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Collision Course
by Robert Silverberg

ONE

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 really died after all, and McKenzie's normally rock-hard face reflected inner tension and the strain of anticipation.

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

The Technarch read the message through twice, nodding, even permitting himself the luxury of a slow smile. So 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. No matter about that, though. The experimental faster-than-light ship was returning safely. It behooved him, as Terra's Technarch, to be present at the landing.

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

"At once, Excellency."

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 vibro-knife, or tune the fine controls on a thermonuclear generator. But they were hands that could choke the life from a man, and 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. Perhaps. There was always the chance that they had traveled no farther than the orbit of Pluto, broken down and limped back home. He would find out soon enough.

Rising, McKenzie traversed the gleaming marble floor of his private chamber—a shameful extravagance, he had always thought in his dour way, but the chamber had not been designed with *his* tastes in mind—and passed through the irising sphincter into his transmat cubicle.

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

"Have you been through it?"

"Of course, Excellency. I have tested it twice."

"Good enough. Leave the field open for my return."

McKenzie stepped forward. The lambent green transmat field pulsed up from the floor aperture, forming a curtain dividing the cubicle in two. The hidden power generators of the transmat were linked directly to the main generator that spun endlessly on its poles somewhere beneath the Atlantic, condensing the theta force that made transmat travel possible. McKenzie did not bother to check the coordinates Naylor had set. Call it an act of faith; the Technarch was supremely confident that no one schemed his

assassination. A minor abscissa distortion, and the Technarch's atoms would be scattered to the cold winds. He stepped into the glow of green without stopping to examine the coordinates.

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 transmat field ripped the Technarch's body molecule from molecule in so tiny a fragment of a micro-second 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 transmat cubicle at Central Australia spaceport, in what once had been the barren Gibson Desert and which now harbored Earth's largest spacefield.

It had been shortly before noon in New York; here, it was early the following morning. A wall clock 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. They were a tense lot. 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 asked, "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."

"Doesn't that mean that the warp-drive was a success?" Leeson demanded.

"All it means," said Daviot pedantically, "is that they succeeded in converting from one kind of drive to another. It doesn't mean that the warp-drive necessarily *took* them anywhere."

"No, but..."

"All right, quiet!" Jesperson said, as if detecting the growing annoyance on the Technarch's face. "We'll find out the story in twenty minutes."

"But the Technarch wanted to know..." Daviot began, and let the sentence come to a dying fall.

McKenzie turned away. They were near the roof of a great transparent dome that covered hundreds of acres. Outside, on the spacefield, the temperature was stifling even now, in the morning's small hours. Within, silent conditioners maintained a more livable climate.

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 gleaming jewels; above, the full moon cast its brightness over the field. Men raced busily over the field's seared surface, readying it for the ship that was plunging down toward Australia from the sky.

McKenzie felt a constriction in his throat, another in the pit of his stomach. It irritated him to be so tense, but no stern command could relax him.

In twenty minutes—nineteen—eighteen—the *XV-ftl* would be returning.

He looked at the stars. Hundreds, thousands of them, sprinkled across the sky. 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 in 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. It was reasonable to assume that the pattern of that sphere held true for the rest of the galaxy: at least one habitable but uninhabited Earth-type planet round every main sequence sun. 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 devising some means 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 advent of Daviot-Leeson Drive, with its incredibly slender generator smashing a hole in space-time by controlled thermonuclear 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 it was returning—in thirteen minutes, twelve, eleven. Minutes ticked tensely

away, no one spoke. Jesperson, wearing headphones, was in contact with the main monitoring station at the far end of the field.

At five minutes before touchdown time Jesperson said, "They've sighted it clear and sharp. It'll be here right on time."

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.

Jesperson was relaying the final countdown, and then the *XV-ftl* 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. At this distance, nearly a thousand yards, he could not make out individual faces; but five had gone to the stars, and five had returned. Their names formed a sort of jingle in the Technarch's mind. *Laurance, Peterszoon, Nakamura, Clive, Hernandez. Hernandez, Clive, Nakamura, Peterszoon, Laurance. Laurance, Peterszoon, Nakamura. . .*

They were trudging across the field now toward the dome. As they came closer, McKenzie observed that three of them had grown beards. He remembered the day he had stood in this very room with them, making farewells that he quietly believed would be final ones. But they had returned.

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

"Hearkening, Excellency," Jesperson gabbled into a phone. Moments later, the door irised open and the crew of the *XV-ftl* entered: Laurance, Peterszoon, Nakamura, Clive, and Hernandez.

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 toward 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 Jesperson on the back. McKenzie said crisply, "But *what*?"

Laurance looked around the room. "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," McKenzie said.

"All right, then. 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 as if—as if they were colonizing that planet, just as we would do."

TWO

Four hours later the entire Archonate convened at Archonate Center in an extraordinary meeting called by McKenzie. The thirteen men who ruled Earth 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 of the table 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 Georach's left was Wissiner, Arcon 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, and 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 into extraordinary session," 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 rising. "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-ftl* 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. The five crewmen of the faster-than-light ship sat facing the Archons, looking upward toward them as they sat at the dais.

The five had, so they said, been without sleep for better than thirty-six hours; but the Technarch had seen fit to call the extraordinary session of the Archonate at once, and so there had been no chance for Laurance and his men to rest. They had merely had time to trim their beards and hair, wash, and treat themselves with anti-fatigue stimulants, before getting the call to the Long Room.

Laurance came forward until he was within twenty feet of the Archons. He showed no great awe, merely the normal respect. 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. His eyes, pale gray, had a warm softness about them that belied the triphammer quickness of his mind and the catlike muscularity of his body.

He said carefully, in a deep, solemn voice, "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 whom you see here. Traveling 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 pre-calculated 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."

At the dais, McKenzie scowled. Laurance's narration so far had been utterly flat, schematic, synoptic; the man had managed to strip away all the wonder of the first interstellar f-t-1 flight and turn it into a mechanical report, the Technarch thought in irritation.

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

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

"Unnoticed?" McKenzie asked.

"So far as is known," replied Laurance.

"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 somewhat more complex joint structure than we do; their arms are double-elbowed, permitting motion in all directions, and as best as we could see at a distance 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 we ourselves are."

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. After two hours of observation we left the fourth planet and proceeded to the third, which was also Earthtype and likewise was undergoing construction of a colony. From there we proceeded by warp-drive to a star two light-years away, where similar colonization was taking place. A third visit, seven light-years farther, showed yet another alien colony being built. We concluded from this that a substantial colonial movement is being carried on by these people in their sector of space. After our visit to the third stellar system, we left on our homeward journey and arrived several hours ago."

"We're *not* alone, then," said Geoarch 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, with some fervor. "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 space-drive 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!"

There was a ringing moment of silence. McKenzie stared forward, at the standing figure of Laurance flanked by his four crewmen.

"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 contact 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 in it 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-ftl*. 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 man best fitted for the task of ambassador to the aliens was himself. But Terran law forbade an Archon to leave Earth; only by renouncing the Archonate could he accompany the negotiating team—and that renunciation would be impossible for McKenzie to embrace.

He waited, impatient in his seat, for the debate to wind on to its predetermined end. They would have to give in. But not yet.

Not until Dawson had finished demanding if this extension of mankind past the boundaries of the present sphere was financially wise; not until Wissiner was through questioning the wisdom of the negotiation; not until Croy had exhausted the objection that perhaps the aliens were expanding in the o*ther* direction; not until Klaus had finished suggesting in a veiled way that immediate war, and not negotiation, was the clearest course.

It went down the table that way, each man ridding himself of his

private phantom, while the five spacemen, weary and travelworn, were treated to the unusual spectacle of watching Earth's ruling oligarchy quarrel. At length the Geoarch said in his quavering, uncertain voice, "I call for the vote."

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—Wissiner's vote, McKenzie wondered?—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 Geoarch said, "The proposal is approved. Technarch McKenzie will prepare plans for 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 walked toward the five spacemen muttering uncertainly to each other in the center of the room. As he approached, one of them—it was Peterszoon, the big blonde—glared at him with an expression of unmistakable hatred.

"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."

McKenzie forced his grave features to contort into the unfamiliar pattern of a smile. "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 smouldered 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."

"How many men will you pick? The ship can't hold much more than nine or ten."

"I won't name many men. A linguist, a diplomat, a couple of biophysicists and sociologists. You'll have enough room." The technarch smiled again; "I know it's a lousy trick to send you out on another trip right after you've come back. But I know you understand. And—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.

THREE

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, and snug, as he liked it. Ancient music tinkled softly down from the overhead sonic screen: Bach, it was, a harpischord piece. He had the volume control set for minimal audibility, just above the hearing threshold. That way, the Bach made no demands on his attention, but he sensed its presence, gay and lilting.

Bernard lay sprawled in his vibrochair, cradling a volume of Yeats on his lap while the shoulder-lamp wriggled unhappily in its attempt to keep the beam focussed on the page no matter how Bernard might alter his position. A flask of rare brandy, twenty years old, imported from one of the Procyon worlds, was within easy 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 sociometrics 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 smiled. Katha had divorced *him*: mental cruelty, she had charged, though Bernard thought of himself as one of the least cruel persons who had ever lived. It was simply that his teaching and his writing and his own studies had left him with no time for his wife. She had divorced him; so be it. He realized now, two marriages too late, that he had not really been the marrying sort at all.

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,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born and dies.
Caught in that…

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. He had never had an extension rigged that would allow him to answer the phone without getting up. He was not yet sybarite enough to carry on his conversations while flat on his back.

The screen brightened; but instead of a face, the image of the Technarch's coat-of-arms appeared. Frowning, Bernard stared at the yellow and blue emblem.

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

"That's right."

"Technarch McKenzie wished 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 McKenzie. He and the Technarch had met only a few times; McKenzie had decorated him with the Order of Merit seven years back, and since then they had crossed paths at several formal scientific functions. But he had heard the Technarch's familiar booming voice on hundreds of state occasions. Now, Bernard 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?" Bernard repeated dazedly.

"You'll be accompanied by three other negotiators and a crew of five.

The crew is ready; I'm still waiting acceptance from some of the others. 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— all 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 vibrochairs 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.

Within half an hour he had compiled a list of those people who needed to be notified about his departure, and he programmed his robosecretary to make such notification—*after* he had left. No point in getting into long debates with people over who was going to cover his classes, who was going to read the galleys on his new book. Better to confront people with the *fait accompli* of his departure and let them make decisions without him.

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.

He stepped through, wondering as always at the manner of the transmat's operation. His thought was cut in half as the field seized hold of him; when he emerged at the other end, he was still in mid-thought.

Dour-faced Archonate men waited for him.

"Come this way, Dr. Bernard."

He followed, feeling strangely conspicuous, like a sacrificial victim being led to the altar. They led him into an adjoining room whose monumentality indicated plainly that it was the private chamber of the Technarch McKenzie, the embodiment of human strength and ambition.

The Technarch himself was not present in his chambers at the moment. But three other men were, and they came to attention as Bernard entered, looking him over with the tense anticipation of men who were still uncertain of their own positions.

Bernard studied them.

To his left, in the far corner of the room, stood a tall, dark-faced man whose lips were drawn down in an austere, almost gloomy scowl. His body was long and angular, seemingly strung together out of rods and pipes. He

wore the somber clothes that indicated his affiliation with the Neopuritan movement. Bernard bristled instinctively; he had grown to regard the Neopuritans with open distaste, as men whose values were so far from his that no reconciliation was possible.

Closer to Bernard stood a second man, shorter, but still a little over six feet in height. He was a cheerfully affable-looking man in his early fifties, with pink close-shaven skin that radiated hearty good health and a sense of enjoyment of life. The third man in the room was short and stocky, with quick, darting black eyes and heavy frown-lines in his forehead. He seemed a packet of energy, contained but ready to burst forth at any unpredictable moment.

Bernard looked around, hiding his discomfort. "Hello," he said, before anyone else could speak. "My name's Martin Bernard, and I'm a sociologist, and one of the somewhat puzzled draftees for this thing. Are you three part of this outfit too, or just here to confer?"

The ruddy-faced, affable-looking man smiled warmly and put out his hand. Bernard took it. A soft hand, uncalloused, but strong nevertheless. "Roy Stone," the man announced. "I'm basically a politician, I guess. Officially I'm the understudy for the Archon of Colonial Affairs."

"Pleased," Bernard muttered ritually.

"And I'm Norman Dominici," the stocky one said, crossing the room in tense steps that added to the impression of penned-up nervous energy he gave. "I'm a biophysicist— when I'm not out on expeditions to green-faced aliens, that is. Welcome to our little band, Bernard."

Only the Neopuritan had not offered an introduction. He remained where he was, at the wall but not leaning against it. Bernard felt irritated at the man's lack of courtesy, but the sociologist's innate desire for friendship got the better of him, and he turned uncertainly toward the Neopuritan, resolved to make the first overture.

"Hello?" Bernard said doubtfully.

"Watch out," Norman Dominici warned *sotto voce*. "He's just not the friendly type."

The big man turned slowly to face Bernard. He was, the sociologist

thought, a veritable hulking giant of a man—six feet seven in height, at the very least. The Neopuritan bore the aloof, withdrawn look that men sometimes develop when they grow to enormous heights at precocious ages. A ten-year-old who stands six feet tall is never really going to get very chummy with the playmates over whom he towers, and the gulf quite unsurprisingly tended to widen in later years.

"The name is Thomas Havig," the lanky Neopuritan said in a high-pitched, reedy voice that was surprisingly thin for one so tall. "I don't believe we've met before, Dr. Bernard— but we've shared the pages of several learned periodicals in the recent past."

Bernard's eyes went wide with sudden amazement and consternation. Of all people... ! "You're Thomas Havig of *Columbia*?" he asked.

"Thomas Havig of Columbia, yes," the big man replied. "The Thomas Havig who wrote *Conjectures on the Etruscan Morphemes*, Dr. Bernard." The merest trace of a smile appeared on Havig's thin lips. "It was an article which you didn't seem to appreciate, I fear."

Bernard looked at the other two men, then back at Havig.

"Why—why, I simply found myself totally unable to swallow any one of your premises, Havig. Starting from the initial statement and going right down the line through everything you said. You flatly contradicted everything we know about the Etruscan personality and culture, you wantonly attempted to distort the known body of knowledge to fit your own preconceived social philosophy, you—you simply didn't handle the job in a way I thought proper."

"And therefore," Havig asked quietly, "you took it upon yourself to attempt to destroy my reputation and standing in the academic community."

"I merely wrote a dissenting opinion," shot back Bernard hotly. "I couldn't let your statements stand unanswered. And the *Journal* saw fit to print it. It..."

"It was a malicious, slanderous article," Havig said, without raising his voice to the level Bernard had adopted. "Under the guise of scholarship you covered me with unwarranted ridicule and cast abuse on my private beliefs..."

"Which were relevant to the argument you were presenting!"

"Nonetheless, your entire attitude, Dr. Bernard, was an unscholarly one. Your emotional attack on me clouded the issue and made it impossible for disinterested observers to see what the point of dissent between us really was. Your article was a display of wit—a quite scintillating display, I am told—but hardly a scholastic refutation."

Stone and Dominici had stood by somewhat puzzledly through the rapid-fire interchange of accusations. Now, evidently, Stone had decided that the bickering had gone far enough. He chuckled—the mollifying chuckle of the professional diplomat—and said wryly, "Evidently you gentlemen are old friends, even though you've never met. Or should I say more accurately old enemies?"

Bernard glowered at the Neopuritan. *Damned pious fraud*, he thought. "We've had our disagreements scholastically," Bernard admitted.

"You aren't going to carry those disagreements along for ten-thousand light-years, are you?" Dominici asked. "It's going to make things damned uncomfortable in that ship if you two will be battling over Etruscan morphemes all the while, you know."

Bernard let a smile cross his face. He was not particularly disposed to be friendly toward Havig, but there was nothing to be gained by continuing the quarrel. The causes, he thought, lay too deep to be resolved easily. He was convinced that Havig hated him bitterly, and could not be soothed; still, the harmony of the expedition was important. Bernard said, "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. But it hardly was a good omen if he and Havig were part of the same team; the fundamental gap in their beliefs would be too great to allow of any real cooperation, Bernard thought.

"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 farther."

"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."

"War's inevitable, Stone," said Dominici doggedly. "You don't have to be a sociologist to see that. Two cultures are colliding. We're just wasting time and breath by going out there to head off the inevitable."

"If that's the way you feel," Bernard said, "why did you agree to go along?"

"Because the Technarch asked me to go," Dominici said simply. "I needed no better reason. But I'm not confident of success."

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?" McKenzie asked.

"Yes, Excellency," Stone said.

McKenzie smiled. "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 grunted 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 dead-lock. 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 Dominici 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, 1 hope he does*.

FOUR

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 the 400-light-year radius of 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 outward into the night, 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-ftl* 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 at a speed fast enough to drive it nearly five times around the Earth in a twinkling of an eye. 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 as if searching in them for the answer to some wordless question.

The four men were quartered together, in the rear compartment of the slender ship. Fore, Laurance and his four crewmen were stationed. When acceleration had ended, Bernard went forward to watch them at work. It was like observing the priests of some arcane rite. Laurance stood in the center of the control panel like a tree in a storm, while about him the others carried on in a furious rage of energy. Nakamura, eyes hooded by the viewpiece of an astrogating device, chanted numbers to Clive; Clive integrated them and passed them to Hernandez, who fed them to a computer. Peterszoon correlated; Laurance coordinated. Each man had his job, each did it well. Bernard turned away, impressed by their fierce efficiency, feeling a layman's awe.

