody warfare, is it cowardly to choose the path of peace?"

Bernard looked up. "I'll grant the strength of what you're saying, Havig. None of us wants war with these people. And maybe it isn't man's destiny to colonize the universe. I can't answer for what is or isn't our destiny. But I know enough

about psychology to figure these people out, alien though they are. Right now they're being tolerant, in a lordly way—they'll let us keep our piddling little empire, provided we leave all the rest for them. But their tolerance won't last forever. If all the rest of the universe becomes Norglan, some day they're going to cast covetous eyes at us and decide to make it a clean sweep. If we give ground now, we're inviting them to come wipe us out later. Dammit, Havig, there's a difference between being humble and being suicidally meek!"

"So you think we should make war on Norgla?"

"I think we should go back to them today and let them know we aren't going to let ourselves be bluffed," Bernard said. "Reject their ultimatum. Maybe that's simply their alien way of negotiating: begin with an absurd demand and work backward to a compromise."

"No," Dominici said. "They want war. They're spoiling for it. Well, we'll give it to 'em! Let's tell Laurance we're heading for home. We'll toss the whole business in the Archonate's lap and wait for the shooting to start. That's the way to handle it."

Stone shook his head mildly. "Bernard's right, Dominici. We have to go back and try again. We can't just go storming off to Earth like hotheads. Or even go meekly crawling away with our tails dragging, as Havig would

like. We'll give it another try today."

The cabin door opened, and Laurance, Clive, and Hernandez entered. They, too, had been up all night, or so it looked from their paleness of face and redness of eye.

Laurance forced a smile. "It's almost morning. I see you haven't done much sleeping."

"We've been trying to figure out whether we ought to try another session with the Norglans," Bernard said.

"Well? What was the decision?"

"We aren't sure. Matter of fact, we seem to be split down the middle on the subject."

"What's the point of disagreement?" Laurance asked.

"I feel it's time for mankind to pull in its horns," Havig said with an apologetic smile. "Our friend Dominici wants to go home too, but for the opposite reason: he doesn't think it's worth talking to the Norglans again."

"Damn right I don't," Dominici snapped. "They've as much as told us they dare us to make war. Now we ought to show them—"

"I'm willing to withdraw my objections to another session," interrupted Havig calmly. "Something in me suggests that going home now would lead only to war. I join forces with Dr. Bernard and Mr. Stone. Let's talk to the Norglans again."

Bereft of his ally, Dominici stared around uncertainly. All

eyes were on him. After a moment he frowned and said grudgingly, "All right. I'll make it unanimous, I suppose. But we aren't going to get anywhere."

They set out an hour after sunrise for the Norglan settlement. The heat was beginning already. Plants whose leaves had rolled tight against the evening frost now uncoiled them, spreading them flat to soak in the sunlight.

When they reached the encampment, the Earthmen strode into the center of the colony together, Bernard, Stone, and Laurance leading the way. Zagidh came forward to meet them.

"You have come back," he said flatly.

"Yes. We wish to talk with Skrinri and Vortakel again," said Stone. "Tell them we are here."

Zagidh swung his swivel-jointed arms loosely. "The *kharvish* are gone."

"Gone?"

"We—they told we—I they did not talk to you—they again," Zagidh said.

Stone frowned, puzzling out the complexities of the blue-skin's version of Terran. "We had not ended talking to the *kharvish*. Get them as you did yesterday."

Zagidh's arms continued to swing. "I can do not. They did not want to talk to you—they again."

From the back of the group came Dominici's bitter voice. All

"They've delivered their ultimatum and now they're gone. We're wasting our time jabbering with this blueface. Do we have to have things made any clearer for us?"

Patiently, Stone tried it from several other approaches. But the result was the same. Skrinri and Vortakel were gone, back to the mother world. They had nothing further to say to the Earthmen. And no, Zagidh would not summon them a second time. Why should he? The position was plain enough. Skrinri had ordered the Earthmen not to colonize any more worlds. Did that statement require clarification, Zagidh asked?

"Don't you see this will be war between Norgla and Terra?" Stone demanded, exasperated. "Innocent people will die because of your stubbornness! We *have* to talk to the *kharvish* again."

Zagidh swung his forearms faster, now; it looked like a gesture of growing irritation. "I have said the words they gave me to say. I must build now. You go. The *kharvish* do not come back."

With one final annoyed flap of his arms, Zagidh spun away and instantly began to shout instructions to a group of greenskins struggling across the clearing with a heavy crate of equipment. The Earthmen, ignored, stood by themselves unshaded in the fierce sunlight.

"I think that's about it," Bernard said quietly. "We've

had it. Maybe they're bluffing, but they're bluffing hard."

They returned to the sleds, and drove slowly out of the Norglan encampment. Turning to glance back, Bernard saw that nobody was watching their departure. None of the Norglans cared.

They travelled through the rolling meadows and over the by-now well-worn forest path to the ship. Bernard's heart felt like cold lead behind his ribs. He shuddered at what they would have to tell the Technarch when they returned to Earth, only a few days hence. McKenzie would be furious.

From the front of the sled, Clive chuckled. "You know, we could have gone along for thousands of years without ever running into these Norglans. If we hadn't built the *XV-ft1*, if we hadn't happened to blunder onto a Norglan-settled planet, if the Technarch hadn't decided to negotiate in advance of the conflict—"

"That's a lot of *ifs*," Bernard said.

"But they're valid ones," Clive protested. "If we'd minded our own business and expanded at a normal rate, none of this would have happened."

"That's pretty close to treason your man is talking," Stone said quietly to Laurance.

"Let him talk," the spaceman replied with a shrug. "We've listened to the Archons all along, and where's it getting us? Just

back into the same muck of war that the Archonate was established to abolish, so—”

“Laurance!” Bernard snapped.

Laurance smiled. “So I’m talking treason too? All right—hang me on the tree next to Clive. But this will be Technarch McKenzie’s war we’ll be fighting, by the Hammer! And win or lose, it may bring the Archonate tumbling down.”

CHAPTER 10

L AURANCE’S defiant words remained with Bernard as he boarded the ship and made his way to the passenger cabin to await blastoff. It was not often that you heard anyone openly expressing antagonism to the Archonate.

It was strange to think of criticizing the Archonate or a specific Archon. To do so was virtually to demonstrate an atavistic urge to return to the dreadful confusion of pre-Archonate days.

The Archons had ruled Earth since the dim days of the early space age. The First Archonate had risen out of the nightmare anarchy of the twenty-second century; despairing of mankind, thirteen strong men and true had seized the reins of command and set things aright.

And, training and choosing their own successors, the Archonate had endured, a continuing body holding supreme authority, by now almost sacred to Terrans

of whatever planet. The pattern of the past argued that no empire sustained itself indefinitely. In time each made its fatal mistake, and gave way to a successor.

Was the cycle of the Archonate ended now, Bernard asked himself as he waited for blast-off? McKenzie’s rash thrust into interstellar space now threatened to bring war down on Terra—war whose outcome might shatter the peace of five centuries and cast the Archonate into limbo with the other discarded rulers of man’s eight thousand years.