And no doubt they think it's just as mysterious to write a sonnet or formulate theorems in sociometrics, he thought. *Complexity is all a matter of viewpoint. Chalk up another score for relativistic philosophy*.

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, sttangely 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 makings 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 fervently. "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. Bernard and the other three watched the spaceman's amusement without comment.

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 grinned. "Maybe you won't feel anything at all. We're still kinda new at this faster-than-light stuff, y'know."

There was no reply. Clive shrugged and 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."

"Perhaps you can now see the advantages of learning to resign yourself to the existence of discomfort," advised Havig gravely. "Impatience is unwise. It leads to anger, anger to rashness, rashness to sin. But..."

Dominici whirled to face the Neopuritan, a muscle cording in his cheek. The biophysicist snapped heatedly, "Don't hand me any of your filthy piousness, Havig! I'm tensed up and I'm damned if I like being cooped up, and words aren't going to make me feel any better! And anyway..."

"Not words, no," Havig said equably. "But the truths that lie behind the words are important. The truth of seeing yourself in relation to Eternity—of knowing that a momentary delay is of no importance—of seeing your place in the vast mechanism of the universe—this helps one overcome the itch of impatience."

"Will you keep that to yourself?" Dominici shouted.

"Hold it, hold it, both of you!" Stone broke in. The chubby diplomat seemed to be cast in a permanent role as peacemaker in the expedition. "Calm down, Dominici. Steady. You aren't making it any easier for us by blowing your stack. Just ease off."

"He had provocation," Bernard said, glaring at Havig. "Mr. Gloom over there in the corner was handing out free advice. That's enough to touch anyone off. I'm surprised you didn't bring a bunch of tracts along to distribute, Havig."

An uncharacteristic flicker of amusement appeared on the Neopuritan's face. "My apologies. I was trying to relieve the general tension you others feel, not to increase it. Perhaps I erred in speaking up. It seemed my duty, that's all."

"We aren't convertible," Bernard said bluntly.

"We teach, but we do not proselytize," Havig replied levelly. "I was only trying to help."

"It wasn't needed."

Stone sighed. "Some fine bunch of treatymakers we are! You'll all be leaping for each other's throats before long if this goes..."

The gong sounded suddenly, resonating through the cabin with an impact that everyone felt. It was a deep, full-throated bonging chime, repeated three times, dying away slowly after the last with a shimmer of

harmonics.

The quarrel ended as though a curtain had been brought down to separate the quarrellers.

"We're making the conversion," Dominici muttered hoarsely. He swung around to face the wall, and Bernard realized in some surprise, by observing the motions Dominici's right elbow was describing, that the seemingly skeptical biophysicist was making the sign of the cross.

Bernard felt uncomfortable. Although not a religious man himself, he wished he could commend himself in some way to a watchful deity, and take comfort therein. As it was, he could do no more than trust to good fortune. He felt monumentally alone, with the dark night of the universe only inches from him beyond the walls of the ship. And soon not even the universe would be there.

Distressed, Bernard looked at his fellow voyagers. Havig was moving his lips in silent prayer, eyes open but lost in contemplation of the Eternity that now was so near. Dominici's hoarse whisper rasped across the room, intoning Latin words Bernard knew only from his studies. Stone, evidently like Bernard a man without religious affiliation, had lost some of his cheery ruddiness of cheek, and sat staring leadenly at the wall opposite him, trying to look unconcerned.

They waited.

If the hours since their blastoff from Earth had seemed long, the minutes immediately following the gong were eternities. No one spoke. Bernard sat back, tasting the coppery taste of fear in his mouth, and wondering what he was afraid of that turned his tongue so dry.

He had no clear idea of what effect to anticipate as they made the conversion. Moments passed, and then he felt a dull vibration, heard a thrumming sound: the mighty Daviot-Leeson generators building up potential, most likely. Bernard knew about as much of the theory as any intelligent layman might. In a moment or two, he realized, a fist of energy would lash out in cosmic violence, sunder the continuum, and create a doorway through which the *XV-ftl* might glide.

Into where?

Into what kind of universe?

Bernard's mind could form no picture of it. All he knew was that they would enter some adjoining universe where distances were irrational figures, where objects might simultaneously occupy the same space. A universe that had been mapped—how accurately, he wondered?—in five years of experimental work, and now was being navigated by bold men who plunged onward with but the foggiest concept of where they were or where they might be heading.

The thrumming grew louder.

"When does it happen?" Stone asked.

Bernard shrugged. In the silence, he heard himself saying, "I guess it must take a couple of minutes for the generators to build up the charge. And then we go kicking through..."

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 by mortal man.

The feeling passed. Bernard took a deep breath. Nothing was different, after all. The sensation of loneliness, of separation, that had been nothing but the trick of an overeager imagination.

"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. Some of the planets had been visible against the backdrop of the Milky Way: red Mars, gem-like Venus.

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 no-space; 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 other choice."

Bernard studied the spaceman closely. Fatigue was evident in every line of Laurance's craggy face. The oddly soft eyes were red with shattered capillaries. They said that Laurance needed no more than three hours of sleep out of each twenty-four; but it would seem, just to look at him, that he had not even been getting his normal minimum.

"You look tired, Commander," the sociologist said.

Again Laurance shrugged. "I am, Dr. Bernard. All of my men are tired. Again—we don't have any other choice."

"Is it safe to operate a complicated ship like this if you're overtired?"

"The Technarch seemed to think so," replied Laurance with what seemed a lingering trace of bitterness. "The Technarch was in an almighty hurry to get this ship back out into space again."

"We have faith in the Technarch," said Dominici. "McKenzie's got as good a head on his shoulders as old Bengstrom ever had. He must have some reason for wanting the hurry-up."

"Technarch McKenzie is but a mortal man," Havig remarked. "He's subject to error."

Dominici lifted an eyebrow. "There are people who'd fall down in catatonic shock if you ever said anything like that about an Archon in their hearing, Havig."

"I have no exaggerated awe for these men. They were chosen from among mankind," the Neopuritan went on.

"Yes," Bernard said. "Chosen in their teens and trained for decades in the art of ruling, before they eventually take over their Archonates. It's obviously a good system, the first really workable system of government Earth as a whole has ever had. But Commander Laurance didn't come in here to discuss the Technarch's qualifications with us, I imagine."

"No, I didn't," Laurance said with a grave smile. "I came in to tell you that all was well with the ship, that we'll be eating in half an hour, and that we expect to be in the neighborhood of Star NGCR 185143 in, oh, about seventeen hours plus or minus a few seconds." Laurance paused just a moment, long enough to consolidate his dominance in the little group. Then he said, "Ah—Mister Clive tells me you're all a bit edgy back there. That you've even been doing some bickering."

Bernard reddened. He was positive that there was the beginning of contempt in Laurance's eyes, contempt of the hardbitten spaceman for the soft academics in the cabin.

Out of the embarrassed silence came, as usual, Stone's mollifying voice. "We've had our little disagreements, yes, Commander. Minor differences of opinion..."

"I understand, gentlemen," Laurance said blandly—but behind the blandness lay solid steel. "May I remind you that you've been entrusted with a very great responsibility. I hope you'll have settled your—ah—'minor differences' before we reach your destination."

"Matter of fact, we just about have them under control now," Stone said.

"Good." Laurance moved toward the door. "You'll find a packet of relaxotabs in the medical supply cabinet over there to my left, just in case

your 'edginess' should continue and become a serious problem. I'll expect you in the fore galley in half an hour."

There was a moment of awkward silence after Laurance had gone. Then Dominici said, "That fellow's almost as regal as the Technarch, you know? They're of the same breed. '*May I remind you that you've been entrusted with a very great responsibility,' "* he mimicked. "The Commander's got the same lordly way of telling you off and making you feel three feet high that McKenzie has."

"Maybe Laurance is a trainee who didn't quite make the grade for the Archonate," Stone suggested quietly. As a trainee himself—for the Archonate of Colonial Affairs—he might be expected to know something of the inside story of maneuvering for high office.

But Bernard said, "It just isn't likely, really. McKenzie wouldn't trust a runner-up with anything as big as this; too much rivalry involved. But it's always possible that Laurance is one of the next generation of trainees. For all we know, he's been picked to succeed McKenzie some day."

"Would McKenzie risk losing his hand-picked successor in a dangerous flight like this?" Dominici asked.

"A Technarch must be forged in the crucible of danger," Havig observed. "If Laurance could not survive a voyage in space, how would he survive the pressures of office? This may be a testing flight."

"You may have something there," Stone admitted.

There were no further speculations. The tension and uncertainty of the job that lay ahead of them dulled conversation, made them all jumpy and restless.

When a half hour had elapsed, the four went up front for the meal. The menu was an array of synthetics, of course—but synthetics lovingly prepared by Nakamura and Hernandez, who approached the job of meal-making the way other men might approach the writing of poetry. After the meal, the four passengers made their way rearward to their cabin.

More than sixteen hours remained to the no-space leg of their journey. Time was crawling; it might just as well have been sixteen years of

traveling ahead.

Bernard settled into his acceleration cradle and tried to read; but it was no use. Obtrusive thoughts of danger got between his mind and his book. The words danced on the page, and the delicate imagery of Suyamo's classic verse blurred into hopeless confusion. In complete disgust, Bernard slammed the book shut.

He closed his eyes. After a while, the babel of thought slackened, and he fell into a light, uneasy sleep that gradually deepened.

Some time later, he groped his way back to wakefulness. A glance at the cabin clock told him that only four hours yet remained till transition, so he had been asleep nearly twelve. It surprised him. He had not thought he was as fatigued as that, to let twelve hours slip away almost instantaneously in sleep.

He looked around the cabin. Dominici was fast asleep, his eyes screwed shut, his mouth contorted in a peculiar grimace. He was twisting and turning as he slept; obviously he was having a bad dream. Bernard wondered if he had looked as restless and troubled in *his* sleep.

Next to him, Stone sat peering endlessly out the vision port at nothing whatever. Realizing that Bernard was awake, Stone turned and flashed a quick, insincere grin, then turned his attention back to the port.

Only Havig seemed at peace with himself and with the mysterious environment outside. The big man leaned back, his long legs stretched forward in a rare gesture of relaxation. A book lay open in Havig's lap—a prayerbook, probably, Bernard thought. The Neopuritan was turning the pages slowly, nodding, occasionally smiling to himself. He took no notice of anything about him. The very tranquility of the man irritated Bernard obscurely.

Bernard forced himself to stop thinking about the frictions that existed in the cabin, and to ponder the enigmatic nature of the aliens waiting ahead.

He had seen their photos, in tridim and color, and so he had at least a tentative idea of what to expect physically.

But yet he looked forward to the coming meeting with complete

uncertainty. Would contact be possible, communication of even the simplest sort? And if they could speak to each other, would an agreement be forthcoming? Or was the civilization of men 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, as if foretelling an apocalypse.

The sound of the gong died away. 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.

FIVE

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-ftl* zipped round four times before spying the alien settlement. It lay in the shadowed nightside of the planet. The encroaching path of brightness, peeling the night away from the turning planet, told that the alien settlement was not many hours from dawn. 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-ftl* dropped in ever-narrowing spirals toward the darkness below. Bernard felt strangely helpless as the ship coiled through its landing orbit. *Here I am*, he thought, *trussed into a mattress like a child in the womb waiting to be born. And no more capable of landing this ship than a child in the*

womb is of delivering himself and cutting the umbilicus.

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. Or they might miss the planet altogether, have to come back and make another nervewracking pass at it.

Bernard swiveled his head backward until his eyes met Stone's. The pudgy diplomat's face was pale and glossy with sweat. But he managed to grin.

"I don't go much for this spaceship travel," Bernard said. "How about you?"

"Give me transmat every time," Stone murmured. "But we can't very well be choosy this trip, eh?"

"Guess not," Bernard admitted. "No choice of accomodations for *us*."

He fell silent again, reminded once again of how little scope for free action a human being really had. The dully deterministic fact had been hammered home to him in his undergraduate days, when he had first encountered the damnably unanswerable set of sociometric equations that covered most of man's traits and behavior patterns. *There's hardly any choice. We're prisoners of—well, call it necessity for lack of a neater term. The only choices we get are low-level ones; and maybe we aren't even really choosing then*.

The ship jounced down through the atmosphere. It was a bumpy drop; Bernard was grateful for the cradle he nestled in. He had never realized that spaceship travel was as crude and as clumsy as this. A transmat trip was clean, sharp, like the blade of a microtome: you stepped in, you stepped out, and you were there. None of this tiresome business of acceleration and deceleration, matching velocities, actions-and-equal-but-opposite reactions.

He smiled, thinking how little he actually knew about the physics of space travel. He, who had spent his honeymoon on a green pleasure-world in the Sirius system, who had vacationed on planets orbiting Beta Centauri and Bellatrix and Eta Ursae Majoris, was hazier on the Newtonian facts of life than most schoolboys building their first model

rockets. Blame it on the transmat, he thought. No one cared how a rocketship worked when he could step through cool green flame and exit four hundred light-years from home.

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.

As the *XV-ftl* whirled past dayside, Bernard caught glimpses of great continents lying in a blue-green sea like slabs of meat against a table. All was motionless, even the fleecy wisps of cloud far below, the dark blotch of a raging storm. Then they were plunged into night, and only indistinct shapes could be seen.

Emerging into dayside again, now the bright threads of the bigger rivers could be picked out. One vast waterway seemed to travel diagonally across the biggest continent, cutting a channel from northeast to southwest and proliferating into hundreds of smaller streams. 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 realized he had dozed, an after-effect of the deceleration pills Nakamura had handed out at the last meal. But he woke suddenly, as if having a premonition of arrival, and, moments afterward, 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.

He stood at the lip of the hatch now, testing the air. 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. He felt, after a few inhalations, a confidence that had deserted him in the dark hours just before landing.

"Let's go, Dr. Bernard," Peterszoon called to him from below. "We can't wait all day."

"Sorry," Bernard said. He reddened and hastily clambered down the catwalk to the ground. The five crewmen were there already. Stone, Dominici, and Havig followed.

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 where the belch of a furnace was unknown.

It might have been Earth on some ninth-century morning, thought Bernard; but there were differences, subtle but none the less positive ones. The grass under their feet, only to take one; its blue-green blades sprouted triple from the stalk, twisting round each other in a complex little 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—were different, too. Cones three feet long dangled from the nearest; its bark was pale yellow, ruffled by horizontal striations; its leaves were broad glossy green knives, a foot long, two inches wide. Crickets chittered underfoot, but when Bernard caught sight of one he saw it was a grotesque little 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. Dominici knelt to touch one and it crumbled like a dream when his finger grazed the fungus' rim.

For the long moment, no one spoke. Bernard felt a sort of tingle of awe, and knew the others were sharing his emotion; the wonder of setting foot

on a planet where mankind and civilization had not yet begun to work changes. This was the planet as it had come from the maker's hand, and even a nonbeliever like Bernard could respond to that.

The men were silent, hearing the cool wind whistle sighingly through the towering trees, hearing the unseen harmonious symphony of crickets and the awakening, dawn-hungry birds, and perhaps the deeper cry of some unknown forest beast thrashing through the black thicket to the south.

And then the wonder faded.

This world was not unmarred, Bernard thought.

Perhaps mankind had not yet set down a colony here— but *others* had.

It was a grim thing to call to mind in the midst of this primeval beauty, the ugly reminder of their purpose in coming here. Bernard's expression darkened. How could a world this lovely be a menace to Earth? The world itself was not the menace, he thought. It merely symbolized the threat of two colliding cultures.

Laurance cut into his mood, saying quietly, "We'll proceed to the alien village on foot. There are two landsleds aboard the ship, but I'm not going to use them."

"Is the hike necessary?" Bernard said.

"I feel it is," Laurance replied, hiding none too well his annoyance of Bernard's love of comfort. "I feel it might look too much like an armed invasion to the aliens if we came rolling up inside the landsleds. We might never get a chance to tell them we were friendly."

"In that case, what about weapons?" Dominici said. "Do you have enough to spare for the four of us? If we have to defend ourselves, we..."

"Weapons?" Laurance repeated, startled. "Do you really expect to carry *weapons*?"

"Well..." the biophysicist stammered, thrown off balance by Laurance's tone. "Of course I thought we'd be armed, just as a precautionary measure. Alien beings—you yourself said they might be surprised when we

approach them..."

Laurance grimly 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 hope each of you is thoroughly reconciled to that fact right here and now. I'd ten times as much rather see us all shot to ashes by alien blasters than to have some jumpy negotiator fly off the handle and pump bullets into them just because one of his private neuroses has been activated. It isn't wise to make a ten-mile overland journey through unknown territory without *some* sort of weapon, which is why I'm carrying this. But I'm damned if I'm going to let all of us walk into that alien camp looking like an invasion party." He glanced around, his eyes coming to rest in turn on Dominici, Havig, Stone, and Bernard. "Is that perfectly clear?" Laurance asked.

No one replied. Uncomfortably, Bernard scratched his cheek and tried to look as though he were reconciled to the idea of martyrdom. He wasn't.

"No objections," Laurance said, more relaxedly. "Good. "We're agreed, then. *I* carry the gun; I'm alone answerable for the consequences of my carrying it. Believe me, I'm not worried about my survival so much as I am about someone else's rash actions. Are there any other questions?"

Hearing none, Laurance shrugged. "Very well. We'll set out at once."

He turned, checking his position against a tiny compass that was embedded, along with several other indicators, in the sleeve of his leather jacket, and nodded toward the west. Without further preamble or prologue, he began to walk.