Nakamura entered the cabin. “Commander Laurance says he’s ready to go.”

The signal came not much later. With landing jacks and stabilizing fins retracted, the *XV-ft1* sat poised in its meadow, while ten miles away unheeding aliens built their colony. A thunder of ions drove the ship upward.

Acceleration ceased at last. Velocity became constant. They could relax.

Some time later, the warning gong began to sound. Bernard went tense. They were entering the nospaces void, which meant that less than a day hence they would be landing on Earth. He found no joy in the thought of homecoming. *In the ancient days, he thought, a messenger who bore bad news was killed on the spot. We won’t be as lucky. We’ll go on living—known for all time as the men who let*

ourselves be walked over by the Norglans.

The cabin lights flickered and the screen winked into featureless grayness. Conversion had been made.

Now there would be seventeen hours of unending waiting. Bernard found his cabinet and took out a slim book.

*Shall I compare thee to a
Summer's day?*

*Thou art more lovely and more
temperate:*

*Rough winds do shake
the darling buds of May—*

Bernard sighed in frustration and let the book slip shut. It was no use; no use at all. The face of Skrinri kept getting between him and the page. Concentration was impossible; too many extraneous fears intervened. His hands were cold with tension. He paced the narrow cabin. The viewscreen showed nothing but gray.

The cabin was silent. Havig was sunk in that impenetrable cloak of abstraction of his, communing with his God; no use seeking company there. Domini had gone to sleep. Stone stared at the viewless vision screen, no doubt thinking of his shattered diplomatic career. A man who goes forth to negotiate a treaty and returns with an enemy ultimatum jammed down his gullet does not rise to the Archonate.

Bernard made his way forward into the control cabin at

the nose of the ship. The door was open. Within, he could see all five of them at work, parts of the same organism, extensions of the ship. For minutes, no one took notice of the sociologist as he stood at the entrance to the control cabin. They were immersed in their duties.

Then Laurance saw him. Turning, the Commander's eyes narrowed; his face, Bernard thought, looked strangely rigid, almost tortured. "Sorry, Dr. Bernard. We're very busy. Would you mind remaining in your cabin?"

Rebuked, Bernard returned to the passenger half of the ship. Nothing had changed. The clock showed that nearly fourteen hours of nospace travel remained.

He was growing hungry. But as the clock-hands crawled on, no one appeared from the crew to announce that it was mealtime. Bernard waited.

"Getting hungry?" Stone asked.

"Plenty. But they looked busy up front when I went fore," Bernard said. "Maybe they can't take time out for a meal break yet."

"We'll wait another hour," Stone decided. "Then we eat without them."

The hour went by, and half an hour more. Stone and Bernard went fore. Tiptoeing past the galley, Bernard glanced into the control cabin and saw the five crewmen as frantically busy as

ever. Shrugging, he stole away again, unnoticed.

"They don't look like they plan to eat," he told Stone. "We might as well help ourselves."

He prepared the synthetics with something less than Nakamura's culinary skill, and they ate a silent meal. It was the seventh hour of nospace travel by the time they finished.

Returning to the cabin, Bernard settled himself in his bunk. He lay back, nestling his head on his hands, and dozed for a while. When he woke, six hours remained. He was hungry again.

"You haven't missed a thing," Dominici assured him. "They're awfully busy up front."

"Still?" Bernard asked. He began to feel uneasy.

The hours trickled away. Three hours left, two, one. He counted minutes. The seventeen-hour nospace interim had expired. They ought to be converting back. But no news came from the control cabin.

When they were three hours past the conversion time, Bernard said through lips dry with tension: "Maybe we ought to go up front and find out what's what?"

"Not yet," Stone said. "Let's be patient."

They tried to be patient. Only Havig succeeded, sitting wrapped in his unbreakable calm. Another hour went by, more tortuously than any of the others. Suddenly the gong sounded, three times, reverberating through the entire ship.

"At last," Bernard muttered. "Four hours late."

The lights dimmed; the indefinable sensation of transition came over them, and the view-screen blazed with light. They had returned to the universe!

Then Bernard frowned. The viewscreen—

He was no astronomer, but even so he spied the wrongness. These were not the constellations he knew. The stars did not look this way in the orbit of Pluto. That great blazing blue double, with its attendant circlet of smaller stars—he had never seen that formation before. Panic swirled through him.

Laurance entered the cabin suddenly. His face was paper-white, his lips bloodless.

"What's going on?" Bernard and Dominici demanded in the same instant.

Laurance said quietly, "Commend yourselves to whatever gods you happen to believe in. We went off course the moment we converted yesterday. I don't know where we are—but it's most likely better than a hundred thousand light-years from home."

CHAPTER 11

"YOU mean we're *lost*?" Dominici asked, his voice rising to an incredulous screech.

"I mean just that."

"Why didn't you tell us about this before?" Bernard demanded.

Laurance shrugged. "We were

making course compensations, trying to find our way back to the right path. But it didn't work. There wasn't even a trace of a single one of our course referents. And everything we did only seemed to make things worse." Laurance's shoulders slumped wearily. "We decided to give up trying, a little while ago, and converted back to the normal universe. But there isn't a single familiar landmark. We're as lost as can be."

"How could such a thing happen?" Stone wanted to know. "I thought our course was pre-set—everything calculated automatically in advance—"

"To a certain extent, yes," Laurance agreed. "But there were the minute adjustments, the position feedbacks, and somewhere along there we went astray. Maybe it was a mechanical failure, maybe a human error. We don't know."

"Does it matter *now*?" Bernard said.

"Hardly. A millionth of a second of parallax error—widening into an enormous departure from course almost instantly. And so—here we are."

"Where?" Stone asked.

"The best I can offer you is an educated guess. We think we've emerged from nospace somewhere in the region of the Greater Magellanic Cloud. Hernandez is busy taking observations now. We've spotted one star we're pretty sure is S Doradus, and that would clinch things."

"So we're not too far from home," Dominici said with a harsh chuckle. "Only in the next galaxy, that's all. What's a mere 50,000 parsecs?"

"If we know where we are," said Stone, "shouldn't we be able to find our way back to Earth?"

"Not necessarily," Laurance replied. "Nospace travel doesn't follow any logical pattern. There's no correlation between time and distance. And no way of telling direction. Our only hope for getting home is trial-and-error computation—and it's just as reasonable to assume that on our next jump we'll wind up in Andromeda as back in our own galaxy."

Nakamura entered the cabin suddenly. In a low voice he said to Laurance, "Commander, could you come up front for a moment? There's something we'd like to show you."

The spacemen left. For a long moment there was silence in the cabin after they had gone.

Bernard stared at the vision screen. It was a breathtaking view: a sprawling field of stars, a Milky Way no human eyes had ever seen before. Blazing blue-white giants and dim red stars studded the field of vision. And down in the lower part of the screen hung a dazzling white cloud, a coil with an arm drifting loose at either end. With a jarring sense of shock Bernard realized he was looking at his own galaxy.

Bernard caught his breath. It

was a numbing sight to see the galaxy from a distance of some 50,000 parsecs. It tended to provide a different perspective on things, to demonstrate beyond the power of all words to convey how small was man and all his aspirations, how unintelligibly mighty the universe. At this distance no single star of the home galaxy could be discerned by the unaided eye.