Nakamura and Peterszoon fell in wordlessly behind him, Clive and Hernandez back of them. The five men trudged off at a good clip, none of them looking around to see if the negotiators were following.

Shrugging, Bernard scurried after the five rapidly retreating spacemen, Dominici jogging alongside him. Stone followed, with Havig, reserved and self-contained as ever, bringing up the rear.

"They don't treat us as if we're very important," Bernard complained 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 Earthlubbers like us. They resent our existence. 'Transmat people,' they call us, with a sort of arrogant sneer in their voices. As though there's something really morally *wrong* about taking the quickest possible route between two points."

"Only insofar as it weakens the body's capacity for endurance," Havig said quietly from the rear. "Anything which makes us less fit to bear the burden of earthly existence is morally wrong."

"Taking the transmat *does* breed some bad habits," Bernard said, surprised to find himself on the same side as Havig for a change. "We lose a sense of appreciation of the universe. Since the transmat was invented we've completely forgotten what the fact of distance really 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."

"And all of us weaklings in God's eyes," Havig said. "But some of us more prepared to go to Him than others."

"Shut up," Dominici said without rancor. "We might all be going to Him in a very short time. Don't remind me."

"Are you afraid of dying?" Havig asked.

"Just annoyed by the thought of not getting done everything I'd like to," Dominici said. "Let's get off the topic."

"And let's stay off it," Bernard said vehemently, "That one-track philosopher back there is going to peddle piety once too often, and..."

"Watch it," Stone murmured warningly.

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. He had made a point of keeping himself in trim with a weekly visit to an exercise house in Djakarta, but now he was speedily discovering the measurable psychological difference between doing

pushups in a gym under relaxed conditions and climbing a steady upgrade on an alien world.

Anxiety toxins were flooding his body now, willy-nilly. The poison of fear added to the fatigue of his muscles, slowing him down. He dropped back a little, letting Dominici move ahead. Once, he stumbled, and Havig caught his elbow to steady him; when he looked around Bernard saw the Neopuritan grin briefly and heard him say, "All of us stumble on our paths, friend."

Bernard was too weary to retort. Havig seemed to have an unearthly knack for turning even the most minor incident into an occasion for homily. Or, Bernard wondered wearily, what if Havig were only spoofing, parodying himself much of the time in a ponderous kind of humor? No, he thought, Havig didn't have a scrap of humor anywhere in his huge frame. When he said something he *meant* it.

Bernard pushed ahead. Laurance and his men, moving along up front, never seemed to flag. They strode on like men in seven-league boots, clearing a way through the sometimes impassable brush that blocked the path; detouring skillfully to circle a fallen tree whose man-high trunk, already overgrown with yellow fungus, prevented advance; pausing to estimate the depth of a dark, swiftly flowing stream before plunging across through water that sometimes rose as high as the tops of their hip-boots.

He was beginning to lose his appreciation of this planet's wild beauty. Even beauty can pall, especially under circumstances of discomfort. The blazing glory of purple flowers a foot across no longer registered on Bernard. The sleek grace of the white, cat-like creatures that bolted across their paths like streaks of flame no longer pleased him. The raucous, almost obscene cries of the birds in the towering trees no longer seemed amusing, but merely insulting.

Bernard had never realized in any concrete way that the abstract term "ten miles" meant quite so many weary steps. His feet felt numb, his calves stiff and throbbing, his thighs already beginning to develop a charley-horse that bid fair to double him up. And they had hardly begun to walk, he thought glumly. He felt ready to collapse, after only half an hour's march.

Think we're almost there?" he asked Dominici.

The stocky biochemist wrinkled his face in good-hearted scorn. "You kidding? We haven't walked more than two and a half, three miles at most. Relax, Bernard. There's plenty going ahead."

Bernard nodded. A pace of ten minutes per mile was probably generous, he thought. Most likely they had done no more than two miles—a fifth or a sixth of the journey. And he was tired already.

But there was no help for it but to plug gamely on. The day had all but begun, now; the sky was bright and the sun seemed hidden just below the distant trees, biding its moment until bursting forth. The air had grown considerably warmer, too, the temperature climbing well into the sixties. Bernard had opened his jacket. He dipped frequently into his canteen, hoping the water would last him the round trip. Their last time here, Laurance and his men had tested the water and found it to be unobjectionable H_2O, presumably readily drinkable. But there had been no time for elaborate checks on microorganic life. Improbable though it was that a nonterrestrial organism could have serious effects on a Terran metabolism, Bernard was not minded to take chances.

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

"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 midday sun*. He smiled at the thought. No more than once or twice a year did he think of himself as an Englishman, even though he was Manchester born and London bred. That was another effect of a transmat civilization; it provided such marvelous motility that no one really thought of himself as tied to one nation, one continent, even one world. Only in odd little moments of sudden insight did it occur to Bernard to regard himself as an Englishman, and thus in some nebulous way heir to the traditions of Alfred and William and Richard the Lion-Hearted and Churchill and the other titans of the misty past.

Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun. Dr. Martin Bernard flicked sweat from his forehead and grimly forced his legs to continue carrying him forward.

SIX

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 after another. And the yards lengthened into miles, and the distance between the spaceship and the alien encampment shrank. *Nothing like a ten-mile hike in seventy- or eighty-degree heat to teach a transmat person what the concept of distance means*, Bernard thought. He was finding out. Distance meant sweat pouring down your face and trickling into your eyes; distance meant the back of your boot gradually rubbing one of your heels raw; distance meant that bunchy, cramped feeling in the fleshy part of your leg, the bitter aching of your foot's small bones, the steady pain in the forepart of your thigh. And this was only a ten-mile hike.

"I wonder how good a hiker the Technarch is?" Dominici asked irreverently.

"A damned good one, more likely than not," Bernard muttered. "That's why he's a Technarch. He's got to be able to outdo everyone in *everything*, whether it's hiking or quantum mechanics."

"Still, I'd like to see him out here sweating under this blasted sun, with..." The biophysicist paused. "They're stopping, up ahead. Maybe we've arrived."

"I hope so. We've been marching close to three hours."

Up ahead, the procession had indeed come 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.

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. It nestled in a broad green valley that was bordered on one side by the group of hills in which the Earthmen now stood, and on the other by a wide, gently upcurving thrust that rose into snub-nosed mountains several miles away.

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. Others were working on a well on the landward side of the colony, while still others clustered around curious machinery, unpacking crates and dragging bulky devices (generators? dynamos?) across the clearing.

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. The spaceship stood open, and aliens streamed to and fro, bearing material out of the big ship.

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 unearthliness.

He could see that 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. Perhaps these aliens would be surprised or revolted to learn of the presence of two black men and a yellow one on the Archonate that ruled Terra, he thought.

Be that as it may, 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. "Dr. Bernard, you're nominally in charge of the negotiations, and I won't question that—but remember that I'm responsible for the safety of all of us, and my instructions will have to be final, no questions asked."

It seemed to Bernard that Laurance was arrogating altogether too much responsibility to himself in this expedition. The Technarch had never openly stated that Laurance was to be absolute boss. But the sociologist was not minded to raise questions of leadership at this point; Laurance seemed to know what was best, and Bernard was content to leave matters at that. He moistened his lips and looked down into the bustling valley.

"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, as if checking on their resources of courage. "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."

Bernard joined Laurance and they began the descent of the hill, with the others following in assigned order. As he walked, Bernard tried to relax. *Shoulders back, legs loose. Get that stiffness out of your neck, Bernard! Inner tension shows up on the outside. Look at your ease*!

But it was easier said than done. He was bone-weary from the long hike, and the sodium-chloride tablet he had swallowed not long ago was taking its time in replenishing the salt he had sweated out during the morning. There was the physical tension of fatigue; and there was the far greater mental tension of knowing that he was walking down a hillside into a settlement built by intelligent beings who were not in the slightest "human."

For a long moment it seemed as though the aliens would never notice the nine Earthmen filing toward them. The non-terrestrials were so busy

with their construction tasks that they did not look up. Laurance and Bernard advanced at a steady pace, saying nothing, and they had covered perhaps a hundred paces before any of the aliens reacted to their arrival.

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.

"I know," Laurance answered. "Let's just keep on going toward them."

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.

"They're just as scared of us as we are of them," Bernard heard Dominici mutter behind him. "We must look like nightmare horrors coming down out of the hills."

Only a hundred feet separated the two aliens from Bernard and Laurance. The remaining nonterrestrials had ceased work entirely; dropping their tools, they were bunching together behind the two blueskins, staring with what seemed to be apprehension at the Earthmen.

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 and Laurance still led the slow, deliberate advance across the clearing under the blazing sun.

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. Their dark blue skins were shiny with sweat, which argued that the aliens were metabolically pretty much like Earthmen, and their huge, saucer-like eyes flicked back and forth from one Terran face to the next, demonstrating not only curiosity but a probable stereoscopic vision-pattern.

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. *Again a lack of choice*, Bernard thought with a philosophical detachment that surprised him as his trembling legs continued to move him forward. *The universe gives us the impression of free will, but in the really big things there's only one possible way that things can be*.

The aliens' arms fascinated him. The double elbows seemed to be universal joints that swiveled in any direction, making the aliens capable of doing fantastic and improbable things with their arms. *Chalk one up for alien engineering*, Bernard thought. *That arm combines all the advantages of a boneless tentacle and a rigid limb*.

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. The three aliens waited stonily, their strange faces appearing to register determination in the teeth of this unforeseen invasion.

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 was ironically conscious that nearly a thousand years of folklore spiraled down to reach the level of reality here and now: this was the moment, first in all recorded history, when Earthman walked up to non-Earthman and offered greeting.

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? But Bernard felt self-conscious all the same, at this moment when cliche became history.

He touched his breast and pointed to the sky.

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

The words, of course, would mean nothing to the aliens, would be no more than meaningless noises. But that was no excuse for not saying the *right* words, all the same.

He pointed to himself once more, 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."

He smiled, wondering as he did so if perhaps the display of bared teeth might be a symbol of fierce challenge to these people. This was far more delicate than the meeting of two hitherto-separate cultures on ancient Earth. At least the same sort of blood flowed in English sea captains and Polynesian chieftain; there was the chance of a common biological

ground. Not here. No previously accepted value was worth anything here.

Bernard waited, and behind him eight other earthmen waited, sharing his tension. He stared levelly into the bulging eyes of the foremost blueskin. The aliens had a faintly musty smell; not unpleasant, but intense. Bernard wondered how Earthmen smelled to them.

Cautiously he extended his hand. "Friend," he said.

There was a long silence. Then, hesitantly, the nearest blueskin lifted his hand, swiveling 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.

The alien reached out, and for a fraction of an instant the calloused 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 "Vvvrennddt!" and he took the sound at face value. Smiling, he nodded at the alien and repeated: "Friend. I—you. You— I. Friend."

The repetition came, and this time it was unmistakable. "*Vvvrennddt!*" 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.

SEVEN

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

The aliens caught the idea at once. They saw, without any coaxing necessary, that one or the other group was going to have to learn the other's language, and that the sooner the better. 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; aside from the mere matter of grammatical complexity, it was obvious to both sides that Earthmen would be dislocating their jaws in any attempt

to reproduce the click, grunts, whistles, and growls of the alien language. 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 was sometimes maddening work, especially in heat that hovered at the ninety-degree mark most of the day, but Havig spared no one, least of all himself.

"Get the verbs across and all the rest comes easy," he said over and over. "Nouns are no trouble—just point to a thing and name it. It's the *verbs* we have to teach them first. Especially the abstract verbs."

The first session lasted nearly six hours. The three blue-skins who seemed to be in charge of the colony squatted in a peculiarly uncomfortable-looking position, heels digging into the backs of their thighs, while Havig jostled the sweating Earthmen around, shouting instructions at them.

"Bend! Bend!" The linguist turned to the aliens, indicated the frantically bending Earthmen, and said, "To bend."

"Dhu benddh," repeated the aliens in turn.

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 established: *to be, to build, to travel*. At least, Havig hoped they had been established. It certainly seemed that way; but there was no certainty.

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

“Terran. We—Terrans."

"Terrans come. Sky. Star."

Bernard nodded to himself. Much as he disagreed with Havig's fundamental ideas about ancient cultures—and with his weird Neopuritan

ideas about today—he had to admit that the stringbean linguist had done a superb job in his first few hours.

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.

Moments later three small vehicles that looked much like landsleds came trundling forward, each driven by a greenskin. The cars were little oval beetles sheathed with what looked like copper, rolling along on three wheels. 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-ftl* took less than an hour, even figuring in detours round impassable wooded areas. When the Earthmen stepped out of the little cars, night had fallen. It was terribly quiet, the clamor of daytime life in the forest stilled for now. Bright, unfamiliar constellations speckled the sky with their strange configurations. And a moon was rising—a tiny reddish sliver of rock, probably no more than a hundred miles in diameter, arching up slantwise through the night. It was rising rapidly, almost at a dizzying pace for men accustomed to the more sedate behavior of Earth's own satellite.

The greenskins left without a word.

The Earthmen were equally silent, as they clambered into their ship. It

had been a long, exhausting day; Bernard could not remember when he had ever felt wearier. No academic responsibility had been this grueling. No personal tribulation had exhausted him this much.

But even with the heavy weight of fatigue numbing them all, it was impossible not to feel a deep, inspiring sense of pride and accomplishment. Earth had come into contact with another race today, an alien people, and there had been communication across the gulf that separated them.

Inside the ship, Martin Bernard sought out Havig—reluctantly, but out of inner need that seemed imperative. The Neopuritan had not loosened his tight black surplice with its starched collar, but had simply sprawled out on his bunk fully dressed.

Bernard stood above him. Havig's eyes were open, but he did not seem to take notice of the sociologist.

"Havig?"

Havig's glance flickered upward. "What is it?"

Bernard hesitated, fighting back the lingering compulsion to argue with the other man. "I—I just wanted to tell you that I thought you did a splendid job today," he said, getting the words out haltingly and with difficulty. "We've had our differences in the past, Havig, but that doesn't keep me from offering you congratulations on the way you handled the session today. I can recognize good work when I see it."

The Neopuritan rose to a sitting position. His unyielding gray eyes bored into Bernard's milder blue ones. In a firm, emotionless voice Havig said, "I seek no congratulations for my work, Dr. Bernard. Whatever I may have accomplished, I have done it only by virtue of God's working through me, and so there is little credit for me to claim."

"But—well, all right, so God worked through you," Bernard sputtered in surprise. "But I still think you did a hell of—you did a swell job, and..."

"I do not deserve your praise, Dr. Bernard. But I recognize the growth of spirit that enables you to offer it." There was just the flicker of a smile. "Good night, Dr. Bernard." Havig lowered himself to his berth once again.

Bernard blinked in bewilderment. He had been pleased to find the strength in himself necessary to offer the congratulations; he had considered it a steep sacrifice of pride. And, though his gesture had not met with utter rejection, it had certainly been received indifferently by Havig. Bernard felt angered. He started to say something.

Dominici broke in gently, "Let him alone, Bernard. You've both made a step in the right direction. Don't press things now. What do you expect him to do—smile and say thanks? He doesn't think he deserves them."

"I could have saved my breath, then," Bernard muttered.

He turned away and readied himself for sleep. Havig, eyes closed, seemed already soundly slumbering. Stone was making notes in a memorandum pad, and Dominici was scrubbing himself under the vibroshower.

Bernard stripped and joined the biophysicist beneath the invigorating molecular field; a stream of ions peeled the day's grime and sweat from him.

Dominici said, "Don't fly off the handle because he didn't beam at your congratulations. You did the right thing in offering them. He *was* damned good out there today."

"Yes, he was," Bernard agreed. "But the man's a congenital sourpuss. He didn't have to give me the stone-wall treatment. He..."

"He honestly feels he's just the tool through which God worked today," Dominici said. "Save your breath and don't try to get him to think differently. Just be grateful he was as good as he was out there, and take the rest in stride."

Bernard slipped into his bunk and wearily tried to relax. He attempted to put himself behind Havig's forehead, wondering what manner of man it was who could so renounce all the joy of life, all the pleasure of accomplishment, and so dourly go through all his days garbed unsmilingly in black. No doubt that Havig had done a superb job today, absolutely first-rate; but was there really any moral harm in accepting congratulations for what he had done? Maybe, Bernard thought, Havig was one of those men who are unable to accept face-to-face praise without acute embarrassment—and thus he took refuge behind the convenient

mask of selflessness that his creed provided him.

Bernard closed his eyes, thumbing the throbbing eyeballs. He thought for a moment of his own cozy life, the life he had left behind, the life that was as different from Havig's as could be imagined. No doubt Havig would deem it scandalous, maybe even blasphemous, to spend an evening listening to music, reading poetry, and sipping brandy, when those hours could have been spent in prayer, contemplation, or the performance Of charitable deeds.

Yet for all Havig's staunch discipline, he was no better in his specialty than Bernard in his—and for all Bernard's self-indulgence, he was no worse in his field than Havig in linguistics. *I'm easy-going and hedonistic, maybe even a bit selfish, but I'm a good man in my field. As Havig is in his, except when he starts mixing propaganda with his conclusions*. It took a whole spectrum of personality types to make up a culture, Bernard thought. He pondered Havig a while, wishing he knew what motivated the man, whether he was really just a dull fanatic or if there were more to him.

After a while, Bernard slept.

When he woke, it was only reluctantly. Nakamura was standing over his bunk shaking him roughly.

"Time to get up, Dr. Bernard." The sociologist stared blearily up at the grinning face. "Commander Laurance says you've done enough sleeping," Nakamura said.