Stone laughed bitterly. "Which is worse?" he asked. "To get lost fifty thousand parsecs from home—or to return to Earth with the Norglan ultimatum? Me, I almost think I'd rather stay lost."

"Not me," Dominici retorted. "I'd survive the Technarch's anger, and maybe even the war with the Norglans. It wouldn't have been so bad with a couple of women on board, but to be stranded this way? Nine Adams and no Eves? Uh-uh. Not for me, friends."

Bernard continued to stare at the alien sky in the vision screen. Ten thousand light-years had seemed so far from home, once. But it wasn't, not really. Earth and Norgla were next-door neighbors, at this distance. *And to think that we were set to divvy up the universe between us! What right do any of us, in our puny little galaxy, have to stake claims out here?*

"I'd like to get back home," he said mildly. "I miss my books, my music, even my classes—"

"No family?" Dominici asked.

"Not really. Two marriages; both dissolved."

"I never married," Stone said, "so in a sense I don't have much to go home to. But I don't want to rot for the rest of my life on some strange planet. To die unmourned, alone, forgotten—"

"It would be the will of God, wouldn't it?" Dominici asked. "Everything's the will of God. Just sit back and let God pour trouble over you, and shrug your shoulders because it's His will and therefore there's no use complaining. Isn't that so, Havig? How come you haven't been spouting your usual stuff to console us. We—*Havig!*"

Sitting by himself, as usual, in his corner bunk, the Neopuritan was very quietly having hysterics. His body was being racked with great whooping sobs, but he was choking them back with almost demonic intensity. His eyes were wet with tears; his jaws were tightly clenched, his white-knuckled hands gripped the edge of the bunk. The sobs rippled up through him, and grimly he forced them back, not letting a sound escape from his mouth. The effect was astonishing.

"Havig!" Dominici snapped curtly. "Havig, what's the matter with you? Are you sick?"

"No—not sick—" Havig gasped.

"What's wrong, then? Is there anything we can get for you?"

In a low, dark, terrible voice Havig muttered, "All my life I

was a good man—kept the ways of God, worked hard, prayed. Worshipped Him as I thought He must be worshipped. And—and—*this*. Lost here, billions of billions of miles from home, church, family. Wife. Children. Gone. Why? Why did He do this to me? *Why? Why?*”

The big man rose and took two tottering steps forward, eyes fixed, jaws flecked with spittle.

“Grab him!” Dominici shouted. “He’s cracking up! Grab him or he’ll run wild!”

They sprang toward him. Bernard and Stone each seized one enormously long, spidery arm; Dominici reached up, practically on tiptoes, to clamp his hands to the linguist’s thin shoulders. Together they forced him down onto his bunk.

“Let go of me! Get your hands away from me!”

“Just lie there until you’re calm,” Bernard told him. “Relax, Havig. Don’t snap now.”

“I have committed some sin,” Havig muttered in a broodingly introspective voice. “Otherwise why would He have forsaken me?”

“You’re not the first to ask that question,” Dominici said. “At least you’re in good company there.”

“Shut up, you idiot,” Bernard whispered. “You want to drive him out of his mind? Get me a sedative.”

“In some way I have offended Him,” Havig went on. “And He has taken His light from me.”

“You’re wrong, Havig,” Bernard said sharply. “This is a trial—a trial of your faith. God is sending tribulations upon you. Remember Job, Havig. *He* never lost faith.”

Havig’s eyes brightened. “Yes. A trial of my faith. Job. Yes. But I can’t stand it! Lost out here—perhaps there is no God out here! And—and—”

Reaching behind him, Bernard took the sonic spraytube from Dominici and jammed it against a vein in Havig’s arm. He flipped the release, injecting the fluid instantly. Havig muttered something unintelligible; his eyes glazed; within moments, he was asleep.

Rising, Bernard mopped sweat from his forehead. “Whew! *That* happened awfully fast!”

“Crazy. Absolutely crazy,” Stone said.

Bernard shook his head. “It’s perfectly understandable. He’s a fanatic who had the rug yanked out from under him. I guess this was one time he couldn’t write every trial and tribulation off to God’s will. So he snapped.”

“Will he be okay when he wakes?” asked Dominici.

“I hope so. I gave him enough of that stuff to keep him out for hours. Maybe he’ll be calmer when the drug wears off.”

“If he goes on ranting like that,” said Stone, “we’ll just have to gag him. Or keep him drugged. He’ll drive us all nuts otherwise.”

The cabin door opened. Lau-

rance entered, followed by Clive and Nakamura.

"What's been going on back here?" Laurance asked. "I heard wild shouting—"

"Havig had a kind of fit of despondency," Bernard explained. The universe suddenly became too much for him all at once, or something. He's conked out under sedatives now."

"It sounded like a riot," Clive said.

"He'll be okay," Bernard repeated. "What's the news? Figure out where we are yet?"

"Greater Magellanic Cloud," said Laurance.

"Is that definite?"

"About as definite as it's going to get. We've found S Doradus, bright as a beacon. And some RR Lyrae variables that we're pretty sure of. The way the stellar population scans out—plenty of Cepheids, lots of O and B stars and K-type supergiants—it fits the Magellanic, all right."

"How about Sol-type suns?" Stone asked anxiously. "Those other kinds aren't any good for landings, are they?"

"I don't think we have to worry much about that," Laurance said with a tight little nervous smile.

"What do you mean?" Dominici asked.

"I mean that matters aren't in our hands any longer."

For the first time, Bernard realized that all five of the crewmen had left the control cabin—Laurance, Clive, and Nakamura

in here, Peterszoon and Hernandez waiting just outside. And if no one were in the control cabin—

"What's happening?" Bernard demanded in sudden panic. "Who's piloting the ship?"

"I wish I knew," Laurance said. He walked to the vision screen. "About half an hour ago some external force seized control of us. We're powerless to move of our own free volition. We're being dragged down as if by an invisible hand—toward a yellow sun."

CHAPTER 12

DOWN, down, down, dropping through the blackness past glittering suns, pulled like a helpless plaything—and there was nothing any of them could do about it.

The controls were jammed. The plasma jets would not fire. The stabilizer rockets were out of commission. The velocity indicators did not register. It was not even possible to switch to the Daviot-Leeson drive and convert into nospace.

Nothing to do but wait.

"Postulate an enormous magnetic field," Dominici suggested. "Something like fifty trillion gauss—a field of an intensity we can't even begin to imagine. The magnetic field of the entire cluster, maybe. And we're caught in it."

"Magnetic fields don't interfere with a spaceship's rocket tubes," Bernard said. "They

don't freeze the controls. Not even a hyper-zillion gauss field of the kind you're trying to postulate. There's intelligence behind this, I say—maybe intelligence as far ahead of ours as your imaginary magnetic field is beyond anything we've ever measured."

The conversation petered out. In the vision screen, the stars rushed blindly toward them, their disks streaking and changing color, and sped past. Laurance's vectors had been accurate: they were heading toward a yellowish sun that grew by gigantic bounds with each passing instant.