Commander Laurance was certainly right about that, Bernard had to admit; a glance at the clock told him that he had slept just over eleven hours. But his head still felt full of cobwebs, and he growled complainingly as he knuckle-eyed himself into wakefulness.

It was an hour past sunrise. The day on this planet was twenty-eight Terran Absolute Hours and twenty minutes long. Still fettered by sleep, Bernard ambled up front to join the others for breakfast.

Laurance had already broken out the ship's two landsleds. When they had finished breakfast, the Commander said, "We'll split up as follows. Clive, you're going to pilot Sled One. Havig and Stone will go with you, also myself. Hernandez, you take the other sled. You'll be driving Bernard,

Dominici, Peterszoon, and Nakamura."

The sled-ride took a little more than an hour. When the Earthmen had reached the Norglan settlement, they saw that the scene was much the same as it had been the day before: the builders were at work, their fierce energy undiminished. The three blueskins who were involved in the language lessons came to greet the band of Earthmen, offering a vocabulary display by way of salutation:

"I—you. Travel. Come. Here. We—Norglans. You—Terrans."

Bernard smiled. Right now, the conversation had an almost comic tinge; but he knew that even the attainment of these halting, disjointed syllables was a staggering achievement. And it was only the beginning.

After three hours of instruction a pair of greenskins hesitantly approached bearing trays of food—flat, coarsely glazed yellow plates on which were arranged slabs of some sweet-smelling pale meat, and thick earthenware flasks of a pungent black wine. Havig looked doubtfully at Laurance, who said, "Refuse, as politely as you can. We don't want to touch anything until Dominici's had a chance to do some analysis."

The food was politely declined. The Earthmen produced their own supplies, and Havig explained haltingly that it might not be safe for Earthmen to eat Norglan food. The aliens seemed to comprehend.

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 negotiations 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.

As the tent went up, the Earthmen smiled in relief. A week on this planet had left them parboiled and blistered by the sun. The aliens did not seem to mind; they sweated, but their pigmentation evidently protected them from any tissue damage. Bernard, on the other hand, looked more than a bit lobsterish. Dominici had begun to tan, but most of the other Earthmen still experienced discomfort.

On the ninth morning, negotiations began. Stone, it had been decided, would do the actual talking, Havig would provide linguistic midwifery. Bernard would make cultural observations, Dominici biophysical ones, that would enable Earth to understand the aliens better. The Technarch had picked his men with care.

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."

The biggest of the three Norglans, who identified himself as Zagidh—whether that was an honorific title or his personal name, there was no way of telling—said, "He is Stone called? I touch?"

An eight-fingered hand reached out and grasped Stone's arm as it lay on the conference table. The chubby diplomat blinked in alarm, then smiled as the Norglan prodded a fingertip into the soft flesh of his forearm.

Zagidh released the hand and fixed all the Earthmen in a saucer-eyed glare. "Stone is hard. He is not-hard."

Havig said, "Stone is label, not description."

The alien puzzled that one over for a while. Dominici murmured, "Curse you for having a name like that, Stone. We may never get past this point because you aren't made out of granite."

But the alien seemed to grasp the distinction between a proper name and a nominal description within moments. Zagidh conferred briefly with his two comrades, then said: "I am Zagidh. You are Stone-label. But label is a not-truth."

It took ten minutes more before Havig was willing to concede that Zagidh really understood the point. The Earthmen fidgeted; *if*, thought Bernard, *we bog down on fine points like this, how are we ever going to get anything important ever settled*?

Stone threaded a tortuous verbal path, with much help and correction from Havig. After two hours he was dripping wet, but 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.

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 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 the three Norglans. Then the alien to Zagidh's left rose and left the tent.

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 remaining blueskin exited without a further word, leaving the startled Earthmen alone.

EIGHT

"What do you figure this means?" Stone asked uneasily. It was half an hour since the Norglans had left the tent. A few curious greenskins had drifted past the tent to peer in at the Earthmen, but their blue overseers had shouted them back to work, and since then the Earthmen in the tent had not been disturbed.

"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?"

"Yes—yes, of course," Stone said. "They've gone to get higher-ups. But how long will it take?"

"If they've got a transmat equivalent," Dominici pointed out, "it won't take any time at all. And if not..."

"If not," Bernard said, "we may be here a while."

They fell silent. Bernard walked to the tentflap and looked out. Work was proceeding, without a hitch. The Norglans were not ones for wasting time when it came to setting up a colony, apparently.

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

"Anybody bring a set of pyramid-dice?" Dominici asked. "We could get a good game going in here."

"You'd be offending Havig," Stone pointed out. "His people don't countenance gambling."

The linguist smiled thinly. "These sly remarks tire me. Do I actively interfere with your behavior? I live by my own example—but I've never

maintained that you should do the same."

Bernard's lips firmed tightly. He found himself envying Havig's glacial self-restraint. At least the linguist could sit quietly, almost as quietly as the spacemen, waiting for the uncertain hours to pass.

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. Inside the tent, the air was hot and hard to breathe, and twice Bernard fought back the desperate temptation to guzzle the remaining contents of his canteen. He rationed himself: a drop now, another drop fifteen minutes later. Just enough to keep his parched throat moist.

"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. How does that sound, Dr. Bernard?"

"As good a suggestion as any," the sociologist agreed. "Sundown's the normal time for breakup of a meeting. They won't have any reason to get insulted if we leave then."

"But how about the insult to *us*?" Dominici demanded with sudden warmth. "These damned bluefaces just picked up without a word and left us to roast in here all afternoon! Why the deuce should we be so concerned about *their* feelings, when they left us..."

"Because we're Earthmen," Bernard said sharply. "Maybe they don't have the same ideas about politeness. Maybe they don't see anything wrong with what they've done this afternoon. We can't judge them by our own behavior norms."

"You sociologists don't seem to think anyone can be judged by *any* norms," Dominici retorted sourly. "Everything's relative, isn't it? There aren't any absolute standards, you say. Just individual patterns of behavior. Well, I say..."

"Quiet," Laurance interjected. "Someone's coming!"

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 Norgla. To speak. Time taken—learning the Terran 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.

The Earthmen regarded them uneasily. Bernard gnawed his lower lip. These two obviously were Very Important Norglans indeed.

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.

Skinri repeated it, making the big word his own. "Ambas-sa-dor. Yes. Ambassador. I label Skrinri, he label Vortakel, he-I-we label ambassador. From Norgla. From home planet."

"You speak Terran very well," Stone said in widely separated syllables. "Were you taught by Zagidh?"

"No—meaning..."

"The past participle," Havig murmured. "They don't know that one. Try, *Did Zagidh teach you*?"

"Did Zagidh teach you Terran?" Stone asked.

"He teach him-I-we," Skrinri affirmed. "We are here since highest of sun."

"Since noon," Havig translated.

Stone said, "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."

Stone looked around, startled. "So they've got a transmat too!"

"Or something that has the same effect," Laurance said.

Sweltering in his corner of the tent, Bernard followed the evolving chain of reasoning. One thing was certain: these two Norglans were pretty special, perhaps as far above Zagidh and the other blueskins in general superiority as the blueskins were above the green laborers. Skrinri and Vortakel learned the language with enormous speed, picking up hints of pronunciation and sentence order from byplay between the Earthmen as well as from the formal statements Stone framed.

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.

As they spoke, Bernard followed every word, trying to construct a picture of the Norglans as a people that might be of some use in further negotiating. They were a stratified race, that was certain: the variation in color was not simply a difference in pigmentation but one of complete genetic makeup. The greenskins were shorter, stocker, and evidently not intellectually gifted; they made ideal workers for this kind of labor. The blueskins were shrewd, good organizers, quick thinkers—but they lacked the inner authority, the decisiveness of personality, that marked a true leader. The big bluish-purple ones had the necessary strength.

Were they the top of the pyramid? Or did they, in turn, depend for guidance on some still more capable kind of Norglan? How far did the stratification extend?

No telling; but it was likely that Skrinri and Vortakel represented pretty close to the pinnacle of Norglan evolution. If there were others who came much better, then the Norglans would be further along the scale of development than they were.

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; as for Stone, he was in his element now, tirelessly advancing the chain of communication until he could bring the discussion to its vital point.

And that moment was approaching. 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. The Earthmen waited, silently, hardly daring to draw a breath.

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

"There must be no war," Stone repeated.

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. Quickly he scuffed out with his foot those Norglan spokes that projected into the Terran side of the line, and those Terran spokes which overreached the boundary in the Norglan's direction.

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 doman—"no Norglans may come. These worlds will be Terran."

He waited for some response from the Norglans.

The aliens were silent, peering down at the lines scrawled in the dirt. Taking their silence for lack of understanding, Stone repeated his suggestion.

"On this side, all worlds to be Terran. On this, all Norglan. Do you understand?"

"We understand," said Skrinri slowly and heavily.

The wind whipped furiously at the tent, whacking 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.

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.

A moment before Skrinri spoke, Martin Bernard divined what the Norglan was going to say. A cold hand seemed to clutch at the sociologist's throat. The triumph of an instant before vanished like a snuffed flame.

Skinri's voice was level, somber, without any hit 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-faced 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 blessing. Come: we'll accomplish no more here today."

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

NINE

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, blackness to grayness, chill to morning warmth, the men of the *XV-ftl* busied themselves in the routine tasks of daybreak. No one had slept that night aboard the ship. Cabin lights had burned through till dawn, as Earthmen too weary to sleep argued and reargued the aspects of the situation.

"We shouldn't have let them march out of there like that," Stone said bitterly, cupping his plump cheeks with plump hands. "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 tories. " '*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 may 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, I'm sure."

"But why a war?" Havig asked. "Why not accept the decree and keep within our limits?" He answered his own question immediately, cutting off Dominici's hot outburst. "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 farther 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?" the linguist asked.

"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 pulling out of here, heading for home. We'll toss the whole business in the Archonate's lap and wait for the shooting to start."

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, turned up his hands, and said grudgingly, "All right. I'll make it unanimous, I suppose. But we aren't going to get anywhere, talking to them."

"Is it definite, then?" Laurance asked. "We stay here at least another day?"

"Yes," said Bernard. "At least another day."

Breakfast was an uneasy meal; after the long night of debate and doubt, no one had much of an appetite. Bernard munched the synthetics Nakamura dished up, making himself swallow most of what was set before him more out of a sense of duty to his body than out of any real hunger. His face felt rough and stubbly; shaving entailed looking into the mirror, and he was not pleased by what he saw there. The sleekness was gone. His face looked pouchy, now; dark circles shadowed his eyes, and his skin seemed to droop. Some of the drooping, he knew, could be laid to the gravitation here, which was fractionally more than Earthnorm. But the real villains were fatigue and despair.

They set out an hour after sunrise for the Norgian 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. Everywhere on this untouched planet, life seemed to blossom. Only in the valley where the Norglans camped was the natural beauty marred by the activity of civilization.

And, Bernard thought bleakly, the Norglan colony was the plague center from which the corruption of civilization would spread outward, until some day every inch of virgin land would have yielded to the builders. Some day this wilderness world would be like Earth, civilized down to its final micron of land. Bernard silently shook his head. Havig was wrong; it was insupportable to think of retreating to the established bounds of the Terran sphere and abandoning an entire universe of fresh green worlds to the Norglans. For someday the new worlds of the Terran system would be old worlds; there would be skyscrapers on Betelgeuse XXIII, and the Terran system would boil with life, and there would be no place to go, for all else would be Norglan.

No! Bernard thought sharply. *Better to drag both empires to flaming doom tomorrow than hand our descendants' birthright to the Norglans*!

The day was hot by the time the Terran sleds reached the outskirts of the alien encampment. Tirelessly the greenskins were working. An entire new ring of huts was under construction; the Norglans were building as if the speed with which they erected their settlement was a vital matter.

The Earthmen strode into the center of the colony together, Bernard, Stone, and Laurance leading the way. The greenskins had lost interest in

them by now; work continued without any show of curiosity. But a blueskin that Bernard recognized as Zagidh came forward to meet them.

"You have come back," Zagidh 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 blueskin'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. "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?"

"Quiet," Bernard warned him. "Let's not give up quite this soon."

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 any 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, while the building of the colony continued all around them.

"I think that's about it," Bernard said quietly. "We've had it. Maybe they're bluffing, but they're bluffing hard."

"Poof! The big boys can't be bothered to talk to us!" Dominici growled. "Go away, little Earthmen, you bother us! They're *asking* for war!"

"Perhaps that's what they want," Stone said. "Or else they simply think we'll be obedient little creatures and go home to stay within the boundaries they allow us."

"This comes as punishment for our pride," said Havig. "We were alone in the universe too long. In solitude a man develops strange fantasies of power—fantasies that collapse when he learns he is not alone."

Laurance said quietly, "I guess we go back to Earth, gentlemen. Or do you want to talk to Zagidh some more before we leave?"

Bernard shook his head. "There isn't anything else we could say to him."

"We might as well leave here," Stone added sadly. "We're up against a dead end. The Archonate will have to decide what happens next—not us."

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 traveled 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; perhaps the galaxy would blaze into war almost at once, as soon as production models of the faster-than-light ship could be turned out.

"So we're going to war," Stone said. "And we don't even know who we're fighting, really."

"And they don't know who we are," Laurance pointed out. "We'll be like blind men jabbing in the dark. Our main objective will be to find Norgla, theirs to find Earth."

"What if they don't have faster-than-light ships?" Bernard asked. "They wouldn't be able to reach Earth, but we'd be able to strike at them."

"Until the first time they captured one of our ships," Laurance said. "But they *must* have f-t-1. Otherwise they couldn't risk war so lightheartedly."

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-ftl*, 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."

TEN

Laurance'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, especially when the outburst came from someone like Laurance. Bernard realized with surprise that the little interchange had jangled his nerves more than it had any right to do. *We're conditioned to love and respect the Archonate*, he thought. *And we don't realize how deep that conditioning lies until someone rubs against it.*

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. And such a return, of course, was inconceivable.

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. Before the Archonate, mankind had been splintered into nations forever at each other's throats, and the stars waited in vain. But Merriman's invention of the transmat had made possible the rise of the Archonate, with Merriman himself as the First Technarch, five centuries gone. And man had yielded to oligarchic rule, and the Archons had goaded man to the stars.

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. But Martin Bernard had studied medieval history; 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 blastoff? A month ago such a thought would never have occurred. But perhaps McKenzie—one of the greatest Technarchs since Merriman, all admitted—had overreached himself, had committed the sin the Greeks knew as *hybris*, by spurring man into breaking the bounds of the limiting velocity. 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. Everybody cradled down for acceleration already?"

Here we go homeward like whipped curs, Bernard thought.

He checked the straps of his protective cradle. They were bound fast.

The signal came not much later. With landing jacks and stabilizing fins retracted, the *XV-ftl* sat poised in its meadow, while ten miles away unheeding aliens built their colony. A thunder of ions drove the ship upward, until the green planet dwindled and became nothing but a dot against the flaming backdrop of its nameless sun. Within the ship, Bernard lay back, his body involuntarily tensing against the push of three gravities as the *XV-ftl* sprang away from the planet below.

Time passed. The sociologist did not think; to think meant to rehearse the catalogue of their humiliation, to repeat silently the account of their treatment at the hands of Zagidh and Skrinri and haughty Vortakel. He waited, mindlessly hanging in a void, as the ship's velocity increased with each continuing instant of acceleration.

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

Peterszoon entered their cabin to inform them that the conversion to no-space was imminent. The big Hollander, taciturn as always, conveyed the bare information and left. Peterszoon had made it quite clear from the start that he had no interest in this journey, even less in the four passengers. He had been ordered by the Technarch to serve in the crew, and serve he did; but the Technarch's orders said nothing about serving with a smile.

Some time later, the warning gong began to sound. Bernard went tense. They were entering the no space 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*.

Just before conversion came, Bernard turned to catch a final glimpse of the solar system behind them. They had not quite left the vicinity of Star NGCR 185143; it glimmered on the screen with an appreciable disk the apparent size of an iron five-credit piece, and dimly visible against its brightness were the dark dots of occulting planets. Then the cabin lights flickered and the screen winked into featureless grayness. Bernard felt the

pang of separation from the universe he knew.

Conversion had been made.

Now there would be seventeen hours of unending waiting. Bernard found his cabinet and took out a slim book. His symmetrical existence of teaching and reading and brandy-sipping seemed infinitely distant now, but he hoped to recapture some of the ease he had known before being plunged into this nerve-draining mission.

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,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing ...

Bernard sighed in frustration and let the book slip shut. It was no use; no use at all.

"What are you reading?" Dominici asked.

"Not *are*. *Were*. I can't concentrate."

"What was it, then?"

"Shakespeare. Medieval English poet."

"Yes, yes, I've heard of Shakespeare!" Dominici said. "He was one of the really great ones, wasn't he?"

Bernard smiled mechanically. "The greatest, some think. I've got a book of his sonnets here. But it's no use, reading them. I keep remembering that Shakespeare's dead twelve centuries; the face of Skrinri keeps getting between me and the page."

"Hand it here," Dominici said. "I've never read any of that old stuff. Maybe I'll like it."

Shrugging, Bernard gave him the book. Dominici opened it at random, and almost immediately began to scowl. He looked up after a moment.

"I can't read it! Don't tell me you've been reading him in the *original*? What is this, Greek? Sanskrit?"

"English," Bernard said. "It's a hobby of mine, studying old languages. But go ahead; look at each word, pronounce it phonetically if you can. Shakespeare's English isn't that far removed from modern-day Terran. It just *looks* strange. But that's the direct ancestor of our own language, you know."

Dominici frowned, muttered a couple of words aloud experimentally, and gave up. "It's hopeless. Even if I could figure out all the words, I'd never get the sense. Take it back."

Bernard retrieved his book. Odd, he thought; he had taken naturally to old English, and read it without a hitch now. But, he had to admit, it was not really very much like contemporary Terran. Hundreds of years of transmat civilization had blended the languages of Earth into one homogeneous tongue, founded on English but vastly different.

It was strange to think of a time when men had spoken hundreds of different languages, thousands of subdialects. But so the world had been, not many centuries ago. Only the transmat, enabling a person to outstrip the lightning in his travels, ensured the continuing uniformity of Terran language and culture everywhere.

He put the book away. 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; it was impossible to tell that they were moving—but they were, incalculable strides each fragment of a moment, plunging on toward Earth.

Bernard did not want to see the Technarch McKenzie's face when he received the news of the Norglan ultimatum. He wished there were some way of submitting a written report instead. But there would be no help for it; they would have to report in person. It would be an ugly little moment, Bernard was certain.

The cabin was silent. Havig was sunk in that impenetrable cloak of abstraction of his, communing with his God; no use seeking company there. Dominici 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, past the walls studded with rivets, past the galley, 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 peering at the flashing lights, listening to the droning click of the computer. 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?"

"Oh—of course. Sorry to intrude..."

Rebuked, Bernard returned to the passenger half of the ship. Nothing had changed. The clock showed that nearly fourteen hours of no-space travel remained.

He was growing hungry. But as the clock-hands crawled on, no one appeared from the crew to announce that it was meal-time. 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 as if they plan to eat," he told Stone; "we might as well

help ourselves."

"What about the other two?"

"Dominici's asleep, Havig's meditating. They can eat whenever they feel like it, after all."

"You're right," Stone agreed.

They fell to, dishing out the synthetics. Nakamura kept the galley spotlessly, everything in its place. Staring into the storage cabinets, Bernard discovered with some surprise that the ship carried enough food to last for months. *In case of emergency*, he thought automatically. Then he checked himself. Emergency? For the first time he realized that the *XV-ftl*, was an experimental ship, that faster-than-light travel was in its puling infancy.

He prepared the synthetics with something less than Nakamura's culinary skill, and they ate a silent meal. It was the seventh hour of no-space travel by the time they finished. In less than half a day, the *XV-ftl* would wink back into the familiar universe somewhere near the orbit of Pluto.

Returning to the cabin, Bernard settled himself in his bunk. Dominici had awakened. "Did I miss lunch?" he wanted to know.

"The crew's too busy to take a break," Stone said. "We made lunch ourselves. You were sound asleep, so we didn't wake you."

"Oh. Okay."

Dominici went forward to see about his meal; after a moment, Havig followed him. Bernard 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 no-space interim had expired. They ought to

be converting back, but no news came from the control cabin. Conversion was twenty minutes overdue, thirty minutes. An hour.

"Do you think there's some reason why we should spend more time in no-space on the way back than on the way out?" Stone asked.

Dominici shrugged. "In no-space theory almost anything goes. But I don't like this. Not at all."

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 viewscreen 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 coldly 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."

ELEVEN

"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. "Why did you leave us to stew here in uncertainty all this time?"

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. In the final analysis we really don't know the first bit about faster-than-light navigation." 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 no-space 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. "No-space travel doesn't follow any logical pattern. There's no correlation between time and distance, and no way of telling direction. We're traveling blindfolded; the best we can do is send out an experimental ship unmanned, track its course, find out where it goes, and then duplicate the course. Only we don't have any unmanned ships to send out. 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."

"But we'll give it a try, at least," Bernard said.

"I'm not so sure we ought to. Right now we're in a galaxy very much like our own. We may be wiser simply to pick out an Earth-type planet and settle there, rather than go shooting off into no-space again and possibly ending up stranded between galaxies, slowly starving to death."

"Better to starve in the attempt to reach home," Havig said, breaking his silence, "than to waste away on some strange world."

"Probably you're right," Laurance agreed. "But we'll have to think things out very carefully before we rush ahead and do anything. We have about three months' food on board ship. So we have some time to play around before we have to start looking for a habitable planet. I..."

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."

"Certainly. Excuse me, gentlemen."

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. Somewhere within that seemingly tightly packed mass of light lay Sol, and the thousands of worlds of the Terran system; in there, too, were the Norglan worlds, and as many millions more of uninhabited, unexplored planets. And there they all were, both rival empires and perhaps all the intelligent life of the universe, looking at this distance like a bright blotch the size of a man's hand.

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. And yet, in that inconsequential cluster of stars in the corner of the screen, how many grandiose plans for universal conquest were born before each sunrise?

Stone laughed, bitterly, mirthlessly. "Which is worse, anyway?" he asked. "To get lost out here fifty thousand parsecs from home—or to return to Earth with the Norglan ultimatum? Me, I almost think I'd rather stay lost, and at least not have to bring that kind of news home."

"Not me," Dominici retorted without hesitation. "I'm not in the same boat you are. If we got back home, I'd survive the Technarch's anger, and maybe I'd be lucky enough to live through the war with the Norglans. At least if I died it wouldn't be a lingering death. I can't buy your preference for staying lost. It wouldn't have been so bad with a couple of women on board, maybe, but to be stranded this way, on the edge of nowhere? Nine Adams and no Eves? Uh-uh. Not for me, friends."

Ignoring the discussion, Bernard continued to stare at the alien sky in the vision screen.

Ten thousand light-years had seemed so far from home, once. A staggering distance, inconceivably vast. But it wasn't, not really, not when you put matters into their proper perspective. Earth and Norgla were virtually next-door neighbors when you stood *this* far away and looked back. Bernard smiled ironically. *And to think that we and the Norglans were all set to divvy up the universe between us! What cosmic*

arrogance, what, supreme gall! What right do any of us, in our puny little galaxy, have to stake even a tentative claim out here?

"How about you, Bernard?" Dominici asked. "You haven't been saying much. What do you think of Stone's idea? Would you rather stay lost out here, or be the bearer of evil tidings?"

"Oh, I'd like to get back home," Bernard said mildly. "No doubt about it. I miss my books, my music, I even miss my teaching chores."

"No family?" Dominici asked.

"Not really." Bernard leaned back. "Two marriages; both dissolved. I have a son somewhere, by my first wife. David Martin Bernard, that's his name. I haven't seen him in fifteen years. I guess he doesn't use my last name. He's been raised to think that someone else is his father. If I met him on the street, he wouldn't know me even by name."

"Oh," the biophysicist said in embarrassment. "Sorry to bring it up."

Bernard shrugged. "You don't have to apologize. It's not a wound that rankles in my bosom, anything like that. I simply wasn't cut out to be a family man. Can't get myself sufficiently involved with other people except on non-practical levels of scholarship or connoisseurship or the like. More's the pity I didn't realize that before my first marriage, that's all." Bernard wondered why he was saying all this. "It wasn't till the second marriage broke up," he went on, "that I realized that temperamentally I was a born bachelor. So I've got no family ties with Earth. But I'd *still* like to get home, all the same."

"I guess we all do," said Stone. "I didn't really mean what I said a few minutes ago. It was just a thought off the top of my head."

"I was married once too," Dominici said to no one in particular. "She was a lab technician with golden hair, and we honeymooned in Farrarville on Arcturus X. She died ten years ago."

And you obviously haven't gotten over it, Bernard thought, seeing the sudden anguished look on Dominici's face.

The sociologist felt uncomfortable. Up till now there had been a certain understanding of reserve in effect between the four of them; cooped up

though they were, they had kept back details of their private lives. But if it all came spilling forth now as a relief from stress, all the long sad autobiographies of frustrations and petty disappointments and lost loves, the situation in the cabin would be intolerable. Each man would clamor to spew out his autobiography, while the others would wait their turns. And, Bernard knew, it would be his fault for having touched off the revelations.

Stone had caught it now. "I never married," he was saying, "so in a sense I don't have much to go home to. Not that there wasn't a girl, but it didn't work out, and—well, it doesn't matter. I don't want to rot for the rest of my life on some strange planet half the universe away from Earth. To die unmourned, alone, forgotten..."

"It would be the will of God, wouldn't it?" Dominici asked. "Everything's the will of God. You just sit back and let God pour trouble all over you, and you shrug your shoulders stoically because it's His will and therefore there's just no use complaining." Dominici's voice had taken on a shrill, flippant edge. "Isn't that so, Havig? You're our expert on God. How come you haven't been spouting your usual stuff to console us? We—*Havig*!"

Bernard swung around.

It was a startling sight. Sitting by himself, as usual, in his corner bunk, taking no part in the conversation, the lanky Neopuritan was very quietly having what looked like a fit of hysterics.

Like every other aspect of the man, even his very hysteria was subdued, repressed. His body was being racked with great whooping sobs, but Bernard realized that he was choking them back with an almost demonic intensity of concentration. 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 conflict between discipline and collapse was evident. The effect was totally astonishing.

The three other men were frozen in surprise a moment. Then Dominici snapped curtly, "Havig! Havig, what's the matter with you? Are you sick, man?"

"No—not sick," Havig said, in a low, dark, hollow voice.

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

"Leave me alone," Havig muttered.

Bernard stared at the Neopuritan in consternation. For once, the sociologist felt that he had penetrated Havig's mask and understood.

"Can't you see what he's thinking?" Bernard said quietly to Dominici and Stone. "He's thinking that all his life he was a good man, kept the ways of God as he saw them, worked hard, prayed. Worshipped Him as he thought He must be worshipped. And—and then *this*. Lost here, billions and billions of miles from home, church, family. Wife. Children. Gone, and why? He's breaking up under that. He doesn't know why."

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

"Grab him!" Dominici shouted in panic. "He's cracking up! Grab him or he'll run wild!"

Without wasting another second, all three sprang toward him. Bernard and Stone each grabbed one enormously long, spidery arm; Dominici reached up, straining practically on tiptoes, and clamped his hands to the linguist's thin shoulders. Together, by sheer force, they pressed him down onto his bunk and held him there.

Havig's eyes blazed with indignant fury. "Let go of me! Get your hands away from me! I forbid you to touch me, do you hear?"

"Just lie there until you're calm," Bernard told him. "Relax, Havig. Don't snap now."

"Watch him," Dominici murmured.

But Havig was not resisting now. He glowered at the floor and muttered in a broodingly introspective voice, "I have committed some sin—I must have—otherwise why would this have happened? Why has He forsaken me—forsaken all of us?"

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

A blasphemous quip at a time like this infuriated Bernard for reasons he did not fully understand. "Shut up, you idiot," he whispered harshly. "You want to drive him out of his mind? Get me a sedative for him."

"In some way I have offended Him unknowingly," Havig went on. "And He has taken his light from me. My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken us?"

Bernard felt a wave of pity and compassion so intense that it startled him. This was a man he had once despised for mysticism and fanaticism, a man he had once attacked in print in terms that he now saw had been vicious and petty— and, now that Havig's shell of faith seemed about to shatter, Bernard felt deep pity.

Bending over Havig, he said sharply, "You're wrong, Havig. You haven't been forsaken. 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, and a faint smile broke through the despair. "Yes, perhaps," he said softly. "A trial of my faith—of my faith and yours, too. As Job, yes. But how can we stand it? Lost out here—perhaps God has turned his face from us—perhaps..." He fell silent, and tears rolled down the gaunt cheeks. Havig looked up imploringly at Bernard, all the old self-willed strength seemingly gone, and began to shake.

Reaching behind him, Bernard deftly took the sonic spray-tube from Dominici and jammed it against a vein in Havig's thin arm.

He flipped the release, injecting the fluid instantly. Havig muttered something unintelligible and shivered; his eyes glazed; within moments, he had relaxed and was on his way to sleep.

Rising, Bernard mopped the beds of sweat from his forehead. "Whew! I wasn't expecting *that* to happen. And it came on so suddenly..."

"Crazy. Absolutely crazy," Stone said. "How could someone so unstable get sent aboard on this mission?"

Bernard shook his head. "Havig's not unstable, despite the performance we just saw."

"What is he if not unstable, then?"

“All this was perfectly understandable. He's a man who's built his entire life around one solid set of beliefs. And he's *lived* those beliefs, not just talked about them. Call him a fanatic, if you want; I certainly called him enough names. Well, he 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 and endure it stoically. He ran out of explanations. So he snapped."

"Will he be okay when he wakes?" asked Dominici. "Or will he take up where he left off?"

"I think he'll be all right. 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, for his good and ours. He'll drive us all nuts otherwise."

"I think he'll get his balance back," Bernard said. "He's too fundamentally solid to go off the deep end."

"I thought you called him a crackpot," Dominici objected. "Are *you* going off the deep end too?"

"Maybe I understand Havig and his beliefs a little better now," Bernard said quietly. "Well, whatever. We just have to sell him on the Job theme when he wakes up. If we can get that idea across to him, he'll be a tower of strength from now on, and there won't be any more crackups."

"Job? What's that?" Stone asked.

"Figure from the Judaeo-Christian religious books," Bernard said. "It's a very good poem, really. It tells how the Devil made a bet with God that this man Job would lose his faith under stress, and so the Devil was permitted to visit all manner of plagues and calamities on Job. Things that make getting lost in space look perfectly mild. But Job stood his ground all the same, never weakening in his faith even when things looked blackest. And eventually..."

The cabin door opened. Commander Laurance entered, followed by Clive and Nakamura.

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

shouting..."

"Havig went off his rocker," Dominici said.

"What?"

"It's not quite that desperate," Bernard said quickly. "He was simply having a fit of despondency. The universe suddenly became too much for him all at once, or something, and his control snapped."

"He do any damage?"

"No," Bernard said. "We got him down on his bunk fast enough. He's conked out under sedatives now, and I think he'll be okay when he wakes."

"It sounded like a riot from up front," Clive said. "We thought you were murdering each other back here."

Not that you'd mind if we did, Bernard thought. *So long as we didn't jeopardize your safety*.

"He'll be okay," Bernard said again. "What's the news from up front? Have you figured out where we are yet? Or is it classified information?"

Laurance looked sharply at him and said, "Greater Magellanic Cloud."

Dominici glanced up. "Is that definite?"

"About as definite as it's going to get," Laurance said flatly. "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 Magellanics, all right."

"But how about Sol-type suns?" Stone asked anxiously. "Have you found any of those yet? These 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 don't seem to be in our hands any longer,"

Laurance said.

For the first time, Bernard realized what should have been immediately obvious to him—except that it was the sort of thing nobody would expect to look for. He became aware that all five of the crewmen had left the control cabin at the same time. That had never happened before on the voyage. Yet Laurance, Clive, and Nakamura were in here, and Peterszoon and Hernandez were 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 right up here."

TWELVE

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. Aboard the *XV-ftl* nine men waited impotently.

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 no-space.

Nothing to do but wait.

Silently. What could be said? This was beyond comprehension, beyond reason. And beyond control.

"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. Being dragged down."

"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—and maybe it's intelligence as far ahead of ours as your imaginary magnetic field is beyond anything we've ever measured."

In his bunk, Havig stirred, moaning incoherently. He slumped back without breaking through the threshold of consciousness. "How fast are we moving?" Stone asked.

Commander Laurance looked up, a taut, white-lipped figure. "I can't tell. We're going plenty fast. The boys are trying to draft some doppler measurements up front. I'd say we're going pretty close to light velocity."

"Without accelerating," Nakamura said dolefully. "Right from a standing start to C, without acceleration. You figure it out. I give up."

The conversation petered out. In the vision screen, the stars rushed blindingly 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 ships, at about nine and six nines out of ten that of light. Which meant that they were traveling at virtually the ultimate speed of the normal universe—with no apparent source of velocity.

It was incredible.

It made no sense.

It continued to make no sense for the next three hours. By that time, Havig had awakened. The linguist sat up with a start, shaking his head.

"What..."

"Feeling better, Havig?"

"What's been going on? You're all looking at me so strangely. What's happened?"

"Nothing much," Bernard said. "You got a little upset; we had to dope you up with an ampoule of quicksleep. Are you feeling calmer now?"

Havig passed a quivering hand over his forehead. "Yes—yes, the terror came over me. I want to apologize. And— Bernard, I've got to thank you for trying to comfort me. It was a generous thing to do, and I admire the effort it cost you. The Job analogy—yes, that was it exactly..."

"It seemed that way to me, too," Bernard said.

Havig smiled. "I suppose one can hold one's self under control only so long, and then one's strength gives out—even if one is strong, or thinks he is. I behaved like a weakling, a coward. But it was an important experience for me. It showed me that my faith can still be shaken. Shaken, though not destroyed. Do you see, now, as I do, that God may sometimes withdraw His gifts and grace for our best interests—though we may not see His purpose clearly? Job did not understand, but he obeyed. As I should have done, but for my moment of weakness—but now I have come through the trial stronger than ever. It is the test of faith which confirms..." Havig stopped and smiled sheepishly. "But I mustn't spoil my thanks by turning them into a lecture. I beg your indulgence for the scene I created."

"Forget it, Havig," Dominici said. "We've all been taking turns at having tantrums. You've been holding everything in, and it all exploded at once."

Havig nodded. "Yes. But thank you, thank you so much. However—there's something you're keeping from me, something new that happened while I slept. I see it in your faces. You all look so pale, so frightened..."

"We better tell him," Dominici said.

"Go on," Stone urged.

As concisely as he could, Bernard explained the situation as it now stood. Havig listened gravely, frowning more deeply with each sentence.

"So we're out of control," Bernard finished bluntly. "That's the long and short of it. We just have to sit tight. There's not a damned thing we can do otherwise but wait and see what's going to happen to us. If there ever was

a time for your Neopuritan brand of stoicism, this is it."