Onward and onward they sped. An hour of this involuntary journey had passed; a second came, went, and a third. Hernandez reported that he estimated their velocity, reckoning by observed doppler shifts, at about nine and six nines out of ten that of light. Which meant that they were travelling at virtually the ultimate speed of the normal universe — with no apparent source of velocity.

It made no sense.

It continued to make no sense three hours later, when Havig awoke. The linguist sensed that something was wrong almost instantly.

"Feeling better, Havig?" Bernard asked.

"What's been going on?"

"Nothing much. You got a little upset; we had to dope you up with an ampoule of quick-sleep. Are you calmer now?"

Havig passed a quivering hand over his forehead. "Yes—yes, I'm perfectly calm. I'm trying to remember—something came over me, a fit of terror—I—I must have lost control of myself. Did I—say anything I should not have said?"

"To tell you the truth," Stone lied, "you were so incoherent we didn't know *what* you were saying. But we figured it was better to send you off to dreamland and let you sleep it off."

"Yes—thank you, thank you so much. But there's something you're keeping from me. I see it in your faces. You all look so pale, so frightened—"

As concisely as he could, Bernard explained the situation. "So we're out of control," he finished. "There's not a damned thing we can do but wait to see what's going to happen to us."

For an hour more the plunge continued, until it seemed as though it might go on forever—or until the ship vanished into the yellow sun that was its destination.

And then the Rosgollan came aboard.

Bernard's first inkling that something strange was about to happen came when he sensed a sudden glow streaming from the rear corner of the cabin, near Dominici's bunk. The strangely luminous golden-brown light filtered through the cabin. Frowning, Bernard turned to see what was causing it.

Bernard's mouth sagged open.

A glowing figure had materialized in the cabin, behind Dominici's bunk. It hovered, some three or four feet off the ground.

It was a being of small stature, perhaps four feet high, poised calmly in the air. Although it wore no clothing, it was impossible to consider it naked. A garment of light unfolded it, softly streaming light that blurred the figure beneath without actually concealing it. The creature radiated not only light but an impression of total serenity, complete confidence, utmost ability.

"What—the deuce—is it?" Stone asked.

"You must not be afraid," said the visitation.

The words were not spoken aloud. They simply seemed to stream from the creature as clearly as its radiance.

Despite the quiet command, Bernard felt a sickly wave of terror sweep over him. His legs began to give way, and he sank down onto his bunk. He felt awe, reverence, and above all else a resonating chord of fear.

"You must not be afraid," the creature repeated. For an instant the light it radiated grew more intense. Bernard felt the fear lifting from him.

"What—are you?" he asked thickly.

"I am of the Rosgollans. I am your guide until we land."

It's all hallucination, Bernard thought grimly. Even in the Greater Magellanic Cloud they

don't have beings who come drifting through the walls of a spaceship and who speak perfect Terran.

He struggled to his feet. "Dominici! Havig! Get off your knees! Can't you see it isn't real? We're having an hallucination, all four of us!"

"Do you really believe that?" the Rosgollan asked gently. There was the hint of an amused laugh. "You pitiful little creatures, so arrogantly deciding what may and may not be called *real!*"

Peals of enormous silent laughter thundered through the cabin. "We were like you, once, Earthmen—hundreds of thousands of your years ago. Eager, questing, brawling, foolish, petty little beings. We survived that stage. Perhaps you shall, too."

Stone said hesitantly, "How did you find us? Was it you that caused us to get lost?"

"No," replied the Rosgollan. "We watched you from afar, but we had no desire for contact with you. Until the moment came when we learned a ship of yours approached our galaxy. We feared, at first, that you had come seeking us—but we saw at once you were lost. I was sent to guide you to safety."

"Where—how—"

"Enough," the Rosgollan said. "The answers will come later. I will return."

The light winked out. The Rosgollan was gone.

The vision screen showed the

yellow sun swelling to cover an entire quadrant of space.

In the cabin, four men stared at each other in confusion and dismay.

Bernard began to laugh. It was a dry, thin laugh that held little mirth; the others frowned at him.

"The joke?" Dominici said.

"The joke's on us. On all of us in this cabin, and on the Norglans, and on the Technarch. Remember what Skrinri and Vortakel told us?"

"Sure," Stone said. "*You may keep these worlds. All other worlds belong to Norgla.*"

"That's right," Bernard said. "In cosmic pride we came to the Norglans, offering to divide the universe equally with them. In even greater pride, they sent us packing. And who were we, anyway, to say, This universe is ours? Insects! Apes!"

"We are men," Havig said stoutly.

Bernard turned on him. "*Men,*" he mocked. "You talk about knowing the ways of God, Havig. What do you know? You're a worm in a puddle, and because you're the lord and master of that puddle you think you own the cosmos!"

"Hold on a minute, Bernard," Dominici protested. "Is it *your* turn to go nuts now? What are you trying to tell us, anyway?"

In a quiet voice Bernard said, "I'm not really sure—yet. But I think we're going to be put into our true slot in the order of things. *We're* not lords of crea-

tion; we're hardly even civilized, in the eyes of these people. Did you hear what the Rosgollan said? They were like us, *a few hundred thousand years ago!*"

"All right, so they're greatly advanced—"

"Greatly?" Bernard shrugged. "The difference is inconceivable. It knocks some of the arrogance out of you, doesn't it, to find out that you're not really king of the heap?"

"Earth will be in for some surprises, if we ever get back," Havig remarked.

"Surprises enough to upset the applectart with a crash," Bernard said. "We had it too good too long. It was bad enough finding the Norglans cluttering up our nice universe—but now to run into *these* people—"

"And who knows what others there might be?" Stone said suddenly. "In Andromeda, in the other galaxies? Creatures far beyond even the Rosgollans—"

It was a numbing thought. Bernard looked away, feeling a kind of dizziness at the sudden revelation of the universe's immensity.

They made their way fore. But there was no need to tell Laurance. The crewmen were sitting in their cramped cabin looking dazed and shaken.

"You saw it too?" Dominici asked.

"The Rosgollan?" Laurance said. "Yes. Yes, we saw it too." His voice was utterly flat.

"We can't let this crack us up!" Bernard said.

"Why not?" Laurance asked tonelessly. "It's the end, isn't it? The finish for all our big talk of galactic empires? Now we know just how insignificant we are. Just the mammals who happen to live on a certain little yellow sun in that little galaxy there on the screen."

Bernard did not reply. He stared at the master screen in the control panel. A planet hung large in the visual focus. The *XV-ft1* had drifted into an orbit round it, an ever-narrowing orbit.

"We're landing," Bernard said.

CHAPTER 13

THE scene that lay before the Earthmen, as they left the ship—which had floated down, feather-light, in defiance of all laws of inertia and mass—was one of pastoral serenity.

Gentle green hills rolled out to the horizon. Dotted the green here and there were the pastel tones of small houses that seemed to sprout as organically from the ground as the low, stubby trees. There was no sign of industry, none of transportation.

"Just like fairyland," Dominiçi said softly.

"Or like Paradise," murmured Havig.