"Now we must all be courageous," Havig said firmly. "We must all of us realize that what is destined for us is destined for our good, and we must not fear it."

Bernard nodded. He was beginning to see the real Havig now, a man who was austere and gloomy enough, certainly, but who, despite his ascetic ways, was somebody Bernard could respect. Not agree with, but respect. There was a solid core of strength in Havig. He didn't use his belief as a crutch to help him limp through life, but as a guide that enabled him to meet existence squarely and honestly. Which was a realization that Bernard knew he would not have been capable of before this voyage.

He felt relieved. Evidently Havig's momentary lapse from control was over, a brief hysterical flare that had died down as quickly as it had arisen.

Dominici whispered to Bernard, "I think you were right about the Job deal. He's going to pull out of it."

"He *has* pulled out of it," Bernard answered. "He's tougher than you think."

It was comforting, Bernard thought, to know that once again there was one man on board who was utterly calm, fatalistically resigned to whatever might come. No, Bernard corrected. *Not fatalistically. Wrong word. He's much too cheerful now. Faith and resignation aren't the same thing.*

For an hour more the plunge continued, until it seemed as though it might go on forever, an endless drop, Lucifer's fall stretched out to infinity—or until the ship vanished into the yellow sun that was its destination.

The men aboard forced themselves to ignore the situation. It was too far from control to worry about.

Nakamura prepared a meal; they ate, without enthusiasm. Clive produced a sonic synthesizer and played old folk tunes, singing along with them in a nasal, rasping voice that achieved a surprising quality of artistry. Bernard listened to the words of the songs, fascinated: many of

them were in the old languages of the nations of the Earth, the buried tongues of the medieval world, and the snatches the sociologist could understand were tantalizingly delightful.

But eventually even the singing wore thin. Clive put the synthesizer away. All pleasure had been drained from the pastime.

It was impossible to forget for very long that the ship was out of control, carrying its helpless passengers impotently to almost certain fiery doom.

It was impossible to forget that they were coping—or trying to cope—with forces beyond all imagining.

It was impossible to live under such conditions. But they continued to live.

And then the Rosgollan came aboard.

Laurance and the crew were up front, all five of them wrestling vainly with the controls, only a hollow hope of regaining mastery over the ship spurring them on. In the passenger compartment time passed slowly. Bernard read a while without absorbing, then tiredly laid his book aside to stare fixedly into nowhere.

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

Before he had turned halfway round there came the harsh, panicky wail of Dominici's voice.

"Mary, Mother of God, protect me!" the biophysicist cried. "*I'm losing my mind!*"

Bernard mouth sagged open as he saw. A figure had materialized in the cabin, directly behind Dominici's bunk. It hovered, some three or four feet off the ground, at the intersection of the planes of the wall. From the figure the sudden glow was radiating.

It was a being of small stature, perhaps four feet high, poised calmly in the air. Although it was completely without clothing, it was impossible to consider it as being naked. A garment of light enfolded it, softly streaming light that blurred the figure beneath without actually concealing it. Its face was a thing of shifting planes and maddeningly coalescing angles; after only a moment of looking at it, Bernard found himself growing dizzy, and he shifted his gaze lower.

The creature radiated not only light but an impression of total serenity, complete confidence, utmost ability to perform any act.

"What—the deuce—is it?" Stone asked in a strangled voice. Dominici was prostrate, speaking rapidly to himself in a low monotone. Havig, still in control of himself but plainly shaken, knelt, praying. Bernard gaped.

"You must not be afraid," said the visitation. "You will not come to harm."

The words were not spoken aloud. They simply seemed to stream from the creature's body as clearly and as unmistakably as its radiance.

Despite the quiet command of assurance, Bernard felt a sickly wave of terror sweep over him. His legs began to give way, and he sank down limply onto his bunk, hugging his arms together. He knew, beyond a doubt, that he was in the presence of a creature as far surpassing man as mankind surpasses the apes. And perhaps the gap was unimaginably greater than that. Bernard felt awe, reverence, and above all else a great resonating chord of fear.

"You must not be afraid," the creature repeated, every word precise and distinct. For an instant the light it radiated grew more intense, deepening in hue to a warm maroon. Bernard felt the weight of fear lifting from him.

He looked up hesitantly and asked, in a thick, fumbling voice, "What—are you?"

"I am of the Rosgollans, Earthman. I shall be your guide until we land."

"And—where are we being taken...?"

"To Rosgolla, Earthman." The answer was bland, forthright, and totally noninformative.

Bernard shook his head. *It's all an hallucination, that's the answer*, he thought grimly. *It's the only explanation. Even in the Greater Magellanic Cloud they simply don't have beings that can come drifting through the solid walls of a spaceship and who speak perfect Terran.*

He struggled to his feet.

"Dominici!" he barked. "Get up! Havig! Get off your knees! Can't you see it isn't real? We're having an hallucination, all of us!"

"Do you really believe that?" the Rosgollan asked gently. There was the hint of an amused laugh. The quiet voice said without malice, "You pitiful little creatures, so arrogantly deciding for yourselves what may and what may not be called *real*! Far more exists in the universe than Earthmen may ever understand, even though you think you hold dominion over all. We are not hallucinations. Far from it, Earthman."

Bernard's cheeks burned. He bowed his head, thinking... *more things in heaven and earth, Horatio...*

He bit his lip and remained silent.

Peals of enormous silent laughter thundered through the cabin now. The strange being seemed vastly amused by the pretensions of the humans. "We were like you, once, Earthmen—hundreds of thousands of your years ago. We were eager, questing, brawling, foolish, petty little beings. Even as you are today. We survived that stage of our development. Perhaps you shall, too."

Stone looked up, his face pasty-white. He moistened his lips and said, "How—how did you find us? Was it you that caused us to get lost?"

"No," replied the Rosgollan. "We watched you from afar as your race developed, but we had no desire for contact with you. Until the moment came when we learned that a ship of yours was approaching our galaxy. We feared, at first, that you had come seeking us—but we saw at once that you were lost. I was sent to guide you to safety! There is much you must be told."

"Where—how..." Stone stammered.

"Enough," the Rosgollan said, in a firm tone that brooked no debate.

"The answers will come to you later, all in due course. 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 frightened men stared at each other in confusion and dismay.

Stone found words first. Wild-eyed, he asked, "Did we really see it?"

"Yes, we saw it," Havig said. His face was even more grim than usual. "It appeared there in that corner. It glowed. It spoke to us."

Bernard abruptly began to laugh. It was a dry, thin, ratcheting laugh that held little mirth. The others frowned at him.

"He's amused," Stone said. "What's the joke?" Dominici asked.

"The joke's on us," Bernard said. "On all of us in this cabin, and on the Norglans, and on poor old Technarch McKenzie too. You remember what Skrinri and Vortakel told us? The terms of the ultimatum?"

"Sure," Stone said. He imitated the tone of the Norglans. "*You may keep these worlds. All other worlds belong to Norgla.'"*

"That's right," Bernard said. "In a puffed-up huff of cosmic pride, we came across space to the Norglans, magnanimously 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! Lowly grubbing creatures of no particular importance!"

"We are men," Havig said stoutly.

Bernard wheeled to face the Neopuritan. "*Men*!" he mocked. "You talk about knowing the ways of God, Havig. What do you know? What does God care for you, for all of us? We're an insignificant part of creation. If He exists, he regards us as just another life-form. Nothing special about us. We're worms in a puddle, and because we happened to be the lords and masters of our particular puddle we tried to say we owned the

cosmos!"

"Hold on a minute here, 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 what I want to say—yet. But I think I see what's ahead for us. I think we're going to be put into our true slot in the order of things. We're not lords of creation. 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! On their time-scale, it's only a couple of minutes since we came down from the trees, just two or three seconds since we learned how to read and write, just a fraction of an instant since we got even the slightest control over our environment."

"All right, all right," Dominici said. "So they're greatly advanced..."

"Greatly?" Bernard shrugged. "The difference is inconceivable. The evolutionary gulf between that—that being and us is so tremendous we can't begin to imagine it. It's enough to knock some of the arrogance out of you, isn't it, to find out that you're not really king of the heap?"

"Earth will be in for some surprises," Havig remarked quietly.

"If we ever get back," said Dominici.

"Earth will be in for surprises, all right," Bernard said. "Surprises enough to upset the applecart with a crash. We had it good too long. Supreme masters of all we surveyed. It was bad enough finding the Norglans cluttering up our nice universe—but now, on top of that, to run into *these* people..."

"And who knows what other races there may be?" Stone said suddenly, a trace of wildness in his eyes. "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. Man was not alone. Far from it. And on planets incredibly distant, older races thrived and watched the brash newcomers. Bernard's eyeballs throbbed; his throat was dry, his lips

gummed together.

He could still see, in his mind's eye, that weird golden glow. Could still hear the calm, assured voice ringing in his mind. Could still remember the infinitely humiliating words...

"Let's go up front," he suggested. "We ought to tell Laurance about it."

"Yes, we should," Stone said.

They made their way fore. But there was no need to tell Laurance the story of the strange visitation. 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.

Clive began to giggle. It began as a ratcheting hoo-ha sound deep in his chest, rising rapidly in pitch until it approached hysteria. For an instant no one moved. Bernard strode quickly across the cabin, grabbed Clive by the bunched-up collar of his shirt, and slapped him three times, hard, without pause.

"Stop it! Cut it out, Clive!"

The giggling stopped. Clive blinked, shook his head, rubbed his flaming cheeks. Bernard stared down in surprise at his fingers, which still tingled with the impact of the blows. He realized it was the first time in his life he had ever struck another human being. But it had been the sensible thing to do; if not checked, Clive's giggling might have infected them all within moments. Just now all of them rode the thin edge between sanity and madness. Bernard moistened his lips.

"We can't let this crack us up!"

"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. We may have spread to a few other worlds, but that isn't the same as saying we're

masters of the universe, is it?"

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

"We're landing," Bernard said.

THIRTEEN

The planet of the Rosgollans was not at all as Bernard had expected it to be. His idea of the home of a super-race was a kind of super-Earth, with vaulting burnished towers springing to the skies, meticulously planned parks providing contrast to the urban scene, flexibridges linking buildings at heights dizzying to the eye.

He was wrong.

Perhaps the Rosgollans had had such things once; in any event, they had long since discarded the empty majesty of massive cities. 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. Dotting 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," Dominici said softly.

"Or like Paradise," murmured Havig.

Bernard said, "It's the post-technological phase of civilization, I'm sure. Remember the withering-away of the state that the ancient Marxists were forever trumpeting about? Well, this is it, I'm sure." He realized he was speaking in a hushed whisper, as though this were a museum or a house of worship.

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. The sun was high in the sky, and looked redder, cooler than was the sun of Earth.

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

"Teleportation," Bernard murmured. "Even better than a transmat; you don't need a mechanical rig."

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? What are you planning to do with us, anyway?"

"You will come to no harm, Commander Laurance," was the soft reply.

Bernard tugged at Laurance's arm. "Better just relax and take things as they come," he whispered. "Arguing with these people won't do a bit of good."

Despite himself, he smiled. Rising defiantly to tell the Rosgollans off was something like an ancient Roman defying a fusion bomb by shouting at it, "*Civis Romanus sum*! Hands off! I am a Roman citizen!" The bomb would pay little attention; neither, Bernard suspected, would these Rosgollans. But he felt a fundamental surety that these beings of light would not be capable of bringing about any harm.

The Earthmen made themselves comfortable. There was no furniture in the room, only soft red cushions, on which they sat. Although the cushions were marvelously comfortable, and seemed to invite reclining, Bernard and the others remained sitting tensely upright.

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 Rosgollans were simply drawing what they wanted to know, without troubling to ask.

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 marriage, 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.

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. The Rosgollans came close to each other; their fields of light seemed to coalesce strangely.

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

Bernard touched his arm again. "Laurance..."

The alien reply was gentle and perhaps a trifle self-reproachful. "Yes, we are amused. We ask your forgiveness, Earthmen, but we are amused!"

Again the laughter rang out silently. 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. Bernard frowned uncertainly, trying to fit the laughter into the culture-pattern he was constructing for the Rosgollans. Angels did not patronize, he thought. And until this moment he had regarded them almost as angelic, with their auras of light and their serenity of motion and their seemingly boundless powers of mind. But angels would not laugh at mortals that way.

"We will leave you alone a while," the Rosgollans said. The light vanished. The earthmen turned to look at each other dazedly.

"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.

"So now we're pets," said Laurance bitterly. "I guess the Rosgollans will

come from all over the universe to play with us."

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

"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. We aren't exactly masters of our own fate."

"You're turning into a defeatist, Bernard," Dominici said warningly. "Ever since the moment these things first grabbed hold of the ship, you've been taking the blackest possible interpretation of everything."

"I'm just looking at things realistically. There's nothing to be gained by deluding ourselves. We're in a mess. How are we going to escape, Dominici? You answer that. Where's the Ship?"

"Why—uh..."

Dominici paused. With a cold frown on his face, 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 through the obliging doorway and into the outdoors.

Green hills rolled to the horizon in gentle undulations.

Fleecy clouds broke the harsh metallic blueness of the sky.

There was no sign of the ship.

None at all.

Bernard shrugged meaningfully. "You see, we might be anywhere on this planet. Anywhere at all. Five, ten, even fifteen thousand miles from the ship. Am I being defeatist? How are we going to get back? By transmat? Teleportation? On foot? Which direction do we go? I'm not trying to be pessimistic. I just don't think we've got any way of getting free."

"So we're prisoners, then," Dominici said bitterly. "Prisoners of these—these super-beings!"

"Even if we could reach the ship," said Havig, "they would only bring us back, the same way they brought us here originally. Bernard's right. We are totally at their mercy. We cannot alter that."

"Why don't you pray?" Stone asked.

Havig merely shrugged. "I have never ceased praying. But I fear we have fallen into a situation which God has designed for us, and from which He will not free us until His purpose is attained."

Bernard knelt in the meadow just outside the building. He snatched up a stalk of saw-edged grass with a snapping motion of his hand, taking a perverse pleasure in the slight sting of the grass cutting into his skin.

It was a painful business, this being gently wafted to Rosgolla. It struck at the center of a man's soul to take hold of him this way, to render him completely helpless, to keep him in this sort of smiling bondage.

Bernard clenched and unclenched his fists angrily. He thought back across only a short span of time to the easy-living dilettante whose self-centered life had been punctured by the Technarch's call. *Then I sat in my vibrochair and lived my own quiet life. And now I am a representative of Earth in who knows what macrocosmic judging*?

"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. Hunger assailed him, and he realized they were far from the ship, far from their own Earthman foods, with no immediate likelihood of returning.

"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 and wandered away, stretching out on the grass.

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 horizones. Bernard wondered how numerous they were. If they lived scattered as sparsely as the view indicated, there could not be many of them on this world—but perhaps there were thousands of Rosgollan worlds strung like beads through space, each with its few thousand inhabitants.

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. I hardly think that these people are the zookeeper type."

The night was falling rapidly now. It was an old world, Bernard thought; an old race, an old sun, short days and long nights.

Unfamiliar stars began to poke through the twilight's gray haze. Later, when the sharp darkness had replaced the vague twilight, it would be

possible to see the island universe in which Earth's sun was merely an indistinguishable dot of light.

Darkness came on with a rush. The Earthmen once again entered the little building provided for them; a warm glow of light made it more cheery, and it seemed proof against the chill growing outside.

"What do we do?" Dominici asked, of nobody in particular. "Sack out and wait for morning?"

"Is there anything else we can do?" Havig demanded. "We have no very great choice of diversions. We can sleep, and we can pray, and we can think."

"Pray for us, Havig," said Laurance quietly. "Talk to that God of yours, get Him to arrange for our return trip home."

Bernard said, "I don't think he can do that, Commander. Don't Neopuritans believe that it's irreverent to ask for special favors?"

Havig flashed one of his rare smiles. "You are both right and you are wrong, friend Bernard. We feel it an impertinence to approach Him for worldly goods, for luxuries, for power. This is not prayer; prayer is communication, understanding, love. Not begging. But, on the other hand, to pray for our welfare, our salvation—this is hardly irreverent. He wants us to ask for whatever we think we need, but then to leave it up to Him and trust that when His will is done, all will be well."

"But that's begging, isn't it?" Bernard objected.

Havig shrugged. "In His eyes, we are all supplicants in great need. I will gladly pray for all of us, as I have been doing from the first."

"Right, pray for us," Laurance said gruffly. "We need all the help we can get."

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.

FOURTEEN

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. But he was awake. He tiptoed to the wall, touched it to make it transparent, and saw that the sun had risen. He glanced at his watch. It was only little more than nine hours since the night had fallen, and here the sun had risen again. Which meant that the day, here on this world Rosgolla, was only about eighteen or nineteen hours long.

Stepping through the conveniently opening door, Bernard sucked in his breath sharply and felt a quick stab of awe and delight. The air was marvelously fresh and sweet, like young wine. The distant hills, smooth rounded humps, 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.

He had dreamed of Katha. Now, in wakefulness, the lingering memory of the dream surprised him, and made his mood a sadly introspective one. He rarely thought, never dreamed, of the slim, bright-eyed, copper-haired girl who had been his second wife. Yet last night he had dreamed of Katha.

He thought he knew the reason why, too. The Rosgollan interrogation

had stirred up the old memories, and the long-hidden patterns would return to trouble him in dreams until once again they settled, like particles suspended in water, to their depth. He would suffer meanwhile. He had thought he had come to an accomodation with himself on the subject of Katha, but the dream had disturbed him in a way he had thought was far behind.