Bernard said, "It's the post-technological phase of civilization. Remember the withering-away of the state that the an-

cient Marxists were forever trumpeting about? Well, this is it, I'm sure."

The nine of them stood together not far from the ship, waiting for a Rosgollan to put in an appearance. The air was sharp, with an alien tang to it, but it felt good to the lungs. A coolish breeze blew in from the hills.

Just when they were beginning to grow impatient, a Rosgollan appeared, winking into view out of nowhere between one instant and the next.

It was impossible to tell whether the Rosgollan was the same one that had come to them aboard the ship. This was about of a size with that other, but its features and body were partially concealed by the blur of light that attended these people wherever they went.

"We shall go to the others," said the Rosgollan in its soft unspeaking voice.

The golden glow suddenly enswaddled them all; Bernard felt a moment of womblike warmth, and then the light dropped away, and the ship vanished.

They were inside one of the alien houses. The Rosgollan said, "Be comfortable. The interrogation is about to begin."

"Interrogation?" Laurance asked. "What kind of interrogation?"

"You will come to no harm, Commander Laurance."

Bernard tugged at Laurance's arm. "Better just relax and take things as they come," he whis-

pered. "Arguing with these people won't do a bit of good."

The Earthmen made themselves comfortable. There was no furniture in the room, only soft red cushions, on which they sat.

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, there were three more Rosgollans in the room. Looking from one to the next, Bernard could see no discernible difference; they were as identical as though all had been stamped from the same mold.

"The interrogation will now begin," came the serene word from one (or was it all?) of them.

"Don't answer a thing!" Laurance snapped suddenly. "We don't want to give them any vital information. Remember, we're prisoners here, no matter how well they happen to treat us!"

Despite Laurance's outburst, the interrogation began. There was nothing Laurance could do to prevent it. Not a word was spoken, not even in their peculiar mental voice; but, beyond doubt, there was a flow of information.

The interrogation seemed to last only an instant, though Bernard was not sure: perhaps it took hours, but the hours were shrunken to a point in time. He could not tell. But he felt the outflow of information.

The four Rosgollans drew everything from him: his childhood, his disastrous first mar-

riage, his academic career, his interests and crochets, his second marriage, his unlamented divorce. All this they took from him in an instant, examined, discarded as being personal and therefore of only incidental interest.

In the next layer they drew from him the summons from the Technarch, the journey to the Norglan colony, the unsatisfactory meeting with the Norglans, the bungled voyage home. They knew everything to date.

Then it was over. The tendril of thought the Rosgollans had inserted into the brains of the Earthmen snapped back. Bernard blinked, stunned a little by the snapping of the contact. He felt drained, hollow, exhausted. He felt as though his brain had been drawn forth, examined very carefully, and put back into place.

And the Rosgollans were laughing.

There was no sound in the room, and, as ever, the faces of the strange beings were veiled in impenetrable light. But the *impression* of laughter hung in the air. Bernard felt his face grow red, without quite knowing why he felt shame. There had been nothing in his mind of which he was ashamed. He had lived his life, sought the ends he thought desirable, cheated no man, wronged no one intentionally. But the Rosgollans were laughing.

Laughing at me, he wondered? Or at someone else here? Or

at all of us, at all the human race?

The unheard laughter died away.

"You're laughing at us!" Laurance cried belligerently. "Laughing, you damned superior beings!"

The alien reply was gentle. "Yes, we are amused. We ask your forgiveness, Earthmen, but we are amused!"

Bernard realized that these Rosgollans were not quite the noble and mature beings he had been regarding them as. They could laugh at the struggles of a younger race. It was a patronizing laugh.

"We will leave you alone a while," the Rosgollans said. The light vanished.

"So that's what it's like to be interrogated," Dominici said. "I could feel them prowling around in my head—and I couldn't shut them out. Imagine it—fingers stroking your bare brain!" He shuddered at the memory.

"Why are they doing all this?" Hernandez demanded. "Why did they have to drag us down here and toy with us? What's their purpose?"

"More important," said Dominici. "How are we going to get out of here?"

"We aren't," said Bernard in a flat voice. "Not unless the Rosgollans decide to let us go."

"You're turning into a defeatist, Bernard," Dominici said warningly.

"I'm just looking at things

realistically. How are we going to escape? Where's the ship? What did they do with it?"

"Why—uh—" Dominici paused. He walked to the door of the room. The door obediently drew back as he approached, and he stepped out, into the open. The others followed him out.

Green hills rolled to the horizon. Fleecy clouds broke the harsh metallic blueness of the sky.

There was no sign of the ship.

"We might be anywhere on this planet," Bernard said. "Five, ten, fifteen thousand miles from the ship. How are we going to get back? By transmatt? Teleportation? On foot? Which direction do we go?"

"So we're prisoners, then," Dominici said bitterly.

"Even if we reached the ship," said Havig, "they would only bring us back, the way they brought us here originally. We are at their mercy."

Bernard kneeled in the meadow just outside the building. He snatched up a stalk of grass with a snapping motion of his hand. It was a painful business, this being gently wafted to Rosgolla. It struck at the center of a man's soul to keep him in this sort of smiling bondage.

"Hey!" Dominici exclaimed. "Food!"

Bernard turned. He caught a glimpse of a dying light, and, spread out on the grass in front of the house, he saw trays of food.

"We might as well dig in," he

said. "The worst it can do is kill us."

He picked up a small golden cake and nibbled it experimentally. It literally melted in his mouth, flowing down his gullet like honey. He ate another, then turned his attention to blue gourd-like vegetables, to a crystal pitcher of clear yellow wine, to round translucent white fruits the size of cherries. It was all delicious, and it was impossible to suggest that such delicate foods might be poisonous to a Terran metabolism. He ate his fill.

The sun was dropping in the heavens now. Near the horizon a small moon could be seen, low in the late-afternoon sky, visible as a tiny flat pearl against the darkening blue. It was a scene of simple beauty, as the meal had been simple, as the few Rosgollan buildings he had seen were simple. That simplicity alone argued for the great antiquity of these people. They had gone past the cultural stage of finding virtue in size and complexity, into the serene mature era of clean lines and uncluttered horizons.

He could find pleasure in such a life, he who had enjoyed solitude and quiet, the peace of a fishing preserve on a young colony, the privacy of his own flat in London, the silence of his study-retreat in the Syrtis Major.

"What do they want with us?" Hernandez was asking.

"We amuse them," Laurance said. "Maybe they'll grow tired of us sooner or later, and let us go."

"Let us go where?" Nakamura said quizzically. "We are more than one hundred thousand light-years from home. Or will the Rosgollans show us how to find our way back, when they let us go?"

"If they let us go," Dominici corrected.

"They won't keep us here long," Bernard said, breaking his long silence.

"Oh? How do *you* know?"

"Because we don't fit into the scheme of things here," the sociologist replied. "We're blotches on the landscape. The Rosgollans have their own tranquil lives to lead. Why should they install a bunch of barbarians on their quiet planet to stir things up? No, they'll let us go when they're through with us. They aren't the zookeeper type."

The night was falling rapidly now.

They went inside and some of the men settled themselves on the cushions as if settling down for the night. Bernard walked to the edge of the single room, leaned against the wall, and watched it turn transparent for three feet on either side of him to provide him with a window.