"Morning," a voice said, behind him, startling him out of his reverie.

Bernard turned. "Morning," he said to Dominici. "You surprised me."

"Been up long?"

"Only a little while, Dom. Ten minutes, maybe. I just walked out to have a look-see." Bernard's eyebrows scooped into a frown; Dominici's sudden blurt of sound had shattered the dream for good.

"You sleep well?" Dominici wanted to know.

"Middling." Bernard knelt and ran his hand over the cool dewy grass. "I was bothered by dreams."

"Dreams? That's funny. So was I." Dominici laughed quietly. "I dreamed I was honeymooning again. Took me back fifteen, eighteen years. The two of us in a watercar, skimming over the waves. My arm around her waist. Her hair billowing out in the breeze. And casting a line, pulling a big thing with teeth out, Jan afraid of it and asking me to throw it back, into the water..." Dominici paused. "I used to wake up drenched with sweat when I dreamed about Jan. Not now, though. I suppose I'm starting to forget. She was killed in a transmat discontinuity," he added after a brief pause.

"Oh. I'm sorry." Bernard flinched at the image of a young woman smiling goodbye, stepping into the radiant transmat field, then vanishing forever into the void in a one-in-a-trillion accident. The transmat was not perfect; yet this was the first time Bernard had ever spoken to someone directly involved in any sort of transmat accident.

"If you have to die," Dominici said, "I suppose that's the best way of any. You don't feel a thing, not even for a quarter of a second. One minute you're alive, the next you don't exist. I didn't have a funeral for her. I kept hoping she'd turn up, you know. There was always that element of doubt.

But the transmat people said no, there definitely had been a slipup in the coordinates, she was gone forever. They gave me two hundred thousand in damages. And you know something? When I held that check in my hands I broke down and cried for the first time since it had happened. Because then I believed it."

"What a terrible thing to happen," Bernard muttered.

"We were going on vacation," Dominici said quietly. "Everything was packed, I was standing there with the suitcases in my hands. She kissed me, stepped through..."

"Don't go on. You're hurting yourself."

"I don't mind," Dominici said. "Some of the pain is dying down now. After ten years. Look, I'm not shaking. I'm talking about her, and I'm not shaking. That's a step. I'm just slow to get over it, that's all."

They talked on for a while, as the others of the group began one by one to awaken within. It occurred to Bernard that he liked Dominici more than any of his other fellow wayfarers; Havig, though not the stereotyped fanatic Bernard had originally pictured him as, was far too austere and unbending to make a close friend, while Stone, for all his superficial diplomatic guile, was much too open and simple a person. But Dominici had an agreeable complexity, this vitriolic little man who blasphemed irreverently at Havig and yet, in times of genuine stress, bowed himself to utter a Latin prayer and make the sign of the Cross.

One at a time, now, the others were coming out, stretching their legs after the short night. Stone joined them first, then Nakamura with his cheery greeting, then Havig, nodding brusquely in that neither-friendly-nor-hostile way of his, and then 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 in general as though each one, personally, bore the direct responsibility for his current predicament.

"What are we supposed to be doing?" Clive asked. "We just stand here and wait, eh?"

"Maybe they'll feed us," Stone said. "I'm starved. Is there any sign of breakfast?"

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

"Or maybe they won't feed us at all," Dominici suggested. "We're just a pack of filthy lower beings, after all. And if they decide..."

"Look there!" Hernandez sang out suddenly. "I'll be damned! *Look*!"

Every head turned as one to look in the direction of Hernandez' tautly pointing arm.

"No," Bernard gasped in flat disbelief. "It just 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, having drifted down from far above. The light had glimmered briefly, then flickered out.

And in the glowing afterimage of the light, two burly figures could be seen—two massive dark-skinned figures, not precisely human, that staggered uncertainly over the moist grass, looking 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 of invisible source. "The negotiations may now proceed once more."

The big Norglans looked as though they were drunk, or else just badly disorientated. They came to a halt, though, seemingly collecting their wits, and made a swift recovery from their attack of the blind staggers. Then all their recovery went for nought as they recoiled in astonishment upon catching sight of the Earthmen.

"Are they the same ones as—as we talked to *before*?" Dominici asked.

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

It was so hard to tell alien beings one from another, Bernard thought. Their very alienness served to draw the attention away from any minor differences of appearance that would aid in distinguishing them. But unmistakably these were the two Norglans who had come as *kharvish* to the Earthmen.

The Norglans drew near, seemingly making an attempt to master their total bewilderment. In a tone that was harsh, guttural, quite unlike his mellow and confident boom of old, Skrinri said, "You—Earthmen? The same Earthmen?"

Stone was supposed to be the spokesman of the Terran group. But Stone was gaping in dumbstruck wonderment. After an instant of cold silence Bernard called out, "Yes. We have met before with you. You are Skrinri—and you, you are Vortakel."

"We are." It was Skrinri who still answered. "But—why have you come here...?"

"We were taken here, not of our own will." Bernard illustrated the process by graphically snatching up a blade of grass. "Our ship was captured and taken here. But what of you?"

Skrinri, apparently still overwhelmed by the enormity of what had been done to him, did not reply. It was Vortakel who spoke, in an unsteady voice. "There was—there was light all around. And a voice said, *Come*, and the world was not there any more. And—and we are now here..." He stopped, as though abashed at his admission of the ease with which they had been yanked across the universe.

It was discomforting, and yet in a way strangely satisfying and pleasant, to see how completely shaken the two Norglan emissaries were. Not surprisingly, Skrinri and Vortakel seemed thoroughly demolished by the abrupt discovery that they did not represent the pinnacle of evolution in the universe after all.

"Where are we?" Skrinri asked.

"Far from home," Bernard said. He groped for the words he wanted; how was it possible to explain in communicable terms the concepts "galaxy." "parsec." "universe"? He abandoned the effort. "We are—so far from home," he said after a moment's thought, "that neither your sun nor

ours can be seen in the sky."

The Norglans looked at each other in a way that seemed to connote simultaneous suspicion and distress. The two aliens spoke with each other for a long while, in their own consonant-studded, vastly involuted language. The Earthmen stood by, listening without comprehension, as Skrinri and Vortakel discussed the situation.

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. Two, three, fifty, a hundred: soon the meadow was ringed with the radiant creatures, will-o'-the-wisps floating above the dew-flecked ground.

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, and war will sunder your planets."

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 in the bland voice. "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. Involuntarily, several of the Earthmen laughed—but the laughter died away, quickly, guiltily. Bernard felt a twinge of shame at his laughter. Two intelligent creatures were being humiliated before their eyes; proud spirits were being broken. Ludicrous though the scene might be, no Earthman had a right to laugh. *We may be dangling next*, for all we know, Bernard thought somberly as he watched the outraged Norglans writhe.

"Put us down!" Skrinri howled.

"Come, show us your strength now, men of Imperial Norgla," came the dry, mocking murmur of the Rosgollan spokesman. Calmly, they put into words their challenge. "You do not tolerate levitation, Norglans? Very well, then. Force us to stop."

Double-elbowed purple arms flailed the air madly. The Norglans rose, inch by inexorable inch, while the Earthmen kept stony silence. Now Skrinri and Vortakel were more than their own heights above the ground, and looking down in dismay and anger.

"Put—us—*down!"* Skrinri grunted.

"Very well."

"You—*ummph!"* The Norglans dropped suddenly, much to their own great surprise. They landed in an undignified heap and remained on the ground a moment, hugging it, as though wanting to be absolutely certain they were no longer under the control of the Rosgollans' powers. When the two Norglans rose, it was slowly, with bowed heads, and they did not look at the Earthmen.

There was an instant of silence.

Then the Rosgollans said, "We have taken you from your home world, and we have shown you the true extent of your strength. Answer us now, men of Imperial Norgla. And still you claim the universe is yours?"

The Norglans made no reply.

The Rosgollan voice continued, quiet but rolling with monumental majesty all the same, "And there stand the Earthmen, creatures less sure of themselves than these Norglans, but equally proud, equally greedy. You, Earthmen: you would divide the universe with the men of Norgla, we learn. But does it lie in your hands to make such an apportionment, Earthmen?"

For a long moment none of the little bank of Terrans dared speak. It was futile to trumpet slogans of strength, in the teeth of beings who held powers beyond comprehension. Shaking a fist at a whirlwind is more a demonstration of weakness than of strength.

But something had to be said.

Some justification had to be made.

I am not the spokesman, Martin Bernard thought. *I have no need to speak out. Why should 1 not keep silence*?

But silence, he saw, would be intolerable, and if no one else spoke forth he would have to do so. Someone had to speak in defense of Earth and Earth's pretensions, at what was rapidly taking on many of the aspects of a trial by jury.

Bernard moved forward self-consciously, standing between his group and the Norglans and looking off at where he thought the Rosgollan spokesman stood.

"We acted in no sense of pride," Bernard said quietly. "Our actions stem from motives that do not need apology. We are a growing race; we sought room to expand. The Norglans, like us, must have more room. Our hope was to reach an agreement that would prevent a conflict of interests and thus a destructive war."

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

Bernard held his ground, sensing the silent encouragement of his fellow Earthmen. "We laid claim to half the universe, yes," he said. "We did so thinking that the universe held no people but Terran and Norglan. *There* lay our pride, in that blind assumption. We were wrong, tragically wrong. There are other races in the universe, we now know, and of all the races we are the youngest, and therefore the most foolish, and for this rashness of youth we ask indulgence. But we still claim the right to expand. We still claim the right to colonize worlds which now lie empty."

He thought he had scored a point. But then he felt waves of ironic laughter sweeping down from the circling jury of Rosgollans. Color mounted to his face, and he realized that what he had hoped was a ringing declaration had turned into a whining plea.

"The Earthmen reduce their claim," commented the Rosgollan voice sardonically. "Instead of half the universe, now they simply demand half of the uninhabited worlds. It is a major concession, we must suppose. It shows commendable willingness to be flexible. What of you proud men of Imperial Norgla? Speak for your people, give us your answer. Will you, too, reduce your claim?"

The Norglans did not hurry to reply. They had adjusted to the strangeness of their situation by this time, and they conferred for a long time before Vortakel said slowly, "You have shown us that— perhaps—we are not—not yet—the strongest people of the universe. We cannot fight you. Therefore we yield."

Well, now, Bernard thought. *I'd say that was pretty noble of you, old boy*. He grinned. *You're willing to make the grudging admission that you're licked. I'll bet it must have hurt*!

For a long frozen moment after the Norglan declaration no one moved, no one reacted visibly. The slump-shouldered Norglans remained standing at each other's side like a pair of beleaguered Vikings making a last stand, while the Earthmen huddled in their little group some twenty feet away, and the ringing circle of Rosgollans remained around them, more sensed than seen.

Then the stasis broke.

"Just one moment!" Laurance cried suddenly.

"Yes? A point of order?"

"You might call it that," the spaceman said tightly, stepping forward to take the space Bernard had held. Looking up defiantly, Laurance said, "You've brought us all to this place, somehow, these Norglans and us. It wasn't much of a trick for you to grab us and yank us here. And now you're holding a little kangaroo court here. Well, fine. You have some fancy powers that we don't pretend to have, and you've shown them off beautifully. You can knock spaceships off course, walk through walls, hoist people across space in a flash. But now tell me this: what right do you have to come meddling inside our galaxy? Who set you up as our judge in the first place, anyway? Answer me that! Is it just the right of might that lets you push us around?"

"We are not judging you here," replied the Rosgollan voice levelly. "We are merely mediating a dispute between two races. Two *young* races, be it understood. In order to mediate successfully, we must establish our authority, we must demonstrate our strength. It is the only way to deal with children," the Rosgollan said.

"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, forever and to all eternity, world without end."

FIFTEEN

It was done. And, though the Archonate knew nothing of the treaty, every one 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 snakelike arms, composed of millions and millions of glowing points of light. The model, breathtaking in its white loveliness, looked authentic as it hung there, a flattened lens ten feet long, shining with a cold brilliance.

Suddenly, springing up within the galactic model, a line of green light picked out a sphere perhaps a foot in diameter, a glowing vacuole within the protozoan-shape that was the galactic model.

"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.

Earthmen and Norglans stared at the model, and at the two puny stellar empires ringed out within it. They waited, knowing what was to come.

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. The model looked now like a microorganism in the first stages of fission; the violent blaze of the violet boundary assailed all eyes. Bernard looked away; he saw the others doing the same.

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. You each are absolute masters within your own sectors, but there must be no trespassing."

"We—we have no right to enter into a binding agreement without informing our government of the course of action," Stone protested stammeringly. "We quite frankly lack the power to..."

"The arrangements concluded here will be binding," replied the Rosgollan. "Let us not obscure the facts. Formal consent of high officials will not be necessary in this matter. This is not a treaty being arrived at by mutual negotiation; it is an imposition from without. The situation is clear. You will obey the establishment of the boundary line. No alternative is open to you."

There it was in the open, Bernard thought. Treaties are made between powers of equal sovereignty. This was something different, a blunt command.

The Norglans, not very surprisingly, looked agitated by the open statement of intent. Skrinri declared, "You—order us to obey your decision...?"

"Yes. We order you. These are the boundaries. You will keep within them; and you will cease to threaten each other with war. We command this in the name of galactic harmony, and we will not tolerate deviation. Is that understood?"

Eleven figures stared dumbly at the model and at the eerie creatures that had created it. No one spoke, neither Earthman nor Norglan. Several seconds ticked by in silence, without a reply.

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

Someone had to speak, to admit what everyone already privately accepted as the dictates of necessity. Martin Bernard shrugged and said quietly, "Yes. We understand the situation."

"And the men of Norgla?"

"We understand," Skrinri said, echoing not only Bernard's words but his tone of resignation.

"It is done, then."

The divided model winked out.

"You will be returned to your home planets. There you will inform the heads of your governments of the existence of the boundary lines we have

just created. You will warn your governments that any transgression of these boundaries will lead to instant punishment."

It was done.

Irrevocably?

Unarguably?

Light swirled blindingly around the stolid, heavy figures of the Norglan negotiators, and immediately they hazed over and were gone. An instant later, most of the Rosgollans had been translated elsewhere the same way.

And a fraction of a second after that, the Earthmen felt a swathe of warm light engulf them—and, without any sensation of transition, they found themselves once again standing just outside their ship.

Out of the silence came a Rosgollan voice in gentle command.

"Enter your ship," it ordered quietly. "We will restore you to the galaxy in which you belong."

Bernard lifted his eyes momentarily, caught those of Laurance. The Commander looked baffled, blocked, humiliated. Laurance glanced away. Bernard did not look at anyone else. The entire group of Earthmen, silent, shamefaced, clambered one by one into the waiting ship.

Peterszoon, the last man to come aboard, activated the hatch controls, swinging the entry gate shut and dogging it tightly in place. There was the faint hiss as the pressure equalizers purred into action. Laurance and his crewmen filed through the ship to their quarters up front in the nose. Bernard, Havig, Stone, and Dominici went wearily aft, to the passenger cabin.

No one spoke.

The four men in the rear cabin took blastoff places and waited uncertainly, each averting his eyes from those of the man opposite him. The common feeling of depression, of supreme humiliation, dampened spirits.

The ship lifted almost immediately, without the slightest sensation of

having blasted off. The vessel simply was detached from the ground and floated spaceward, as though escape velocity on Rosgolla were zero, and mass and inertia just so many meaningless words.

It was Stone who finally broke the clammy silence as the ship sprang upward.

"So that's that," he muttered bitterly, staring at the wall. "We've got quite a story to tell when we get home! I'll really make a splash. The bold Earthmen encounter not one alien race but *two*, and the second one kicked us around a little harder than the other. But we sure came off third best in that little conference!"

Dominici shook his head in disagreement. "I wouldn't say we did so badly."

"No?" Stone challenged.

"Not at all," Dominici maintained. "I'd say the Norglans came out a good sight poorer off than we did, after all was said and done. Don't forget that originally the Norglans were claiming the entire universe except for our little sphere, before the Rosgallans stepped in. And now the blueskins are held down to a mere fifty-fifty split of one galaxy, nothing more!"

"I suppose you could call that a victory for us," Stone said. “But that kind of reasoning can rationalize away anything."

"And it's assuming that the Norglans will abide by the dividing line," Havig remarked.

"I think they will," Bernard said. "It doesn't seem to me that they have much of an alternative. They'll *have* to stick to the agreement, whether they like it or not. These Rosgollans seem to have almost unlimited mental powers. They'll probably be keeping an eye cocked at our galaxy, policing it and breaking up any trouble that might conceivably start over a boundary violation."

"Policing our galaxy," Stone said darkly. "That's lovely, isn't it? So we set out from Earth with a flourish of trumpets, as representatives of the universe's dominant race, and we come back home policed into one little 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 said. "But the truth never is. And this is one bit of truth that's bound to stick in any Earthman's craw. The thing we've found out we didn't know before is that we *aren't* the universe's dominant race; at least not yet, anyway. The Rosgollans and maybe some others out in the distant galaxies have an evolutionary start of perhaps five or six hundred thousand years on us. So we've been slapped back into our place—for a while. We were like a bunch of kids imagining that the universe was ours for grabs. Well, it isn't, that's all, and the Archonate and all the rest of the people of Earth will just have to get used to the idea."

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

"Defeat?" Bernard snorted. "Listen, Stone, do you call it a humiliating 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 fundamental nature of metal bulkheads to be stronger than bare fingers, and it's ridiculous to moan about the philosophical aspects of the situation."

"If I want to defeat a bulkhead, I don't use my bare hands," Stone replied. "I'd use a blowtorch. And I'd win ten times out of ten."