He peered outward, upward. The strange stars blazed down. He sought for Earth's galaxy, but it did not seem to be visible from this part of the planet.

Feeling suddenly stifled by the magnitude of his distance from home, Bernard reeled away from the window and threw himself down on the nearest cushion. He jammed his eyes tightly together. His lips moved as if of their own accord.

He recovered his self-control after an instant and thought in quiet wonder, *I prayed! By the Hammer, I actually prayed to go home!*

The prayer had been like a release. The knot of tension that had been forming for hours within him let go its hold. He cradled his head on his folded arms, kicked off his shoes, and was asleep within seconds.

CHAPTER 14

MORNING came swiftly. Bernard woke, feeling cramped and musty from having slept fully dressed, and rose to a sitting position. The others were strewn around the floor, still asleep, and the room was still dark.

Stepping through the obliging door, Bernard sucked in his breath sharply; the air was marvelously fresh, the distant hills looked new-minted in the transparent morning sky, a silvery sheen of dew glistened over the meadow. For an instant Bernard almost forgot where he was and how he had come to be here.

One by one the others came out, stretching their legs after the short night. Stone joined

them first, then Nakamura with his cheery greeting, then Havig, nodding brusquely, and Laurance, lost in his own private bitterness. After him came Clive and Hernandez, with the taciturn Peterszoon strolling out last and glaring at the group as if each, personally, were responsible for his predicament.

"Any sign of breakfast?" Stone asked.

"Not yet," answered Bernard. "Maybe they were waiting until we were all awake."

"Look there!" Clive cried suddenly. "*Look!*"

Eight heads turned to look. "No," Bernard gasped. "It isn't so. It's a hoax—an illusion—"

For an instant, a nimbus of radiance had settled lightly to the meadow some fifty yards from the group of Earthmen. The light had glimmered briefly, then flickered out. And in the afterimage of the light, two burly figures could be seen—two massive dark-skinned figures, not precisely human, that staggered uncertainly over the grass, looking all about them in bewilderment and—perhaps—fear.

Skrinri and Vortakel. The *kharvish*. The haughty Norglan diplomats.

"We have brought you companions," said a Rosgollan voice. "The negotiations may now proceed once more."

The big Norglans looked drunk, or else just badly disorientated. But they recovered swiftly; and then all their re-

covery went to nought as they recoiled in astonishment upon catching sight of the Earthmen.

"Are they the same ones as—before?" Dominici asked.

"I'm sure of it. See, the bigger one is Skrinri, the one with the scar on his shoulder is Vortakel."

The Norglans drew near. In a tone that was harsh, guttural, quite unlike his mellow boom of old, Skrinri said, "You—Earthmen? The same Earthmen?"

Bernard answered, "Yes. We have met before with you. You are Skrinri—you, Vortakel."

"Where are we?" Skrinri asked.

"Far from home," Bernard said. He groped for the words; how to explain the concepts "galaxy," "parsec," "universe"? He abandoned the effort. "So far from home," he said after a moment, "that neither your sun nor ours can be seen in the sky."

The Norglans spoke to each other, for a long while, in their own consonant-studded, vastly involuted language.

Bernard pitied them. If anything, the Norglans had a higher opinion of themselves and their relation to the universe at large than any of the Earthmen had; and it had been crushing enough to the Terran ego to discover that such a race as the Rosgollans existed. How much more agonizing it must be, he wondered, for the Norglans to discover that they could be plucked from their planet and hurled incalculable distances across the

sky by strange glowing beings of another galaxy?

He became aware that Rosgollans were returning. Like fireflies they glimmered on the horizon, flickering into existence all about.

A silent Rosgollan voice said, "We have interrogated the Norglans while they journeyed here. We learn from them that they hold it is their manifest destiny to conquer all the universe. While you Earthmen have something of the same belief. Obviously, one side or the other must give ground or there can be no peace between you. You must reach a mutual decision."

Skrinri growled — evidently the Rosgollan's words had been intelligible to the Norglans as well as the Earthmen— "We have been fair to the Terrans. We permit them to keep their own worlds. But the other planets—these must be ours."

"By whose grant?" asked the Rosgollan with a trace of mockery. "At whose behest do you take possession of all the worlds there are?"

"At our own!" rumbled the Norglan, getting some of his self-confidence back. "The worlds are there; we reach them; we take them. What greater authority do we need than our own strength?"

"None," replied the Rosgollan. "But your own strength is insufficient. Weak, arrogant, blustering creatures you are, nothing more. I speak now to

both participants in this dispute."

Skrinri and Vortakel seemed to curdle with rage. "We do not speak more! Return us to our world or we shall take steps! Imperial Norgla does not tolerate this manner of abuse. We—"

Vortakel's voice died away in sudden confusion. He and Skrinri had risen from the ground during their outburst; now they hovered, better than a yard above the grasstops, kicking their feet in rage and frustration.

"Put us down!" Skrinri howled.

"Show us your strength now, men of Imperial Norgla," came the dry murmur of the Rosgollan spokesman. "You do not tolerate levitation? Very well; force us to stop."

Double-elbowed purple arms flailed the air. The Norglans rose, inch by inch; now they were more than their own height above the ground.

"Put — us — down!" Skrinri grunted.

"Very well."

The Norglans dropped suddenly, much to their great surprise. They landed in an undignified heap; when they rose, it was slowly, with bowed heads, and they did not look at the Earthmen.

"We have taken you from your home world," the Rosgollans said, "and we have shown you the extent of your strength. And still you claim the universe is yours?"

The Norglans made no reply.

The Rosgollan voice continued, "And there, the Earthmen, creatures less sure of themselves, but equally proud, equally greedy. You would divide the universe with the Norglans, we learn. But does it lie in your hands to make such an apportionment?"

For a long moment no Earthman dared to speak. It was futile to trumpet of strength, in the teeth of beings who held powers beyond comprehension.

But something had to be said. Some justification had to be made.

"We acted in no sense of pride," Bernard said quietly. "We are a growing race; we sought room to expand. The Norglans, like us, must expand. Our hope was to reach an agreement that would prevent a conflict of interests, something that would be of benefit to both races."

"You laid claim to half the universe," the Rosgollan voice said accusingly. "Where is the humility in this?"

"We laid claim to half the universe, yes—thinking the universe held no people but Terran and Norglan. *There* lay our pride, in that blind assumption. We were wrong. There are other races in the universe, and of all the races we are the youngest, and therefore the most foolish. But we still claim the right to expand and colonize worlds which now lay empty."

Bernard felt waves of ironic laughter sweep down from the circling jury of Rosgollans.

"The Earthmen reduce their claim," commented the Rosgollan voice sardonically. "Instead of half the universe, now they simply demand half the uninhabited worlds. It is a major concession, I suppose. What of you, proud men of Imperial Norgla—speak for your people. Will you, too, reduce your claim?"

The Norglans did not hurry to reply. At length Vortakel said, "You have shown us that—perhaps—we are not—the strongest people of the universe. We cannot fight you. Therefore we yield."

For a frozen moment no one moved: the slump-shouldered Norglans standing at each other's side like beleaguered Vikings, the Earthmen huddled in their little group some twenty feet away, the ringing circle of Rosgollans.

"Just one moment!" Laurance cried suddenly. "You've brought us all here, somehow, these Norglans and us, and you're holding a little kangaroo court here. Fine. You have powers we don't have, and you've shown them off beautifully. But what right do you have to meddle inside our galaxy? Who set you up as our judge, in the first place? Is it just the right of might?"

"We are not judging," replied the Rosgollan voice levelly. "We are mediating a dispute between two races. Two *young* races. In order to mediate successfully we

must demonstrate our strength. It is the only way to deal with children."

"With—"

"*Children*, yes. Life has come late to your galaxy. As yet, only two intelligent races have evolved there—energetic, vigorous races. For the first time the paths of these young races have crossed. Your fledgling empires soon would be at war without our mediation. We take it upon ourselves, therefore—acting in the interest of the races of the universe, of which we are neither the oldest nor the most powerful—to prevent this war.

"Therefore limits will be drawn for the empire of Earth, and limits for the empire of Norgla. You shall not exceed these bounds in your search for colonies. And in this way your galaxy shall live in peace."

CHAPTER 15

IT WAS done. And, though the Archonate knew nothing of the treaty, everyone of the nine Earthmen realized that what they had done was irrevocable.

Through some magic of their own, the Rosgollans had conjured up, out there in the meadow, a scale model of the island universe that contained Earth and Norgla. It drifted in midair, a spiral with two curving snake-like arms, composed of millions and millions of glowing points of light.

Suddenly, springing up within the galactic model, a line of

green light picked out a sphere perhaps a foot in diameter.

"This is the Terran sphere of dominion," a Rosgollan voice silently informed.

An instant later a second sphere sprang into glowing life, this one red, of virtually the same size, and located halfway across the model.

"This is the Norglan sphere of dominion," came the Rosgollan admonition.

A searingly bright line of fierce violet zigzagged out across the model, dividing it from rim to core, lancing between the tight-packed stars to partition the galaxy into two roughly equal segments.

Colors began to spread all across the model, the green light filling all the Terran half, the red streaming over all the Norglan suns. The Rosgollan said, "These shall be the everlasting boundaries of your dominions. Crossing them for any reason will bring immediate retribution from beyond your galaxy."

"We have no right to enter into a binding agreement without informing our government," Stone protested stammeringly.

"The arrangement will be binding," replied the Rosgollan. "Formal consent of high officials will not be necessary. This is not a treaty! it is an imposition from without. You will obey the establishment of the boundary line."

The Norglans looked agitated. Skrinri declared, "You—order us to obey?"

"Yes. We order you. These are the boundaries. You will keep within them; and you will cease to threaten each other with war, in the name of galactic harmony. Is that understood?"

Eleven figures stared dumbly at the model and at the eerie creatures that had created it.

"*Is that understood?*" demanded the Rosgollan again, with some acerbity.

Martin Bernard shrugged and said quietly, "Yes. We understand."

"We understand," Skrinri echoed.

"It is done, then." The divided model winked out.

Light swirled about the heavy figures of the Norglans, and immediately they were gone. An instant later, most of the Rosgollans had vanished. The Earthmen felt warm light engulf them—and then they stood just outside their ship once again.

"Enter it," a Rosgollan voice commanded gently. "We will restore you to the galaxy in which you belong."

The Earthmen, silent, shamefaced, clambered into the ship. Peterszoon, the last man aboard, activated the hatch controls, swinging the entry gate shut and dogging it tightly closed.

The ship lifted almost immediately, without any sensation of blasting off. It simply detached itself from the ground and floated spaceward.

"So that's that," Stone muttered bitterly. "We've got quite

a story to tell when we get home! We encountered *two* alien races, and one kicked us around a little harder than the other."

Stone said darkly, "So we set out from Earth as the universe's dominant race, and come back home policed into one corner of our own galaxy. That isn't going to be easy for the Archonate to swallow."

"It won't be easy for anyone to swallow," Bernard replied. "But the truth never is. We *aren't* the universe's dominant race; not yet, anyway. The Rosgollans and maybe some others have an evolutionary head start of maybe half a million years on us. So we've been put in our place—for a while."

"This is the greatest defeat Earth has suffered in her history," Stone persisted.

"Defeat?" Bernard snorted. "Do you call it a defeat if you slam your hand against a metal bulkhead and break your fingers? Sure, the bulkhead defeated your hand. It'll do it every time. It's in the nature of metal bulkheads to be stronger than fingers, and it's ridiculous to moan about the philosophical aspects of the situation. In the same way, it's in the nature of highly advanced races half a million years older than we are to be more powerful than we are. Why get upset about it?"

"Bernard is right," Havig said. "The great wheel of life keeps turning. Some day the Rosgollans will be gone, and we, in the twilight of our days, will

watch other, younger, stronger races come brawling across the skies. And what will we do then? Just what the Rosgollans did to us: confine those races, for the sake of our own peace."

Sinking his head in his hands, Stone muttered, "It all makes perfectly good sense on the abstract, intellectual level. But come down to realities. How do you tell a planet that thought it was the tops that it's very small potatoes indeed?"

"That's the Archonate's problem," Dominici said.

"What does it matter *whose* problem it is?" Stone demanded. "It's a planetary humiliation."

"It's a planetary eye-opening," Bernard snapped. "For the first time we have some other races to measure ourselves against. We know that the Norglans are just about as good as we are, right now—and that the Rosgollans are a whole lot better. So we know we have to progress, to keep abreast of the Norglans, to aim toward the level of the Rosgollans. And we'll get there."

Hernandez entered the cabin. "Commander Laurance sent me back to let you know that the Rosgollans have returned us to the place where we got lost, and we're about to convert into no-space and head for home."

Dominici gasped. "You mean we're back in our own galaxy so fast? But—"

"That's right," Hernandez said quietly. "It's only half an

hour or so since we left Rosgolla. But we've come back. There's no doubt about it."

As the spaceman left, Bernard felt a tremor of awe. They had crossed the galactic gulf in twenty or thirty minutes, thanks to the Rosgollan boost. It was a feat beyond the capacity of the mind to grasp. But, he realized, it was only to be expected of a race as advanced as the Rosgollans. *Where were we half a million years ago?* he wondered. *Pounding our hairy chests, brachiating through the trees, cooking our uncles for dinner, maybe even eating them raw if cooking hadn't been invented yet. And we came from Pithecanthropus to the transmat era in half a million years—picking up speed as we came. Who's to say where we'll be half a million years from now?*

The thought was warm, comforting. For the first time since the journey had begun, back in the wastes of Central Australia, Bernard felt a moment of certainty, of understanding man's relation to the universe about him.

CHAPTER 16

THE private chamber of the Technarch McKenzie had a harsh, almost hieratic simplicity, with its black stone walls and its bright, shimmering marble floor. The windowless chamber had been designed to impress both its occupant and his visitors with the somber impor-

tance of the Technarch's post. Bernard felt a tinge of something quite like awe as he followed McKenzie in.