“But we don't *have* a blowtorch we can use on the Rosgollans," Bernard said. "We just aren't in their league. 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 in a quiet voice. "The great wheel of life keeps turning. Some day the Rosgollans will be gone from the universe, 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 these races, for the sake of our own peace. But, perhaps, by then we will know Who has made us, and we will not act for our own sake."

Sinking his head in his hands, Stone muttered, "What Bernard's been saying all makes perfectly good sense on the abstract, intellectual level. I'm not trying to deny that. But come down to the realities of the situation. How do you go about telling a planet that thought it was the summit of creation that it's very small potatoes indeed?"

"That's going to be the Archonate's problem, not ours," Dominici said.

"What does it matter *whose* problem it is?" Stone demanded sharply. "This will set Earth in an uproar. It's a planetary humiliation."

"It's a planetary eye-opening," Bernard snapped. "It'll destroy any lingering shred of complacency. 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'll 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 and stopped, looking about uncertainly at everyone.

"Am I interrupting something important?" he asked.

"What could be important *now*, anyway?" Stone asked in a dismal voice.

"We were just hashing over the implications of our new status," Bernard explained. "Is there any sort of trouble up front, Hernandez?"

The crewman shook his head. "No, no trouble, Dr. Bernard. Commander Laurance sent me back to let you know that it seems 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."

"But that can't be," Stone said.

Simultaneously Dominici gasped and said, "What? 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, ship time. But we've come back."

"Are you certain?" Bernard asked.

"The Commander's positive."

Hernandez turned and left. A tremor of cold awe shot through Bernard.

The ship, then, had crossed the galactic gulf in a mere matter of twenty

or thirty minutes, thanks to the boost from the Rosgollans. It was a feat beyond the capacity of the human mind to grasp.

Beyond the capacity of the *human* mind. But, Bernard realized, it might have been the simplest thing in the world for a race as advanced as the Rosgollans. An after-dinner stunt, a casual flip of a craft across thousands of light-years— hardly worth mentioning.

He felt profoundly uneasy.

Yet, even so, there was comfort. The Rosgollans were half a million years ahead, evolutionally. And they could work miracles. But how many accomplishments of *man* would seem like miracles to the man of only a few hundred years earlier? Not to mention man of half a million years.

Where were we half a million years ago? Bernard wondered. *We were pounding our hairy chests, brachiating gaily through the trees, cooking our uncles for dinner, maybe even eating them raw if cooking hadn't been invented yet*.

And yet we came all the way from Pithecanthropus erectus to the transmat era in half a million years—picking up speed as we came. That's a hell of a long journey in not really a hell of a long time. So who's to say where we'll be half a million years from now? Who can predict where we'll be when we're as old as the Rosgollans are now?

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

The new warmth flooded dizzyingly over him.

"Hey, Bernard. Bernard? Are you feeling all right?" Dominici asked.

"Uh—yes. Sure. Why do you ask?"

"You looked so queer all of a sudden. You got a kind of funny smile on your face for a second, a smile that I've never seen on you before."

"I was—thinking about something," he said quietly. "Some pieces fitted together. And I—well, I just felt *good* for a second. I still do." He leaned

forward. "Dom, tell me about the Norglans, biologically speaking. As much as you could figure out."

Dominici frowned. "Well—for one thing, they're obviously mammals."

"Of course. How about their evolutionary decent?"

"They stem from some primate-like creature, I'm pretty certain. Of course, there are big differences, but that's only to be expected across a gulf of twelve or fifteen thousand light-years. The eyes, the double elbow—these are things we don't have. But other than that, at least on external evidence alone, I'd say they were pretty much like us."

"A younger race than we are, would you say?" Bernard went on.

Uncertainty hooded Dominici's eyes. "Younger? No, I wouldn't say that. I'd be inclined to say they were an older race than we are."

"Why do you say that?"

Dominici shrugged. "Call it a hunch. They seem settled in their ways, stratified almost. The difference couldn't be much—two or three thousand years, maybe—but I have a definite feeling they've been civilized longer than we have."

"I tend to agree," Havig said from his corner of the cabin. "From what little I could catch of that complicated language of theirs, I'd say it's a highly evolved one—the sort of language a race might have been speaking for a couple of thousand years. But what's on your mind, Bernard? Why the sudden questions?"

Bernard shrugged. "I'm piecing together something to tell the Technarch when we get back," he said flatly, and made no other attempt at an explanation.

The gong sounded, signalling conversion. Conversion came; not long after, Nakamura came aft to let the passengers know that this time the ship was square on course, and that a meal was about to be served.

They ate quietly. There was no reason to be jubilant after such a mission to the stars. They were all conscious that they were returning to Earth after a mission that had ended in unexpected diminution of man's

place in the universe. The news they bore would hardly be welcome to the people of the Terran worlds or to that hard, inflexibly proud man who had impelled them to take this journey. Harsh truths are rarely welcomed.

Havig remained in the galley to give Nakamura a hand with the job of clearing away the meal. Bernard returned to the cabin with Stone and Dominici. A hush had fallen over them once again. Each minute, now, brought them closer to Earth, to the reckoning with the Technarch.

Stone sat quietly on his bunk, his hands covering his face. Bernard looked up suddenly and realized that the pudgy diplomat was weeping.

He went over to him.

"*Stone*. Snap out of it!"

"Leave me alone!" was the muffled reply.

"Come on, knock it off..."

"Go away."

"Dammit," Bernard said hoarsely, "what are you crying about, anyway? Does the fact that Earthmen aren't the big cheeses we used to think we were upset you so damned much? Or is it the fact that you're probably out of a job in the Archonate that's digging into you?"

Stone looked up, white-faced, red-eyed, with the shocked look of a man whose most carefully hidden secret has been punctured. "How dare you say that..."

"It's the truth, isn't it?"

"What are you trying to..."

"Admit it," Bernard said in a deliberately harsh voice. "Face the truth. It's a habit we all could stand to cultivate around here."

The diplomat looked as though he's been given five strokes with a neural whip. He shrank into himself and after a moment's silence said in a soft, distant voice, "All right, it's the truth. I won't try to hide it any more. For twenty-five years I've been training for the Archonate, and it's all shot to hell now. I've got no career left. I'm nothing but a used-up shell. Am I

supposed to be happy about the way things have turned out? Do you think they would ever pick as Archon the very man who brought back the crushing news that we— that we..."

Stone could not go on.

He started to blubber again. Bernard felt uncomfortable and helpless, as he stood there watching the fleshy shoulders shake uncontrollably.

I might as well let him cry, Bernard thought. *Maybe his career's finished and maybe it isn't, but he can use the nervous release anyway. God knows, we all can*.

Bernard returned to his bunk. After a while he saw Stone rise, wash his face, dry his eyes, and jab his arm with a spraytube of a sedative. The diplomat lay down again and was asleep almost at once. Bernard remained awake, watching the grayness of the vision screen, watching the steadily advancing hands of the clock. His mood was a depressed one, yet not as bleak as it might have been. It had been, he knew, a valuable voyage—for him, for everyone on Earth. Earth had learned some things about itself that it desperately had needed to find out—and so had Martin Bernard. Some of his actions surprised him, as he looked back. His burst of sympathy and understanding for Havig, for instance.

The trip had broadened him, had extended his knowledge of himself and of others. He could look back now and see the Martin Bernard of the recent past in a cold, clear new perspective.

What he saw hardly pleased him.

He saw a self-centered, almost irritatingly selfish man, with a streak of cruelty well camouflaged by his outward amiable ways. His hatchet job on Havig's article, for instance, had not been an expression of scholarly dissent as much as it had been an attack on a philosophy of life that called his own hedonistic ways into question. His relationship with his wife, too, he saw with uncomfortable clarity: it was not that he was not "born" to be a good husband, but simply that he had not been willing to work at it. She was no shrew, merely a woman who wanted to share her husband's inner life and had been shut completely away from it.

Bernard stared steadily ahead. This close confinement, away from the lulling influences of his cozy nest at home, had forced him in on himself,

compelled him to take a healing look at the real self enclosed in a shell of complacency.

Earth was in for the same kind of rough awakening, Bernard thought. He wondered if the people in general would profit from the jolt of truth, as he felt he had, or if they would angrily throw up defense mechanisms to keep the true barb from sinking in. Bernard frowned. He had his doubts.

And time was running out, now. Only twelve hours remained until conversion time. The clock hands moved, slowly, inexorably.

Ten hours.

Eight.

Six.

Four.

Twenty minutes.

The last minutes took the longest. Bernard's face was set in a rigid mask, his eyeballs throbbing as he watched the clock. No one had spoken in hours.

The gongs sounded, finally, their resonance booming through the cabin like an annunciation of Judgment. The moment of conversion came. The vision screen brightened as the faster-than-light ship twisted out of the unknown void and crashed across the barrier into the familiar universe.

The message came aft from Laurance, in slow, measured tones. "We're crossing the orbit of Neptune at this moment, heading inward. I've radioed ahead to Earth and they got the message. They know we're coming home."

SIXTEEN

The private chamber of the Technarch McKenzie had a harsh, almost hieractic 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 importance of the Technarch's responsibilities—and in that it succeeded, Martin Bernard thought. He felt a tinge of something quite like awe as he followed McKenzie in.

Few words had been interchanged since the landing of the *XV-ftl* in Central Australia an hour before. The wanderers had come forth; and perhaps the Technarch had seen from their tense, bleak faces that the news they bore was not to be blurted out hastily. In any event, he had asked no questions, merely nodded a Technarchical greeting as the men left the ship. Bernard had come up to him.

"Hearkening, Excellency."

"Hello, Bernard. What news?"

"Might I report to Your Excellency in your private chambers?"

The audience had been granted. One by one, stepping through the transmat, they had crossed the gap from the spacefield to the Archonate Center. Now Dominici, Stone, and Havig waited in the Technarch's antechamber, while Bernard, alone, faced McKenzie within.

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 knew what he was going to say, but tension gripped him all the same.

He stared levelly at the Technarch's face. At the dark, brooding eyes, the thick hump of a nose, the wide, tightly clamped lips, the jutting chin, the corded neck. McKenzie seemed to have the strength of a bull. Bernard wondered how much of that strength McKenzie was going to need in order to withstand the blow that was coming.

"You wish to report to me, Dr. Bernard. Very well. I'm extremely interested in learning how your voyage went—in detail." The Technarch's voice was level, well modulated, with the sharp edge of strength shaping every syllable.

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

"An excellent idea."

Quit stalling! Bernard told himself sharply. The Technarch's eyes reflected impatience, mockery perhaps. 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. Dr. Havig did an excellent job of teaching several of the aliens to speak Terran. They call themselves Norglans, by the way. 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—larger physically and evidently much more intelligent, since they were able to absorb a week's instruction in Terran in only a few hours, from their comrade. When they met with us, they could speak fairly well, and they improved every minute."

"What did they say?" McKenzie asked.

Bernard leaned forward, knotting his hands together tensely. "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?"

"Badly. 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."

"What?"

"The two Norglan ambassadors hurled their ultimatum and walked out—went back to their home planet. Evidently they have the equivalent of transmat travel between worlds of their system too, Excellency. We protested to the colony supervisor, but he said he could do nothing; the ambassadors had left, and would not be returning. So the talks broke down. 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 telling of our journey."

"There's more?"

"Much more. You see, we became 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 no-space, 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. Teleportation, psychokinesis, and many other abilities. They—read our minds. Interrogated us. 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—examining our claims, dismissing them. The Norglans got indignant, so the Rosgollans humiliated them—levitated them, let them hang in the air, dropped them in a heap. It was a demonstration of unmatchable power. And after it was over—after the Rosgollans had shown us we could not hope to question

their orders—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. He leaned forward, gripping the top of his desk with big, powerful hands. He squeezed the desk top, closing his eyes, grimacing with inner torment.

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*..."

"But we got what we went for, after all!" Bernard protested. "You sent us out to divide the galaxy with the Norglans—and we succeeded in that!"

The sophistry sounded hollow the moment he had uttered it. McKenzie smiled strangely. "You succeeded? I sent you out to divide the *universe;*

you came back with half a *galaxy* apportioned to you. It's not the same thing at all, is it, Bernard?"

"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!"

"Eh?" McKenzie asked, startled. It was probably the first time since he had assumed the mantle of the Technarchonate that anyone had so flatly contradicted him. But now he had hardly the strength to be angry.

Bernard said, "This isn't the end, Excellency. 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. Now, for the first time, we see our true position.

"Sure, it isn't a position of supremacy. We're a long way from that. 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, except that we'll be past the point of needing pride.

"I think we're an even younger race than the Norglans, Excellency. But we've caught and equalled them, for all their speed in building colonies—and I think the Rosgollans are afraid of us, too. They see how fast we're developing—they know it's only a thousand years since we entered the age of machines, and they see how far we've come in that time. They're watching us, worried, anxious. They want to put checks on us now so we don't overdevelop, spill out into the universe faster than we ought to.

"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."

Bernard stopped. He felt like a small boy lecturing his schoolmaster. But the old relationships no longer held; and this strangely limp man behind the big desk was no longer the figure of awe he had once been.

In a muffled, hollow voice, McKenzie said. "Maybe— maybe you're right, Bernard. But—but it isn't easy to accept."

"Of course not, Excellency."

McKenzie looked up. "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. You'll never know how I dreamed, Bernard. And now those dreams can only be realized by our remote descendants—thousands of years from now."

Bernard shook his head vehemently. He struggled for some way of communicating to the Technarch the surge of optimism that gripped him.

"Excellency—don't you see that we can't be stopped? We've got the current running with us. We'll climb back to the place where we thought—in our blindness—that we were. On the top."

"Yes. Someday, perhaps, we will," said McKenzie tonelessly. "But I won't live to see it, Bernard, nor will you nor any of us nor even our children's children. And I had wanted to see it. To build it, Bernard. To shape tomorrow with my hands. Can you understand that, man? I! Me! I! While I live!"

A deep sob racked the Technarch's body. Bernard looked away awkwardly, trying to pretend he had not seen. He felt helpless to stop this man's grieving. There was nothing he could possibly say, no imaginable word of sympathy, nothing whatever to be done for this massive man

whose dreams of cosmic empire-building had tumbled so quickly into the dust.

The Technarch's lips moved wordlessly, beyond the man's control for a moment. Then, with a powerful effort, he mastered himself and said flatly, quietly, "All right, Bernard. You can put the report in writing and submit it the proper way. Tell the entire story, from beginning to end, just as you told it to me. Don't gloss anything over. Understood?"

"Yes, Excellency. Is there—is there anything else I can do...?"

A pause. Then: "Get out of here, that's all. Just leave me alone. Tell Naylor I won't be seeing anyone else today. *Get out of here*!"

"Hearkening, Excellency."

A lump of pity clogged Bernard's throat as he made a formal bow to the Technarch, still a formidable figure in his black cloak of office. McKenzie was obviously fighting to keep his craggy features under control while Bernard still remained in the room. Then, unable to bear the sight, Bernard turned and rushed away, through the irising sphincter into the ante-chamber.

Dominici, Stone, and Havig waited there for him, sitting tensely upright on the carved bench at the far well. Bernard realized that his face and body were soaked with perspiration, that his hands were clenching and unclenching of their own volition.

"Well?" Stone asked jumpily. "How did he take the news, Bernard?"

The sociologist shrugged. "Badly."

The single word made its effect. Dominici asked, "Did you tell him everything?"

"The works," Bernard said solemnly. "I didn't pull any punches. You could see his face crumble when it all sank in. He wanted to see mankind out and planting colonies in Andromeda while he was still Technarch. I guess he won't." Bernard let a slow smile cross his face. "I pity him. The man's a monolith. He may not be able to adjust to the situation."

"Don't underestimate him," Stone said. "He's a great man."

"Great, yes, but this may destroy him; I hope not," Bernard said. "Maybe he'll have the strength to adjust to it. But he'll never be the same man again."

Naylor, the Technarch's man, came shuffling into the antechamber, his face a careful professional blank. Bernard wondered how Naylor would react when he found his master in a state of near-shock. Probably go into shock himself, Bernard thought.

Naylor said, "Have you gentlemen concluded your audience with the Technarch?"

"Yes, we have," Bernard said. "And the Technarch asked me to pass a message along to you."

"Sir?"

"He said that he doesn't want to see anyone else for the rest of the day."

"Yes, sir. Very good, sir." Naylor flicked the matter into the back of his mind. "Shall I make arrangements for your homeward trips?"

"Yes."

While Naylor busily set up the transmat coordinates, Bernard made his last goodbyes to the men with whom he had joined in this unhappy venture into the kingdoms of the stars. Stone, now a dismal, hopeless figure, his life's basis as shattered as that of the Technarch; Dominici, cocky as always, unruffled by his experience, at least outwardly; Havig, austere, withdrawn, pious, but at least no longer aloof.

They were all *men*, Bernard thought.

He was glad to have known them.

The moment had come to leave now. "Mr. Bernard, sir?" Naylor called.

"So long," Bernard said.

"God go with you," Havig called after him.

Bernard smiled and stepped through the transmat, emerging in his own flat, four thousand miles away in London. Everything was as he left it;

everything seemed to be waiting for him. Even the air smelled fresh, not at all as though he had left the apartment for so long a span as he had. It was all there—the books, the pipe, the music, the brandy—waiting for him to slip back into his comfortable 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.

Never the same again. But, somehow, deep within his soul, he felt that everything was going to work out for the best; that—though neither he nor the unhappy Technarch nor any man now walking the Earth would live to see it—mankind would someday be taking its rightful place in the stars.