Dominici, Stone, and Havig waited in the Technarch's antechamber, while Bernard, alone, faced McKenzie.

The Technarch slipped into his seat behind his broad, bare-topped desk and gestured to Bernard to sit facing him. Glad to get off his shaky legs, Bernard took the seat. He stared levelly at the Technarch's face and took a deep breath.

Bernard said, "I'll begin at the beginning, Excellency."

"An excellent idea."

In a calm voice Bernard said, "We had no technical difficulties in reaching the planet of the alien colony. We landed, observed the aliens for a while, and finally made ourselves known to them. They call themselves Norglans. We made it clear to them that we had come to negotiate a treaty, whereupon our Norglan contact left us and returned, some time later, with two of his superiors."

"What did they say?" McKenzie asked.

Bernard leaned forward. "We explained quite clearly to them that it was inevitable that the boundaries of our respective spheres of expansion were bound to overlap and clash, and we showed them that it was Earth's wish to arrive at a peaceful settlement *now*, rather than let matters slide until the actual collision came, and with it war."

"Yes? And how did they react?"

"They listened to what we had to say, and then they presented a counter-proposal: that Earth confine itself to the worlds already colonized, leaving all the rest for Norgla."

"What?" Fury blazed in the Technarch's eyes. "Of all the preposterous nonsense! You mean they simply told you to agree to an end of all Terran expansion? That we abdicate as a galactic power?"

Bernard nodded. "That was precisely the way they put it. The galaxy was theirs; we would be allowed to keep the worlds we had already taken, but no more."

"And you rejected this insanity, of course."

"We didn't get the chance to. The two Norglan ambassadors hurled their ultimatum and walked out—went back to their home planet. We protested to the colony supervisor, but he said he could do nothing. So we blasted off for Earth."

McKenzie goggled incredulously. Spots of color appeared on his cheeks; his nostrils widened in suppressed rage. "You realize what this ultimatum means. We're at war with these creatures after all, despite everything—"

Bernard held up one hand, fighting to keep it steady. "Your pardon, Excellency. I haven't finished."

"There's more?"

"Much more. You see, we be-

came lost trying to return home. Commander Laurance and his men spent hours trying to get us back on course, but there was nothing they could do. We emerged from nospace, finally, in the region of the Greater Magellanic Cloud." Bernard felt a band of tightness in his stomach. The words rolled glibly from his lips, though he knew each one drove a maddening wedge deep into the Technarch's mind. "We were lost, fifty thousand parsecs from Earth, and no way of returning. But suddenly our ship was taken over by an irresistible force. We were drawn down to a planet in the Magellanic Cloud, inhabited by beings that identified themselves as the Rosgollans. Strange beings—with wonderful mental powers. They—read our minds, found out about our mission to the Norglans. And then—then they brought the two Norglan ambassadors across space to meet with us again."

The Technarch's facial expression had been changing all during Bernard's last few sentences. Now McKenzie seemed to be staring silently off into a void, face growing pale, eyes glazed and reflective.

"Go on," the Technarch said in a terribly quiet voice.

"The Rosgollans staged a kind of courtroom scene—and after it was over they divided the galaxy into Terran and Norglan spheres."

"Divided it?"

"Yes. Here—I have the chart

on a flat projection. It's a line that runs right through the heart of our galaxy. Everything on this side is ours; everything on the other side, Norglan. And if either side crosses the boundary line, or if we leave the confines of our galaxy, the Rosgollan scouts will discover it and administer punishment."

The Technarch took the star-chart from Bernard with a leaden hand, looked at it for an instant, shoved it roughly to one side. He seemed to sigh.

"You aren't—making all this up, Bernard?"

"No, Excellency. It's all true. The Rosgollans are out there, half a million years cleverer than we are—and they hinted that there were other races even more powerful, in the distant reaches of the universe."

"And we have to keep in line—like small boys in school—Norglans over here, Terrans over there—while the Rosgollans make sure we don't get out of step. Is that it?" The Technarch's face became a mask of rigid anguish.

Something shattered inside the Technarch. His shoulders seemed to slump; his face sagged, the wide mouth drooped, the massive forearms lost their strength and dangled limply. Bernard stared at the floor. Watching McKenzie break in this instant was like watching a monument tumble to destruction; it was painful to see.

When McKenzie spoke again,

it was in a different voice, with none of the metallic inner strength of his Technarch tone. "I guess this expedition didn't work out so well, then. I sent you out as representatives of the finest race in the galaxy—and you come back defeated—*crushed*—"

"Excellency—"

"So all my dreams are over. I thought in my lifetime I'd see Terrans ranging the farthest reaches of the universe—and instead we're hemmed into half a galaxy, by the mercy of our masters. And that's the end, isn't it, Bernard? Once a limit has been set, once someone puts a fence around us—that ends all our dreams of infinity."

"No, Excellency! That's where you're wrong! I admit we aren't in the same position of supremacy we were in before Laurance discovered the Norglans—but *we never were in that position of supremacy!* We never were the lords of creation. It only *seemed* that way, because we'd never come across any other race.

"We're too young, too new, to have the kind of power we thought we had. There are the Norglans in our own galaxy, just as strong as we are, probably. And outside the galaxy the Rosgollans, and who knows what greater races than those? But now we have something definite to work for. We have finite goals instead of vague, indefinite ones. We know we have to work to evolve past the Norglans, toward the Rosgollans. When we're in

their class, we'll legitimately be able to hold our heads up in pride.

"The Rosgollan boundary will guarantee that we don't bite off more than we can chew, Excellency. But we've got all the future ahead of us. Tomorrow belongs to *us*. We've had a setback, maybe, but it isn't really a setback—just an end to our complacency, a beginning of the realization that we're not the be-all and end-all of creation. That we still have a long way to go. So that's why we can't let this throw us, Technarch McKenzie."

In a muffled, hollow voice, McKenzie said, "Maybe—maybe you're right, Bernard. I wanted to forge Man's empire in the stars. With these hands, I wanted to build it."

"We haven't lost that hope, Excellency."

"No. *We* haven't. But *I* have."

A sob racked the Technarch's body. Bernard looked around helplessly. There was nothing he could say, no word of sympathy, nothing to be done for this man whose dreams of empire-building had tumbled so quickly into the dust. The Technarch's lips moved wordlessly. Finally he said,

"All right, Bernard. Put the report in writing. Don't gloss anything over."

"Yes, Excellency. Is there anything else?"

A pause. Then: "Get out of here. Leave me alone. Tell Naylor I won't be seeing anyone else today. *Get out of here!*" His voice trembled.

A lump of pity clogged Bernard's throat as he bowed to the Technarch, still a formidable figure in his black cloak of office. Then, unable to bear the sight, Bernard turned and rushed away, through the iris-ing sphincter into the antechamber, and to the transmat that sent him home.

Everything was as he had left it. Everything seemed to be waiting for him—the books, the pipe, the music, the brandy—waiting for him to slip back into his life at the point where he had stepped out of it. But it would never be the same again, Bernard thought.

Never the same again for any of us. He walked to the window, looking out past the foggy London night to the faint glimmering stars that managed to make their way through the haze.

THE END

